The Montana State University-Northern basketball team knew it was stepping up in competition this weekend. So the Lights responded by stepping up their game in a pair of early-season wins over the University of Regina.

Friday at the Armory Gymnasium, the Lights toppled the Cougars 84-57, then returned to beat them on Saturday night, 68-54. The two wins improved MSU-N to a perfect 3-0 start to the 2013-14 season, as they prepare to embark on their first road trip of the year.

"It is amazing what another week of practice can do," MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. "There is no substitute for hard work, I know that gets said a lot, but that is the truth. And our guys really learned a lot since last week, and we knew just because we won our first game last week that we weren't where we wanted to be or needed to be. We really dug in this week and I thought our guys did a great job.

"We know we have a ways to go," Huse added. "We are still a work in progress. We just need to keep working hard to improve every week."

On Friday night, the 3-pointer and hard-nosed defense were the keys to a Northern victory. The Cougars, who play in the CIS Canada West Conference, came out strong, but so too did seniors Alfie Miller and Allan Brown. The duo combined for four early trey's, helping MSU-N jump out to a 23-15 lead with nine minutes left in the first half.

However, Regina put up a fight and closed the gap several times before Northern put together a strong finish to the half. Leading by just six late in the half, Jesse Vaughan capped a Northern steal with a great transition layup, then Miller dropped in another bomb to put the Lights back up by double digits. And to finish off the half, newcomer Nicholas Blount, one of four Lights in double figures on the night, hit a jumper, then a triple to send Northern into the halftime break with a commanding 45-30 lead.

MSU-N started the second half the way it finished the first. The Lights ran off a 14-4 run, essentially putting the game out of reach.

Defense was big for Northern. The Lights held Regina to just one 3-pointer, and forced the Cougars into 22 turnovers. The Lights capitalized too, with 18 points off those turnovers. Offensively, MSU-N shot 49 percent for the game and 40 percent from three. Those numbers were well up from last Sunday's season debut against Concordia University.

Miller paced the Northern offense with 15 points, while Blount came off the bench to hit two three's and score 14. Gabe Finley added a pair of triples and 13 points, while Brown scored 10 and Will Perry added eight points, five boards and two steals off the bench.
"We would absolutely love to keep shooting like that," Huse said. "We would like to keep shooting like that all season, that was a nice final score. But we know we won't always have those nights and when you don't, that is when you need to make sure the defense is where it needs to be. But we made a lot of great hustle plays and played Northern basketball. But in that first game our offense was just clicking on all cylinders and yeah, we would love to have that kind of production every night."

But the shooting success didn't quite carry over into Saturday's game, and it took several players at different times throughout the game stepping up to help carry the Lights to their third straight victory, and second straight over the Cougars. Instead of coming out and blowing through the Cougars for a second straight night, Regina looked much improved as they fought to keep the contest locked in a 32-32 tie at the halfway point.

Neither team could find the edge needed to run away from the other. But a solid half-court defense by the Cougars did keep the game close. Northern turnovers, late fouls, and streaky scoring didn't help their own cause either, as the Cougars went to the line five times in the final three minutes of the half. The Lights also hit just 12-of-28 from the field and turned the ball over nine times in the opening half. The Cougars kept the game tight by also hitting 12 shots, including going 3-for-3 from behind the arc.

"Give Regina credit," Huse said. "They made a lot of good adjustments for us for tonight (Saturday) and they really played us tough in the first half. They are a big team and they looked good, they were knocking down shots, getting to the basket, and truly handled us in the first half. I was proud of our guys for coming out and setting a new tone in the second half. I don't think we took them lightly, but we did come out and buckle down in the second half."

The second half was much better for the Lights, proven by just four more turnovers, but being able to finally gain some ground on the Cougars came by several different players stepping up at different points in the game.

Gabe Finley was the spark to keep the Lights competitive in the first half, as he had a stretch of four consecutive buckets, scoring eight of the first 14 points and helping the Lights out to a 14-8 lead. Corbin Pearson also had some nice plays, including giving the Lights some much needed momentum to start the second half. Pearson came out aggressive, knocking down a trey on the first possession of the half, then followed with three quick offensive boards, a reverse layup, and four free throw shots all in the opening five minutes.

Xavier Shaw also had a nice stretch late in the game, as he finished with the final six points of the game for the Lights, while Alfie Miller also had several key moments and finished with an eventual game-high 20 points on 6-of-13 shooting. Miller was also 3-for-9 from behind the arc as his jump shot was a major factor in the Lights' win.

"I really thought our seniors stepped and led us," Huse said. "As well as some of the juniors. And when we needed somebody to step up and help us out, we got that tonight, and I was glad to see that. The new guys had their moments too and that is good too see, that shows they are really starting to figure things out. That is what we are trying to do, we are seeing what guys we have that will step up and players like Gabe need to continue to improve and be a solid player for us, and he knows that. Xavier is the same way, this is new to them, this is new everything to them, and we have only been on the basketball side of things for a few weeks.

The Lights finished shooting 38 percent from the field, and Pearson finished with a solid 12 points and nine rebounds, while Roshawn West and Finley both finished with nine points each. Shaw also finished with five points and seven rebounds for the Lights.

After the weekend sweep of the Cougars, the Lights will hit the road for two games next weekend in Lethbridge, Alberta. Northern takes on the University of Lethbridge on Friday night and Mount Royal University Saturday. MSU-N is back home to host MSU-Billings Nov. 1.
Lights 84, Regina 57

UR – Travis Sylvestre 3-4 0-1 7, Darius Mole 0-6 2-4 2, Matthew Augustine 4-8 4-4 12, Brendan Gebert 3-7 0-0 6, Wesley Jones 1-4 1-2 4, Addison Docherty 1-2 0-0 2, Luke Girke 0-1 0-0 0, Ryan Delwo 1-4 0-0 2, Brandon Tull 5-8 4-5 14, Kade Marra 2-6 0-0 4, Will Tallman 2-4 0-0 4. Totals 22-54 12-19 57.

MSU-N – Corbin Pearson 3-3 0-0 6, Jesse Vaughan 2-6 0-0 5, Roshawn West 2-6 0-0 6, Allan Brown 3-4 2-2 10, Alfie Miller 6-9 0-0 15, Nicholas Blunt 6-13 0-0 14, Gabe Finley 5-10 1-2 13, Anfernee Standing Rock 1-3 0-0 2, Mike LaValley 1-4 0-0 3, Will Perry 3-4 2-3 8, Pat Jensen 0-1 0-0 0, Xavier Shaw 1-6 0-0 2. Totals: 33-68 5-7 84.


Lights 68, Regina 54

UR – Travis Sylvestre 1-10 0-0 2, Will Tallman 4-12 2-2 12, Darius Mole 4-4 0-2 9, Mathew Augustine 1-1 4-6 7, Brendan Gabert 0-6 1-1 1, Brandon Buttazoni 1-1 0-0 2, Addison Docherty 1-2 0-1 2, Luke Girke 1-1 0-0 2, Ryan Delwo 1-1 0-0 2, Brandon Tull 2-6 0-0 5, Kade Marra 1-5 0-0 2, Jones Wesley 3-7 2-4 8. Ryan Sandhu 0-0 0-0 0, Razvan Anca 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 12-30 9-17 54.

MSU-N – Corbin Pearson 2-5 7-8 12, Jesse Vaughan 2-8 0-0 5, Roshawn West 2-5 4-5 9, Allan Brown 1-2 0-0 3, Alfie Miller 6-13 5-5 20, Gabe Finley 4-8 1-4 9, Mike LaValley 0-4 2-2 2, Will Perry 1-2 0-0 2, Xavier Shaw 3-3 0-0 6. Anfernee Standing Rock 0-4 0-0 0, Pat Jensen 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 21-54 19-24 68.

Northern senior Will Perry, left, tries to go around a Regina defender during Saturday night’s game in Havre.