Lights brace for an Argo invasion
MSU-N men begin Frontier title defense tonight against UGF
George Ferguson
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The last few weeks have been a little daunting for the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team. Outside of a thrilling 85-81 win over nationally-ranked Westminster College, the Lights have suffered losses to UM-Western at home, as well as devastating setbacks last week at Rocky Mountain College and Dickinson State.

Northern’s rough finish to the regular season saw the Lights (22-8) drop out of contention for a Frontier Conference regular season title, and also fall to the fringe of being an at-large bid to the upcoming NAIA national tournament.

But there is an upside to MSU-N’s recent downturn, and that’s the Frontier Conference tournament. The Lights are the No. 3 seed and at the onset, every team in the postseason controls its own destiny. The No. 20 Lights are also the two-time defending Frontier champions and they begin defense of their postseason crown tonight when they host the Great Falls Argos at 7 inside the Armory Gymnasium.

“It’s win or go home time,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “It’s do or die at this point. And our guys understand that. They understand that we haven’t played our best basketball lately and they know they are going to have to be better in this tournament. We’ve seen it all year, in this league, anybody can beat anybody, so we have to be prepared for everything. But we’re still proud of where we’re at and we’re looking forward to getting back in our gym and hopefully playing well on Wednesday night.”

The Lights certainly haven’t shot their best, especially from the 3-point-line of late, and they’ll hope to turn it around against the Argos tonight. In Northern’s last two outings, the Lights have shot 11-57 from beyond the arc, and if UGF decides to play its patented zone defense tonight, Northern will have to up its shooting percentage significantly if it wants to advance to the semifinals for an eighth straight season.

MSU-N will look to senior leader Devin Jackson, who averages 14 points and four assists per game, and could very well be playing in the Armory for the final time in his illustrious career (See related story on A7). But Jackson needs help from fellow guards Roshawn West and Alfie Miller, while the Lights will also look to keep Corbin Pearson and Jesse Vaughan going inside. Pearson has been a catalyst for Northern down the stretch, averaging 11 points and five rebounds over his last nine games.

The Lights have also had success against the Argos (17-13) in recent games. Northern swept UGF during the regular season, and also beat the Argos in the 2012 Frontier semifinals in Havre. But past history makes no difference when it comes to tonight’s winner-take-all game. And Huse knows the Argos will come to Havre with every intention of putting up a great fight.

“We know we’ll get Great Falls’ best shot,” Huse said. “It seems like that’s the way it always is with them. And with so much at stake, we expect them to come in here and play at a very high level. It will be an intense game.”
The Argos gave Northern an intense battle earlier this month when the Lights had to come from behind to win 58-54. So expect nothing less tonight. The Argos have had some great wins since that Feb. 1 battle, and they have one of the most athletic teams in the Frontier.

Everything with UGF starts with junior guard Marcel Towns, who averages 19 points per game and is equally as good on the defensive end. Inside, 6-6 James Holmes and 6-6 Naren Maynerd can wreak havoc on both ends of the floor, while 6-5 Miguel Bocachica is a deadly 3-point shooter and another quality defender. And UGF does defend. The Argos are one of the top defensive teams in the Frontier, and they certainly know Northern well.

“We’ve seen about 60 minutes of zone and about 20 minutes of man from them (Argos) this year,” Huse said. “And they are very good at both. They are long and quick and very disruptive on the defensive end. So we know we will have to be a lot sharper on offense than we have been the last couple of games. We’re going to have to execute a lot better.

“And we have to be prepared to defend hard for 40 minutes,” he added. “They can score a lot of points, so we have to be prepared for everything they do. It’s going to be a big test for our team.”

The winner of tonight’s game will advance to play either second-seeded UM-Western in Dillon or top-seeded Lewis-Clark State in Lewiston, Idaho on Saturday night. Over the last two years, the Lights have won a Frontier title on the road and one at home.

“We just have to put the last few games behind us,” Huse said. “And focus solely on this game against UGF. I know the guys were disappointed after the Dickinson State game, but all we can do now is be ready to go on Wednesday night.”

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Argos will tip off at 7 inside the Armory Gymnasium in Havre.

No. 20 Lights (22-8) vs UGF (17-13) tonight at 7 p.m. in the Armory Gymnasium

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM
Internet: www.msun.edu
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MSU-N Probable Starters

G Devin Jackson, 6-2, Sr.
G Roshawn West, 6-0, Jr.
G Alan Brown, 6-1, Jr.
F Jesse Vaughan, 6-5, Jr.
F Will Perry, 6-4, Jr.