Lights ground feisty Blue Hawks
George Ferguson
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Just one day before the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team was set to re-open Frontier Conference play, veteran MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse stated how there weren’t going to be any easy nights in league play.

And in just Northern’s second conference game of the season, Huse couldn’t have been more right.

On Thursday night at the Armory Gymnasium, the No. 22 Lights had to fight and scratch for a 72-65 win over the Dickinson State Blue Hawks, in a game that was anything but easy.

“I felt like we were battling uphill all night long,” Huse said. “It was a hard game, there was no flow to it, and in a lot of ways, it was very ugly. But that’s the way it goes sometimes, and I’m proud of our guys for finding a way to win when we most certainly were not at our best.”

The Lights were particularly not at their best at the start of a game in which the Blue Hawks came out strong. DSU held Northern to just seven points in the first seven minutes and led 14-7. Northern started to battle back via an Alfie Miller 3-pointer, and some hard-nosed inside play by Corbin Pearson. Twice, the Lights were able to catch the Blue Hawks on Pearson shots in the post, while Miller started a late 6-0 spurt with another three. Then, tied at 30-30 thanks to some tough plays by DSU’s Johnie Sanders, the Lights took the lead when Will Perry, who had an outstanding game as well, stole the ball at half court and threw down a one-handed dunk just before the half expired.

And with struggles like seven first-half turnovers and nine missed free throws in the first half, Huse and the Lights were elated to be in front at intermission.

“Dickinson came in and really played hard and played very well, especially at the start of the game,” Huse said. “But we blew some good opportunities, especially out of the gate. It really helps when you get off to a good start and we didn’t do that tonight. We had some early turnovers, a lot of missed free throws, missed layups and missed shots that guys are normally knocking down. So when you look at it like that, it’s kind of surprising we ended up on top.

“And that’s where I’m really proud of our team,” he continued. “Our guys did a really good job of overcoming a lot of stuff that wasn’t going our way tonight.”

Things did manage to go the way of the Lights for a while in the second half however. Roshawn West opened the second stanza with a triple, and eventually, the Lights went on a 12-1 run which included some good contributions from Savion Udeh, who knocked down a big three at the 15:06 mark.
Northern led by as many as eight midway through the second, and seemed to be shooting the ball at a much better clip. But through hustle plays and offensive rebounds, the gritty Blue Hawks didn’t go away. They twice cut the lead back four points, before the Lights were finally able to salt the game away at the foul line, as Devin Jackson and Miller made eight foul shots in the final two minutes.

“We hit just enough big shots in the second half,” Huse said. “Defensively, we hung in there just enough to get some big stops down the stretch, and most importantly, we made our free throws for the most part, at the end of the game. Our guys overcame a lot tonight and I’m proud of that.”

Jackson led the way with 16 points, mostly on hard drives to the bucket. Perry added 12 points and seven rebounds, while Pearson earned a hard-fought 10 points. Miller hit three of Northern’s eight triples on his way to 13 points, while Udeh added seven points off the bench.

As a team, the Lights played much better in the second half, and wound up only turning the ball over 10 times. The Lights also wound up shooting a solid 52 percent from the floor while holding DSU to just 39 percent shooting and four trey’s. The Blue Hawks (0-2, 6-10) got 11 points from Johnie Sanders and 10 points and eight boards from Phillip Johnson Jr. in the loss.

And though it wasn’t pretty, the Lights improved to 2-0 in conference play and 14-2 overall. They also took the first step towards holding serve at home on the first big weekend of league play.

“It was a tough game, one we really had to fight for all night,” Huse said. “And we really appreciate all the fans who came out on a Thursday night, because we really feed off the crowd’s energy and we needed that boost tonight. We miss not having our students here for these games, because they really add to that great home-court atmosphere. But we were glad to have our fans out for this game tonight and their energy is always big for us.”

The Lights will look to make it a weekend sweep tonight when they host a very good Rocky Mountain College squad at 8 at the Armory Gymnasium.

**Lights are 2-0 in the Frontier, 14-2 overall; Next Up: RMC Tonight at 8 p.m.**

**Lights 72, Dickinson St. 65**

**DSU** — Johnie Sanders 3-15 5-6 11, Phillip Johnson Jr. 5-12 2-3 10, Ty Ackelson 2-8 0-3 5, Robbie Morey 1-4 4-4 6, John Hanstad 1-3 0-0 3, Anthony Hodges 4-5 1-2 9, Ryan Sullivan 0-0 2-2 2, James Hayden 0-1 2-3 2, Brock Boos 4-4 0-0 10, Isiah Thomas 3-3 0-0 6, Jarek Hansen 0-3 1-2 1. Totals: 23-58 15-24 65.

**MSU-N** — Will Perry 6-11 0-0 12, Jesse Vaughan 1-4 2-4 5, Roshawn West 2-4 0-0 6, Devin Jackson 6-12 3-7 16, Alan Brown 0-0 0-2 0, Corbin Pearson 5-7 0-2 10, Dontae Clark 0-0 0-0 0, Savion Udeh 2-2 2-4 7, Mike LaValley 1-1 0-0 3, Alfie Miller 3-9 4-4 13. Totals: 26-50 12-23 72.