Lights roar back to beat UGF

Pearson’s late-game heroics lifts Lights to a thrilling win

George Ferguson
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Fans have grown accustomed to the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team playing sound, fundamental team basketball. Of players unselfishly stepping forward when their number’s called. Of rising to the occasion when the chips are down, and having a pension for winning close games.

And the Lights did all of those things and more in front of an ear-splitting crowd Friday night at the Armory Gymnasium in Havre.

The 15th-ranked Lights, on the shoulders of sophomore and former Big Sandy star Corbin Pearson, came back to beat the rival UGF Argos 58-54 in dramatic fashion Friday night, while also grabbing a share of the Frontier Conference lead at 7-3 in league play.

After blitzing UGF to the tune of 16 3-pointers a week ago in Great Falls, the Lights’ offense struggled mightily against a daunting Argo defense Friday night. But Northern managed to erase a five-point UGF lead midway through the second half thanks to a huge triple by Mike LaValley, and what was the start of an impressive stretch run by Pearson.

In all, Pearson scored seven points in the final seven minutes, but none were bigger than the three he had with :51 left.

UGF had gone back in front, 48-45 when Marcel Towns buried a cold-blooded trey with 4:36 to go. But after a series of defensive stands, the Lights clawed back to within one when Jesse Vaughan nailed a huge three of his own with 2:48 to go.

The teams went back and forth again for the next two minutes, but after two Towns’ foul shots, the Lights found themselves down by two at 54-52 with 1:10 to go. After a timeout by Northern, Pearson got open just enough on the right side of the lane, and banked in a tough shot against UGF’s 6-6 Naren Maynerd. He was also fouled on the play, and he calmly sank the free throw to put the Lights in front 55-54. That free throw came on the heels of two big foul shots Pearson had made just minutes earlier, and he also came up with a blocked shot, and a key rebound on the final minute to help Northern seal the victory — a victory which was finished off by three free throws by Roshawn West in the last :18.

“Down the stretch, the game really came down to our defense,” Pearson, who scored 10 points in all said. “We weren’t getting stops. We needed stops and in the final few minutes we buckled down and got them.

“Devin (Jackson), our senior leader went out of the game at the end too and we knew someone had to step up,” he continued. “And it feels good to be the one to do that. But I really think it came down to us executing as a team on defense tonight. That was the biggest key for us in this win.”

“It really was Corbin saying in the huddle, give me the ball,” Added MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse. “And that’s what we did at the end. He made big free throws and layups and he came up with a couple of huge
rebounds. I’m just tickled for him that he was able to step up like that when his team needed him. And it showed we have some more leaders on this team, ready to step up and take over a game.”

And the Lights certainly needed all of Pearson’s heroics in order to escape with a win over the Argos, who have really intensified the rivalry in recent years.

Unlike in last Thursday’s Northern win in Great Falls, UGF played an aggressive man defense against the Lights, and for much of the game, it stymied a usually-potent Northern attack. Will Perry did get Northern going by scoring eight points in the paint as MSU-N jumped out to an early 11-1 lead, capped by Vaughan’s first trey of the night. And when West and LaValley made back-to-back three’s the Lights were in front 22-10 and looked like they were going to run away from the Argos yet again.

However, Towns and the rest of his Argos clamped down on defense, put together an impressive 19-4 run in the final 11 minutes of the first half and took a 29-28 lead into intermission. And besides leading 30-29 just seconds into the second half, the Lights lost control of the game to the Argos for a good portion of the second, which set up the wild finish.

“Give UGF a ton of credit,” Huse said. “They did everything and then some to to put themselves in a position to win this game. They played a great game, and these are the types of games you hate to have to have a loser. But maybe we did just a couple more things than they did to win, and that was the difference.

“For much of the game though, the chips were really down,” he continued. “Except for the start of the game, we just couldn’t get anything going in the first half, and the shots weren’t falling in the second half. And we weren’t getting the stops on defense. So I’m just really proud of our guys sticking with it and once again finding a way to gut one out at the end.”

And the Lights had to be gritty, because in the stat sheet, UGF won many battles. The Argos impressively out-rebounded Northern 36-17, and held MSU-N in check from beyond the arc, allowing the Lights to go just 5-of-18, while holding them to just 42 percent shooting from the floor. Towns was also a difference maker, scoring a game-high 18 points, and making big shot after big shot. But MSU-N’s defense stepped up big when it had to the most, including forcing Towns to take an ultra-tough three that missed with 22 seconds left.

“At the end, our guys really buckled down and won the game on defense,” Huse said. “UGF played great defense all night, but I really believe we won that game with our defense down the stretch. And we came up with some big rebounds by committee, which isn’t easy to do against a taller team like UGF. So I’m just really proud of our guys right now.”

Offensively, Perry went 7-for-11 from the field and paced the Lights (19-5) with 14 points. Jackson matched Pearson’s 10 before fouling out, while West made 5-of-7 free throws and finished with 12. LaValley and Vaughan each hit two trey’s, all of which were also needed to secure the victory, which, thanks to Westminster’s win over Lewis-Clark State Saturday night, put the Lights back into a three-way tie atop the Frontier standings.
“The crowd was a big factor tonight,” Huse said. “They were loud and behind us, and they gave us a big lift when we needed it.”

“How we finished this game shows the character of this team,” Pearson added. “Having lost a couple of games at home already, we knew this was one we had to have. And I’m really proud of this team for stepping up tonight.”

The Lights are back on the road Friday to face Montana Tech in Butte. Northern will also be in Helena Saturday night to take on Carroll College. MSU-N’s final two home games will take place Feb. 14 against UM-Western and Feb. 16 against Westminster.

**Lights are 7-3 in the Frontier, 19-5 overall; Next up: At Tech Friday**

**Lights 58, Great Falls 54**

**UGF** – T.J. Harris 4-7 1-2 9, Miguel Bocachica 2-4 1-2 6, James Holmes 1-7 4-4 4, Naren Maynerd 2-3 2-2 6, Marcel Towns 5-14 6-9 18, Reid Tramelli 1-2 0-0 2, Maleek Singleton 1-5 2-3 4. Totals: 17-44 16-24 54.

**MSU-N** – Will Perry 7-11 1-2 14, Jesse Vaughan 2-4 0-0 6, Roshawn West 3-5 5-7 12, Devin Jackson 2-9 6-8 10, Allan Brown 0-0 0-0 0, Corbin Pearson 3-5 4-5 10, Dontae Clark 0-1 0-0 0, Savion Udeh 0-0 0-0 0, Mike LaValley 2-3 0-0 6, Pat Jensen 0-0 0-0 0, Alfie Miller 0-6 0-0 0. Totals: 19-45 15-21 58.