It's Frontier Time: Lights, Bears brace for big showdown
By George Ferguson
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Just five days ago, the Montana State University-Northern Lights were at home, winning two games against little-known Northwest Indian College. But, in college basketball, things can intensify in a hurry.

And the intensity will certainly be turned up a notch this weekend, as the No. 16 Lights (1-0, 13-2) ring in the new year with a pair of Frontier Conference road games. The action begins tonight with a nationally ranked showdown between the Lights and No. 10 Rocky Mountain College at the Fortin Center in Billings. Northern will wrap up its first league road trip with a visit to Dickinson State Saturday night.

“These are two very difficult road games,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “We’ll have to be very focused and very well prepared in both of them. It’s going to be a very difficult road trip.”

Montana State University-Northern senior Mike LaValley launches a shot during a men's college basketball game back in October in Havre. The No. 16 Lights begin Frontier Conference play with a pair of tough road games. Northern is in Billings to face No. 10 Rocky Mountain College tonight. The Lights will also visit Dickinson State on Saturday night.

Tonight’s game is a highly anticipated showdown between two teams certainly at the top of the list of Frontier title contenders. The Battlin’ Bears (1-0, 10-3), like Northern, went to the NAIA national tourny a year ago, and they return with plenty of firepower. RMC has 6-9 center Joel Barndt, who averages 20 points and 10 rebounds per game, while 6-6 senior forward Jeremy Nicholas, a returning NAIA All-American will be back in the Bears’ lineup tonight, after missing six games with an injury.

Barndt and Nicholas give Rocky a powerful inside game, but the Bears have more than more. Transfer Tyree Anderson, a 6-3 guard, has had an instant impact on the Bears’ lineup. He averages 17 points per game and can score from anywhere on the floor. And offense isn’t the Bears’ strongest attribute. RMC is No. 2 in the NAIA in total rebounding, and the Bears rank in the Top 10 in seven different defensive categories.

That fact should make for an interesting matchup tonight because the Lights rank second in the NAIA in 3-point shooting and seventh in assist to turnover ratio. Northern is coming off a win last Friday night in which the Lights made 16 threes, while MSU-N only turned the ball over 19 times in its last three games combined. And defensively, the Lights are just as good. Northern is second in the nation in scoring defense, allowing just 59 points per game.

Individually, the Lights have playmakers just like RMC. Corbin Pearson and Jesse Vaughan will be key on defense, taking on Barndt and Nicholas, while Alfie Miller leads the team in scoring at 17 points per game. Roshawn West, Pearson, Vaughan, as well Gabe Finley and Nicholas Blount each average around eight points per contest.

So, with two great defensive squads, loaded with veteran playmakers going head-to-head tonight in Billings, the game will be a showcase of the Frontier at its best, and it’s only week one.
"We know going in that Rocky is very solid," Huse said. "They have good size, and a lot of athleticism. We’re going to have to be very good defensively. It should be a very good game."

Things will be tough on the Lights Saturday night in Dickinson, N.D., as well. The Blue Hawks (0-1, 5-8) have struggled out of the gate this season, but they certainly can't be overlooked, as the Lights found out in a late-season, 64-49 loss at DSU a year ago.

The Blue Hawks have been struggling on the offensive side of the ball, but they still have talent, especially at the guard position. Tevin Russell, a 6-4 guard leads the team in scoring, while backcourt mates Ty Ackelson and Robbie Moorey are dangerous from the 3-point-line as well.

But right now, Huse and the Lights aren’t thinking about the Blue Hawks. Their sole focus is on Rocky. MSU-N and RMC both bring a high national ranking and unbeaten conference records into tonight’s game, and the winner will begin the race to the Frontier title with a leg up on the other.

"It’s conference time," Huse said. "It’s a new season essentially. But we also understand that it’s a long season. One game won’t make or break things. We just have to go out and play hard, give great effort for 40 minutes each night, and play Northern basketball one game at a time."

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Battlin’ Bears will tip at 7:30 in Billings, as will Saturday night’s game between MSU-N and DSU. Both games can be heard live on 92.5 KPQX FM, or can be streamed live by going to http://www.msun.edu/athletics. Northern returns home to face UM-Western on Jan. 9 and Westminster College Jan. 11.