Holiday Sweep: Lights storm back to beat Fighting Saints
Northern men win Frontier opener in dramatic fashion
By George Ferguson
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Winter hasn’t even started yet, and to be honest, the meat of the Frontier Conference men’s basketball season is still a month away. But none of that mattered to the Montana State University-Northern Lights Saturday night.

Instead, with just over three minutes to go, the No. 24 Lights were staring down the barrel of an 0-1 start to Frontier play, and that start was about to happen on their home floor, against their biggest rival.

But then senior Roshawn West woke the Lights up, and with them, a packed Armory Gymnasium crowd. West’s two 3-pointers in the final three minutes, coupled with four clutch free throws by Jesse Vaughan, lifted the Lights to a 60-57 win over Carroll College in the Frontier opener for both teams Saturday night in Havre.

Before West buried his two trey’s from the corner, the Lights had really struggled offensively, and were down 56-50 with 3:17 left in the contest. And with Carroll milking the shot clock on every possession, time was running out.

However, the two triples, the free throws, and key defensive stops in the final minutes of a classic Northern/Carroll battle was enough to get MSU-N over the hump as the Lights outscored the Saints 10-1 in the final four minutes.

“I just knew I had to come up huge for my team,” West said. “Seniors have to step up and make plays, and tonight, it was my turn. I’ve been working on my shot, been getting a lot of extra reps in, so I knew eventually the shots would fall for me. Tonight, they did. Tonight was just huge for us.”

“It doesn’t get any bigger than those two 3-pointers by Roshawn (West),” echoed MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse. “They were huge threes, and they came because of really good passes. I thought our ball movement and our unselfish play down the stretch was great. But yes, those were two huge shots for us.”

Northern needed a multitude of big shots and big stops in the second half, and actually in a first half which saw the Lights go one for their first 12 from the floor and fall behind 18-9. But trailing early on against an inspired Carroll squad, which won just twice all of last year, and which hasn’t won in Havre since 2005, players began to step up for the Lights.

Midway through the first half, sophomore Xavier Shaw came in and gave the Lights a boost. He blocked two shots and scored five points in a three-minute stretch, ultimately helping MSU-N go on a run that brought the Lights to within three at 26-23. Then, a Nicholas Blunt 3-pointer gave MSU-N its first tie of the game, and though Chris McGrath drilled a 40-foot shot at the buzzer, the Lights were within striking distance at 31-26 at intermission.
"I thought Xavier started to show what he’s capable of tonight," Huse said. "He gave us a great spark off the bench in that first half, and that really helped us catch up. The game really could have gotten away from us right there. He just continues to improve and he was big for us tonight."

Though the Lights got themselves out of a big first-half hole, Carroll quickly put MSU-N in another one in the second. The Saints started the final 20 minutes on an 11-3 run, and led by 11 points with 17:41 to go. However, Northern’s hard-nosed defense really clamped down on Carroll from there, while a Vaughan triple with 8:36 left brought the Lights to within three.

Carroll would go back up by as many as six points, but the Lights continued to fight, continued to get stops and rebounds, and another bucket, and free throw by Vaughan with 5:09 to go kept MSU-N close enough to set up the exciting finish, which included Carroll missing two game-tying shots in the final 25 seconds and huge rebounds off those shots by Vaughan and Corbin Pearson.

"I do feel like our defense won that game tonight," Huse said. "Down the stretch, we were scoring and getting to the foul line off of big stops. I thought the guys played very hard, they never gave up and I’m just really proud of the way they fought to the very end tonight."

"The main thing for us has always been, we live by our defense," West added. "No matter what is happening to us on offense, we know our defense can keep us in a game. And that’s what we did tonight. We got stops, we got rebounds, we forced turnovers. We just kept playing hard, and by doing that, we knew we would have a chance."

The Lights needed their stellar defensive effort, because the Saints, under new head coach Carson Cunningham, threw a great defensive effort at Northern, while McGrath bombed in four three’s and a game-high 19 points. Carroll did shoot better than 57 percent from the field, while Northern shot 40 percent, but the Lights got stops when it counted, and made eight triples compared to just four for the Saints.

West was the catalyst, scoring 15 points, with three triples, while Alfie Miller added 12 points and Vaughan scored 10. Blount gave the Lights seven off the bench, while Shaw added six, and Pearson finished with four rebounds. Senior Allan Brown also knocked in a key 3-pointer in Northern’s first-half comeback.

"Hats off to Carroll," Huse said. "I thought they came in here and played a defense that really disrupted our offensive rhythm. I thought Carroll played really hard tonight and they probably feel like they let one get away.

"But I’m also really proud of our guys for hanging in there, for fighting through tonight," he continued. "The fact that we could find a way to win a game like this, without Will Perry, too, that speaks to how hard these guys fought, and how focused and poised they stayed down the stretch. It was really gutsy effort by all of our guys tonight and it’s going to really be great experience for us to draw on later in the season."

And that effort gives MSU-N a 1-0 start to league play, and gives the Lights some momentum heading into December. Northern is now 8-2 on the season, and has five non-conference games left before returning to league action in early January. Northern is back at home Thursday night to host the University of Lethbridge.

But, no matter how far away the rest of the Frontier games are, West, one of Northern’s many veterans, knew how important it was for the Lights to beat the Saints on their home floor on Saturday night.

"It’s about how you respond to adversity," West said. "We did that tonight. We had a lot of things not go our way, especially in the first half. We made a lot of mistakes tonight. But we responded to all that. Tonight was huge."

**Lights are 1-0 in the Frontier, 8-2 overall; Next Up: vs Lethbridge on Thursday**

Lights 60, Carroll 67
CC – Jake Hollifield 2-2 2-2 4, Dennis Mikelonis 6-9 0-0 12, Zayn Kirkendoll 4-9 0-0 8, Zach Taylor 2-3 4-4 8, Chris McGrath 5-11 5-6 19, Nick Williams 0-0 2-2 2, Andrew Campbell 1-1 0-0 2. Totals: 20-35 13-18 57.

MSU-N – Corbin Pearson 1-2 3-4 5, Jesse Vaughan 2-3 5-6 10, Roshawn West 4-9 4-4 15, Allan Brown 1-3 0-0 3, Alfie Miller 3-8 4-4 12, Nicholas Blount 2-5 2-2 7, Gabe Finley 1-2 0-0 2, Mike LaValley 0-1 0-0 0, Pat Jensen 0-0 0-0 0, Xavier Shaw 2-6 2-5 6. Totals: 16-39 20-26 60.

Halftime: Carroll 31-26. 3-pointers: MSU-N 8-18 (Vaughan 1, West 3, Brown 1, Miller 2, Blount 1), CC 4-6 (McGrath 4); Rebounds: MSU-N 19 (Pearson 4), CC 24 (Hollifeild 4); Fouls: MSU-N 18, CC 24; Fouled out: Mikelonis; Technical foul: MSU-N bench, 7:00 of 1st half.