Frontier Notebook: Lights, Warriors and Argos square off
Frontier Conference Notebook
George Ferguson
Thursday, January 17th, 2013

Even after Rocky Mountain College captured the 2009 NAIA men’s basketball national championship, it has seemed as though Frontier Conference teams have had a hard time making headway in the weekly NAIA Coaches Poll.

However, so far in 2013, that hasn’t been the case. With Lewis-Clark State ripping off 18 straight wins to start the season, and the Montana State University-Northern Lights not far behind, winning 16 of their first 19 this season, the NAIA has had to take notice. And with a great first half stretch, the Westminster Griffins have also been right there.

In fact, the Frontier has, at one time or another this season, had three different teams ranked inside the NAIA top 10. LC State peaked at No. 3 and remains there this week, while Northern rose to No. 10 last week and sits at No. 12 this week. The Griffins got as high as No. 6 in the NAIA before Christmas, and despite a tough stretch as of late, they are still ranked No. 18 heading into the third week of Frontier play.

Finally, the Frontier is getting some national respect, and it’s well deserved.

And though many argue rankings don’t mean much, they certainly do to Frontier teams. Where a team ends up in the final poll can have a direct effect on whether or not that team receives an at-large bid to the NAIA national tournament, and furthermore, it’s used for seeding as well, and a ranking in March can often mean the difference between a winnable first-round game in Kansas City, or an early exit. That happened to the Lights last season, as they beat UM-Western for the Frontier title and were 2-1 against the Bulldogs for the season. However, Northern and Western were tied in the final poll, and the Bulldogs got un-seeded John Brown of Arkansas in the first round last March, while the Lights drew Columbia of Missouri, an eventual Final Four club, and the team that’s now ranked no. 1 in the NAIA.

So make no mistake – rankings matter.

And thanks to Frontier getting some much-needed respect in the NAIA Poll as of late, the fans get a second straight week of a great head-to-head matchup. Last week it was then 10th-ranked Northern traveling to then 18th-ranked Westminster, and this week it will be 3rd-ranked LCSC visiting the Armory Gymnasium to take on 12th-ranked MSU-N in what should be the NAIA Game of the Week.

High-Scoring Towns

Marcel Towns was already having a season to remember well before he arrived in Salt Lake City last Thursday night. But 43 points later, Towns made sure that night, and the season will never be forgotten. Towns lit up Westminster to the tune of 43 big ones, breaking a 43-year-old UGF scoring record in the process. That led to him being named the NAIA Player of the Week, and after upping his average to 21 points per game, he’s leading the Frontier in scoring.

Towns performance also lifted the Argos to a 73-71 win over Westminster, their first-ever victory on the Griffins’ home floor.

More Surprises
Last week, we took a look at the biggest surprised on the wrong end of the spectrum so far in Frontier play. This week, we need to give kudos to team’s on the upswing.

On the men’s side, you have to start with LC State. The Warriors, in just their second year under head coach Brandon Rinta, might just be one of the most put-together team’s in the country. LC State is deep and talented, though they play no one bigger than 6-6. But balance is key for LCSC. The Warriors lead the Frontier in scoring at 86 points per game, and they lead the league in scoring defense, allowing a scant 59 points per outing. Another scary stat is the fact that LC is out-rebounding opponents by an average of 14 per game. That margin is unheard of, and it’s one of the many reasons why LCSC has just one loss, is the only team in the country to beat Eastern Oregon this season, and is on track to have its first run at a Frontier title in eight years.

The Lights and Argos are also surprises in their own right this season. Northern graduated eight scorerers and four starters from last year’s repeat championship team. But it’s as though the Lights haven’t missed a beat, and right now, they are on the same record-setting, 27-win pace from a year ago. UGF also lost key personnel from last year’s team which just missed out on an NAIA at-large berth. However, head coach Steve Silsby has UGF pointed in the right direction as the Argos appear poised to make another run at postseason glory.

On the women’s side, UGF has also been a pleasant surprise. The Argos won 12 of their first 16 games, and though they’ve slipped a little since January rolled around, there’s no denying how much talent UGF has. The Argos have some high-quality wins this season and will still be a force to be reckoned with as February turns to March. On the flip side is Western, which stumbled out of the gate, but is looking more and more like a team which can vie for a league championship down the stretch.

**Big Games**

The much-anticipated showdown between LC State and Northern Saturday night isn’t the only big one this week in the Frontier. Before the Warriors can even worry about the Lights, they have to face UGF Friday night in Great Falls. And with how well Towns and the Argos are playing, Friday night in Great Falls is every bit as big as Saturday night in Havre will be. Men’s games in Dillon both Friday and Saturday will have lasting implications as well. The Bulldogs RMC Friday night and surging Dickinson State Saturday, and whoever comes out of that trip with the best record this weekend will have a chance to keep pace in the league standings.

Friday night is a big night in Havre too, as the Skylights host Montana Tech. The rivalry between the Skylights and Orediggers heated up last season, and especially in the last couple years as the two team’s have played some barnburners. But no game on the women’s side will be bigger this weekend than Saturday’s battle between Carroll and Westminster in Salt Lake City. If the Saints and Griffins both win earlier this week, they’ll both come into Saturday night’s showdown with perfect 6-0 records and the winner will likely have the inside track on the Frontier crown.