Champions!
Lights deliver a championship to a sell-out crowd
George Ferguson
Tuesday, March 6th, 2012

It couldn’t have been a better scenario for any fan of the Montana State University-Northern Lights. A sold-out crowd. A steamy hot gymnasium with two great basketball teams going at each other with the Frontier Conference championship hanging in the balance.

However, things did indeed get better.

With 26 seconds left and the Lights clinging to a three-point lead over the University of Montana-Western Bulldogs, Northern’s defense forced Western’s Brandon Brown to miss a potential game-tying 3-pointer, which then lead to a Joe Simpson rebound and a Frontier title-clinching layup by fellow senior David Maddock.

The sequence, which lifted the Lights to a 61-56 win over the Bulldogs Monday night, brought a sold-out Northern crowd to its feet and caused perhaps one of the loudest roars ever heard at any sporting event in Havre, as the Lights claimed the Frontier tournament championship for the second straight year.

“This crowd is so amazing, ” Northern senior Shaun Tatarka said. “This is truly a special night. Our goal wasn’t just to win the championship again this year, but to do it at home. Our fans are so amazing, and they made this one very special tonight. ”

An estimated 2,200 fans packed into the Armory Gymnasium for Monday night’s championship game and were loud from start to finish. It wasn’t an official attendance record at Northern, but Monday night’s crowd certainly may hold the record for being the loudest.

And the Lights made some history as well.

This Lights’ team has now won back-to-back Frontier postseason championships, the first Northern squad to do so since Lights’ teams accomplished the feat in 1995 and 1996. Northern is also headed back to Kansas City, Mo. for the NAIA national tournament for a remarkable third time in the last four years.

“To see the Northern guys pull through against Western was fun, especially with the way the rankings were, ” Northern student body President Paul Tokarski said as fans stayed to celebrate with the Lights well after the game was over. “It means a great deal to us here at Northern to grab a home victory, and it is always fun. The last two minutes we (the fans) were trying to make as much noise as possible to get in their (Bulldogs) heads, but that last 30 seconds was as loud as it has ever been in my three years here. ”

Loud doesn’t begin to describe an incredible night in Havre.

The pre-game ceremony included the colors being presented by members of the Army National Guard, as well as the National Anthem being sung by Northern volleyball standout and “American Idol” hopeful Sierra Diehl. There was also a great moment where Northern Athletic Director Mark Samson and Western Athletic Director Mark Durham came together to honor legendary former Western head coach Kasey Keltz, who passed away on Sunday at the age of 79. Keltz retired from coaching at Western in 1996 after 28 years and 409 career wins. He was honored with a moment of silence.
The game itself was a barn-burner as well, with neither team leading by more than seven points the entire way. However, MSU-N led by three at the half, and never trailed in the second half which saw Northern splash monumental 3-pointers by Devin Jackson and LaVon Myers, while senior Simpson poured in 18 points and grabbed 11 rebounds.

The post-game celebration was also a year in the making. About 300 Northern fans and students watched the Lights cut down the nets last March in Helena after defeating Carroll College in the 2011 championship game. On Monday night, a lot more Lights’ fans did the same, while Frontier Commissioner Kent Paulson, Northern head coach Shawn Huse and Tatarka all addressed the excited crowd after the contest.

“Winning a championship is always a special accomplishment, ” Huse said. “But winning it here is extra special. I’m happy for these players, I’m happy for all of our families and loved ones. I’m so happy for all of our students and our fans who got to be here tonight. This was a special win for all of us, and it’s special for anybody and everybody who’s involved with, a part of or a fan of Northern basketball. This night will always be very special to me and to this program. ”

And the Lights (27-6) aren’t done. Northern is headed back to Kansas City for the third time in Huse’s career and the second time for this particular team. MSU-N will find out its first-round opponent at the 2012 NAIA national tournament on Wednesday night when the pairings for the tourney, which runs March 14-20, will be released. Fans can watch the pairings be announced Wednesday by going to www.victorysportsnetwork.com.

For much more coverage of the Lights, see today’s sports section, and follow the Lights all the way to Kansas City with the Havre Daily News.