Lights were resilient all year, and again on Monday
George Ferguson
Tuesday, March 6th, 2012

In sports, repeating a championship is never easy. Just ask Michael Jordan, the New England Patriots or Lance Armstrong. They’ve all done it.

And not only was beating Western not at all easy, but just getting to the point where they had a chance to play for a Frontier title was a monumental task.

"I do think it was harder to do it this year,” said Shawn Huse, the all-time winningest men’s coach at MSU-N said. "For one, we were the hunted instead of the hunter this year. And with winning the championship last year, a lot of pressure came with that. And I do think our guys felt that pressure at different times this season. In Great Falls, and even when games we won, I think they carried a heavy weight on their shoulders.”

The Lights added to that weight by going on a tough, three-game losing skid in February, a slide which included a last-second loss to rival UGF on Feb. 4 in Great Falls. That loss stung Northern but like the Light shave done so many times this season, they found a way to shrug it off and forge ahead.

In actuality, the Lights had to do that several times this season. While they broke the school record for most wins in a year, an overtime loss at the University of Saskatchewan and a last-second loss at Warner Pacific were setbacks Northern had to overcome.

And overcome the Lights did. After the loss in Oregon, which was back in November, the Lights ripped off 11 straight wins, rose to No. 10 in the NAIA Coaches Poll and didn’t lose again until a heartbreaking overtime setback at Carroll on Jan. 19.

After losses to UGF, Western and Montana Tech, Northern was more than resilient, sweeping its final two home games of the regular season, then sweeping road games at Westminster and LC State for the first time school history.

And by the time Western rolled into town for the Frontier title game, the Lights had reeled off six straight wins, including playoff blowouts over Tech and the Argos.

“I really can’t say enough about what our guys have done the last three weeks,” Huse said. "People don’t get to see those road games against Westminster or LC, and don’t really understand just how tough that trip is. For us to bounce back from losing three really tough games, and to go on and win like we did, even to survive a great game against Carroll at home, it speaks to this team’s heart, determination and their character.

“Things could have gone a different way for us a few weeks back,” he added. "But this team just wouldn’t be denied. They wanted a Frontier championship, they wanted to host the championship game and they wanted to go back to the national tournament. So they went out and earned it all, under a lot of pressure and against some very good teams. I’m just so proud of the way they have been resilient and the way they’ve carried themselves all season long.”

And though they were in a dogfight all night with the Bulldogs, there was only one way the Lights were going to allow this chapter of their remarkable story to end — by cutting down the nets in front of 2,000-
plus screaming and appreciative Northern fans.

“\textquote{It has been tough this season,\textquote{}} Northern junior Devin Jackson said. \textquote{This league is so tough from top to bottom. And we had a target on our back all year. We went through a couple of games where things just didn’t go our way. But we stuck together. We’re one heart beat together, and now we’re champions again.}

\textquote{This conference is so tough,\textquote{}} senior Shaun Tatarka added. \textquote{So even though we won a championship last year, we knew this wasn’t going to be easy. We had a target on our back all season long. We took everybody’s best shot every night and we had some tough losses along the way. But we know what kind of team we have here. We play together, and we stuck together through every game this season. And ultimately it paid off with another championship.\textquote{}}

Another championship indeed. And now the Lights are going back to Kansas City, with at least one more chapter yet to be written. The journey will be as tough as the one the Lights just ended. But this Northern team sticks together and has already proven it can overcome just about anything.