Lights hold off Bulldogs to claim Frontier Championship
By Pat Ryan • March 6th, 2012

HAVRE – In presenting the trophy for the Frontier Conference men’s basketball title, conference commissioner Kent Paulson called the Western Bulldogs and the Northern Lights the two “heavyweights” of the league.

And for 40 minutes — two rounds — the teams battled it out toe to toe.

After the final bell rang, Montana State-Northern was left standing with a 61-56 advantage on the judges’ scorecards Monday night at Armory Gymnasium on the campus of MSU-Northern in Havre.

Though the final spread was five points, the game wasn’t more than a 3-point basket apart for much of the game, especially the final six minutes.

“What a great game,” said a tired Western head coach Steve Keller after the finish. “It was a great atmosphere. In the end, it came down to who could get the stops. But our kids played their hearts out.”

Brandon Brown had yet another stellar game for the Bulldogs, scoring 19 of his game-high 32 in the first half. Teammate Tyler Hurley picked up the slack in the second half, where he hit for 10 of his 12 points.

But it wasn’t enough to match the relentless push from the Lights. Though a hard-working Western defense held Northern senior Shaun Tatarka to seven points, Joe Simpson put up 18. The Lights also saw 14 from Devin Jackson and 12 more from LaVon Myers.

The Bulldogs led 7-0 after the first three minutes of play, but Northern stormed back to score the next eight. The Lights went on a 10-0 run late on the first half and led 27-20 with three minutes and 47 seconds left before break, but a pair of 3-pointers from Haynie and Hurley’s first bucket of the game kept the Bulldogs within three at intermission.

Most of the second half was a cat and mouse game with the Lights clinging to a slim lead.

Tyler Miller paced the Bulldogs on the boards with seven rebounds, while Kyle Erickson had five points and five rebounds. Hurley added a block and a steal to his dozen, while Bridger Chambers had seven rebounds and two points.

Simpson added 11 rebounds to his 18 in a key double-double, while Myers had five assists.

In a very physical battle – only 19 fouls were called and 15 total free throws attempted – it came down to position, hustle and shooting accuracy. Both teams had 29 rebounds and both teams shot 46 percent from the floor. Northern made three more 3-pointers, but Western made four more free throws.

“It seems like if we play at our place, we win, and if we play here, they win,” Keller observed. “It didn’t matter, because we’re both going to Kansas City (for the national tourney). Sure, we would have liked to win, but that’s our ultimate goal.”

The Bulldogs have yet to win in Havre with Keller. Since he took over in 2007, the Bulldogs are 3-9 against the Lights with all three wins coming in Dillon.

NOTES: In front of a raucous packed house at Armory Gym, MSU-Northern football coach and athletic director Mark Samson gave a heartfelt speech in memory of recently passed Western coach Casey Keltz.
The entire crowd observed a moment of silence in honor of the Hall of Fame coach. ... The tournament pairings for the NAIA National Tournament are slated to be announced on Wednesday. ... Frontier commissioner Paulson noted; “Though these two teams are undoubtedly the co-conference champions, the other six ain’t too bad either.”

MONTANA WESTERN – Tyler Miller 1-2 0-0 3, Tyler Hurley 4-12 4-4 12, Kyle Erickson 2-2 0-0 5, Jake Owsley 0-2 0-0 0, Brandon Brown 13-23 3-5 32, Kyle Perry 1-2 0-0 2, Bridger Chambers 1-4 0-0 2. Totals 22-47 7-9 56.

MSU-NORTHERN – Sean Kelly 1-3 2-2 4, Joe Simpson 9-14 0-0 18, Devin Jackson 5-10 1-2 14, Shaun Tatarka 3-8 0-0 7, LaVon Myers 4-10 0-2 12, David Maddock 2-6 0-0 4, Jordan Harris 1-2 0-0 2, Ben Mitchell 0-1 0-0 0, Corbin Pearson 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 24-54 3-6 61.