Showdown in Great Falls: First place on the line between Lights and streaking Argos

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The schedule hasn’t been favorable to the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team in recent weeks. But then again, that’s life in the Frontier Conference.

And the challenges of life on the road in the Frontier continues tonight as the No. 13 Lights (5-2, 17-4) visit arch rival Great Falls at 7:30. Northern must also turn around and travel to No. 5 Lewis-Clark State Saturday night, just seven days removed from a rough loss to the Warriors in Havre.

MSU-N comes into tonight’s game in Great Falls having lost two of its last three league games, and both losses came by way of double digits. And things don’t get any easier against an Argos’ squad which has won four of its last five and is tied with MSU-N and LCSC for first place in the Frontier standings.

“I think right now we need to correct some things that we haven’t been doing well,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “That’s what’s important for us no matter who we’re playing. “We’ve had a couple of bad losses in our last three games, and as a result, we need to buckle down and get some things corrected. I know our guys feel like we’re a much better team than we’ve showed in those two losses and I know they want to get back to playing like the team they know they are.”

The Argos (5-2, 14-7) won’t make that easy on the Lights tonight. And MSU-N’s last memory of playing in the McLaughlin Center wasn’t a good one as UGF banked in a 3-pointer to beat the Lights a year ago. And much of that UGF team is back this season.

The Argos possess the leading scorer in the Frontier in 6-2 junior Marcel Towns, who averages 20 points per outing. Joining towns in the backcourt is sharp-shooter Miguel Bocachica (6-5) and super-quick point guard T.J. Harris (5-10), who’s averaging 10 points per game. Inside, the Argos have plenty of length with 6-6 forwards James Holmes and Naren Maynerd, who combined to score 17 points and grab 12 rebounds per game. As a team, UGF is stout defensively, allowing just 68 points per night, while the Argos are scoring 62 per contest.

“We fully respect what UGF can do,” Huse said. “They are playing really well right now. They are very capable on both ends of the floor. They have a lot of athleticism and their length is a factor. They can really cover team’s well with their zone, and like every team in the Frontier, they are going to be very tough to find success against...especially on their home floor.

“But I think the biggest thing for us is correcting some of the things we need to,” he added. “We need to improve both offensively and defensively, and that’s individually and as a team. We some areas we need to shore up right now.”

While UGF won’t make improving easy on the Lights tonight, MSU-N certainly will have its hands full when it has to play Lewis-Clark State for the second time in seven days. The warriors (5-2, 19-2) beat the Lights 79-65 last Saturday night in Havre, and stopping LCSC in the paint was a big problem for MSU-N.
The Warriors got 24 points from 6-6 forward P.J. Bolte and another 14 from 6-6 big man Danny Marshall. Because LCSC did so much work in the interior, the Warriors wound up shooting 60 percent from the field and out-rebounding MSU-N 30-20.

So, if Northern is to turn things around Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho, it will start on the defensive end.

“Our defense is going to need to hold up much better against them (Warriors) in a lot of different situations,” Huse said. “We have to be more focused. We have to pay more attention to detail and we need to play better and harder for 40 minutes instead of 30 minutes if we’re going to have a chance to be successful down there.”

While the Lights are looking for better defense in both games this week, MSU-N will want to be efficient on the offensive end too. Devin Jackson leads the Lights in scoring at 15 points per game, while Jesse Vaughan chips in 12 points and Alfie Miller scores 10 off the bench. The Lights also got a career-high 27 points from Roshawn West last Saturday, while Corbin Pearson gave MSU-N a key 12 in last Friday’s win over Montana Tech.

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Argos tips off at 7:30 at the McLaughlin Center in Great Falls. MSU-N and UGF will meet again Feb. 1 in Havre. Northern’s game at LC State will begin at 8:30 p.m. Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho. For online viewing, fans can go to www.msun.edu/athletics.