Western ends Lights' two-year reign atop the Frontier

Daniel Horton
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DILLON — A change in momentum can come from anything, anyone, or any situation in college basketball. It is an emotional game and sometimes, things just don’t go a team’s way.

Saturday night in Dillon the No. 20 Montana State University-Northern Lights, and No. 15 UM-Western Bulldogs faced off in a very tight Frontier Conference tournament semifinal matchup. And after several runs by both teams, and several shifts in momentum, it was the hosting Bulldogs who put a stop to the Lights’ season, and hopes of a conference tournament three-peat.

The Bulldogs defeated the Lights 68-59. The Lights finished the season with an overall record of 23-9 and will now wait to hear if they have done enough to earn an at-large bid to the NAIA national tournament in Kansas City.

“Not to take anything away from them (Bulldogs),” MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. “They played a really good game and have a really good team. They have a good chance at winning this tournament. I thought we did what we needed to do to win, besides making a few more shots, I guess we could have shot better.”

The final turning point came midway through the second half, putting the Lights in a hole they just couldn’t find a way out of.

At the 9:38 mark the Lights led 38-35, and looked to be well on their way to earning a spot in the conference championship game. Western big man Jake Owsley was smacked with a double technical and the Lights’ Alfie Miller hit three out of the four foul shots to extend the lead to 41-35. Corbin Pearson followed with a goal to give the Lights a 43-35 lead, and it looked as if after overcoming a 28-26 deficit at the half, the Lights had finally settled into a groove.

But after the double technical, and yet another change in momentum, the Lights struggled to adapt to the tightly called final eight minutes.

“I think that was the turning point,” Huse said. “It was a tough stretch. We have to go back and take a look at film because we apparently weren’t adjusting to the officials very well. We had too many fouls during that stretch, and we can’t let that happen, we fouled them eight straight times and they made their free throws. That was the stretch that killed us, not that we were out by any means, we had our chances, but that was tough to recover from. We have to adjust better.”

In a three-and-a-half minute stretch, the Lights were called for eight fouls, compared to the Bulldogs none in the same stretch. The Lights eight-point lead was erased with 6:34 left to play as the Bulldogs earned nine points at the charity stripe and took a 44-43 lead. In the final minutes of the second half the Lights were outscored 24-16. Western shot 5-for-8 in the final five minutes, as well as hit 13 more shots from the free-throw-line on 14 attempts, all coming in bonus situations as the Lights come back.
On the night, the Lights shot 35 percent from the field and 23 percent from 3-point range. They had a better shooting first half as they shot 40 percent from the field, and got some clutch treys from Alan Brown. MSU-N trailed 17-11 early and the Bulldogs were scoring inside and out. But with 5:20 left in the first half, Brown hit a triple on consecutive possessions to tie the game at 19-19 at the 4:31 mark. The Lights began to fall into a groove with the hot hand of Brown, but were derailed in the tightly called second half.

Pearson had another strong showing and finished with 14 points and nine rebounds to lead the Lights in both categories. Roshawn West finished with 12 points and Jesse Vaughan finished with seven, while Brown and Alfie Miller scored six points each.

Northern also had 11 turnovers to Western’s nine, as well as 25 fouls compared to Western’s 14. The Bulldogs also out-rebounded the Lights 34-28.

“I think we turned the ball over too many times,” Huse said. “That didn’t help us. We could have shot free throws better that would have helped us too. You have to do all the little things right, especially when you are getting into foul trouble, you have to be precise in everything. But credit Western, they found a way to get to the line, and it is just disappointing because we beat them in the regular season down here, they barely beat us on a last-second tip-in at our place, and we knew we could win this game. All we can do now is move on and be proud of what we did this season, and know that there is a great shot at us getting an at-large bid.”

The NAIA national tournament field will be announced on Wednesday night.

UM-Western 68, Lights 59

**MSU-N** — Will Perry 2-4 0-0 4, Jesse Vaughan 2-4 2-3 7, Roshawn West 6-14 0-1 12, Devin Jackson 2-10 0-2 4, Alan Brown 2-5 0-0 6, Corbin Pearson 4-8 6-8 14, Savion Udeh 1-2 0-0 3, Mike LaValley 1-4 0-0 3, Alfie Miller 1-5 3-4 6. Totals — 21-56 11-18 59.

**UM-W** — Maazin Butler 1-4 7-8 9, Gabe Rucker 5-8 5-6 16, Jake Owsley 3-8 1-2 7, Tyler Miller 3-7 2-2 9, Kris Castro 2-5 3-4 7, Kris Collins 0-2 0-0 0, Jordan Overstreet 2-5 7-7 11, Vince Turk 3-5 3-3 9. Totals — 19-44 28-32 68.