Heartache: Bulldogs bite Lights right at the end
George Ferguson
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On most nights in the Frontier Conference, if not all, the Montana State University-Northern Lights are at a distinct size disadvantage. And against the tall and rangy UM-Western Bulldogs, that’s especially true.

And that size mismatch wound up being a major difference Thursday night as the No. 12 Lights lost a heartbreaker on Valentine’s Day, thanks to 6-8 Western center Jake Owsley’s tip-in with six seconds left. Owsley’s putback on teammate Gabe Rucker’s 3-pointer lifted the Bulldogs to a 59-57 win over the Lights (9-4, 21-6), who fell out of first place in the Frontier with three games left.

Northern rallied from as much as a 10-point deficit in the second half, mainly behind an intense 1:23 span late in the game, where Alfie Miller banged in a 3-pointer, then Corbin Pearson buried one, then Miller hit from beyond the arc again. In that time frame, the Lights went from behind 54-48 to ahead 57-56 with 2:37 left with the Armory crowd in a frenzy.

From there, MSU-N had chances to further the lead. Northern had three straight possessions in which it led by one point, but in all three, the Lights couldn’t make the Bulldogs pay. With :24 left, Roshawn West was whistled for a moving screen and that call set Western up for its game-winning tries. After Owsley’s bucket, the Lights had two more cracks to stay alive, but a turnover ended one possession, and the other was a nearly full-court desperation heave by Pearson as time expired.

“We had some opportunities to increase our lead at the end of the game,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “And we didn’t take advantage. We made some mistakes, and there were a few circumstances that were beyond our control too. Maybe one too many. But at the end of the day, we had chances in the last couple of minutes and we blew em’...plain and simple.”

The loss was a bitter one for the Lights, especially at home, especially to the rival Bulldogs, and especially considering Northern stormed all the way back after playing from behind most of the night, a night in which the Lights were clearly not at their best, as they shot just 38 percent for the contest.

“Western did a great job of coming in here ready to play,” Huse said. “They played great at the start and certainly better than we did. I thought our defense got better as the game went on and it was a heck of a battle by us to come back and take the lead late in the game. But again, some things didn’t go our way at the end, even the last shot they (Bulldogs) took, we played really good defense and forced a miss, but a putback ends up being the difference. So things just didn’t go the way we needed them to down the stretch.”

They didn’t go the Lights’ way early on either. Northern trailed by as much as nine points in the first half as Western came out firing. The Bulldogs got three triples from Kris Collins in the first half, while the Lights had to get late three’s from Alan Brown and Alfie Miller in order to only trail 32-26 at intermission.
In the second half, Western led for most of the way. Northern could never seem to get momentum fully on its side as the Lights twice cut the lead to two points, but Western would then go back up by as much or six or eight. That stretch then set the stage for a thrilling end, which included the huge shots by Miller and Pearson, as well as Mike LaValley, which went along with key defensive plays by Pearson, Will Perry and West in the final minutes.

“I was proud of the way we kept fighting back, because it seemed like we were really fighting uphill all night,” Huse said. “I was proud of our effort and the fact that we didn’t quit, even when we weren’t at our best. But we just didn’t convert on those possessions at the end, and you can only leave the flood gates open for so long.”

Pearson led the way for the Lights, scoring 13 points, grabbing three boards and blocking two shots. Devin Jackson scored a quiet 11, while Miller hit three of Northern’s seven bombs for nine points. LaValley chipped in with eight, as did Perry, who also grabbed seven rebounds.

The Bulldogs (8-5, 18-8), who are very much alive in the Frontier title chase, got a game-high 16 points and six boards from Owsley.

Northern will now have to quickly regroup, because after one day of rest, the Lights host 18th-ranked Westminster Saturday night, in what is the Lights’ home finale.

“We just have to learn from this game and move on,” Huse said. “We’ve got another very good team coming in here Saturday and now we have to prepare as hard as we can for that game.”

The Lights play their regular season home finale against the Westminster Griffins Saturday at 8 p.m. Northern closes out the regular season next Thursday at Rocky Mountain College and Saturday at Dickinson State.

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**Lights are 9-4 in the Frontier, 21-6 overall; Next up: vs No. 18 Westminster Saturday**

**Western 59, Lights 57**

**UM-W** — Maazin Butler 1-4 2-2 4, Gabe Rucker 1-5 2-3 4, Jake Owsley 5-9 6-8 16, Tyler Miller 2-10 4-4 9, Kris Castro 2-3 1-2 5, Kris Collins 3-5 0-0 9, Jordan Overstreet 4-8 2-2 10, Vince Turk 1-2 0-0 2. Totals: 19-46 17-23 59.

**MSU-N** — Will Perry 4-6 0-0 8, Jesse Vaughan 0-5 2-2 2, Roshawn West 0-6 0-0 0, Devin Jackson 3-7 2-5 11, Alan Brown 2-4 0-0 6, Corbin Pearson 4-10 4-6 13, Dontae Clark 0-0 0—0 0, Mike LaValley 3-4 1-8, Alfie Miller 3-6 0-0 9. Totals: 19-49 12-15 57.