Lights take their shot at Columbia
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Defense has helped lift the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team to new heights, including a second straight trip to the NAIA national tournament.

However, defense will be thrown right back in the Lights’ face when the Frontier Conference champions take on the Columbia College Cougars in the first round of the NAIA national tournament. Tonight’s battle between the No. 18 Lights (27-6) and No. 15 Cougars tips off at 7:45 M.S.T in Kansas City and will put the top two defenses in the NAIA against each other.

Northern, which is making its second straight first-round appearance and third in the four years, has led the NAIA in scoring defense from wire-to-wire this season. The Lights allow just 57 points per game, but tonight, they will go up against the Cougars, who are second in the country in scoring defense. The American Midwest Champions allow just 59 points per outing, so scoring could likely be at a premium as the Lights try to get past the first round of the tournament for the first time since 1995.

“They (Cougars) are a tough, quality opponent,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “In looking at the numbers, they certainly like to defend and try to hold teams down. That’s a lot how we like to play. They have really good size and length, but they are also very athletic. They get out and defend the perimeter well and with their size, they certainly can clog up the paint. So we’re going to be challenged offensively. We’re going to have to be very patient, take very good care of the basketball and be consistent in our offensive execution.”

Though the Lights went into the national tournament as the No. 1 scoring defense in the NAIA last year, they ran into another great defense in Biola. The Eagles held the Lights to a tough shooting night and consequently, Northern was beaten in the first round by 11 points. Defensively, and in size, the Cougars mirror Biola, so the Lights certainly know they have to be better offensively tonight than they were a year ago in Kansas City.

And right now, things are looking good for the Lights, who come into tonight’s game with a seven-game winning streak and increased offensive production. In six of their last seven wins, the Lights have shot better than 50 percent from the floor and they’ve eclipsed the 43-percent mark from beyond the 3-point-line in all seven games. As a whole, Northern’s points per game average has jumped by eight points during the win streak, while individual production is way up too.

During the regular season, senior Joe Simpson hovered around the 10-point per game mark, but in the postseason, he’s averaging 17 points and nine rebounds per night. That’s solid production in the paint to go along with the fact that Northern’s guards are hot right now too. Devin Jackson has been on a tear as of late, averaging nearly 16 points in his last seven games, while Shaun Tatarka leads the team at 14 points per game and point guard LaVon Myers scores 11, while dishing out four assists. Myers has also averaged close to 15 points per game in his last five outings. Fellow senior guard David Maddock has also been on fire of late. Maddock is averaging 10 points per game off the bench and almost 12 in his last seven games.
“We didn’t shoot the ball as well as we were capable of (last year),” Tatarka said. “So that’s something we understand we have to be better at this time around. And I think we can do that. We’ve been shooting it pretty well the last few weeks and we know now what it’s like to shoot in that arena down there. But a big focus for us is definitely shooting it better and being more efficient on offense.”

Offense is only half the battle for the Lights though. Northern is a great defensive team and will certainly bring the defensive intensity tonight. But the Cougars score around 76 points per game and lead the country in average margin of victory. For the season, Columbia has outscored its opponents by an average of 15 points per game.

And Northern hasn’t gone up against too many big men with the skill of Columbia’s Jordan Dressler. The 6-8 Toledo transfer scores 16 points and grabs nine rebounds per game and is the reigning AMC Player of the Year. But Dressler is dangerous from the outside too and that makes Columbia a versatile bunch. He also has a partner in the paint in 6-9 Hal Payne. So a big focus tonight will be on the Lights’ perimeter defense, especially the bench. Forwards Jordan Harris, Chris Brown and Corbin Pearson will play a key role in defending the Cougars in the paint, while Northern’s guards will look to stymie the Cougar trio of Devin Griffin (6-1), Wendell Crowder (6-2) and Henrique Medieros (6-0) on the outside.

“They (Cougars) have really nice balance,” Huse said. “And they have good depth. They are solid with the basketball and they are solid on defense. So there’s certainly nothing that’s going to be easy about this game.”

And while the Lights understand nothing will come easy, as nothing ever does at the national tourney, they also understand they are playing their best basketball of the season, they have a veteran team with nine players who played in last year’s national tournament and they are riding a winning streak which includes big wins over Carroll College, as well as Westminster and LC State on the road, two playoff blowouts and an emotionally charged victory over UM-Western in last Monday’s Frontier championship game.

And they also go into tonight’s outing with the Cougars hoping to take things further in Kansas City than any Northern team has in a long, long time.

“We have a group of guys who are very hungry,” Huse said. “And they have proven to a tough and resilient basketball team all season. They are excited to have another shot at this tournament. They have been shooting for this since that final buzzer went off against Biola last year. So this is an exciting time and out guys are very focused and hungry to play this game.”

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Columbia College will tip off at 7:45 M.D.T. at Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City. The winner will take on either No. 2 seed Oklahoma Baptist or Bellhaven of Mississippi in the quarterfinals on Friday night. For complete post-game coverage, see www.havredailynews.com tonight, as well as Thursday’s Havre Daily News, online and on Facebook.

No. 18 MSU-Northern vs No. 15 Columbia
Tonight at 7:45 p.m in Kansas City, MO.

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM
Streaming: www.NAIA.org
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Lights Probable Starters
G Shaun Tatarka, 6-0, Sr. 14 ppg
G LaVon Myers, 6-2, Sr. 11 ppg
G Devin Jackson, 6-1, Jr., 12 ppg
F Sean Kelly, 6-6, Sr. 5 ppg
F Joe Simpson, 6-4, Sr., 13 ppg, 7 rpg