Big Nights in the Armory: Lights awaiting Tech, and a huge showdown with LC State
George Ferguson
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It’s no secret that in Frontier Conference men’s basketball, there are no night’s off. No team is a pushover, and every game has lasting implications.

And that’s what the nationally-ranked Montana State University-Northern Lights are facing this weekend as they host the Montana Tech Orediggers tonight at 8 inside the Armory Gymnasium, as well as the third-ranked Lewis-Clark State Warriors on Saturday night.

Not only is this weekend a huge home stand for the No. 12 Lights (16-3), who are tied with LC State at 4-1 in the Frontier standings, but it’s also a chance to pick themselves up off the mat after a disappointing 32-point loss last Saturday night at Westminster. And with a head-to-head matchup with the Warriors looming, it’s an opportunity for Northern to seize at least a little control of their Frontier destiny.

“This is what it’s all about,” MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. “These are big games and it’s fun to be a part of big games. We’re certainly going to be up for two big challenges this weekend. These are two very good teams coming into our gym. But that’s life in the Frontier Conference. There are no easy nights and any team can win on a given night. We saw that last weekend at Westminster. We understand you have to be at your best every single night in this league in order to be successful.”

And the Lights are hoping to return to their best after the Griffins snapped MSU-N’s 10-game winning streak. It was also Northern’s first conference loss in over a year.

But don’t expect MSU-N to stay down. The Lights still possess the second-best defense in the Frontier, as they allow just 61 points per game, while Northern’s depth plays a key role. Starters Devin Jackson, Jesse Vaughan and Roshawn West all average in double figures, but Alfie Miller comes off the bench to score 11 points per night, while reserves Corbin Pearson, Mike LaValley, Dontae Clark and Savion Udeh add a combined 22 points per outing off the bench. Miller is also second in the Frontier in 3-point shooting, as he makes 42 percent of his long-range bombs.

So it shouldn’t be much of an issue for the Lights to put the loss to Westminster behind them, and while it would be understandable to think the Lights are looking forward to LCSC Saturday night, in what’s being billed as the NAIA Game of the Week, Huse and company can’t afford to, and won’t overlook Montana Tech.

The Orediggers (2-3, 11-8), despite finishing at the bottom of the Frontier the last three years, are much improved. They are big, physical, they rebound well, and they are the best 3-point shooting team in the NAIA, averaging a 44 percent clip from beyond the arc. Tech, which has a home win over Westminster to its credit this season, is also talented and balanced. Star guard Adam Greger (6-6) leads the way at 14 points and six rebounds per game, and he’s as versatile a player as there is in the league. But the Diggers’ get balanced scoring from the likes of Daniel Simon (6-6), shooting guards Bryan Bock (6-3) and Branden...
Rydberg (6-3) and point guard Tanner Neumann (6-2). Together, that foursome averages a combined 36 points per game, while as a team, the Diggers’ put up 73 points and allow 70 per night.

“They are executing really well. And obviously they are shooting the three very well this season,” Huse said of Tech, where he was once a Frontier Conference MVP. “They have a lot of weapons. (Adam) Greger is a tremendous talent who can score in a variety of ways. And he has plenty of help. So a big key for us is being able to disrupt them offensively. We have to be physical and tough and play very hard on defense.

“Basically, all we need to know about Tech is to look at the fact that they beat a Westminster team that we didn’t have any success against just last week,” he added. “That’s all we need to know to know we’ll have our hands full with them.”

And that’s all the Lights need to know in order to focus all their energy on tonight’s game, and not be tempted to think about the huge first-place showdown with the Warriors on Saturday night - no matter how much hype surrounds that game.

“We have to take a peek at the second team of our weekend during our week of prep,” Huse said. “But for much of the week, our focus is on the first game of the weekend. We have to take care of that game first. So while we do look at the second team, the majority of our work goes into that first game, and right now, our focus is Montana Tech.”

Eventually though, the Lights will turn their attention to the Warriors (18-1), who play at UGF tonight. Northern has swept LCSC three straight seasons, but the Warriors are no longer down, or a team on the rise. They’ve now risen to be one of the NAIA’s elite, and there’s plenty of reasons why.

The Warriors are not only the top offensive team in the Frontier, averaging 86 points per game, but they are also the best defensive team in the Frontier and the third-best scoring defense in the NAIA, allowing just 59 points per night. On top of all of that, LCSC is one of the best rebounding team’s in the country, as the Warriors out-rebound opponents by a staggering 14 boards per game.

From a talent standpoint, the Warriors are loaded with veterans, explosive scorers, and size. It all starts with Frontier Player of the Year candidate P.J. Bolte (6-6), who averages 16 points and six boards per game. Bolte is a dynamic and powerful player, much in the mold of Carroll College great Andy Garland, and he can hurt team’s in a number of ways. Surrounding Bolte are talented forwards Danny Marshall (6-6) and Nick Fromm (6-6), while guards Dontae Archie and Robert Ellis compliment standout scorer Jacob Champoux (5-11), who averages 11 points and is a deadly outside shooter.

“They (Warriors) are really balanced on offense,” Huse said. “They can really put points on the board, and they do it in a number of different ways. They are very tough to defend. And I really like the way they defend. They are just very solid defensively, and they rebound extremely well. We’ll be undersized in this game, so we’re going to have to rebound as a pack and really work hard on the glass on both ends of the floor.

“They (Warriors) are having a really good season, they seem to be executing really well in everything that they do on both ends of the floor, and they have some really talented players,” Huse added. “So our work is definitely cut out for us on Saturday night.”

As Huse noted earlier, the Lights have their work cut out for them every night in the Frontier. And this weekend is no exception. But, as the two-time defending Frontier champions, and with so much success, every game the Lights play is a big one. Everybody is gunning for Northern and Huse and his team wouldn’t have it any other way.

“It’s fun to be a part of the big games,” Huse said. “It’s a lot better to be a team that’s always a part of those big games than to be on the outside looking in at them. So I’m just really proud of all this team has accomplished so far, and we’re really excited to be in a position to be playing two really big games at home this weekend.”
Tonight’s game between the Lights and Orediggers tips off at 8 at the Armory Gymnasium. Saturday night’s NAIA showdown between MSU-N and LC State also gets under way at 8 p.m. Tonight's game is a "Blackout" night and Saturday's game is a "Whiteout" night so all fans are asked to dress accordingly.

Northern is on the road to face rival UGF next Thursday, then the Lights visit LC State for a rematch next Saturday.

No. 12 Lights (4-1, 16-3) vs Tech (2-3, 11-8) tonight at 8 p.m.; vs No. 3 LC State (4-1, 18-1) Saturday at 8 p.m.

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM

Internet: msun.edu/athletics

Twitter: Twitter/Havredaily

Lights Probable Starters

G Roshawn West, 6-0, Jr.
G Devin Jackson, 6-2, Sr.
G Allan Brown, 6-0, Jr.
F Will Perry, 6-4, Jr.
F Jesse Vaughan, 6-5 Jr.