Lights put away Tech; On to the semis
George Ferguson
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The Montana Tech Orediggers were the last team to beat the Montana State University-Northern Lights during the regular season. But the Lights were not about to let that happen again.

The No. 21 Lights began defense of their Frontier Conference championship by thumping the talented Orediggers 72-57 Tuesday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, setting up a semifinal showdown with the Great Falls Argos Friday night in Havre.

And though the Lights won by 15 on Tuesday night, and had as big as a 24-point lead in the second half, the game was much more difficult than it looked.

"Give Tech credit," Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. "Make no mistake, that’s a very good eighth place team we just played. They (Orediggers) took us to the wire both times during the regular season and they were by no means an easy out tonight.

"I thought we played well in stretches," he added. "But they just kept fighting, kept coming at us. They came in here and played physical and played hard and they deserve a ton of credit for that."

The Lights deserve a ton of credit for breaking the game wide open midway through the first half. Tech came in and played inspired early on and Northern may have been a little fatigued after only returning from a three-day road trip on Sunday morning.

But the Lights have been a great defensive team all season long, and it was defense that got them going Tuesday night. Tech was hanging close even after Shaun Tatarka and David Maddock buried back-to-back 3-pointers, but the Lights started to separate when LaVon Myers and Joe Simpson hooked up for steals and easy transition baskets on two straight Tech possessions. The second steal resulted in the first of two Simpson thunder dunks on the night and it was part of 14-1 run by the Lights, leaving the game at 30-15 with 3:53 to go in the half.

"Basically, our defense leads to a lot of easy baskets," Tatarka said. "It’s been that way for two years now. And when we get up and get after it like we did tonight, we can get some easy baskets. And we really got after them on the defensive end."

Ultimately, the Lights outscored Tech 22-3 in the final 7:13 of the first half, leading 39-17 at the break. And the run carried over into the second. After another layup by Simpson, the Lights were ahead by a commanding 24 points at 43-19 with most of the second frame still to play.

However, the Orediggers, who beat the Lights three weeks ago in Butte, had some fight left in them. A.J. Paine, Tanner Neumann and Adam Greger all hit triples as the Diggers’ went on a 14-4 run and cut the lead all the way down to 11 points with 12 minutes to play. Northern responded with another Simpson...
dunk off a steal as the Lights turned Tech over 15 times, but the Diggers would again shave the lead down to 11 on a Tyree Haynie three with four minutes to go. A Tatarka three and some solid free throw shooting and rebounding down the stretch was enough however, to keep the Diggers’ at bay and move advance Northern into the semifinals for the eighth straight season.

“For as well as we played in the last 10 minutes of the first half, we played about as bad in the last 10 minutes of the game,” Huse said. “Some of that was Tech because they really never quit. And some of it might have been some fatigue. It wasn’t an easy turn around to play this game after just coming off that last road trip. And I saw our guys start to tire a little there towards the end of the game.

“But this tournament is about survive and advance,” he added. “And we played well enough to do that tonight. So we’ll be pleased with this win and then dig in and get ready for Friday night.”

The Lights went 8-for-18 from beyond the arc and shot 47 percent from the field. Northern also played a clean game, committing just 10 turnovers, though MSU-N’s defensive game plan allowed Tech to win on the boards 43-28.

Northern was also balanced in the scoring column. Simpson led five Light sin double figures with 16 points, while Tatarka and Myers each scored 11. Tatarka hit three trey’s. Ben Mitchell also gave the Lights a big 11 points off the bench, including two key putback baskets just as Tech was making its run midway in the second half. Jackson added 10 points and Simpson led with four rebounds.

Tech, which ends its season with an 11-15 record, got a game-high 17 points from Greger, while Cole Conway had a double-double with 14 points and 11 boards.

It was a solid start to the Frontier playoffs for the Lights (25-6), who will now play rival Great Falls on Friday night at 7 p.m. in Havre. And Tatarka credited his team for not looking past the Orediggers, even though the Lights have home-court advantage throughout the playoffs.

“That’s what you have to do in this tournament, take it one game at a time,” Tatarka said. “That’s always how we approach every game, but in this tournament, if you look past someone, you’re done. So we came in here tonight focused on only Tech and nothing else. And that’s what we’re going to keep doing. Taking it one play at a time, one game at a time.”

**Lights Notes:** Tech received two technical fouls Tuesday night, one on the bench and one on forward Brian Cummings, who slammed Tatarka to the floor after a made Northern basket. The Lights scored 19 points in transition and had nine steals, four by Simpson. Northern was without the services of redshirt-freshman Corbin Pearson, who was injured in practice earlier this week. Another redshirt-freshman, Pat Jensen capped off the game with a 3-pointer just before time expired. The Argos, Northern’s next opponent, took out Carroll 80-78 Tuesday night in Helena.

**Lights are 25-6; Up Next: Vs. Great Falls on Friday**

**Lights 72, Montana Tech 57**
MT — Neumann 3-7 2-2 9, Daniel Simon 1-5 0-0 2, Brian Cummings 0-6 0-0 0, AJ Paine 1-7 0-0 3, Brandon Rydberg 1-2 0-0 2, Reid Baerlocher 0-0 0-0 0, Cole Conway 5-7 4-5 14, Tyree Haynie 4-12 0-0 10, Adam Greger 8-13 0-0 17. Totals 23-59 6-7 57

MSU-N — David Maddock 2-2 0-0 5, Devin Jackson 2-7 4-4 10, Jordan Harris 0-2 0-0 0, Shaun Tatarka 3-9 2-4 11, LaVon Myers 3-9 5-6 11, Sean Kelly 1-3 0-0 2, Mike LaValley 0-0 0-0 0, Chris Brown 1-1 1-2 3, Joe Simpson 8-12 0-1 16, Ben Mitchell 5-10 0-0 11, Pat Jensen 1-1 0-0 3, Baird Henning 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 26-56 12-17 72


Frontier Playoffs

Tuesday
MSU-Northern 72, Montana Tech 57
UM-Western 78, Lewis-Clark 56
Great Falls 80, Carroll 78
Westminster 73, Rocky Mountain 53

Friday
MSU-Northern vs Great Falls
UM-Western vs Westminster