One win away: Lights crush Argos
Northern thrashes UGF in Frontier semifinals, setting up tonight’s title showdown with Western
George Ferguson
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The University of Great Falls Argos cooled off a red-hot Montana State University Northern Lights team back in January. But Northern had no intentions of letting the Argos do the same thing in the Frontier Conference semifinals.

On Friday night, inside a ear-shattering and nearly sold out MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, the No. 21 Lights advanced to their second straight Frontier championship game by thumping the Argos 81-56.

"This was a great win for us," Northern senior David Maddock said. "UGF is a great team. They’ve battled us all year. But I think tonight we just executed really well. We had a game plan and we came out and executed it exactly how coach wanted us to.

"It’s special to have the championship game at home," he added. "Tonight was a great moment for our fans and hopefully we’ll give them another great moment on Monday night."

In particular, Friday night turned out to be especially great for the Lights and their raucous fans in the second half. Northern and UGF had split the regular season series with each team winning by one point on its own home floor.

And the way UGF and the Lights went at each other defensively in the first half, the semifinal bout looked like it was heading to a photo finish as well.

However, Northern senior Shaun Tatarka drilled a 3-pointer to start the second half, with the Lights already leading 33-29, and little did anyone know at the time, but his trey was the start an overwhelming 20 minutes by the Lights, who made eight of their 11 three’s after halftime.

LaVon Myers also hit a three and Tatarka nailed another to give the Lights a 47-35 lead with 16 minutes to play. And they were nowhere near done. Tatarka and Maddock went back-to-back from long range to cap off a 15-1 run Lights’ run, and the Argos never recovered.

“We were definitely firing on all cylinders tonight,” Tatarka, who hit five three’s said. “We shot the ball well and our forwards had a huge game as well. They were finding us for open looks and when we weren’t hitting from the outside, they were scoring in the paint. It was just one of those nights when everything was clicking for us."

Devin Jackson got into the act, hitting a triple at the 12-minute mark, which sparked another Northern run. The Lights reeled off 18 unanswered points, with Joe Simpson dominating on the interior, before Leon Sutton finally answered for the Argos. But the damage was done. With 6:30 left, the Lights were out in front 72-44 and the game was completely out of reach for the Argos, who had their best season in 25 years.
“It certainly helps when you make shots,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “And we did that tonight. We knocked down a lot of good looks and you must do that against a really long, athletic team like UGF. Our guards were shooting the ball very well and our posts did a great job of setting them up. They made great passes all night. I thought we shared the ball extremely well.

“But I think the thing I’m most proud of is how consistent we were defensively,” he added. “UGF is a tough team to guard, but our guys were not going to be denied tonight on the defensive end. They brought a tremendous effort tonight, and I think we broke them (Argos) just as much with our defense as we did with how we played offensively.”

While the Lights turned the second half into a runaway, the first 20 minutes was anything but. The Argos came out inspired and quickly jumped to a 7-4 lead behind a pair of Marcel Townes buckets. Sutton then knotted the early defensive struggle up at 14-14 with a trey before Jackson and Tatarka gave the Lights the lead back on back-to-back triples.

In all there were eight first-half lead changes. UGF went back in front via a 7-0 run with 5:59 left until intermission, but a three by Tatarka and two straight Simpson baskets gave the Lights a 9-4 run and a four-point halftime lead.

“Give UGF a ton of credit,” Huse said. “They’ve had a really good year. They’ve shown they’re capable of beating anyone in our league, so I feel like we beat a tough team tonight, and we’re as proud of beating them as we are with anyone we’ve beaten this season because they are that tough.”

Simpson led the Lights with a game-high 22 points to go along with five rebounds. Tatarka also poured in 20 points on 5-of-7 shooting from beyond the arc and a 5-of-5 performance from the foul line. As a team, MSU-N shot a blistering 11-of-18 from three and 53 percent from the floor. Maddock added three trey’s and scored 11 off the bench, while Myers chipped in with nine points and three assists.

The Lights’ bench has been a huge asset during its current three-game winning streak and it was again on Friday, as Northern also got production from Corbin Pearson, Ben Mitchell, Jordan Harris and Chris Brown.

“Our bench stepped up huge tonight,” Maddock said. “I think we have all year. This was a total team win. We were firing on all cylinders.

“David (Maddock) has been huge and he’s led our bench in helping us close out the regular season and through these first two playoff wins,” Huse added. “We’ve had a great deal of success the last few weeks and with the way David and the rest of our bench is playing right now, that’s not a coincidence. We really are getting a total team effort every night.”

UGF, which finished the season at 21-12 was led by Sutton’s 15 points off the bench. No other Argos reached double figures, and the Lights held them to 46 percent shooting and almost 20 points below their season average. MSU-N’s menacing defense also forced the Argos into 18 turnovers.

“I think our kids remembered how it felt to lose that game in Great Falls, and the way we lost it,” Huse said. “And that certainly served as motivation to make sure they played well tonight. I thought our guys were really poised tonight and that’s something I’m always very proud of them for. Win or lose, our guys are always poised, have good attitudes and play the game the right way and they did that again tonight.
“It was a special environment tonight and a great win,” he added. “How about our crowd. I think they showed why we have the best home-court in the Frontier Conference and our guys really feed off the energy our crowd brings. Hopefully, we have the same intense atmosphere on Monday night.”

And Monday night is here now. The Lights will face Western (24-8) in another rubber match, with the Frontier championship and an automatic bid to the NAIA national tournament on the line. Northern and Western split the season series and have clearly been the two best teams in the Frontier all season long.

“Tonight was a great win,” Tatarka said. “And it means a lot to have the championship game at home. Last year, the championship game at Carroll felt like a home game for us because our fans were so great there. So I can only imagine what Monday night will be like in our gym.”

Tonight’s championship game between the Lights and Bulldogs will tip off at 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. General admission seating is on a first-come-first-serve basis so fans are asked to arrive as early as possible. Northern is also planning for the game to be a white-out, so fans are asked to wear white shirts to the game.

**Lights Notes:** Northern has now shot better than 50 percent from the field and better than 45 percent from three for six straight games, all wins. The Argos were whistled for two technical fouls on Friday night, including a pre-game technical for a UGF player dunking during warm-ups. In five Frontier playoff games dating back to 2011, Simpson is averaging 17 points and nine rebounds during those contests. Tonight’s meeting will mark the fourth straight year in which the Lights and Bulldogs have met in the Frontier semifinals or finals. Northern beat Western in the Frontier semis last year in Havre.

**Lights are 26-6; Next up: vs Western tonight**

**Lights 81, Great Falls 56**

UGF — Naren Maynard 3-3 2-2 8, Marcel Towns 3-5 2-2 9, Eric Taylor 0-0 0-0 0, Melvin Williams 1-3 3-4 6, Nathan Bailey 0-1 0-0 0, Leon Sutton 6-10 1-3 15, Miguel Bocachica 2-5 0-1 4, T.J. Harris 0-2 0-0 0, James Holmes 2-4 0-0 4, Reid Tramelli 0-1 0-0 0, David Ubadigbo 0-0 0-0 0, Brian Burtynyk 0-0 0-0 0, Paris Oliver 1-2 0-0 2, Joe Simpson 0-2 0-0 0, Ben Mitchell 0-0 0-0 0, Pat Jensen 0-0 0-0 0, Corbin Pearson 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 21-45 10-16 56.

MSU-N — David Maddock 4-6 0-0 11, Devin Jackson 2-6 1-2 7, Jordan Harris 1-5 0-0 2, Shaun Tatarka 5-7 5-5 20, LaVon Myers 1-1 6-6 9, Sean Kelly 0-0 2-2 2, Mike LaValley 0-0 2-2 2, Chris Brown 0-2 0-0 0, Joe Simpson 10-16 2-3 22, Ben Mitchell 2-3 0-0 4, Pat Jensen 0-1 0-0 0, Corbin Pearson 1-2 0-0 2. Totals 26-49 18-20 81.


**No. 21 MSU-Northern vs No. 17 Western**
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. 14 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., 12 ppg, 7 rpg