Getting to know the Columbia Cougars

George Ferguson
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A year ago, the Montana State University-Northern Lights face a big and defensive team in the form of Biola University in the first round of the NAIA national tournament.

And though the Lights are back in Kansas City this week for the 2012 NAIA national tourney, and it’s a new year, their first-round opponent has a familiar look.

On Wednesday night, the Lights will take on Columbia College, the champions of the American Midwest Conference. The Cougars (26-6) are making their 15th appearance at the national tournament, and just won the AMC for the ninth time under legendary head coach Bob Burchard, who’s been on the Columbia bench for 23 seasons. And like last year against Biola, the Lights are up against a defensive-minded team with some big brutes in the paint.

“They (Cougars) have a tremendous amount of size and length,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “When you see them on film, you can see how much they like to run the offense through the middle, and then kick out to pretty good shooters if it’s there. But they are very impressive on defense too. Those big guys can defend and they clog up the middle pretty good. They are just a balanced and disciplined team, very well coached too.”

The Cougars, who crushed Hannibal-La Grange 80-46 in the AMC championship game, hail from Columbia, MO, which is also the home of the NCAA Division I Missouri Tigers. The school was founded over 150 years ago and was originally a Christian Female College. The main campus has an enrollment of 1,500 and is considered a liberal arts and technical college.

As for its basketball team, Columbia is the epitome of consistency. Burchard is one of the winningest active coaches in the NAIA and this year’s team is ranked and seeded No. 15 going into Wednesday night’s showdown with the Lights.

Columbia is led by AMC Player of the Year Jordan Dressler (6-8), a transfer from Toledo. Dressler is a monster in the middle, averaging 16 points and eight rebounds per game. But his game is versatile and he’s shown the ability to slip out of the key and knock down shots. In all, Dressler ranks among the top 20 in the NAIA in seven different categories. Dressler has help in the middle in the form of 6-9 center Hal Payne, another big who can also shoot and was the leading shot blocker in the AMC this season.

On the perimeter, the Cougars run three guards at once. Sophomores Devin Griffin and Wendall Crowder both can run the point, and Griffin is the team’s second-leading scorer at just over 12 points per game. The third guard, Henrique Medeiros is the team’s 3-point specialist. He averages just under nine points per night, but shoots better than 45 percent from beyond the arc. Off the bench, the Cougars will look to the likes of 6-2 frosh Tanner Sutton, 6-6 junior Marquette Murrell and 6-7 junior Ben Bowman.

From a team perspective, Wednesday night’s game will be a war between the top two defenses in the country. Northern leads the NAIA in scoring defense at just over 57 points per game allowed. Sitting right behind the Lights is Columbia however. The Cougars average just 59 points per game scored on them this season and they lead in the nation in scoring margin. Columbia is outscoring opponents by an average of
16 points per game this season. On offense, Columbia scored 75 points per game, shoots around 51 percent per game from the field and has made 179 three’s on the season.

“They (Cougars) are a solid team,” Huse said. “They’ve had a lot of consistency over the years and it seems like they are at the national tournament every year. That speaks to what coach Burchard has accomplished with that program. So like every other team at down there, we will certainly have our hands full.”

Northern could also have its hand full with a possibly hostile crowd on Wednesday night. The Municipal Auditorium in K.C. is generally fairly quiet for most NAIA first-round games, but Columbia is only 123 miles from downtown Kansas City, so a strong Cougar following will likely be on hand.

Wednesday night’s game between the Lights and Cougars is slated to tip off at 7:45 p.m. M.S.T. in Kansas City. The winner will advance to play in the quarterfinals on Friday night against either Oklahoma City or Bellhaven. For more on the game, and the Lights, see Wednesday’s Havre Daily News.

Columbia College

Quick Facts

Location: Columbia, MO.

Enrollment: 1,500

Conference: American Midwest

Coach: Bob Burchard (23rd season)

Cougars have made 15 NAIA appearances. Won 9 AMC championships. Are led by AMC Player of the Year Jordan Dressler, a transfer from NCAA DI Toledo University.