This trip was an uphill climb
Lights had to battle hard, but the end result was still a trip to Kansas City
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Life in the Frontier Conference is never easy. After all, it’s one of the most challenging leagues in all of NAIA men’s basketball. But for nearly two full seasons, the Montana State University-Northern Lights sure made it seem like winning championships was easy.

But after back-to-back regular season and postseason championships in 2010-11 and 2011-12, things were anything but easy for the Lights the last five months.

And though Northern is heading back to Kansas City, and the NAIA national basketball tournament, as the Lights face No. 9 Evangel of Missouri on Wednesday night, the road to get there was filled with challenges, with highs and lows and with moments of trepidation.

“This year was definitely different for us,” Northern’s All-Conference sophomore Corbin Pearson said. “The Frontier just keeps getting stronger, there are great players on every team and it’s a fight every night. There were a lot of ups and downs for us this season, but we just kept working hard to get to where we are now.”

The fight to get back to Kansas City really started there for the Lights. When Northern lost to Columbia of Missouri last March in the first round of the 2012 NAIA tourney, the careers of four starters and eight total Lights ended right there. And all of sudden, rebuilding wasn’t even the word to accurately describe what head coach Shawn Huse and his program was about to undertake.

And that’s what makes what the Lights have achieved this season, winning 23 games, finishing in the top half of the Frontier yet again, and reaching the national tournament for the third straight season, so remarkable. It’s even remarkable to Huse.

“It’s unbelievable to think about it right now,” Huse said. “Walking out of that arena (Kansas City) last year was a big slap of reality knowing we were about to lose eight seniors and have to rebuild this team. And if anybody would have told me at that time that we were going back there again in 2013 I wouldn’t have believed it.

“And even from where we started this season,” he continued. “I mean, we might be the only team in the country that lost our own intra-squad scrimmage (laughing). We didn’t look like a national tournament team back in early October. So that’s a credit to these guys and how hard they’ve worked and how far they’ve come this year. I’m just so impressed with this group and I’m so happy for them to have this opportunity.”

The Lights’ journey towards Kansas City began all the way back in early October when they started the season, a season with four new starters and as many as eight new full-time players, a perfect 7-0. There were moments when Northern had to adjust to so many new faces, but Huse said a familiar face led the way.

In all, Northern lost just twice before January, and both of those losses came against team’s playing in the national tournament, and for a time, it seemed like the Lights weren’t in a rebuilding mode, it looked more as though they had already been rebuilt.
"When you look back at this season, and think about what got us here, the first thing I’d say is Devin (Jackson) really got us off to a good start," Huse said. "We really leaned on him early on. I think Jesse (Vaughan) got comfortable and stepped in right away too, but for the most part, Devin was the reason we were able to get off to such a good start. After that, everybody else started to fall into place, but for those first seven to 10 games, Devin really showed is the way."

Northern got to the new year with a sparkling 13-2 record, and with the likes of Jackson, Vaughan, and newcomers Roshawn West, Alfie Miller and Will Perry really shining through.

And though the Lights got off to a strong start in conference play, indications that a quest to three-peat as conference champions wasn’t going to be easy quickly surfaced. A 32-point loss at Westminster College and a rare home loss to Lewis-Clark State before the end of January put the Lights in a new territory, as they were not the top dog in the Frontier any longer.

"We definitely feel like we got everybody’s best shot this year," junior Savion Udeh noted. "Coming in, I think we did feel a lot of pressure. We knew we had some big shoes to fill because of what all last year’s seniors did for this program. And when we lost a couple of games at home, that was disappointing. But we just kept our heads down and kept working hard."

There would be more difficult losses on the horizon. The Lights were swept on a weekend for the first time in three years when they closed the regular season at Rocky Mountain College and Dickinson State. And a tip-in by Western’s Jake Owsley on Valentine’s Day was the first of two gut-wrenching losses to the Bulldogs in the final three weeks of the season.

But for all the lows, the Lights also had highs and they showed a ton of heart and resiliency. Northern rebounded from the loss at Westminster with a home win, then came back and beat Great Falls on the road with 16 3-pointers after its home loss to LC State. After losing to Western at home, the Lights turned right around and beat Westminster 85-81 on Jackson’s senior night, and they also likely punched their ticket to Kansas City with a 74-52 thrashing of the Argos in the Frontier playoffs Feb. 27 in what was the final game of the year at the Armory Gymnasium.

"I’m really proud of my team," Jackson said. "I think we knew we could have a pretty good season, but it took a lot of hard work. We had some tough losses, but we always came back and won big games after them. We never quit working hard and it shows because we were able to win some big games and get back to the national tournament.

"The guys have really been resilient," Huse said. "We had some tough losses. We had some games where we could have easily folded. And we always had a target on our back this season. There’s a lot of pressure that comes with all that. But these guys never quit. They never got down. They always came back ready to fight the next game, and they kept finding ways to win the games we absolutely had to have. That has really impressed me."

Yes, this season certainly didn’t resemble the past two for Northern. But in some ways, the Lights were more impressive. When only Jackson, Pearson and Mike LaValley saw real time last season, and you add in nine players who had never played a Frontier Conference game before, the Lights’ record of 10-6 in the league and 23-9 overall, and they reached the conference semifinals for the eighth straight year, it’s certainly been a success. And though there were low points, the goal and the end result was the same. Northern wants to win a national championship and a team can’t do that if it doesn’t even qualify for the national tournament. The Lights also led the Frontier in scoring and field goal defense for the third straight season, another remarkable feat for such a new team.

And while it wasn’t easy, the Lights did what they needed to in order to have a shot at their ultimate goal.

"I think leadership was key for us," Huse said. "And we got great leadership on and off the floor from Devin and Corbin this season."
“Another big key is the fact this team bonded and has great chemistry,” he continued. “We really have that in this group. They work well together and they are truly a team. The new guys bought into Northern basketball and what we’re all about really quickly. This group has played very smart and very disciplined all season, and they’ve played very unselfishly. They are a true team and we are where we are because of a total team effort this season.

“There have been a lot of ups and downs this season,” Pearson added. “But we have never quit working hard. We’ve kept fighting all season long, and as a group, we stuck together and did what we needed too to make sure this season this season was going to be a success. It wasn’t easy, we kept fighting.”

And at the end of the day, and regardless of what happens on against Evangel, Northern’s 2012-13 season is already a success story.

Consider the pressure of trying to defend back-to-back Frontier championships, consider losing all-conference performers Joe Simpson (2012 Frontier Defensive Player of the year), Shaun Tatarka and LaVon Myers, consider seeing great role players like Sean Kelly, Ben Mitchell, Jordan Harris, David Maddock and Chris Brown graduate. Consider the fact that Jackson, while great, was Northern’s only returning starter, and Pearson, while great is just a sophomore. Consider so many new players, consider how good the Frontier has been with the rise of LC State, Rocky, Montana Tech and Great Falls, and it’s absolutely incredible the Lights are playing Wednesday night in Kansas City.

None of that is lost on Huse and he hasn’t taken one moment of this great roller coaster ride for granted.

“It’s really surreal right now,” Huse said. “It really is. I’d be lying if I said I expected this to happen. We’ve gone through turnover before but never like this. I’m not sure many college basketball teams have lost as much as we did last year, so we felt the weight of the world on our shoulders when it came to recruiting last spring. And at times, it felt almost insurmountable because the last thing any of us want is to take steps back. You never want that for your program no matter how daunting a task it might be to keep it at the level we’ve been able to get to here.

“So for these guys to come together so quickly and have as much success as we’ve had this season, I couldn’t be more impressed with this team,” he continued. “The fact that we’re going back to Kansas City is a credit to this group, how hard they’ve worked and what a great group of guys they are. I just couldn’t be more impressed with this team, and I’m so proud of them.”

**Lights in Kansas City**

**Fans can follow the Lights all the way through Wednesday night’s game against Evangel with full coverage in the Havre Daily News, online at www.havredailynews.com and on Twitter at Twitter/HavreDaily.**

**Coming in Tuesday’s HDN:** A feature story on MSU-N’s trio of transfers from Shoreline Community College, as well as a full preview of the Lights’ opponent, Evangel.

**Notes:** Northern arrived in Kansas City late Sunday night. The Lights left Havre Saturday morning, and practiced in Kearney, Neb. Northern also held two night practices before leaving Havre and will also hold one more night practice in Leavenworth, Kan., in order to prepare for the late tip time against Evangel Wednesday night. The Lights will play at 10:30 p.m. local time.