It's game time in Kansas City
Lights seeking coveted NAIA tourney win tonight against Evangel

George Ferguson
Wednesday, March 13th, 2013

Admittedly, the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team didn’t play its best basketball in the final stretch of the season. Actually, the Lights lost four of their last six games and let the Frontier Conference’s regular season title slip through their fingertips on their final road trip of the year.

But that’s the beauty of the postseason, and the NAIA national tournament. Teams can be reborn, and that’s what the No. 24 Lights will look to do tonight when they face the No. 9 Evangel Crusaders at 9:30 p.m. M.S.T. in the first round of the national tournament in Kansas City.

And the Lights (23-9) don’t just want to atone for a less-than-stellar finish to this season, they also feel like they have something to prove inside the Municipal Auditorium tonight. Northern is making its third straight appearance in the national tourney, and its fourth in the last five years. That’s remarkable consistency for MSU-N, yet the Lights have failed to get out of the first round in each of their last three tourney games.

“We do feel like we have some unfinished business,” MSU-N senior Devin Jackson, who leads the Lights in scoring at 14 points per game said. “We just need to be focused. We have to play well on defense and then we have to shoot a good percentage. We know we have to knock down shots. That’s something we haven’t done the last couple of years in Kansas City. We just have to be focused, worry about what we can control and play Lights’ basketball.”

Lights’ basketball means playing a suffocating defense, like they have this season in allowing just 59 points per game. It also means getting shots to fall. In Northern’s wins this season, the Lights have shot better than 50 percent from the floor and over 35 percent from the 3-point line, and when they dip below those numbers, the Lights have struggled on the offensive end. So shooters like Roshawn West (11 ppg), Alfie Miller (9 ppg), as well as Jackson and Alan Brown will certainly have to be on their game tonight, especially helping to take some pressure off of Jesse Vaughan (11 ppg), Corbin Pearson (10 ppg) and Will Perry (5 rpg), who will have their hands full in the paint with Evangel’s lineup.

And make no mistake, the Crusaders (24-6) have the size to test Northern’s interior defense. Evangel, the champions of the Heart of America Conference and the No. 9 seed in the tournament, starts 6-7 Stephen Cotton and 6-5 Zack Kleine, who combine to score about 23 points per game. The Crusaders also play 6-5 Brodie Wingert and 6-8 Josh Veurnik on the inside, while they also have a bevy of shooting guards who can knock down shots. In fact, for as big as the Crusaders are, they shoot 37 percent from distance, making them a truly versatile squad, and a handful for even a great defensive team like the Lights.

“Evangel is real solid,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “They are well coached, have a lot of tradition with their program and they play very disciplined and simple on both ends of the floor. They have
good size, they are physical and they play smart and play hard. They seem to have real good chemistry too and they are a veteran team. So we understand, like with every other game in this tournament, we have our hands full.”

Huse is certainly correct in that, there are no easy matchups at the national tournament. The NAIA DI men’s tournament is considered one of the more difficult postseason tournaments in all of college basketball, because the national champion will win five games in six days. Certainly, Northern has those aspirations even though the Lights return just four players from last year’s 58-52 loss to Columbia in the first round in Kansas City. But that’s what’s made this season so special. The Lights are a relatively new team, with new players and new roles, yet they have a chance to make history tonight against the Crusaders.

“At this point, the keys are pretty simple,” Huse said. “We have to play the kind of defense that has gotten us to this point. We have to be very good defensively for all 40 minutes. And we have to not just execute our offense, but we have to make shots. For us to be successful, the round ball has to go in the round hole. It really is that simple for us.

“Our mind-set going in is, we just have to play Northern basketball,” Pearson added. “We want to show people that we belong at this level. We want to show we can play. We’ve worked very hard this season, and I think we’re going in really well prepared for this. Now, we just have to go out and play Northern basketball for 40 minutes.”

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Crusaders, who have never met, is set to tip at 9:30 p.m. M.S.T. in Kansas City. The winner will meet either LSU-Shreveport or No. 8 seed Pikeville on Friday at 3:30 p.m. M.S.T. The loser’s season is over.

**No. 24 Lights (23-9) vs No. 9 Evangel (24-6) tonight at 9:30 p.m. in Kansas City**

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM

Internet: www.naia.org

Twitter: Twitter/Havredaily

**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.