Getting to know the Evangel Crusaders
Crusaders may be big, but they will launch plenty of three's against the Lights
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Tuesday, March 12th, 2013

The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team must be getting used to the state of Missouri by now. After all, the Lights are making their third straight to Kansas City for the NAIA national tournament, and their fourth jaunt there in the last five years.

And on Wednesday night at the Municipal Auditorium, the Lights will square off against a team from Missouri in the first round of the big dance for the second straight year. Last March, the Lights fell to Columbia College out of Columbia, MO., in the opening round, and now the Lights are set to battle Evangel University in the opening round of the 2013 national tournament.

Evangel hails from Springfield, MO., which is located just 2.5 hours south of Kansas City. So once again, the Lights will be up against a team basically playing on its home turf in K.C.

But Evangel has much more than proximity going for it Wednesday night. The Crusaders, led by head coach Steve Jenkins and his 31 years at the helm, are champions of the Heart of America Conference. They went 25-6 overall this season, including going 15-3 in league play. The Heart of American is a tough conference too with stalwarts like Culver-Stockton and MidAmerica Nazarene also qualifying for this week’s national tournament. And Evangel’s non-conference schedule was rigorous to boot. The Crusaders played top-tier teams like Rogers State, Robert Morris of Illinois and Oklahoma Baptist early in the season, and having played in last year’s national tournament, they will certainly be battle-tested.

“They (Crusaders) are a solid team, very well-coached and very disciplined,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “They have a lot of depth, they have talent and they’ve played a tough schedule. They are certainly national tournament caliber team and they will be a very tough opponent.”

Tough and consistent is what the Crusaders are. They averaged nearly 75 points per game, which would have led the Frontier Conference this season, while shooting better than 37 percent from the 3-point-line, which is also stellar. Evangel is also big in the middle, which led to the Crusaders leading the Heart of America in total rebounding and rebounding margin this season. On the other side of the ball, the Crusaders allowed just 65 points per outing, which was third-best in their league.

Evangel is deep, but 6-5 forward Zack Kleine and 6-7 power forward Stephen Cotton will be players Northern needs to watch. Kleine was a first-team all-conference performer, averaging 13 points per game, while shooting nearly 44 percent from three. Cotton adds 11 points per outing and leads the Crusaders with seven rebounds per night. And while the Crusaders will present a size matchup dilemma for the Lights, they, like Northern, like to shoot the three-ball. Four different players shoot better than 40 percent from beyond the arc, led by Victor Agbasi (6-2), who’s made 53 bombs this season and averages 11 points per game.

Evangel’s depth is also apparent as the Crusaders get eight points or better from Jayme Donnelly (6-3), Brodie Wingert (6-5) and J.J. Williams (5-11). Korry Tillery (6-4) and 6-8 sophomore center Josh Veurink also combine to score 10 points and grab another six rebounds per night.
And with so much size, and good shooters to worry about, Northern’s vaunted defense, which gives up just 59 points per game, will certainly be tested on Wednesday night. Evangel also plays a ton of seniors, all of whom were part of last year’s Crusader team, which reached the NAIA Sweet 16. So the tournament atmosphere won’t be new to the Crusaders.

“They (Crusaders) aren’t complicated, they are just very solid at every position and very disciplined and consistent in what they do,” Huse said. “I would say they aren’t a team that is hard to prepare for, but they will be a team that will be very hard to play. We’ll certainly have our work cut out for us.”

Wednesday night’s NAIA first-round game between the No. 24 Lights and No. 9 Crusaders tips off at 9:30 p.m. M.S.T. Fans can watch the game via the internet for $29.95 by going to www.naia.org.