Bounce Back: Lights down Griffins
George Ferguson
Sunday, February 17th, 2013

Senior night is a night filled with emotion. It’s only natural when you’re honoring a player who has been so special, such as Montana State University-Northern Lights’ senior Devin Jackson has been to the Northern program over the last four years.

But when you add to that, a visiting team like the 18th-ranked Westminster Griffins, a devastating loss just 36 hours earlier and a playoff-like atmosphere, you get one intense basketball game.

And Saturday night in the Armory Gymnasium was all that and more as the No. 12 Lights beat the No. 18 Griffins 85-81 in a classic Frontier Conference battle. Jackson was the catalyst, scoring 24 points and grabbing six rebounds, while he and Westminster’s Jake Orchard went head-to-head all night, as did the Lights and Griffins in what was one of the best league games of the year.

The win allowed the Lights (10-4, 22-6) to remain alone in second place in the Frontier standings heading into the final week of the season, and it also offset Thursday’s setback against UM-Western. Perhaps just as important, the Griffins lost their third straight and are now a full three games behind the Lights in the league standings.

“It really was a very good game,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “Both teams played really well. Obviously, we would have liked to have gotten a few more stops at the end, but this game was really like a heavyweight fight and sometimes you do just have to exchange blows. Sometimes, when two teams are shooting it that well, and playing that well, you just have to stand your ground and exchange offensive blows, and we did that tonight.”

The game indeed was a series of devastating punches as both teams shot a whopping 58 percent from the floor. The difference could very well have been the 3-pointer as the Lights went a scorching 10-for-16 while the Griffins knocked down just four long-range shots.

Jesse Vaughan, Jackson and the Lights threw the first punch as Vaughan hit a triple to start the game, while Jackson knocked down two early treys, and Alan Brown and Alfie Miller did as well as Northern jumped out to a 21-11 lead. Westminster wasn’t quiet on offense either, with Orchard and Alex Drecksel doing work in the paint. But Miller and Jackson hit triples in the final three minutes and a Will Perry tip-in with :24 left sent MSU-N into halftime with a solid 44-35 lead.

“Our start was obviously key,” Huse said. “The guys came out ready to play. I think they were very determined tonight, knowing they wanted to bounce back from the loss to Western. Sometimes a loss like that can send a team in a different direction, but our guys came out focused and determined not to let that happen. So I was really proud of them for that.”

Montana State University-Northern’s Jesse Vaughan, left, hangs in the air for a shot during Saturday night’s Frontier men’s game between the Lights and Westminster at the Armory Gymnasium. The Lights won a thriller 85-81.

Northern senior Devin Jackson shoots a free throw during Saturday night’s exciting game against Westminster. Jackson scored 24 points in the Lights’ home finale.
As entertaining as the first half was, the second was even better.

Roshawn West opened with a long three, scored seven points early and Savion Udeh capped a big Northern run with a bomb of his own. At that point, the Lights led 58-42 and looked like they were going to blow the Griffins out. But Orchard seemingly carried the Griffins from there. He scored their next eight points, and it took Miller’s third triple of the night to stop the run. And while Orchard kept on scoring, and Colton Moon buried a three to make it 69-62 with five minutes left, the Lights weren’t going to be denied.

West hit a jumper as the shot clock expired to put the Lights back up 10 with 2:30 to go, and though the Griffins kept whittling away at the lead, Jackson, and the rest of the Lights made 14-of-16 free throws in the final three minutes to hold off the Griffins.

“We did a lot of things right tonight,” Huse said. “We moved the ball well, we were very unselfish, we took care of the ball and we won most, if not all of the loose ball and hustle plays tonight. And I’m particularly proud of the way we shot free throws tonight. Every free throw was critical tonight.”

Fittingly, Jackson, with his family from Denver, Colo., in attendance, led the way, and his teammates followed right along. Jackson was 9-or-9 from the foul line, while Vaughan went 7-for-7 to go along with a big 16 points. West scored 15, while Miller hit three trey’s, went 4-of-4 from the charity stripe and scored 13 points. Perry gave the Lights six points as well, while Orchard dropped in 32 points for the Griffins.

“The guys did it for Devin tonight, but Devin did it for Devin too,” Huse said. “He was tremendous. He was a leader out there tonight. He’s a very special senior and it was an emotional night for him. He’s been a great one in his time here and I’m just so very proud of him.

“I thought we got a great effort all the way around tonight,” Huse added. “We had guys making big shots all over the place, we had guys getting big rebounds and steals and making free throws…it was just a really great team effort. And I’m really proud of our guys for coming in ready for this game. It was a lot of fun to watch our guys play like that tonight, against a very good Westminster team who plays basketball the right way. It was just a great Frontier Conference basketball game.”

Indeed, it was a great game, almost playoff-like, yet the Lights still have a tough road trip to get through before the playoffs actually begin. Northern can still catch Lewis-Clark State for the regular season title, but the Lights will need wins and help to do that. Trailing MSU-N is Western by one game, Great Falls by two and Westminster and Rocky Mountain College by three.

The Lights will close out the regular season Thursday night at Rocky Mountain College in Billings and Saturday night at Dickinson State in Dickinson, N.D.

**Lights are 10-4 in Frontier, 22-6 overall; Next Up: at RMC Thursday**

**Lights 85, Westminster 81**

**WC** – Alex Drecksel 7-7 3-3 17, Jake Orchard 11-16 9-9 32, Tallon Robertson 3-7 1-1 7, Colton Moon 3-6 0-0 9, Jordan Hayter 3-6 3-4 9, Adam Rainbird 1-3 0-0 2, Jordan Bjornberg 0-1 0-0 1, Jordan Hamilton 2-2 0-0 4. Totals: 30-51 17-20 81.

**MSU-N** – Will Perry 3-3 0-0 6, Jesse Vaughan 4-8 7-7 16, Roshawn West 6-9 2-6 15, Devin Jackson 6-8 9-9 24, Alan Brown 1-3 0-0 3, Corbin Pearson 1-4 3-4 5, Dontae Clark 0-0 0-0 0, Savion Udeh 1-2 0-0 3, Pat Jensen 0-0 0-0 0, Alfie Miller 3-6 4-4 13. Totals: 25-43 25-30 85.
Halftime: Northern 44-35. 3-pointers: MSU-N 10-16 (Vaughan 1, West 1, Jackson 3, Udeh 1, Brown 1, Miller 3), WC 4-14 (Orchard 1, Moon 3). Rebounds: MSU-N 18 (Jackson 6), WC 21 (Drecksel 5). Fouls: MSU-N 17, WC 25. Fouled out: None.