Lights geared up for Tech tonight
George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team were pinned into a corner after suffering three straight losses two weeks ago. Now the Lights are the No. 1 seed in the Frontier Conference tournament – a testament to just what kind of basketball they played down the stretch.

Tonight at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, the No. Lights bring a four-game winning streak into a first-round matchup with Montana Tech in the opening round of the Frontier playoffs. Tip for tonight’s game is 7 p.m.

After suffering losses at UGF, UM-Western and Tech, the Lights were free falling and out of first place for the first time all season long. But Northern, which is led by a veteran group of eight seniors, as well as stalwarts like junior Devin Jackson and redshirt-freshman Corbin Pearson, quickly got back on track by sweeping Rocky Mountain College and Carroll at home, then sweeping road games at Westminster and Lewis-Clark State to end the regular season. And here the Lights are, back in first as Frontier co-champions and with home-court advantage throughout the playoffs.

“It’s hard to emphasize just how big sweeping Westminster and LC on the road was,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “Very few Montana teams have ever done it, and for these guys to go do it on the last weekend of the regular season, with everything there was at stake, it’s just flat-out impressive. I couldn’t be more proud of what this team has done the last couple of weeks.”

But as well as the Lights have played, and they have played well, shooting better than 42 percent from the 3-point line and 50 percent from the field in their last four games, Northern must now refocus and turn its attention to the one-and-done playoff format. And that starts with the Orediggers, the last team to beat the Lights. Tech beat Northern 63-55 just three weeks ago in Butte. And though the Diggers’ finished last in the Frontier and come in with an 11-14 overall record, Huse knows the regular season matchups now mean nothing.

“It sounds like a cliché, but it’s so true in our league. Anybody is capable of beating anybody,” Huse said. “We’ve seen that all year in our league. The teams in the conference have really kind of beat up on each other.

“And they (Diggers’) beat us the last time we played them,” he added. “So the last thing we’re doing is taking them lightly.”

Tech did indeed beat the Lights last time around, and the Orediggers also gave Northern some trouble in a 62-52 Lights’ win back in January. Tech is a talented team with good size. The Orediggers are led by 6-6 freshman Adam Greger, who scores 13 points and grabs six rebounds per game. But they also get good production from veteran guards Tyree Haynie and A.J. Paine, both of whom can shoot the ball well from all over the floor. As a team, Tech is last in the league in scoring offense, averaging just 62 points per game, but part of that is the style the Diggers’ like to run. On defense, Tech is fifth in the Frontier yielding 65 points per outing.
“We have to figure out a way to play better against them this time around,” Huse said. “In either game, we didn’t play that well. They are athletic and have good quickness and they defend the half court really well. Offensively, they are as patient as any team we face and they force you to stay on your toes for 40 minutes defensively. So all the way around, we need to be better in this game than we were the last two times we played them.”

And the Lights already seem to be doing that. Northern has torched the nets the last few outings, with Jackson leading the way. Over the last four games, Jackson is averaging 18 points per and shooting better than 50 percent from beyond the arc. Shaun Tatarka, who scored a game-high 18 points at LC State on Saturday night, leads the Lights in scoring at 13 points per game, while LaVon Myers and Joe Simpson each average 11. David Maddock has also picked up the shooting pace lately, while Ben Mitchell, Jordan Harris and Pearson have given Northern quality bench minutes down the stretch run.

“I couldn’t be more proud of the way this team has rose to the occasion,” Huse said. “They really showed a lot of character and determination in doing what they’ve done the last couple of games. So with that said, I know they are focused and ready for this game against Montana Tech. It’s going to be another tough, hard-fought physical Frontier basketball game. And I think our guys are ready for that.”

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Orediggers will tip off at 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. If Northern wins, the Lights will host the lowest remaining seed in the semifinals Friday night.

No. 21 MSU-Northern vs Montana Tech
Tonight at 7 p.m
MSU-Northern Fieldhouse

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM
Streaming: www.msun.edu/athletics
Twitter: www.twitter/havredaily

Lights Probable Starters
G Shaun Tatara, Sr. 13 ppg
G LaVon Myers, 6-2, Sr. 11 ppg
G Devin Jackson, 6-1, Jr., 12 ppg
F Sean Kelly, 6-6, Sr. 5 ppg
F Joe Simpson, 6-4, Sr., 11 ppg, 6 rpg