It's a rubber match with Lights, Argos
George Ferguson
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The University of Great Falls Argos are having their best season in 25 years, and certainly their best since the school brought back basketball 11 years ago.

The Argos have also started to rekindle what has been a pretty one-sided rivalry with the Montana State University-Northern Lights. Tonight in Havre, that fire could get stoked even hotter when the Argos invade the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse for a Frontier Conference semifinal showdown with the No. 21 Lights. Tip-off for tonight’s game is set for 7 p.m.

Like the Argos, Northern is having a season of epic proportions. The Lights, who are the defending Frontier champions, got to 20 wins faster than any other Northern team ever has, they reached as high as No. 10 in the NAIA Coaches Poll, and they captured the Frontier regular season championship for the second straight year, and are likely locked into a berth in the upcoming NAIA national tournament.

That’s a special season by all accounts.

However, there was one moment, one split second really, which almost derailed Northern’s year, and it happened against the Argos. Just last month in Great Falls, UGF’s Leon Sutton capped a wild comeback by the Argos by banking in a 3-pointer as time nearly ran out, giving UGF a huge rivalry win over the Lights, which ultimately sent Northern on a three-game losing streak.

MSU-N rebounded from the streak to win four straight, and that streak extended to five on Tuesday when the Lights thumped Montana Tech in the quarterfinals. But the UGF game back in February is one the Lights haven’t forgotten, and neither is the one-point win the Lights gutted out against the Argos in the conference opener back in January at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

And though the Lights (25-6) haven’t forgotten about the bitter loss in Great Falls, it’s not revenge which is on head coach Shawn Huse’s mind entering tonight’s game. It’s more about making sure his team plays well against a Great Falls’ squad which has given the Lights all they can handle this season.

“Even though we play a little different style of basketball, what’s happened between us and them at the end of the two games this year would indicate we’re pretty evenly matched,” Huse said. “Both times have gone right down to the wire, and it’s going to take a heck of an effort again on Friday night. UGF is an athletic, talented and explosive team and I don’t think this game will be any less of a challenge than the last two have been.”

The Argos (20-10) have had a remarkable season and are trying to play their way into their first national tournament in over two decades. UGF has had a lot of firsts this season, including its highest finish in the Frontier regular season and its first playoff win since sports were reinstated at the school. That playoff win came Tuesday night when the Argos toppled Carroll College 80-78 in dramatic fashion in Helena.

In that game, Miguel Bocachica drilled a Frontier playoff record 11 3-pointers and scored 38 points. Bocachica is just one of a handful of dangerous Argos, including leading scorer Marcel Towns (6-2), Melvin Williams (6-2), James Holmes (6-6) and 6-9 center Ken Anderson. From top to bottom, UGF may be equal to the Lights in depth as head coach Steve Silsby will play as many as 11 players throughout the course of the game. UGF also leads the Frontier in scoring, averaging nearly 73 points per contest, while the Argos
are a very good defensive team, allowing just 64 points per game, which is second only to Northern’s NAIA-best 58 points per game allowed.

“It’s going to be a tremendous challenge,” Huse said. “Somehow, we have to find a way to defend what they do. They are explosive and athletic on the offensive end. We have to find a way to slow them down and make sure we rebound, because they also get after it on the boards.

“Offensively, we have to find some ways to get buckets,” he added. “And that’s not easy to do with their length, athleticism and size. They really get after you defensively. That’s been something they’ve been really consistent with all year.”

And aside from one down stretch of play, the Lights have been consistent too. Northern has been the best defensive team in the NAIA wire-to-wire, and the Lights have found some resurgence on offense over the last three weeks. Northern’s scoring, 3-point shooting and field goal percentages have all risen during its five-game winning streak and the Lights will look to continue that trend at home tonight.

Individually, the Lights have been getting a great, collective effort. Devin Jackson has been averaging 17 points per game over his last five outings, while Shaun Tatarka still leads the Lights at 13 points per night. Joe Simpson, Northern’s top defender and rebounder, is also heating up. He’s been in double figures for nine straight games and scored a game-high 16 points in Tuesday night’s win over Tech. LaVon Myers also averages 11 points per game, while David Maddock and Ben Mitchell have combined to give the Lights a combined 15 bench points per game during Northern’s most recent winning streak. Sean Kelly, Jordan Harris and Chris Brown give MSU-N an added inside presence, which the Lights will need to night against the long and athletic Argos. As a team, the Lights are shooting better than 45 percent from three over the course of their last five games.

And with a 63-62 win in January, and a 69-68 loss to the Argos in February, this season’s series couldn’t be any closer, and that’s what makes tonight’s game so intriguing. There’s no doubt the Argos try to rise to the occasion against Northern, and now in the semifinals for the first time in decades, UGF is perhaps playing its biggest game in school history.

However, Northern has been down this road before. The Lights have been the hunted all year, and with a bevy of seniors with Frontier title experience, Northern won’t be phased by the magnitude of the moment. Instead, the Lights are focused on winning one game, tonight, in their house. Nothing more, nothing less.

“You hope, when you get to big games like this, that the experience we have will pay off,” Huse said. “I’d like to think that it would. Our guys are very determined, very focused, and I suspect that our concentration level will be very high for this game. It has to be against an explosive team like UGF.”

The winner of tonight’s game will face either second-seeded UM-Western on third-seeded Westminster. The Bulldogs and Griffins play tonight in the other semifinal in Dillon. Those two teams split their regular season series, just as the Lights and Argos did this year in conference play.

Tonight’s rubber match between the Lights and Argos will tip off at 7 inside the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse in Havre. The winner will advance to Monday night’s championship game with the Frontier’s automatic bid to the NAIA national tournament on the line. Tonight’s game can be heard locally on 92.5 KPQX FM.

**No. 21 MSU-Northern vs Great Falls**  
**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, 6-0, 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