Lights host Bulldogs, Griffins in huge rivalry games
Northern men look to hold on to the top spot in the Frontier with key home games

George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team has been here before. Four games left in the regular season, fighting for a regular season Frontier Conference championship, and getting ready to battle two bitter rivals.

For the Lights’ program, which has won the last two league titles, it’s business as usual.

Taking care of business is exactly what the Lights will try and do in their final regular season home stand, which starts tonight with a visit from the UM-Western Bulldogs at 8 inside the Armory Gymnasium. Northern will also have a showdown with the nationally-ranked Westminster Griffins Saturday night in Havre.

And the stakes couldn’t be higher.

After beating Montana Tech and Carroll last weekend on the road, the Lights jumped up to No. 12 in this week’s NAIA Poll. Northern is 9-3 in league place with a half-game lead on Lewis-Clark State, while they are a full game up on Westminster, and two wins better than the Bulldogs.

But even though time is winding down, Northern head coach Shawn Huse knows there’s a lot of basketball left, a lot to be sorted out, and his team is solely focused on taking this weekend one game at a time.

“Those are both really big home games for us,” Huse, who’s guided MSU-N to yet another 20-win season said. “But at the same time, we have to look at it as, everybody is still playing for something at this point. And we have to really good teams coming to our place, and that’s all we can worry about right now.”

Two good teams include the Bulldogs (7-5, 17-8), who are by no means out of the championship picture just yet. The Lights handled Western 64-53 in Dillon on Jan. 10, but the rivalry is as intense as there is in the Frontier, and Western will come to Havre tonight, and throw everything it has at the Lights, who have won three straight games and have beaten the bulldogs in six of the last eight meetings.

“They (Bulldogs) are like every other team in this league, capable of beating anyone on any given night, and you saw that with the way they just handled a very good Westminster team last week on their home floor,” Huse said. “They are a team that has good size, they find a lot of different ways to get the buckets they need, they have guys who can shoot it, can drive it and can rebound. So we have to be prepared for all of it, and we know it’s going to take a great effort on our part because they’re playing good basketball right now.”

The Bulldogs are paced by junior Maazin Butler (6-3), who scores 13 points per game. Jake Owsley (6-8) is a force inside, averaging 12 points and eight rebounds per game, while Jordan Overstreet is one of the deadliest 3-point shooters in the conference. He averages 12 points per game and shoots a whopping 46 percent from beyond the arc.

Head coach Steve Keller’s club is also fairly high-scoring. The Bulldogs put up 74 points per night in a league dominated by stout defense’s, which is what the Lights do best. Northern leads the Frontier in total
defense, allowing just 61 points per night, while averaging 70 on offense. The Lights are led by senior Devin Jackson, who’s playing in his final two regular season home games this weekend. He scores 15 points, dishes out four assists and grabs four rebounds. Jesse Vaughan and Alfie Miller each average 11 for the Lights, while sophomore Corbin Pearson has really come on strong of late. Pearson is averaging seven points and five rebounds per game, but over his last six outings, he’s putting in 12 points per night off of a deep Lights’ bench.

“I feel like a big key against both teams this weekend is going to be keeping them off the boards,” Huse said. “We have to find ways to get quality stops and then get the rebounds. That, and we have to be consistent offensively. At this point, we’ve got to knock down the shots when we get them.”

That especially holds true Saturday night when the No. 18 Griffins (7-4, 20-5) come calling. Westminster handed the Lights their worst loss of the season back on Jan. 12, a 82-50 drubbing in Salt Lake City. And the Griffins haven’t slowed down much since. They are the highest-scoring team in the Frontier, averaging 80 points per game, while only allowing 64 defensively.

Individually, Westminster is as deep as any team in the NAIA, as head coach Adam Hiatt routinely plays 12 or more players on a given night. The Griffins are led by senior star Jake Orchard’s 13 points per game, but they are as balanced as any team in the league. Tallon Robertson (6-6) scores 12 and grabs five rebounds per game, while Blake Skidmore (6-0) averages 10 per night. Jordan Bjornberg (6-6), Colton Moon (5-11), who shoots 45 percent from three and Jordan Hayter (6-3) are just a few more of the Griffins’ deep and talented roster, all of whom can go off on a given night.

“They (Griffins) execute so well,” Huse said. “They are sharp on both ends of the floor and if you don’t stay focused, they make you pay. They are a really patient team so we have to be extremely patient as well. We didn’t play well at all against them at their place, and we’re going to have to be much better in every aspect in order to be successful against them this time around.”

Indeed, the Lights will have to play well I what amounts to the two biggest games of their season. The Frontier’s regular season title, a top seed in the Frontier playoffs and so much more truly hang in the balance over Northern’s next four games.

“We’re excited to be at home,” Huse said. “We have to very good teams coming into our gym for a big weekend. And we’re just focused on going out and playing well in both games.”

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Bulldogs tips off at 8 in the Armory Gymnasium. The Lights and Griffins meet Saturday night at 8 p.m. in Havre. Northern finishes the regular season at Rocky Mountain College and at Dickinson State next week.

No. 12 Lights (9-3, 21-5) vs Western (7-5, 17-8) tonight at 8 p.m., No. 18 Westminster (7-4, 20-5) Saturday at 8 p.m. in the Armory Gymnasium

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MSU-N Probable Starters
G Roshawn West, 6-0, Jr.
G Devin Jackson, 6-1, Sr.
G Allan Brown, 6-1, Jr.
F Will Perry, 6-4, Jr.
F Jesse Vaughan, 6-5, Jr.