**Championship game tonight**

*Lights clash with Bulldogs for Frontier title at Armory*

George Ferguson  
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On Friday night, the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team took care of one revenge game when the Lights dismantled the University of Great Falls Argos in the Frontier Conference semifinals. Now, the Lights turn their attention to another.

Tonight in Havre, everything will be on the line when the No. 21 Lights square off with the No. 17 UM-Western Bulldogs in the Frontier Conference championship game. The game is set to tip off at 7 inside the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

The Lights (27-6) are going for their second straight Frontier title, after winning the championship a year ago on Carroll College's home floor. But tonight will be extra special, because Northern is playing perhaps its biggest nemesis on its own home floor in a championship game. The last Frontier title game to be played in Havre was back in 1998.

"It feels really good to have the championship game here at home, " MSU-N senior Shaun Tatarka said after Friday night’s 81-56 win over UGF. "After winning it last year at Carroll, we had high expectations for ourselves this season. We wanted to be in this game at home, we expected to be here. This is what we’ve worked all season for. “

And the Lights are now just one win away from repeating as Frontier champions, something that hasn’t happened at Northern in well over a decade.

But standing in the Lights’ way is the Bulldogs (24-8). Western tied Northern for the Frontier regular season championship, with both teams going 10-4 in league play. During the regular season, the Lights beat the Bulldogs 63-55 on Jan. 13 in Havre, then Western returned the favor by beating the Lights 89-75 on Feb. 10 in Dillon. Tonight’s rubber match is the fourth straight year the Lights and Bulldogs have met in the postseason, and Northern head coach Shawn Huse expects nothing less than a great game.

"At this point in the season, everybody is going to play their own style, “ Huse said. “And it’s usually the one that plays their own style better who comes out on top.

"So I don’t expect them (Bulldogs) to be much different than the last time we saw them, “ he added. “Sure, both teams will make little adjustments, but with only a couple of days to prepare, this game will come down to who plays better for 40 minutes. “

While Northern breezed past UGF in one Frontier semifinal Friday night, the Bulldogs had to beat Westminster 70-68 on a Brandon Brown jump shot at the buzzer to advance to tonight’s tilt.

And Brown is the catalyst for the Bulldogs. The reigning Frontier Player of the Year averages 22 points, four assists and three steals per game, all tops in the conference. But Western’s talent and depth will certainly challenge the Lights tonight. Kyle Erickson (6-5) scored a career-best 34 points the last time Western faced Northern, while the front line of Tyler Hurley (6-5) and Kyle Perry (6-9) are as formidable as any front line the league.
They (Bulldogs) are good, ” Huse said. “There’s no question about that. We have to find a way to slow them down because they are very explosive offensively. And on the other end, we’re going to have to score more than the last time we faced them. We went through a six-minute stretch in Dillon where we didn’t score at all and that was the difference in that game. For us to be successful, we’re going to have to do better than that on Monday night. ”

The Lights have been doing better since that loss in Dillon. Northern is on a six-game winning streak and, coming into tonight’s finale, the Lights have shot better than 50 percent from the field and 45 percent from the 3-point-line during that stretch. During that same streak, Tatarka, Devin Jackson, Joe Simpson and LaVon Myers have all averaged in double figures.

But another factor tonight may be the home court itself. Northern is hoping for a sell-out crowd tonight, and is asking fans to arrive as early as possible because general admission seating is on a first-come-first-serve basis. Western is expected to bring a fan bus as well, so a large crowd should be on hand. A “white-out” is planned for the game, as all Northern fans are asked to wear white shirts to the contest. There is also a planned Northern Pep Rally from 4-6 p. m. tonight at the Golden Spike.

All season long, Northern fans have created the best environment in the Frontier and Huse and the Lights are hoping for an even more intense atmosphere in what will be the final home game of 2012.

“Our fans have shown why we have the best college basketball environment in the conference, ” Huse said. “They are loud, and they really energize our guys. Our players feed off their intensity and they appreciate the support so much. I expect it will be a great atmosphere for this game, and we’re very fortunate to have the opportunity to play this game on our home floor.

“It means a lot to have this game at home, ” Tatarka added. “I can’t even imagine what it’s going to be like in this place on Monday night. ”

Both the Lights and Bulldogs are locks to go to the NAIA national tournament next week in Kansas City, but the winner of tonight’s game will receive the Frontier’s automatic bid and probably the higher seed in the field of 32.

MSU-Northern vs UM-Western, 7 p. m. at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse

Admittance: Tonight’s game will have Frontier Conference prices in effect. Prices are the same as the previous two playoff games. General admission seating is on a first-come-first-serve basis. Northern fans are being asked to come early.

"White-Out the Bulldogs”: A planned "white-out" is in effect for tonight’s game. All Northern fans are asked to wear a white shirt to the game.

Pep Rally: There will be a pre-game rally for the Lights starting at 4 p. m. this afternoon at the Golden Spike. The event will last until 6 p. m. and Happy Hour will be moved up in accordance with the event.

Online: The game will be streamed live at www.havredailynews.com/sports_live and can be followed on twitter at www.twitter.com/havredaily