The rivalry between the Montana State University-Northern Lights and the UM-Western Bulldogs has become as intense as any series in the Frontier Conference. And the first battle between the Lights and Bulldogs was no different.

Thanks to critical plays from Jesse Vaughan, Allan Brown, Gabe Finley and Corbin Pearson in the final 10 minutes of the second half, the No. 15 Lights were able to strike the first blow, defeating the Bulldogs 61-52 Thursday night at the Armory Gymnasium.

The win pushed Northern to 3-1 in the Frontier, and forced a tie atop the league standings. It also gave MSU-N a leg up on the Bulldogs, who fell to 2-2 in league play.

“Our conference is so tough,” said Pearson, who posted a double-double and made four key free throws in the final minute. “And, we know, both us and Western are always fighting to be at the top of it. They beat us in a couple of really close games last year, so it was huge for us to come home and get this win. Even though it’s still early in the season, this was a big game.”

“I just felt like our guys weren’t going to be denied,” added MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse. “Even when we were behind, I felt like we were playing good basketball. And our guys were just really stubborn tonight. They fought hard on every single play, and they beat a really good Western team.”

The Lights were indeed stubborn, especially after quickly falling behind at the start of the second half. Western senior Maazin Butler nailed a 3-pointer at the end of the first 20 minutes, giving the Bulldogs a 26-24 halftime lead. Then, Butler knocked in another bomb in the first minute of the second half, sparking the Bulldogs to a 31-24 lead, the biggest margin by either team up to that point.

But as good as Western played, Northern had a response. Pearson buried back-to-back threes and Roshawn West added another as the Lights took the lead right back, 36-35. From there, the lead would change six times before Northern ripped off an 8-0 run to lead 48-43 with 3:46 to go.

Western didn’t fold though. Butler quickly cut the lead to three with a driving layup, but again, the Lights answered. Vaughan knocked down a huge triple to push the Lights’ lead to six, and seconds later, Brown put in a high floater off the backboard to help the Lights gain a 54-47 lead with just 1:46 remaining. Butler would again cut the lead to five, but Pearson hauled in two key rebounds, and sank four straight foul shots, followed by two more big free throws from Finley, helping the Lights secure yet another dramatic win.

We got big plays when we needed them the most,” Huse said. “Different guys stepped up at really key times in the second half and down the stretch. From Corbin and Jesse and Allan as starters, to Gabe coming off the bench, we just kept making big plays. We got key rebounds, key stops and key buckets, all when we really had to have them.
"The focus for us is always on the defensive end first," Pearson added. "We knew we had to get stops, and once we did that, our offense would come to us. I just thought everybody really did a great job of focusing on defense, and then we had a bunch of guys step up and make big shots down the stretch."

It was a night of big shots, and another classic between the Lights and Bulldogs, who will meet again Feb. 13 in Dillon.

In the first half, West hit two treys, and he and Finley combined for 12 points in helping the Lights to an early 14-6 lead. But foul trouble, and the inside play of Jake Owsley pushed Western to take the lead with 6:57 to play. Buckets by Will Perry and Nicholas Blount gave Northern the lead back, but Butler’s three with :07 left in the first stanza sent Northern into the lockerroom trailing by two, setting up an exciting, and well played second half.

"It was a good basketball game," Huse said. "I thought both teams played really well. There were a lot of momentum swings and big shots. But in the end, our guys really wanted this one. They weren’t going to be denied, and it is big for us to hold serve at home against a very good team."

Pearson finished with 15 points and a season-high 14 rebounds. Finley added 14 points off the bench, while West totaled 12. Northern made seven threes while out-rebounding the bigger Bulldogs 36-30. As usual, the MSU-N defense was spectacular, holding the high-scoring Bulldogs to just 33 percent shooting and forcing them into 13 turnovers. Butler paced Western with 13 points, while Owsley and Jordan Overstreet chipped in with 12 points each.

And with one big game out of the way, the Lights (15-3) can turn their attention to another one Saturday night, as the Westminster Griffins come calling. But for the moment, both Huse and Pearson were just extremely proud of the effort and the victory which came out of Thursday night’s intense battle.

"This is a big win," Pearson said. "Man, we just had a lot of different guys step up. It’s early, but this was one we know we had to have."

“I was just really proud of how we made the most out of every opportunity on every possession,” Huse said. “Whether we were up or down, our guys fought hard on every single play, and they really played good basketball for a full 40 minutes against a team that was never going to go away. I’m just really proud of this team for that."

The Lights and Griffins will face off Saturday at 8 p.m. inside the Armory Gymnasium. Westminster plays at UGF tonight.

**Lights are 3-1 in Frontier, 15-3 overall; Next Up: vs Westminster Saturday**

**Lights 61, Western 52**

**UM-W** - Tyler Miller 1-2 0-0 2, Jake Owsley 4-14 4-5 12, Maazin Butler 5-11 0-1 13, Kris Castro 0-3 1-2 1, Shyke Smalls 3-6 2-2 8, Jordan Overstreet 4-8 2-4 12, Vince Turk 1-4 2-2 4. Totals: 18-50 11-16 52

**MSU-N** - Corbin Pearson 3-6 7-10 15, Jesse Vaughan1-5 2-3 5, Roshawna West4-10 1-4 12, Allan Brown1-3 1-2 3, Alfie Miller2-6 0-0 5, Nicholas Blount1-4 0-0 2, Gabe Finley5-6 4-4 14, Will Perry 1-3 2-2 4, Xavier Shaw 0-1 1-2 ; Mike LaValley 0-1 0-0 0. Totals; 18-44 18-27 61.

Halftime-Western 26-24. 3-pointers: MSU-N 7-18 (Pearson 2, Vaughan 1, West 3, Miller 1), UM-W 5-14 (Butler 3, Overstreet 2); Rebounds: MSU-N 36 (Pearson 14), UM-W 30 (Owsley 9); Fouls: MSU-N 21, UM-W 22; Fouled out: Butler.