Twice as Bright: Lights repeat as Frontier champions
Northern tops Western in front of a huge crowd at the Armory
George Ferguson
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After two months of intense basketball all over the Frontier Conference, it was only fitting that the two best teams would meet for the Frontier Conference championship.

Perhaps it was also fitting that the Frontier championship game would be staged in the historic Armory Gymnasium in Havre, one of the longest-standing venues in Frontier history.

The Lights captured the Frontier’s postseason championship for the second straight season, and with the win over Western, secured the league’s automatic bid to next week’s NAIA national tournament in Kansas City.

“When we won it last year at Carroll, it was a great accomplishment for this team,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “But right there in Helena last year, this team set a goal of not only hosting this game this season, but winning it front of our fans. And they weren’t going to be denied tonight.

“To win this game at home is extra special,” Huse added. “And I’m just so proud of this team, of what they’ve achieved, and most importantly for how they carry themselves. They are a great group on and off the floor and they are an incredible group to coach. I’m just really happy for them.

“It’s an amazing feeling,” MSU-N senior Joe Simpson added. “It’s kind of like something you’d see in a movie. No matter what, this was going to be our last game at home this year, and for the seniors, it was the last time we’d ever play here. So it’s a blessing to be able to go out and win this game. It’s amazing.”

Northern’s march to a repeat wasn’t easy however, especially after the Lights went on a three-game losing streak in early February. And the Bulldogs didn’t make Northern’s last hurdle in what has been another dream season any easier on Monday night.

The Bulldogs and Lights waged a great battle, especially in a second half in which Northern never trailed, but led by no more than five points.

In the final minutes, the Lights would cling to slim leads as Western’s Brandon Brown, who scored a game-high 32 points kept his Bulldogs in the game with assassin-line scoring. Northern would answer Brown with 3-pointers by LaVon Myers at the 10:48 mark and Devin Jackson at the 8:21 mark, but it was clear the game was going to go down the wire.

“All the credit in the world to Western,” Huse said. “They are a great team and they came in here and wanted to take this from us. They were not going to just lay down and let us win this at home. Our guys had to go out and earn it and that’s what they did. Western showed tonight why they will be a very tough team to contend with in Kansas City, but our guys just weren’t
going to be denied tonight.”

And Northern wasn’t denied, though Western tried. Jackson put the Lights up 56-53 with a strong drive to the basket with 4:03 to go, then after a series of missed free throws on both ends and a couple more Brown buckets, the Lights again led by just one with 2:13 to go. And that’s when Simpson stepped up and made a tough shot in the lane to put the Lights ahead by three as the MSU-N crowd blew the roof off the building.

The Lights still led by three with just :22 remaining and needed one defense stop to secure the championship. And that’s what they got. Brown let go of a step back 3-pointer which would have tied the game, but for one of the few times all night, he was off the mark. Fittingly Simpson secured the rebound, one of his 11 boards on the night, and threw ahead to David Maddock who laid in the game-clinching layup as the Northern crowd brought the noise to a deafening pitch.

“Our team takes pride in our defense, ever since I’ve been here it’s been that way,” Simpson said. “Western battled us all the way, but we knew, if we could just get stops down the stretch we would be ok. We take pride in executing on defense and that’s what we did down the stretch. And now we’re champions again.

“Defense wins championships,” senior Shaun Tatarka added. “Western is a great team, but we know, every game, if we bring our ‘A’ game defensively, the offense will take care of itself. And I think that was the difference tonight. When we really needed to, we got stops. Every guy on this team plays so hard defensively. Coach Huse preaches defense to us, and we know if you can’t defend in this league you can’t win. Tonight, like we do every night, we grinded hard on defense and ultimately it won us another championship.”

The game was truly a heavyweight fight from start to finish.

Western threw the first punch by racing out to a 7-0 lead. But Simpson and back-to-back three’s by Jackson and Tatarka quickly restored order. Simpson capped an 8-0 run with six unanswered points, then Myers nailed the first of his four triples to put the Lights up 15-13 midway through the first half.

However, Brown scored 19 of his 32 points in the first half and he led a Western charge after the Lights had ripped off 10 unanswered points, ultimately ending the first half with Northern holding a slim, 31-28 lead.

“We knew we would take Western’s best shot tonight,” Jackson said. “They are a great team. But in the end, it comes down to defense and I thought everyone on this stepped up on defense tonight. And we came out victorious.”

The first half saw both teams shoot over 50 percent which eventually led to eight lead changes in the first 20 minutes. There were no lead changes in the second half, as the Lights led the whole way. However, Western got 10 points from Tyler Hurley in the first eight minutes of the second stanza, while Northern answered that stretch with big shot after big shot by Simpson, as well as trey’s from Jackson and Myers.

“I thought, as much as we did to execute offensively,” Huse said. “This game ultimately came down to the little things. Rebounds, hustle plays and execution on defense. And in the second half our guys really did that. They really stayed the course, they stayed composed and they took Western’s
Simpson was brilliant, going 9-of-14 from the floor for 18 points to go along with his 11 rebounds. Jackson was 5-of-10 with three trey’s for 14 points, while Myers had a great game from the point, scoring 12 points and dishing out five assists. He hit four timely three’s as well. Tatarka added a tough seven points, while Brown was 13-of-23 from the field for the Bulldogs (24-9) and Hurley chipped in with 12 points. Northern’s defense held the Dawgs’ to just five three’s while the Lights went 8-of-21 from beyond the arc.

And with a herculean effort on Monday night, the Lights did something no Northern men’s team has done in 16 years – repeat as Frontier champions. The Lights are also headed back to the NAIA national tournament for the third time in the last four years – a remarkable achievement in a conference loaded with great teams and great players.

"Since I have been here at Northern, all we have known is hard work, hustle, family and discipline, and it really paid off in the end," Myers said. "When other teams were sleeping we’re up early, five o’clock in the morning to run lines, and for us to come in here and compete and to make history is a blessing.

"It’s unbelievable," said Jackson. "We set high goals for ourselves at the start of the season. And it was a tough season. But we stayed together. We played it one game at a time, night after night. We knew we could succeed. We knew we could get here. And we’re still together, here we are now, victorious.

“Our kids were once again resilient tonight,” Huse added. “They not only wanted to host this game, but they wanted to win it here, in front of our great and faithful fans. This team went out and won a championship and they won it the right way and I couldn’t be more proud of them for that. It’s extra special to do it here at home. I’m just very proud of these guys. I’ve always said, this group of guys does things the right way, on and off the court. And it’s great to have teams like that, but sometimes, you can have great teams like that and things don’t always work out on the court. But this team does things the right way and they’ve had success and won a lot of games. I just couldn’t be more proud of them."

The Lights head into the national tournament on a seven-game winning streak, and with a sparkling 27-6 overall record. Northern will find out its first-round opponent on Wednesday night. The NAIA national tournament runs March 14-20 in Kansas City.

**Lights Notes:** The last back-to-back Frontier champions at Northern were the 1995 and 1996 teams. Northern last hosted the championship game in 1998. Brown has now scored 30 or more points against the Lights in five of his last games. The game featured just 12 turnovers and neither team reached the double bonus in either half. Over the course of two straight Frontier championships, the Lights have compiled a record of 51-15. Northern’s 27 wins this season breaks the school record of 26 for wins in one season. Fans can tune into www.victorysportsnetwork.com for the NAIA national tournament selection show on Wednesday night.

**Lights are 27-6; Next up: Kansas City!**

**Lights 61, Western 56**

**UM-W** — Kyle Erickson 2-2 0-0 5, Bridger Chambers 1-4 0-0 2, Tyler Hurley 4-12 4-4 12, Kyle Perry 1-2 0-0 2, Brandon Brown 13-23 3-5 32, Jordan Overstreet 0-0 0-0 0, Tyler Miller 1-2 0-0 3, Jake Owlsely 0-2 0-0 0. Totals 22-47 7-9 56.

**MSU-N** — David Maddock 2-6 0-0 4, Devin Jackson 5-10 1-2 14, Jordan Harris 1-2 0-0 2, Shaun Tatarka 3-8 0-0 7, LaVon Myers 4-10 0-2 12, Sean Kelly 1-3 2-2 4, Mike LaValley 0-0 0-0 0, Joe Simpson 9-14 0-0 18, Ben Mitchell 0-1 0-0 0, Corbin Pearson 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 25-54 3-6 61.