A Bright Start
Lights shoot down Carroll in Frontier opener
George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team couldn’t have had a better script to the start of Frontier Conference play, even if Steven Spielberg had wrote it.

The No. 23 Lights opened league play by shooting better than 60 percent from the field and bombing in 12 3-pointers as they overwhelmed arch rival Carroll College, 85-66 Friday night at a loud and boisterous Armory Gymnasium in Havre.

It was an emotional and intense matchup as is always the case when the Lights and Fighting Saints hook up. And though Northern is playing the 2012-13 season with a bevy of new players and four new starters, the Lights picked up right where they left off last March when they repeated as Frontier champions.

“We do have a lot of new guys, and this was their first conference game and first game against Carroll,” Northern senior and two-time all-conference performer Devin Jackson said. “And I thought they all stepped up big tonight. I thought we came in ready to go and everybody did their part tonight.

“I thought tonight was an example of a basketball team being extremely unselfish, and that was huge,” added MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse. “You’ve seen it building the last few games and things really clicked tonight.

“As a team, we really played for each other tonight,” he continued. “We shared the ball, we were communicating on offense and defense and they just played together. It was nice to see that and it takes those types of things, along with how hard our guys play, in order to win games in this league. So I’m just really proud of these guys for the way they played tonight.”

The Lights did play team basketball on both ends of the floor, and it was a thing of beauty.

Not only did MSU-N shoot a blistering 12-of-20 from three, but the Lights had 18 assists to just seven turnovers, while they forced a normally disciplined Saints’ squad into 19 miscues.

And as the Lights beat Carroll for the fifth time in the last six meetings, the long-range shot was the crucial factor.

Alfie Miller, Jesse Vaughan and Roshawn West all made triples as Northern went on an 11-0 run and led 18-7 early in the first half. And when Devin Jackson pumped in back-to-back three’s at the halfway point of the first stanza, it looked as though the Lights might turn the game into a complete snoozer, especially when Jackson capped the run with a steal and thunderous one-handed dunk.
“It’s been a while since we have really clicked like that shooting the ball,” said Jackson, who scored 16 points against the Saints. “We worked hard this week to prepare for this game and all the guys got a lot of shots up in practice. And I think we just did a great job of moving the ball, making the extra pass and finding the right shooter. That was big for our offense and we were due for a night like this shooting the ball.”

The Lights never really went cold, making six triples in all in the first 20 minutes. But Carroll had answers, especially in the form of 6-7 forward Dennis Mikelonis, who helped the Saints claw their way back into the game with a 10-2 run late in the half. And with their backs against the wall, having yet to win a game in 2012, the Saints trimmed the MSU-N lead to a manageable 41-35 deficit at intermission.

“Credit Carroll,” Huse said. “They fought us all the way. And they didn’t go away. That game was not nearly as easy as the final score makes it look. I just think our guys got on a roll tonight and they were not going to be denied this one.”

And Huse’s assessment was on the money, at least for a while.

West buried two early three’s in the second half, but the Saints, behind the hard-nosed play of Mikelonis, were still within five at 52-47 with 15 minutes left in the contest. From there, Northern started to really pour it on as Miller hit two more bombs and the Lights went on a 13-3 run to lead 60-47 with 12 minutes to play. And though the Saints clawed back to within six points one more time, Northern’s offense proved too much as Miller, Vaughan and Alan Brown all buried triples in the final 10 minutes, helping Northern balloon its lead to as many as 21 points near the end of the game.

“I just thought we really shared the ball well,” Huse said. “Guys were committed to getting the best look we could get and they were willing to make that extra pass. And when we’re doing that and we’re making them, you see the result. I also thought our defense helped create some good offense. We were able to get some steals and turn them into quick baskets in the second half and I think when you do that, you’re able to wear your opponent down some. So I thought our effort on both ends was tremendous tonight.”

Miller really hurt the Saints by going 5-for-7 from beyond the arc, and scoring a game-high 19 points. Jackson had two three’s as did West who added 12 points. Vaughan also buried two triples on his way to 17 points, while Corbin Pearson came off the bench to score seven and grab five rebounds.

The Saints, who fell to a heartbreaking 0-8 on the season, got 17 from Mikelonis and 12 from Chris McGrath. Carroll made just three trey’s and had to go without leading scorer Ben Cutler, who was injured early in the first half.

Meanwhile, the Lights, who are trying to defend their back-to-back Frontier titles, are off to a 1-0 start and improved to a solid 11-2 after thrashing New Hope Christian 82-67 (See related story above) Saturday night. And though Northern won’t play another Frontier Conference game until Jan. 3, the start to league play couldn’t have gone any better.

“It feels good to see us click the way we did tonight,” Huse said. “And what’s really good is, I feel like we can still get better. I still feel like this team isn’t where they want to be yet.

“But tonight was definitely how you’d want to start off conference play,” he continued. “And a win like this, against a very good Carroll team, will hopefully give us a nice confidence boost heading into the break we have coming up.”
“This one feels great,” Jackson added. “It’s good to come out and play like this in a conference game. Now we just have to finish out our preseason schedule strong and be ready to go when we start conference games back up again.”

The Lights are off until Dec. 20-21 when they travel to Portland, Ore., for a pair of non-league games. MSU-N will be back at home Jan. 3 to take on Dickinson State.

Raining Three's

Lights 85, Carroll 66

CC – Tyson Percifeld 3-5 1-4 10, Dennis Mikelonis 8-15 0-2 17, Ben Cutler 0-0 0-0 0, Noah Kane Nelson 1-2 2-2 4, Brett Ball 3-7 1-2 7, Riley King 3-7 1-2 8, Jake Hollifield 1-2 0-0 2, Chris McGrath 4-4 2-2 12, Nick Jones 3-9 0-3 6. Totals: 26-47 11-18 66.

MSU-N – Roshawn West 5-7 0-0 12, Devin Jackson 7-12 0-0 16, Corbin Pearson 3-4 1-2 7, Savion Udeh 1-3 1-6 3, Allan Brown 1-3 0-0 3, Mike LaValley 0-1 0-0 0, Will Perry 3-5 0-0 6, Jesse Vaughan 5-11 5-5 17, Pat Jensen 1-1 0-0 2, Alfie Miller 7-10 0-0 19, Dantae Clark 0-0 0-0 0, Anfernee Standing Rock 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 33-57 7-14 85.