Stopped again: Crusaders foil Lights
Rough shooting night, big shots by Evangel bring Northern’s season to an end in Kansas City
George Ferguson
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The 3-point shot has been a big part of the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team’s success in recent years — and especially this season. But it has seemed to be the Lights undoing in their last three trips to Kansas City and the NAIA national tournament.

It certainly was again Wednesday night.

The No. 24 Lights missed two crucial three’s in the final two minutes when trailing by just three points, and they went on to fall to the No. 9 Evangel Crusaders 65-54 in the first round of the national tournament late Wednesday night at the Kansas City Municipal Auditorium. The loss ended another brilliant season for the Lights with a 23-10 record, while Evangel (25-6) moves on to face LSU-Shreveport on Friday night.

“Big shots, that was pretty much the story of the game for both teams,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “The 3-point shot is a big part of our arsenal and we didn’t shoot a good percentage tonight. Everyone is disappointed too, the coaches and the players because we know we’re a better shooting team than we showed tonight. So it’s a tough pill to swallow. But you have to take your hat off to Evangel. They played great. They got it going early and they made big shots when they needed them most.”

Northern’s misses did indeed seem to be to be Evangel’s gain.

The Lights had worked hard to cut an 11-point Evangel lead all the way down to three with 2:40 to play. The spurt was sparked by a huge night from Corbin Pearson, who played large with 17 points, including one of the few trey’s Northern was able to connect on. But down by three, Alfie Miller missed a clean look at a triple which would have tied the game, and Evangel’s J.J. Williams answered with a bucket on the other end. On Northern’s next possession, Roshawn West missed on a wide open look at a three, and the Crusader’s Victor Agbasi all but put things away with a three just seconds later, as in a span of less than a minute, the Lights went from being down three with a chance to tie to down eight and forced to foul. Northern never scored again, and overall went just 6-of-25 from beyond the arc, while the Crusaders made 9-of-17 trey’s, including two big answers in the final five minutes.

“Everybody feels disappointed for the way we shot the ball tonight,” Huse said. “But at the same time, the kids did an outstanding job of overcoming that, overcoming all of the adversity, and giving us a chance to make a move towards the end of the game. I was so proud this team for that.

“But at the end of the day, the big shots, the one’s we had to have just didn’t fall,” he continued. “And on the other end, they (Crusaders) made their big ones. The start to the game, plus the fact that they made the big shots and we didn’t, that was really the difference tonight.”
While shooting a poor percentage, and Evangel shooting a good one certainly forced the Lights into struggle mode, the start was also key. Evangel hit three triples in the first four minutes and raced out to a 12-2 lead. From there, the Lights played catch-up all night. Northern crept to within six points late in the first half, but the second of Agbasi’s four three’s lifted the Crusaders to a commanding 36-23 lead at intermission.

The second half was much the same. Northern went on three separate 6-0 runs, cutting the Evangel lead to five or six points on each occasion. Pearson was the catalyst, as was Dontae Clark, who connected on a big three to open the second half. During each stretch, the Lights also got big plays from Will Perry, who had a strong outing. But each time the Lights threatened, the Crusaders answered, via shots by Kleine and Agbasi among others. And in the end, three points was as close as Northern could get, despite a valiant comeback attempt.

Pearson wound up leading the Lights by going 7-of-13 from the floor while adding eight rebounds. No other Light reached double figures, with Perry, Clark and Devin Jackson each scoring eight. Vaughan also grabbed seven rebounds as the Lights won that battle 28-26. Evangel, which advanced to the second round of the national tournament for the second straight year, was aided by Kleine’s game-high 18 points, while Agbasi scored 16 and hit four three’s.

“Can’t say enough about the way Corbin and Dontae played tonight,” Huse said. “Those guys really stepped up big for us. I was proud of how hard the whole team played and how hard they fought. They never quit tonight, no matter the adversity we faced.”

And though the shots didn’t fall when the Lights needed them most, and they ended their season with a third straight first-round loss in Kansas City, Huse was no less proud of what his team accomplished this season.

“A lot of coaches and players never get this opportunity, the opportunity to play in the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City,” Huse said. “So that’s the bright side of it right now. This team did that. They earned their way here. Devin Jackson got to end his career here. So they certainly have nothing to hang their heads about as it relates to this season. I’m very proud of this team. And all the guys in the locker room coming back will be hungry to get back here next year. That is already their goal.”

Northern’s season ends with a 23-10 overall record

Evangel 64, Lights 54

MSU-N — Will Perry 4-4 0-0 8, Jesse Vaughan 2-6 0-0 5, Roshawn West 1-9 2-2 5, Devin Jackson 3-9 2-4 8, Mike LaValley 0-1 0-0 0, Corbin Pearson 7-13 4-5 17, Dontae Clark 3-5 0-0 8, Savin Udeh 0-1 0-0 0, Alan Brown 0-1 0-0 0, Alfie Miller 1-4 0-0 3. Totals: 21-53 6-11 54.

EU — Zack Kleine 7-12 2-2 18, Stephen Cotton 2-4 0-2 4, Brodie Wingert 1-4 0-0 2, Jayme Donnelly 2-4 2-2 8, J.J. Williams 3-5 4-4 11, Jordan Fielding 1-2 1-1 3, Victor Agbasi 6-11 0-1 6, Josh Veurink 1-1 0-0 2, Korry Tillery 0-2 0-0 0. Totals: 23-46 9-12 64.

Halftime: Evangel 36-23. 3-pointers: MSU-N 6-25 (Vaughan 1, West 1, Pearson 1, Clark 2, Miller 1), EU 9-17 (Kleine 2, Donnelly 2, Williams 1, Agbasi 4). Rebounds: MSU-N 28 (Pearson 8, Vaughan 7), EU 26 (Three with four each). Fouls: MSU-N 13, EU 13. Fouled out: None.