Lights take the sting out of an old rival
Northern men blow out NCAA DII MSU-Billings in the Armory
By George Ferguson
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As expected, if only for a moment, Friday night felt like 1980’s Frontier Conference basketball inside the Armory Gymnasium. But the Montana State University-Northern Lights turned a nostalgic battle with Montana State-Billings into an old-fashioned, modern-day Northern blowout.

The No. 24 Lights used an 18-0 run midway through the second half to pull away from former Frontier rival MSU-B (Formerly Eastern Montana College) Friday night in front of a large crowd inside the Armory. In the end, Northern improved to 6-0 on the season, beating the NCAA DII Yellowjackets 71-50.

The game was billed as a big one for many reasons, including the fact that the Yellowjackets haven’t been to Havre since the 1996 season. But it was also big for Northern because the Lights were playing up a level in competition, and it was big for the Jackets because it was their season-opener, though the game won't count towards MSU-B’s season total.

"I’m of course, very pleased with the outcome," Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. "Any time you play up, it's a big challenge, but to have MSU-Billings come to our gym, that's something very special. I think they (Jackets) are going to get better and better. They're so well coached and they have a lot of talent to work with. They’ll be a different team when we see them again in three weeks.

"But for us, this was a great win," he continued. "I thought we played very well, and any time you can play as well as this, against a quality opponent like MSU-B, you have to be pleased. And I am. I'm very happy for our kids tonight."

Early on, MSU-B did make the game look like an NAIA versus NCAA matchup. A stifling Yellowjacket defense gave Northern's offense fits at the start. However, MSU-N was just as good defensively, and that led to a low-scoring start. But Northern started to figure things out midway through the first half. Alfie Miller started it with a long 3-pointer, and inside buckets by Corbin Pearson and Will Perry helped the Lights stake a 19-11 lead with six minutes remaining.

The Yellowjackets made a charge and knotted the game up at 19-19, but from there, Northern outscored MSU-B 20-8, including eight free throws in a row and a Roshawn West layup that just beat the halftime buzzer. West's ultra-quick drive to the hoop capped off another 8-0 spurt which gave Northern a solid 39-27 lead at intermission.

"We kind of started slow," Huse said. "But a lot of that is MSU-B's defense. They are a very, very aggressive team defensively. They really get after you, put a lot of pressure on you and force you into bad mistakes. What I liked though is the way our guys responded. I think they really got after it defensively themselves and on the glass. I thought we matched their effort right away, and that helped us get a nice lead, and then we executed well enough to maintain that lead."

The Lights didn't just execute in the second half, they quickly buried the Yellowjackets.
MSU-B made to early three's in the second stanza but Miller had a quick answer from beyond the arc. Then, when Perry tipped in a missed bucket at the 13:07 mark, the Lights went on a run which turned the game into a laugher. During the 18-0 stretch, Miller and Jesse Vaughan went back-to-back from three, then Miller and Nick Blount did the same thing. By the time Blount's three tickled the twine, the Lights led 65-39, while later, Pearson put the exclamation point in an exciting night in the Armory with a coast-to-coast, two-handed jam.

"We did execute offensively very well in the second half," Huse said. "And while we hit some three's that broke the game open, I don't think the 3-pointer was our best weapon tonight. I thought the body blows in the paint were where we did the most damage. And it was mostly Corbin and Will doing that damage in the paint.

"I think it started with our defense," Perry, who scored 12 points and grabbed seven rebounds said. "We take a lot of pride in our defense, and we knew, playing a (NCAA) DII team, we had to be really solid defensively. It really started on Monday, we prepared hard all week on defense and tonight, that defense sparked us. We got a lot of steals and loose balls, and everybody just really worked hard all game, and I think we kind of frustrated them (Jackets). It was a really solid effort by the whole team."

The Lights did seem to frustrate the talented Yellowjackets, who are a member of the Great Northwest Athletic Conference. MSU-B wound up committing 17 turnovers, including 12 in the second half, while the Jackets shot just 40 percent from the floor, 18 percent from three and a disappointing 58 percent from the foul line. Northern also won the rebounding battle 28-26.

Meanwhile, MSU-N's torrid second-half pace was too much, even for a good defensive club like MSU-B. The Lights shot 50 percent from the field and went a stellar 13-of-14 from the free-throw-line. Miller led the way with 21 points and four triples, while Pearson added 18 points on 8-of-9 shooting. After Perry's 12, Vaughan added seven points and West chipped in with six.

"We got some nice contributions all the way around," Huse said. "I felt like everybody did something key for us, especially during that stretch in the second half when we essentially put the game away. Again, it was an all-around great team effort. I'm proud of these guys, and this win means a lot, not just because we beat a quality team in MSU-B, but it does a lot going forward. This game will certainly prepare us for all the tough non-conference games we still have, and of course, the rigors of our conference schedule. In a way, tonight felt like Frontier Conference game, and that's really going to be beneficial for us in the long run."

Huse was right on the money about Friday night feeling like a conference game, especially considering two decades ago, it was. It was indeed a special night in the Armory, and was a big home victory for the Lights.

"We're really proud of this," Perry said. "Any time you can win against an NCAA team, it's big. It means a lot. It was a great performance by our whole team tonight, and it's definitely one of the better games we've played so far."

The Lights will play MSU-B again, but in Billings on Nov. 22 and in a game the Yellowjackets will count towards their season record. Next up for Northern however, is a trip to Phoenix for a pair of games in a tournament hosted by Arizona Christian College next weekend Nov. 15-16.
Lights are 6-0 overall; Up Next: Arizona Christian Tournament

Lights 71, MSU-Billings 50

**MSU-B** – Connor Donaldson 1-7 0-0 2, Jonathan Meshgna 4-8 6-8 16, Tyler Nelson 3-5 1-2 7, Kalob Hatcher 0-1 0-0 0, Devon Wallace 1-4 0-2 2, Kendall Denham 0-0 1-2 1, Danny Desin 0-0 0-0 0, Jace Anderson 0-1 0-0 0, Jordan Perry 1-1 0-0 2, Chase Miller 2-8 2-2 7, Marc Matthews 2-2 1-2 5, Luke Adams 0-0 0-0 0, Austin Hudson 3-5 0-0 6. Totals 18-43 11-19 50.

**MSU-N** – Corbin Pearson 8-9 2-3 18, Jesse Vaughan 2-3 2-2 7, Roshawn West 2-8 2-2 6, Allan Brown 1-3 0-0 2, Alfie Miller 5-10 7-7 21, Nicholas Blount 1-3 0-0 3, Gabe Finley 0-0 0-0 0, Anfernee Standing Rock 0-0 0-0 0, Mike LaValley 0-4 0-0 0, Will Perry 6-10 0-0 12, Pat Jensen 0-0 0-0 0, Xavier Shaw 0-1 0-0 0. Totals: 25-51 13-14 71.