The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team’s postseason hopes were literally hanging in the balance Thursday night in Salt Lake City – a place the Lights had never won.

Forgetting about a Frontier Conference regular season championship, or home court-advantage in the Frontier playoffs, down 40-32 to the Westminster Griffins with 12:35, the Lights were in jeopardy of falling into third place in the Frontier with one game to go, and possibly right out of an at-large berth to the NAIA national tournament.

Instead, Northern rose up like the veteran team it is. The No. 22 Lights ripped off a 25-7 run in a six-minute span, then held the Griffins off in the closing minutes for a huge 60-57 road win, their first-ever in Westminster’s home gym.

The win pushed the Lights (9-4, 23-6) back into a first-place tie with No. 14 UM-Western thanks to Rocky Mountain College’s upset victory over the Bulldogs Thursday night in Billings. It also gives Northern a chance to clinch at least a share of the Frontier title if the Lights can beat Lewis-Clark State Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho.

But for now, Northern will revel in the fact it found a way to win perhaps its toughest road game in the Shawn Huse era. Northern has been close to beating Westminster in Salt Lake before, and the Lights got off to a strong start Thursday night.

The Lights jumped out to a 10-2 lead behind strong play from senior Ben Mitchell, who wound up making four 3-pointers coming off the bench. Northern shot 60 percent from the field in the first half on its way to a 25-18 lead at the break.

The Griffins however, battled right back in the first 10 minutes of the second half. Westminster went on a 14-3 run and by the 12-minute mark, seemed to have taken control of the game, leading by eight points. But Northern never wavered as the Lights got huge shots from Devin Jackson and Joe Simpson, ripped off the run, then held off one final Westminster surge. The Griffins did have a heave to tie the game as the buzzer sounded, but it missed and the Lights left Salt Lake back in first place in the Frontier.

Mitchell, who’s minutes are often limited, hit his first five shots and went 6-of-9 from the field. The Lights also got 13 points and eight rebounds from Jackson, while David Maddock had a huge game off the bench scoring 12 points. Shaun Tatarka scored eight points and hit two three’s for the Lights as well. Ben Walker paced the Griffins with a game-high 18 points.

Now the Lights will turn their attention to the Warriors Saturday night. LC State lost to UGF Thursday night at home and the Lights beat the Warriors by 10 points last month in Havre. Thursday night’s win did lock up at worst a second-place finish for the Lights, who will be at home for the first round of the Frontier playoffs against either Montana Tech, Rocky or LC State depending on what happens around the league on Saturday night. A win in Idaho, coupled with a Carroll win over Western Saturday night in Helena would give the Lights the outright league title. If Northern and Western both win, the league title will be shared and home-court advantage will come down to tiebreakers, and the same would be true if both teams happen to lose Saturday night. A Western win and a Northern loss Saturday would give the Lights a solo second-place finish.
Northern and LC State will tip off at 8:30 p.m. M.S.T. Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho. The game can be viewed live on the internet by going to www.msun.edu/athletics.

Lights 60, Westminster 57

MSU-N — Devin Jackson 13, Shaun Tatarka 8, Joe Simpson 6, Sean Kelly 4, Ben Mitchell 17, David Maddock 12. Totals: 23-41 6-8 60.
