Thirteen players, one heartbeat
The MSU-Northern Lights are a family, in basketball and in life
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Basketball teams often use words like family, loyalty, trust and many other superlatives to define what said team is all about.

But anyone who has watched the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team over the last two seasons knows that when the Lights use those words, they truly mean. In fact, those words define what the Lights are all about.

The Northern basketball family is about to embark on the 2012 NAIA national tournament, where the No. 18 Lights will face the No. 15 Columbia College Cougars on Wednesday night in Kansas City.

And like it has been since the collection of Lights, who came together from all over the place almost three years ago, on Wednesday night, and until whenever the Lights are done playing, it will be all about family.

“We all come from different places,” Northern senior Joe Simpson said. “We all have similarities because we’re basketball players, students, we all have common goals and common interests. But I think it’s the fact that we all come from different places that bonded us together. We need each other, on and off the court and that makes us very tight. It makes us very much a family.

“Joe (Simpson) was the first one of my teammates I met, right when I got off the plane,” said senior Chris Brown, who hails from San Diego. “And soon after, I met the rest of these guys and everything came together really quickly. It’s been a blessing to have these guys as teammates. Actually, they are a lot more than that, they are my brothers really. And we’ll always be that way with each other. Even after basketball is over, we’ll always be connected.”

And the Lights certainly play connected on the floor. Together, the current Northern roster has won 51 games over the last two seasons, and it’s the bonds they all developed off the court, which have helped lead to so much success on it.

“We are very much a family,” senior LaVon Myers said. “And it shows in how we play on the court. We do everything together. We hand out, we have meals together, we’re in class together, we’re on the road together. We all have a trust in each other that a lot of other teams might not have. And I now every one of these guys has my back and I have theirs. All of that carries over into our games.

“This team is really tight in all ways,” senior Shaun Tatarka added. “I think we all realize how lucky we are to have each other. I don’t think a lot of teams have the kind of bond we do. And those bonds help us on the court every night.

“I think one of the biggest things is, we all come here and we are all far from home,” senior David Maddock said. “I think you realize real quick just how much you need each other. How much you have to rely on each other. We’re a long way from our families and to make it, your team needs to become a family. That’s what we have here. We are very much a family.”
The likes of Maddock and Tatarka and the rest of the Lights don’t just preach or think of each other as a family either, they live it every day – on and off the court. In basketball, you see teams who have players get down on each other in games, in practice and even off the court. There are different backgrounds, different ways of living life and different basketball philosophies on any team. But this Lights’ team, right from the fall of 2010 when they first came together, seemed to gel as one and it’s only grown stronger as the years have gone by. And not coincidentally, as that bond has grown stronger, more and more wins, and conference titles have piled up in the process.

"A lot of us come from junior colleges and at that level, you absolutely don’t get that kind of bond with your teammates. It just isn’t like that,” MSU-N senior Sean Kelly, who comes from Grover Beach, Calif., said. “But right away when I got here, it was a totally different feeling. I quickly built friendships with all of these guys that I know will last the rest of my life. And when you have the closeness, that family atmosphere off the court, it leads to a special kinship on it. We have so much trust in each other, we all know each other so well that that translates to how we play together, and that is one of the biggest reasons we’ve been so successful.

“We are brothers,” senior Jordan Harris added. “Some teams just don’t have what we have. We can relate to each other and communicate with each other, not just about basketball, but all things in life. I consider every one of these guys my brother and I’ll always be there for them, and they’ll always be there for me.

“I’ve never been part of a team like this before,” redshirt-freshman Corbin Pearson added. “From the time I got here, these guys became my friends, not just my teammates. We all have each other’s back, and this experience has been something I’ve never seen before. We definitely have a family bond.”

Those bonds have made this last five months an emotional season for the Lights, who will graduate eight seniors when their run at the national tournament comes to an end. But just as the tight-knit group has used that bond to succeed on the court, and succeed at a level that few basketball programs have, they will also keep those bonds long after their playing days are over.

“This is a very special group in that way,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “I think we’ve always had teams who have good chemistry and are pretty close. But this team, with so many guys who didn’t even know each other when they got here, really bonded together in a special way. They are as unselfish as a group as you could have and they truly play for each other. They support each other on and off the court and they really have become a family.

“This is a great group of guys,” junior Devin Jackson added. “We have great seniors on this team and this thing is going to be sad when it’s all over. I just consider myself blessed to have had the chance to play to with these guys and the bond we have is something that’s been a huge help to us.

There are 13 players on the active Northern roster, but all of them say they have just one heartbeat. They play as one, they play together and they play for each other. They have lived the college life together and have had an incredible run in the crazy, intense and pressure-filled world of college basketball.

And is this Lights’ team prepares to write the final chapter in their basketball careers together, with the connections they all have to each other, with the bond they’ve nurtured and shaped over the last two seasons, even when basketball is over, the family will always stay together.

“Almost every team breaks the huddle on the word family,” Simpson said. “But not every team really means it. When we break on family, we mean it. We are a family.”

Follow the Lights to Kansas City!

Havre Daily News sports writer Daniel Horton will be with the Lights throughout their trip to the NAIA national tournament in Kansas City. Starting in Tuesday’s Havre Daily News, Horton will be filing trips reports leading right up to Northern’s game with Columbia College on Wednesday night. Also in Tuesday’s HDN, see a feature story on Northern senior guard Shaun Tatarka.
Note: The Lights’ game will be webcast. Northern fans can purchase Northern’s game against Columbia by going to NAIA.org. Fans can purchase a single day package or the entire men’s tournament.