Rivals: Lights host Bulldogs, Griffins
By George Ferguson
January 9, 2014

The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team is certainly feeling good after its dramatic overtime win last Saturday at Dickinson State, but in the Frontier Conference, there’s no time to relax.

The No. 15 Lights (2-1, 14-3) return home from last weekend’s split at Rocky Mountain College and DSU to face a pair of bitter Frontier rivals. Tonight, the Lights play host to the UM-Western Bulldogs, and things get even more challenging when MSU-N hosts Westminster College Saturday night. Both games are slated to tip at 8 inside the Armory Gymnasium.

Northern was able to avoid what would have been a big setback last Saturday in Dickinson, N.D., as Alfie Miller rescued the Lights with a shot at the overtime buzzer, giving MSU-N a 71-69 win. Now, the Lights turn their attention to two of their biggest and toughest Frontier rivals.

“It’s a big weekend, but then again, every weekend in this league is,” MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. “I think our guys are excited to be back at home, playing in front of our fans. There’s nothing better than that as far as we’re concerned.”

The Lights are looking for the momentum they built at DSU to carry over into this weekend’s critical matchups.

Offensively, Northern is led by Miller’s 15 points per game, while Corbin Pearson, Roshawn West and Jesse Vaughan each average around nine points per night. However, MSU-N has been getting a couple of big lifts as of late. The return of senior Will Perry has given the Lights a huge spark on both ends of the floor. Perry missed nearly two months with a knee injury, but he appeared to be right back to form, playing very well in last weekend’s games. Gabe Finley also played extremely well last weekend, scoring in double figures both nights, and playing great defense. And if Damian Robinson can return soon from an ankle injury, the Lights will be at full strength for the first time all season.

They’ll need to be at full strength and playing well on both ends of the floor tonight.

The Bulldogs (2-1, 9-5) bring as talented a team as any in the Frontier into tonight’s rivalry game. Western averages 80 points per contest, and can do damage both inside and out. That fact will certainly challenge Northern’s top-rated defense. The Lights allow a league-best 60 points per contest.

Individually, Western’s lineup is riddled with star power. Senior Jake Owsley (6-8) averages 15 points and seven rebounds per game, while also leading the Frontier in blocks. He helped Western to two dramatic wins last weekend, and earned Frontier Player of the week honors. Owsley will certainly be a handful for Northern’s undersized interior, and he has plenty of talent around him. Senior guard Maazin Butler averages 15 points per game as well, while Jordan Overstreet, Kris Castro and Gabe Rucker give the Dawgs a dynamic backcourt. Add in the play of 6-5 Tyler Miller and 6-8 Vince Turk and Western is a truly balanced club.
“I think their balance is the biggest challenge,” Huse said. “They have guys who can score at every position, so you have to be mindful of all of them.

“They (Bulldogs) have really good size,” he continued. “They also have the experience factor going for them. They have a lot of guys who have played together for a while now. So it’s by no means going to be an easy game, as none of the games in this league are. We’re going to have to play really good basketball for 40 minutes. We know we’ll be challenged both offensively and defensively, so we just have to come out prepared to play Northern basketball.”

Emotions will likely be running high in tonight’s game as well. The Lights and Bulldogs have played some thrilling games in recent memory, including as recently as last season’s Frontier semifinal in Dillon. The game between MSU-N and UM-W has become one of the best rivalry games in the Frontier, and tonight’s bout should be no different.

However, tonight’s game is only the first installment in what is a big weekend for Northern, Western and the Westminster Griffins, who come to Havre Saturday night.

The Griffins (3-0, 9-6) are off to a great start in league play, including having beaten Western last month. Westminster may have slipped the last couple of seasons, but the Griffins appear to be back on track as a Frontier power.

“They (Griffins) are playing really well right now,” Huse said. “Especially defensively. They look to be really getting after teams on the defensive end. They have a lot of talent and a lot of depth, they are very athletic, and they appear to be getting out in transition a little more than we’re used to seeing against them. They look like they’re pushing the pace a bit more this season, and they certainly have the personnel to do that.”

The Griffins do make headway on the defensive end, allowing just 66 points per game. They are also ninth in the NAIA in total steals and teams are shooting just 41 percent from the floor against them this season. But, as expected, the Griffins aren’t one dimensional. Westminster head coach Adam Hiatt will routinely play 12 players, and all of them seem to be as talented as the next.

Led by senior forward Tallon Robertson’s (6-6) 17 points per game, the Griffins are a dangerous shooting squad. Veterans Blake Skidmore, Jordan Pryor and Colton Moon all shoot better than 40 percent from beyond the arc, while 6-5 Quincy Bair has become an important post presence.

“We’ll need to be patient, and we need to execute offensively,” Huse said. “They do some different things to disrupt you offensively, so you have to be ready for that.

“Really, execution on both ends will be key for us in both games,” he continued. “These are two very good, very balanced teams, so we’ll have to be ready to play good basketball on both nights.”

And playing good basketball is paramount because all three teams playing in the Armory this weekend are battling to stay in the upper tier of the Frontier. A sweep by Northern would really set the Lights up for a run at the Frontier title, but it’s a long season, and Huse and the Lights are just happy to be at home this weekend.

“It’s conference time, school’s back in, and hopefully we’ll have our great crowds this weekend,” he said. “I know our guys are excited for these games and excited to be playing in our gym.”

Tonight’s game between MSU-N and UM-Western starts at 8 in the Armory Gymnasium. The Lights host Westminster at 8 p.m. Saturday. Northern is on the road next Friday to take on Montana Tech and Saturday at Carroll College.

**No. 15 Lights (2-1, 14-3) vs UM-Western (2-1, 9-5) and Westminster (3-0, 9-6) Tonight and Saturday at 8 p.m. at the Armory Gymnasium**

**Radio:** 92.5 KPQX FM
**Streaming:** www.msun.edu/athletic

**Twitter:** Twitter/Havedaily

**MSU-N Probable Starters**

G Allan Brown, 6-1, Sr. 7 ppg  
G Alfie Miller, 6-0, Sr. 15 ppg  
G Roshawn West, 6-1, Sr. 9 ppg  
F Corbin Pearson, 6-6, Jr. 9 ppg  
F Jesse Vaughan, 6-5, Jr., 9 ppg