George Ferguson Column: The Answer: A memorable couple of hours in the Armory

From the Fringe...

George Ferguson
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In some ways, it takes a lifetime to pile up great memories. For the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team, MSU-N students and fans, it took just 40 minutes to compile a host of great memories which will last a lifetime.

There were so many great things about Monday night’s Frontier Conference championship game, a game the Lights defeated the UM-Western Bulldogs 61-55 in, I’m not sure where to start.

But I’ll start at the beginning.

There was the very classy gesture by Northern Athletic Director Mark Samson to bring out Western A.D. Mark Durham to honor legendary Western head coach Kasey Keltz, who passed away on Sunday.

The game itself was chalked full of memories too. Joe Simpson, LaVon Myers and Devin Jackson carried the load for the Lights offensively. Simpson was unbelievable scoring 18 points and grabbing 11 rebounds and time-and-time again, showing his dominance in the paint. Myers hit four three’s but I’ll never forget the one in the second half in which he faked a pass to his right, getting Western’s Kyle Erickson to go with the fake, then pulling the ball back and draining a three to put the Lights ahead by three points with 10 minutes left. Jackson’s long-range bombs and Shaun Tatarka’s tough shots he made in the lane will also stand out.

I have to say, Western senior Brandon Brown will stand out too. How that guy isn’t playing for the University of Washington, Washington State or Gonzaga is beyond me. He’s that good and that fun to watch. But it was equally fun to watch Northern senior David Maddock defend Brown. Maddock is one of the few guards in the Frontier who has the speed and athleticism to stay with Brown step for step and his defense can’t, and didn’t go overlooked.

“Joe (Simpson) was not going to be denied tonight,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “He was just playing at a completely different level tonight. Whatever we needed, rebounds, defending a screen, offensive rebounds, a big shot, he did it tonight. His all-around play was incredible. I thought LaVon really was a leader tonight too. He was really poised and he made all the right decisions tonight. His leadership was huge for us out there.

“And I think you can’t say enough about the way David Maddock has been playing, especially defensively,” he added. “Brandon Brown is a great player, a great scorer, but I thought David did a tremendous job on him tonight.”

Watching the Lights celebrate as time wound down, watching Simpson snatch the rebound off Brown’s last, game-tying attempt was special too.

And the noise the Northern fans made in those final moments of Monday night’s game was not just special, it was intense.

Lights’ fans have brought the noise all season, but that final roar as the Lights staved off Western last time was is the kind of thing people will be telling their grandkids about years from now. It was indeed that loud.
And the crowd itself, perhaps not the biggest in school history, but certainly one of the most enthusiastic ever will forever be etched in mind. I can’t tell you how amazing it was to look up into the stands and see so many people I now, all there with one thing in common – and that was to help will the Lights to victory. It truly was a community atmosphere on Monday night and it’s a crowd that will never be forgotten.

“It was crazy,” Tatarka said. “Our fans are so amazing. I love them all. It was so loud in here tonight, it was just phenomenal.”

The celebration to follow, with Northern players, students and fans standing as one on the Armory floor was just as amazing as anything that happened during the game. This team has given us all so many great memories the last two years, but they certainly saved the best for last. The finally got to cut the nest down in their own gym and that’s just another great memory we can all cherish.

And all that made for a night no one inside the Armory Gymnasium will ever forget. I won’t even forget former Northern stalwart Walynn Burgess running circles around the court during time outs to start the wave, then leading the MSU-N student section in the Y.M.C.A. In fact, I don’t think anyone will ever forget that sight.

As Monday dawned, I asked myself what it was going to be like during the championship game in Havre Monday night. Thanks to the Lights, the coaches, the Bulldogs, and especially the great Northern fans I have my answer.

Monday night was exactly like I hoped it would be — Unforgettable.