When the dust settles on the next three nights of Frontier Conference basketball, the season will officially be half over. But before the second half of play and the drive to the Frontier playoffs can begin, teams must first get through rivalry week.

Around the league there will be some huge matchups this weekend, but none will be bigger than the women’s meeting between Westminster and Lewis-Clark State Saturday night in Salt Lake City.

The third-ranked Griffins and 14th-ranked Warriors will meet for the first time this season, and together, they are two of the most storied programs in the Frontier over the last decade. They are also bitter rivals, and Saturday night’s game will be as bitter as it gets. Sole possession of first place in the Frontier standings, as well as the inside track to home-court advantage in the playoffs will be at stake in Salt Lake, as will survival in the upper echelon of the NAIA Women’s Poll.

The men’s game in Salt Lake City will also be big, as it will have lasting implications on the Frontier standings. With such a hotly contested race, and both the Griffins and Warriors coming off tough losses last weekend, neither can really afford to lose to the other Saturday night. The loser of the contest will fall well behind the Frontier pace.

Friday night in Havre will also be an intense rivalry night as the Great Falls Argos come to the Armory Gymnasium.

On the men’s side, Northern and UGF have developed an intense feud, mainly because in several critical games, including in the Frontier playoffs the last three seasons, the Lights have kept the Argos from really fulfilling their destiny. UGF has been on the verge of reaching the NAIA national tournament the last three seasons, but losses at the hands of the Lights have slowed the Argos’ progress. The last few meetings between the Lights and Argos have harkened back to the old days of the Northern Montana College/UGF rivalry. Last season, Northern beat UGF in Great Falls, silencing a raucous Argo student section. Then, later in February, Northern blew the Argos out, 74-52 in the Frontier quarterfinals in front of a huge crowd in Havre.

During the 2011-12 season, the two teams waged two great regular season battles, with Northern winning 63-62 in Havre, and UGF banking in a 3-pointer at the buzzer to beat the Lights 69-68 in Great Falls. The rubber match took place in front of a sold-out Armory as the Lights shattered UGF’s hopes of a Frontier title, winning 81-56 in the conference semifinals.

Friday night’s battle should be another classic too. But it’s the Argos who come to Havre with the upper hand. UGF is ranked No. 24 in the NAIA and in a tie for first in the Frontier, while the Lights have lost two of their last three league games, and desperately need a home win over the Argos to keep pace in the league standings.
The MSU-N women will also have their hands full Friday night. The Skylights are far and away the best defensive team in the Frontier, but their biggest rival is far and away the most explosive offensive team in the league. UGF can score in bunches and possesses the top two scorers in the Frontier in Erin Legel and Lindsay Abramson. And though the Skylights have dominated the rivalry as of late, Friday night’s game should be a barnburner.

And for good measure, rivalry week won’t really end for Northern and UGF. Following Friday night’s games in Havre, the two schools turn right around and meet again next Thursday night in Great Falls.

Games between UM-Western and Carroll and Western and Great Falls this weekend only add to what is already the biggest rivalry weekend of the season.

Trouble in the Mining City

Montana Tech’s women’s basketball team had high hopes entering the 2013-14 season. But in an instant, things have derailed. Not only did the Orediggers suffer double-digit losses to Northern and LC State last weekend, but they lost their head coach and top assistant too.

Just hours before Tech’s game with LCSC, athletic director Charles Bradley was fired. But what followed was extremely bizarre. In a show of support for Bradley, first-year women’s coach DeAnn Craft, and her top assistant, Kesha Watson resigned. The two coaches left the Tech team literally hours before the Orediggers were set to take the floor against LCSC, leaving assistant Lindsie Wilson to coach the game.

On Monday, Wilson was named interim head coach for the rest of the season, while former Tech AD and retired head football coach Bob Green will fill in as AD for the remainder of the school year. Tech also announced Monday that the search for a new women’s head coach is already underway.

The Orediggers lost to LCSC Saturday night, 85-69 and have slipped to 2-5 in league play. Tech travels to Dickinson State this Saturday night.

The Three-Ball

The Lights may have had their lowest offensive output of the season in last Saturday’s stunning 56-47 loss at Carroll College. But make no mistake, Northern is still one of the deadliest 3-point shooting teams in the country.

The Lights lead the Frontier in every 3-point category, and are ranked second in the NAIA in 3-pointers made with 193, fifth in the nation in 3-pointers made per game at 9.1 and seventh in 3-point field goal percentage. As a team, MSU-N shoots 39 percent from beyond the arc.

Individually, Northern has Alfie Miller shooting 47 percent from three, while Roshawn West and Allan Brown are also both over 40 percent. But the Lights’ bigs can shoot it, too. Junior Corbin Pearson has been on a 3-point tear as of late, including going 4-for-4 from downtown in last Friday’s thrilling double-overtime win at Tech. Jesse Vaughan also shoots 41 percent from three, while Gabe Finley is averaging 40 percent from outside the arc.

Scoring Machines

When the Great Falls Argos get inside the Armory Gymnasium Friday night, they won’t just be bringing two teams with an intense dislike for Northern, They’ll be bringing a lot of offensive firepower with them.

UGF players lead both the Frontier men’s and women’s standings in scoring coming into Friday night’s game. Super senior Marcel Towns leads the league at 22 points per game. Towns has hit two game-winning shots in the last two weeks for the Argos, who are arguably the hottest team in the Frontier right now. Towns also leads the league in steals and is among the league leaders in assists.

The UGF women meanwhile, have the top two scorers in the Frontier in Legel, who averages 19 points per game, and Abramson, who averages 18. Abramson is also the holder of the Frontier record for most points in a game, after she scored 51 against RMC two weeks ago. Add in Darah Huertas-Vining, who scored 32
points in last week’s win over Dickinson State, and it’s no wonder the Argos are the top offensive team in the conference.