Lights host Cougars, twice
MSU-N men play Regina tonight, Saturday night in the Armory
By George Ferguson
October 18, 2013

It's still early in October and it's still very early in the NAIA basketball season. But the Montana State University-Northern Lights are already looking to kick their season into high gear.

Northern opened its 2013-14 campaign with a relatively stress-free win over Concordia University of Alberta last Sunday. But this weekend, the Lights will see a much tougher foe from north of the border. Tonight and Saturday, the Lights host the University of Regina with both games taking place at 7 p.m. inside the Armory Gymnasium.

And though MSU-N breezed to a 59-36 win over Concordia last week, Northern head coach Shawn Huse said his team will need to be much better this weekend, than it was last.

"It's definitely a step up in competition," Huse said. "Regina plays at the top level of college basketball in Canada. Our execution wasn't great (referring to the win over Concordia), but that was to be expected for a season-opener. That was pretty typical. But these next games, we'll have to start executing much better offensively."

Indeed. Against Concordia, the Lights shot just 34 percent from the floor, a not so uncommon number for the first game of a new season. MSU-N, which has been known as a 3-point shooting team for several years now, made nine long-range bombs against the Thunder, but the Lights attempted a whopping 33. Senior Alfie Miller paced the Lights offensively, scoring 11 points, while newcomer Gabe Finley scored eight and had a team-high eight rebounds. But Northern also had the luxury of playing every player that suited up, which also led to some lower percentages.

Defensively, the Lights were already in mid-season form against the Thunder. MSU-N held Concordia to under 30 percent shooting, no three's, and forced 22 turnovers. The Lights also held a decisive edge in the rebounding department. It was the kind of defense Huse expects to see from the Lights every night, and he expects it again this weekend.

"We'll have to be sharp defensively," Huse said. "Regina is a much bigger team. They have guys who can play in the paint. But they also have some quickness at the guard position, so we'll have to be ready for them defensively."

The Cougars play in the CIS, which is the top level of Canadian college basketball. Though they had a rough 2012-13 season, going just 7-15 in the Canada West Conference, they've always played the Lights tough, whether in Havre or in Regina.

Regina, which played in Great Falls on Thursday night, is led by guards Darius Mole (6-1) and Brandon Tull (6-4). Both are capable shooters and both can get to the rim in a hurry. Meanwhile, forwards Will Tallman (6-8) and Wesley Jones (6-8) give the Cougars a strong inside presence, and both are outstanding
rebounders. Regina is also a team loaded with depth, and the Cougars will play 10-12 players on a given night.

The Lights showed they have depth too. While the likes of Miller, Corbin Pearson, Roshawn West and Jesse Vaughan will log heavy minutes and carry a bulk of the scoring load, Northern will also have the option of changing its lineup throughout a given game. Allan Brown looks very comfortable at the point, while Will Perry is back for another season in the post. And Finley and Nicholas Blunt give the Lights plenty of punch off the bench. Veterans Mile LaValley and Pat Jensen can also do the same.

And though Northern got its feet wet last Sunday, the Cougars will present new challenges this weekend, and Huse knows his team must be ready.

"We got a good look at what we need to do to improve from that first game," Huse said. "These games against Regina will be a good measuring stick for our team. Hopefully, we start to see some of those improvements right away. It's still early, and we can't expect things to be perfect. But Regina will be a really good test to see where we're at and where we need to go."

Tonight's game between Northern and Regina tips off at 7 in the Armory Gymnasium, as does Saturday's rematch. Next weekend, the Lights head to Lethbridge for games against CIS stalwarts the University of Lethbridge and Mount Royal.