The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team is known for playing tenacious defense and making clutch 3-pointers, among many other great things.

But Saturday night in the Armory Gymnasium, the Westminster Griffins threw those two things back at the Lights. The Griffins rode four second-half threes from Blake Skidmore, and a late 11-0 run, to upset the No. 15 Lights 69-59 Saturday night in Havre. The road win gave the Griffins sole possession of first place in the Frontier Conference, while the Lights dipped to 3-2 in league play.

"Credit Westminster," Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. "They hit huge shots down the stretch. They came in here fired up and ready to go after a really tough loss in Great Falls Friday night. They played a great game."

Following a big home win over UM-Western on Thursday night, the Lights were back to being short-handed. With Damian Robinson still not one hundred percent healthy, the Lights also had to go without senior Will Perry because of illness. Perry had just returned from a knee injury last week and was playing at an exceptional level.

"It’s been tough to get consistently clicking," Huse said. "We’ve had some injuries and some setbacks and things. But we don’t make excuses either, and we take nothing away from what Westminster did tonight. They played a great game, and they earned it."

As great as the Griffins were, the Lights looked to be in good shape as the game entered crunch time.

Northern trailed 31-26 at the half, but back-to-back Alfie Miller three’s and a 10-0 Lights run erased that to start the second half. And after Skidmore hit his second of what would be four triples in a short period, Gabe Finley answered for Northern, drilling a trey from the top of the key to tie things up at 49-49 with 5:50 to go.

From there, however, the Lights had no more answers. Skidmore followed Finley’s three with one of his own, and on the Lights’ ensuing possession, he forced a steal which led to an Adam Egan layup, putting the Griffins back up 54-49 with 5:11 left. Things continued to unravel for Northern from there. Nick Jensen put in an offensive rebound and was fouled for a 3-point play, and seconds later, Skidmore knocked in another bomb from the left corner, capping an 11-0 run which saw the Griffins lead 60-49 with 3:49 to play.

In the span of less than two minutes the game went from being tied to Westminster holding a double-digit advantage, and Northern didn’t recover.

"We didn’t answer the bell enough times on offense," Huse said. "It reminded me a lot of the finish at Rocky. I still felt like we played well enough on defense. I thought the game was closer than it looked it. But we made a couple of bad decisions that really hurt us down the stretch, and we didn’t make enough shots, and Westminster did. That’s pretty much the bottom line."
Both teams made plenty of big shots in what was a first half of momentum swings.

Roshawn West nailed two threes and scored 10 points in the first six minutes of the game, while Westminster’s Tallon Robertson was scoring in the post, as both teams came out swinging. With the Griffins leading 13-12, the Lights went on a 9-0 run as Mike LaValley hit two big shots and capped the run with a trey, giving the Lights a 21-13 lead with eight minutes left before the half. However, the Griffins has answers.

Finley’s thunderous dunk gave Northern a 26-20 lead late in the half, but Robertson and Skidmore combined for the final 11 points of the half, giving the Griffins a five-point lead at intermission.

Robertson finished the game with 24 points and seven rebounds, while Skidmore drilled five treys and totaled 23 points. In all, the Griffins shot an efficient 57 percent from the floor, but it was their defense which seemed to give the Lights the most trouble. The Griffins held Northern to just 36 percent shooting, while MSU-N committed eight second-half turnovers.

“With any game, we adjust our style of play,” Huse said. As far as what they (Griffins) were running, we knew what was coming at us defensively. And I thought we were getting what we wanted, but we made some poor decisions against their defense and we just didn’t make enough shots. Against a very good team like Westminster, you’re going to have to take, and make, big shots and we didn’t do enough of that tonight.”

West paced the Lights with 16 points and two trey’s. Miller finished with 12 points and Corbin Pearson scored 11 while grabbing seven boards. LaValley chipped in with a solid nine points off the bench for an MSU-N team which lost just its second Frontier game at home in the last three-plus seasons.

Northern, which is 15-4 overall, will have to regroup quickly as the Lights head back out on the road for games at Montana Tech Friday night and Carroll College Saturday night. MSU-N then plays four games against rivals Great Falls and Lewis-Clark State.

“This is a tough loss,” Huse said. “You don’t like to lose home games in this league, that’s for sure. But we have a veteran group of guys, and they’ll go back to work and get ready for the next game. It’s a long season and we have a long way to go.”

Lights are 3-2 in Frontier, 15-4 overall; Next Up at Montana Tech Friday

Westminster 69, Lights 59

WM - Quincy Bair 1-1 0-0 2, Tallon Robertson 8-14 8-12 24, Colton Moon 1-3 0-0 2, Blake Skidmore 9-16 0-0 23, Jordan Pryor 3-7 0-0 6, Adam Egan 0-0 1-3 1, Marcus Perry 1-1 0-0 2, Nick Jensen 4-5 2-3 10. Totals: 27-47 11-18 69.

MSU-N - Corbin Pearson 1-8 9-9 11, Roshawn West 7-14 0-0 16, Allan Brown 1-3 0-0 2, Alfie Miller 3-9 3-3 12, Gabe Finley 2-6 0-0 5, Mike LaValley 3-3 1-2 9, Jesse Vaughan 2-5 0-0 4, Nicholas Blount 0-2 0-0 0, Damian Robinson 0-1 0-0 0, Pat Jensen 0-0 0-0 0, Xavier Shaw 0-1 0-0 0. Totals: 19-50 13-14 59.

Halftime – Westminster 31-26. 3-pointers: MSU-N 8-18 (West 2, Miller 3, Finley 1, LaValley 2), WM 5-11 (Skidmore 5); Rebounds: MSU-N 24 (Pearson 7), WM 30 (Robertson 7); Fouls: MSU-N 14, WM 13; Fouled out: None.