Daniel Horton Column: A trip of a lifetime
Kick the Beat...
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Tuesday, March 20th, 2012

KANSAS CITY — I think the best way to describe my trip to Kansas City with the Montana State University-Northern Lights basketball team is once in a lifetime. It is a simple and commonly used term I know, but when I think of the magnitude of the trip, once in a lifetime just seems to fit perfectly.

When I first got hired on at the Havre Daily News, almost four years ago, I knew I would gain a lot of experience in the sports journalism/photography field. Havre is a sports loving community, and it doesn’t matter if it is little league baseball, Blue Pony athletics, or MSU-N athletics, I have always had plenty to cover for local fans.

But traveling halfway across the United States to cover one of the most iconic basketball tournaments in the nation, I didn’t know that was ever going to be an option.

And it just wasn’t the high level of athleticism and talent I had the opportunity to watch in my stay in Kansas City. What made my trip so memorable, and what still sticks out in my mind is the rich history behind the NAIA that I would have otherwise had no idea about.

This year was more special than some. This year the NAIA was celebrating 75 years in what a lot of people are calling college basketball’s toughest tournament. Just like the front of the program said, 32 teams, 31 games, 7 days, and one champion. And with that much basketball being played in such a short span of time, I am not surprised by just how much history the NAIA has produced, and will continue to produce for years to come.

I know I could probably ramble on for quite a few paragraphs, but there are couple things I recall from this last week that I think every Lights and NAIA basketball fan should know.

• Dr. James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, was influential in the creation of the NAIA national tournament in 1937. The first tournament was played at the same Municipal Auditorium and is the longest continuing national basketball tournament in the United States.

• The NAIA tournament was also the first national organization to allow African-American student athletes to participate. Clarence Walker took the court for Indiana State in 1948 and was the first African-American to participate in a collegiate national championship at any level. Legendary coach John Wooden was the coach.

• In 1957 Tennessee A&I (a historically black college) won their first NAIA title. After being the first traditional black school to win a national title in the nation, they also won their third straight in 1959, becoming the first team in college basketball history to three-peat.

• Only three schools in all of college basketball history have three-peated and two of them were in the NAIA. Tennessee A&I was the first and Kentucky State was the second in 1972.

• There has been a lot of NBA talent to emerge from the NAIA, including Dennis Rodman, who was a three-time All-American for Southeastern Oklahoma State University.
• Including this year, the NAIA national tournament has been at the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City for 49 out of the 75 years.

• Players like Bevo Francis put the NAIA talent on the map. Playing for Rio Grande College, in 1953, the 6-9 Francis averaged 46.5 points per game, still an NAIA record. Francis also holds the college record for most points in a game with 113.

I know some of these statistics may seem pointless, but they are truly what made my trip so special. Obviously I loved being able to shadow the Lights and enjoyed watching them play on such a huge stage in their second straight appearance, but I had no idea what kind of tournament I was attending before I got there.

John Wooden is one of the most famous college basketball coaches in the history of the sport, and I stood on the very floor he coached on, and the very floor he earned his first ever college national title on. There has been 75 years of rich, college basketball history in the NAIA and I attempted to soak up every ounce in just a matter of days. I was sorry to have trip cut short, but knowing head coach Shawn Huse, and knowing how proud the Lights’ program is, I hope I am around the next time they make the trip because I know I still have more learning to do, I know they have unsettled business at the national level.

And without how great the Lights were, I wouldn't have had this tremendous experience.