The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team got out of town before the winter storm rolled through, but it was still a rough weekend in sunny Phoenix, Ariz., for the Lights.

Entering the weekend with a 6-0 start to the season, and ranked No. 24 in the NAIA, the Lights faced two strong programs at the Arizona Christian Tournament. Friday, the NCAA DII New Mexico Highlands Cowboys defeated Northern 64-49. And Saturday, the NAIA No. 16 Arizona Christian Firestorm defeated Northern 77-56.

Prior to the two losses, the Lights’ offense was held to less than 68 points in a game just one time this season.

“We just didn’t do enough of the right things at the right times,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “Both games were really back and forth until the end when each team ran away from us. But those were two good teams that we played and we just didn’t make enough key shots down the stretch or make the right plays. We made some silly mistakes both nights that you can’t make against good teams, but I think it brought this group some very valuable experience, and now we just have to go back to work and learn from it.”

The Cowboys handed the Lights their first loss of the season, and they did so after a very tight first half of play.

Both teams traded baskets as well as the lead, but the Cowboys grabbed the five-point advantage at the break. The Lights were up 9-6 early, but found themselves trailing 23-15 with about six minutes to go. Jesse Vaughan did grab a bucket with just under 2:00 on the clock to bring the Lights within three, but they couldn't retake the lead before intermission.

And coming out in the second half, the game remained tight early on, but the Cowboys never gave up the lead. The Lights were within three-points on several occasions, but being outscored 31-21, that was as close as they would get. At the 4:26 mark Roshawn West grabbed two-points on a layup to close the gap to 54-49, but Northern was outscored 10-0 in the final minutes to end any chance at the road win.

West finished the game with a team-high 16 points, while Alfie Miller and Corbin Pearson finished with 10 points each. Pearson led the Lights with nine rebounds, while Vaughan finished with six boards and six points to help pace the offense. Allan Brown and Pat Jensen combined for the Lights’ remaining seven points as the offense shot just 36 percent from the field and 53 percent from the free-throw-line. Northern was 6-for-18 from behind the three-point arc for 33 percent on the game.

“I don’t think that we will face anybody as big or athletic as New Mexico Highlands was,” Huse said. “As talented as a few of their players were, I just don't think we will face anybody like that again all year”

It was a little different story Saturday night as the Lights ran into the best defensive team they may have seen this season.

Scoring just 56 points, the Lights were forced to shoot a lot of deep treys. The Firestorm held the Lights to just four two-point buckets all game long, including just one in the first half, where the Lights shot just over 31 percent from the field. The Firestorm shot nearly 54 percent from the field in the first half while the Lights put up 15 treys, knocking down six for 40 percent from behind the arc. But not much went in favor of the Lights Saturday, as they were outrebounded 39-17 and out performed in the assist column 12-4.
MSUN’s defense also had its hands full with Talib Uqdah, a dominating scorer so far this season for the Firestorm. Uqdah led all scorers with 29 points, and has now recorded double-digit points in his three games this season. He also shot over 55 percent from the field, added seven rebounds, and five assists against the Lights Saturday.

“Their guard play was outstanding,” Huse said. “Talib is a 31-year-old guy that plays so composed and is very talented. He shoots it as well as any guard that you will see at any college level in the country. He is the real deal.”

There is no doubt the Lights faced two outstanding teams, but a rough offensive weekend started with a key loss to the lineup. Will Perry is crucial to the offense and defense, but exited Friday’s game early with an injury, and missed the remainder of the weekend.

But the Lights will look to move forward with a couple of tough opponents. Friday MSU-N will take on MSU-Billings on the road and will remain on the road on Sunday to take on Jamestown College.

New Mexico Highlands 64, Lights 49

New Mexico Highlands – Lavell McDade 5-11 0-0 13, Mannie Cass 3-5 2-2 8, Stargell Love 2-6 3-5 7, Stuart Sullivan 3-6 0-0 7, Javerik Nelson 3-5 5-7 11, Erick Vegas 2-2 0-1 4, DaLand Stafford 0-0 0-0 0, Terrance Lafatte 0-0 1-2 1, Drew Martin 1-1 0-0 2, Luis Rodriguez 0-1 0-0 0, Dominick Baca 2-4 2-2 7, Augustus French 2-2 0-2 4. Totals: 23-43 13-21 64.

MSU-N – Roshawn West 7-9 0-1 16, Nicholas Blount 0-3 0-1 0, Allan Brown 1-4 2-2 5, Corbin Pearson 4-10 2-2 10, Alfie Miller 3-9 1-2 10, Gabe Finley 0-4 0-1 0, Anfernee Standing Rock 0-0 0-0 0, Mike Lavalley 0-0 0-1 0, Will Perry 0-1 0-0 0, Jesse Vaughan 2-6 2-4 6, Pat Jensen 1-3 0-0 2, Xavier Shaw 0-1 0-0 0. Totals: 18-50 7-13 49.

Arizona Christian 77, Lights 56

Arizona Christian – Mason Jones 1-3-0-0 3, Martin Kim 0-0 0-0 0, Brandon Newman 8-11 1-1 18, Rod Hudson 0-0 0-0 0, Talib Uqdah 9-14 6-7 29, Jason Timpf 2-4 0-0 5, Jordan Block 3-7 1-4 7, Paul King 0-0 0-0 0, Jackson Helms 3-3 1-1 7, Mike Navar 2-6 0-0 4, Dan Cornelius 0-0 0-0 0, Mateus Oliveira 2-3 0-0 4. Totals: 30-51 9-13 77.

MSU-N – Roshawn West 0-1 2-2 3, Nicholas Blount 4-9 0-2 11, Allan Brown 3-6 0-0 9, Corbin Pearson 1-7 2-2 4, Alfie Miller 3-8 2-2 11, Gabe Finley 0-4 0-1 0, Anfernee Standing Rock 0-0 0-0 0, Mike LaValley 2-5 1-2 6, Jesse Vaughan 4-7 1-3 12, Pat Jensen 0-2 1-2 1, Xavier Shaw 0-0 0-2 0. Totals 17-49 9-17 56.