Streaking Lights trap Bears
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It’s no secret that every night in the Frontier Conference is a challenge. Every game is a true test. And the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team had already met two of those challenges head on.

But on Friday night, in front of a big crowd at the Armory Gymnasium, the Lights passed their first big test of the conference season with flying colors. The 22nd-ranked Lights blew by powerful Rocky Mountain College Friday night, 71-59, improving to a perfect 3-0 in league play.

And the Lights toppled the Battlin’ Bears in the same fashion they’ve become accustomed too – with hard-nosed defense, and timely shooting. Northern made 11 3-pointers Friday night, and on the other end, held Rocky, which was second in the Frontier in scoring, to 17 points below its season average.

“I thought we just played a really good, all-around basketball game,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “Rocky is a really good offensive team with a lot of weapons. So to do as well as we did defensively against them, to hold them to 59 points, I’m really proud of our guys for that.

“We came in wanting to make sure we played with a lot of intensity defensively,” Northern junior Jesse Vaughan added. “Good defense leads to good offense and we were focused on making sure we took care of things on defense first tonight.”

By the numbers, the Lights played great defense for all 40 minutes Friday night. Northern held RMC to just two trey’s and 35 percent shooting from the field. And even though the Lights were overmatched size-wise, they out-rebounded the Battlin’ Bears 37-31, and turned the ball over just six times, while forcing RMC into 13 miscues.

But make no mistake, for most of the night, the Lights were clicking on offense too.

Back-to-back three’s by Vaughan and Devin Jackson got Northern off to a good start. And when Alfie Miller came off the bench to drill his first three of the night, the Lights were up 17-7. Vaughan continued his fine play as he scored 11 points in the first seven minutes of the contest, and for a time, it looked like the Lights were going to turn the game into a laugher before halftime.

“Getting off to a good start was critical,” Huse said. “And I would say that our bench was really big too. You’re only as good as your bench is, and tonight, right from the start, our bench played really well. Every one of those guys came in and were ready to go tonight. The lift those guys gave us all night was really important.”

The bench did play a key role for the Lights. Two three’s by Mike LaValley and a couple of tough plays inside by Corbin Pearson helped Northern stave off a Rocky run, and lead 43-35 at halftime.

Then, in the second half, the bench again came up big, as did the entire Lights’ team.
Rocky went on an 8-0 run to close to within four points at 55-51 with 9:17 to play and all of a sudden, it was anybody's game. But Roshawn West knocked in his third trey of the game to stop the bleeding, while just minutes later, LaValley nailed his third triple of the night to put Northern back up by 10 points at 63-53. From there, the Lights were able to keep control of the game, with Jackson closing the game out with six points in the final three minutes.

“A lot of guys stepped up and made big shots tonight,” Huse said. “And we shot well from the free-throw-line. That, and how well we did on the boards were big keys. Rocky is a big and physical team, but I was really proud of the effort our guys gave tonight. They battled hard and really fought on the boards and that was big.”

It was big considering the Lights really didn’t match up well with RMC’s 6-9 center Joel Barndt, who leads the Frontier in rebounding. But Northern limited Barndt to just four boards and only 12 points. Jeremy Nicholas, a 6-7 forward, did have a game-high 20 points, but he only pulled down three rebounds, after he came in averaging seven per night.

On offense, the Lights went 11-for-30 from three and shot 46 percent from the floor. Northern made seven triples in the fast-paced first half, and all four of the Lights’ bombs in the second half were timely. The Lights were balanced too, with Jackson scoring 20 points and going 6-for-6 from the charity stripe. Vaughan finished with 15 points and West had 11. He and LaValley also combined for six trey’s while Miller had two three’s off the bench. Will Perry and West led the Lights on the boards with six each.

“We shared the ball really well tonight,” Vaughan said. “I got some good looks because I have great teammates and we have a very unselfish team. And when you have that, you have a lot of guys who end up getting good looks and I thought we shared the ball really well all night. But again, it goes back to our defense. We played hard on the defensive end and that really opened things up for us offensively.”

Now the Lights are off to the kind of start the two-time defending Frontier champions were hoping for. Northern is 3-0 in league play and 15-2 overall. And with a weekend sweep at home under their belt, the Lights embark on perhaps their toughest road trip of the season with a lot of confidence. Northern visits arch rival UM-Western Thursday night and league favorite Westminster Saturday night in Salt Lake City.

“It’s so early still in this league,” Huse said. “But we did face some big challenges at home this weekend and we were able to come away with two wins, which wasn’t easy. We know we have big challenges still ahead of us, but our guys did a great job this weekend and I’m really proud of them.

The Lights will be back in the Armory Jan. 18-19 when they host Montana Tech and Lewis-Clark State.

Lights are 3-0 in the Frontier, 15-2 overall; Next Up: at Western Thursday

Lights 71, Rocky Mountain 59

RMC – John Bayo 1-3 1-2 4, Joel Barndt 4-9 4-5 12, Jeremy Nicholas 6-7 7-8 20, Don Parham 3-8 5-5 11, Malachi Roberts 1-7 0-0 3, Matt Strickland 1-8 2-2 4, Nile Finney 2-5 1-3 5. Totals: 18-49 21-26 59.

MSU-N – Will Perry 2-2 0-0 4, Jesse Vaughan 5-9 4-5 15, Roshawn West 4-11 0-3 11, Devin Jackson 6-16 6-6 20, Alan Brown 0-3 0-0 0, Corbin Pearson 3-5 0-0 6, Dontae Clark 0-0 0-0 0, Savion Udeh 0-1 0-0 0, Mike LaValley 3-3 0-0 9, Pat Jensen 0-0 0-0 0, Alfie Miller 2-4 0-0 6, Anfernee Standing Rock 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 25-54 10-14 71.

Halftime: Northern 43-35. 3-point field goals: MSU-N 11-30 (Vaughan 1, West 3, Jackson 2, LaValley 3, Miller 2), RMC 2-12 (Nicholas 1, Roberts 1). Rebounds: MSU-N 37 (Perry 6, West 6), RMC 31 (Parham 5). Fouls: MSU-N 16, RMC 15. Fouled out: None.