The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team has already played several tough games this season. And though last week’s 50-point win over Lethbridge in Northern’s home opener wasn’t one of them, several of those games will hopefully have prepared the Lights for what they’re about to face.

Saturday night, the No. 21 Lights will host the Warner-Pacific Knights at the Armory Gymnasium, and the game is sure to resemble a big, Frontier Conference showdown. Tip-off is set for 7 p.m.

Warner-Pacific comes to Havre as the No. 15-ranked NAIA Division II team in the country, and the Knights are picked to finish third in a loaded Cascade Conference. They also return a bevy of talented players from a team which reached the quarterfinals of the NAIA DII national tournament last spring, and those same players waged two good battles with the Lights last season.

“They (Knights) are very talented, they return some talented players and have brought in some good new guys,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “So we have no reason to believe they won’t be every bit as tough as they were last season.”

The Knights have yet to play a game this season, as they open their campaign tonight at UGF in Great Falls. But after splitting with the Lights last year, losing 62-61 to Northern in Dillon, the beating the Lights 69-67 in Oregon, Huse knows what the Knights do well, and what their strengths are.

“They (Knights) are very quick and active,” Huse said. “They play very hard, they hustle and they like to create offense through hustle plays, with their rebounding and by creating turnovers. They resemble a UGF or a Carroll from last year because they play so much zone defense. So I expect this game to be a very-much like a Frontier Conference game for us.”

The Knights have depth and talent, including a pair of 6-6 forwards who can play inside and out in Jeremy Jones and Stephen Harris. They also have an outstanding point guard in 6-0 William Sharp. Sharp is a consummate point guard who is good at distributing the ball, but can also hold his own shooting from perimeter. Warner-Pacific’s top outside shooter is probably 6-1 guard Ryan Parks, a dangerous 3-point threat.

But as good as Warner-Pacific is, and as tough a games as the Knights gave the Lights as season ago, Northern comes into Saturday night’s tilt playing very well at 6-0. The Lights might even be a little ahead of schedule considering they have four new starters and as many as 10 new faces playing quality minutes. And Huse attributes that to a tough, early-season road schedule.

“Warner-Pacific is a tough opponent, but I feel like we’ve already had some games like that,” Huse said. “Those three games we played in Canada two weeks ago were very much like mid-season Frontier Conference games and it turns out that really helped us. We’re by no means where we want to be yet, but we’ve certainly grown a lot in a short amount of time.”

Indeed. The Lights are finding their place as a new team and starting to settle in. That was evidenced by their demolition of Lethbridge last Friday night, where all 12 Lights got into the scoring column and every combination Huse used clicked. Early on Jesse Vaughan, Devin Jackson and Roshawn West are all averaging double around 10 points per game, while the likes of Alfie Miller, Dontae Clark and Will Perry are really playing well. Vaughan and Corbin Pearson are leading the team in rebounds, while the Lights
are holding their opponents to under 50 points per game and under 333 percent shooting. On the flip side, MSU-N is averaging 11 3-pointers per night and shooting better than 45 percent from the field.

But make no mistake, as well as Northern played in October, the month of November is going to present new challenges, including a daunting trip to Las Vegas next weekend, where the Lights will take on No.1-ranked Concordia of California. But it all starts tonight with the Knights.

“This game is going to be a challenge for our team, no question,” Huse said. “Warner-Pacific is going to be very good, very athletic and present a great test for our us. But that’s what we like right now. These games are all good experiences for our young team and playing a Warner-Pacific will certainly help us prepare for what we’ll face in the Frontier Conference.”

Saturday night’s game between the Lights and Warner-Pacific will tip off at 7 p.m. at the Armory Gymnasium. The Lights will back at home Nov. 23-24 for a pair of games against Jamestown College.