In the game of basketball, a split second in time is all that’s needed to change momentum. Sometimes, it’s all that’s needed to turn a devastating loss into a dramatic win.

The Montana State University-Northern Lights had one of those moments in a heated rivalry game with the University of Great Falls Argos.

With four minutes left in Friday night’s Frontier Conference game at the Armory Gymnasium, the Lights found themselves trailing by one point against the 24th-ranked Argos. Northern had fought hard just to get within one point, but a give-and-go play which ended with a thunderous Corbin Pearson dunk changed the complexion of the game, and ultimately helped lift the Lights to a 54-50 win in front of a raucous crowd in Havre.

Pearson’s dunk was part of a 10-2 Northern run, which saw the Lights go from trailing by four points with under 10 minutes left to leading for good. After Pearson’s slam, which was assisted by a great pass from Will Perry, the Lights never trailed again, as he followed it up with a 16-foot jumper on MSU-N’s next possession which put the Lights ahead 49-45. Marcel Towns hit a big three, followed by a layup from Reid Tramelli, which pulled the Argos back to within one at 51-50, but Alfie Miller and Roshawn West made three clutch free throws, while Towns missed a game-tying three in the final 24 seconds.

“Corbin’s dunk definitely gave us the momentum, and it got the crowd into it,” said Miller, who drained a pair of huge 3-pointers in yet another MSU-N second-half comeback. “Coach tells us all the time to use the crowd to our advantage when we can, and it tonight, the crowd was big for us. And Corbin’s dunk was big because it really changed the momentum of the game.”

“It was a huge moment in what was a hard-fought game,” added MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse. “Corbin played a great game against tonight. And the thing I’m most proud of him for is, he really took it up a notch or two on the defensive end in the second half. He and Will Perry got some huge rebounds for us, and they didn’t give up anything easy in the paint. I thought that was where we came up really big in the second half.”

The Lights did buckle down on defense in the final 20 minutes. The Argos had seized control of the game when Towns, who averages 22 points per outing, drilled a 25-foot 3-pointer with hands in his face as time expired on the first half, giving UGF a 28-26 lead at the break. And early in the second half, Towns knocked in another trey to push UGF’s lead to 40-34 with 12:56 left in the contest. Normally, the high-scoring Argos might have been able to run away from the Lights at that point, but Miller responded with a triple of his own, and Perry hit a jumper from the elbow to pull the Lights right back to within one point at 40-39.
From there, Northern’s defense held the Argos to just 10 points in the final 11 minutes of the game, while Miller would knock in another bomb, which helped the Lights finish the game on a 15-11 run.

“We struggled a lot in the first half,” Miller said. “But we knew if we stayed aggressive, we’d get some good looks. But I think where we really won this game was on D (defense). We came up big on defense in the second half. We held them to 22 points in the second half and, really, to hold UGF to 50 points is big. I thought we really stepped it up on D.”

The Lights did indeed step up on defense, and in essence, the game was a true defensive battle. Northern got off to a great start, with Pearson scoring 10 points as MSU-N jumped ahead 12-3. Towns brought the Argos right back, however, and the game was knotted at 17-17 with 8:24 left in the first half. Miller buried a trey after a Gabe Finley putback to put the Lights back in front, but UGF stayed the course, and grabbed all the momentum when Towns hit his long-range bomb at the halftime buzzer.

"Give UGF a ton of credit," Huse said. "They came in here wanting to win this game, you could just feel it. And they fought it tooth and nail the whole way.

"This team’s M.O. is to be in tight ballgames I guess," he added. "And they’ve done a really good job of dealing with that. We talk a lot about that it’s nice to get a big lead and build on it, but if we don’t, we deal with it. And again tonight, I thought we dealt with a tight, very difficult game really well. We have a saying, ‘expect to have problems and eat ‘em for breakfast.’ I think the guys did that tonight, because it was a very hard-fought game, very typical of when we play UGF."

Miller hit three of Northern’s four treys and scored a game-high 19 points and a team-high seven boards, while Pearson helped lead the way again with 18 points, five rebounds and a block. In what was a great display of defense by both teams, Finley added a critical six points off the bench, and Roshawn West scored five. Towns scored 18 for the Argos, while Shawn Williams added 10, but the Northern defense limited UGF to a dismal 26 percent shooting in the second half.

But as much as Pearson, Miller and others’ late-game heroics helped score Northern a huge win Friday night, Huse saw yet another total team effort.

“I thought everybody stepped up and did something big when we needed it,” he said, “bench players and starters both. Mike LaValley played great defense in the second half tonight, Gabe Finley made some big shots, it was just a total team effort, and in this league, with how tough every team is and how close every game is going to be, you have to have that, and we got that effort from our entire team tonight.”

The win pushed Northern to 5-3 in the Frontier and into a four-way tie for first place in the league standings. It was certainly a big victory especially coming off last Saturday’s loss at Carroll, but it also set the tone for next week’s return game at UGF.

“I’m really proud of our guys,” Huse said. “You come off a loss where you didn’t perform down the stretch in a tight game, and then tonight, we’re in another tight game and the guys rise up and make huge plays down the stretch. That feels really good and I’m proud of them for doing that tonight.”

“This was a big one,” Miller added. “With the league being so close right now, this is a game we knew we had to have. It was critical to beat these guys at home. We had to win in our house, and it’s big, not just for tonight, but for next week’s game at their house.”

The Lights (17-5) and Argos (5-3, 15-7) meet again Thursday night at the McLaughlin Center. MSU-N also travel to take on Lewis-Clark State Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho.

**Lights are 5-3 in Frontier, 17-5 overall; Next Up: at UGF Thursday**

Lights 54, Great Falls 50
UGF - Reid Tramelli 3-5 0-0 7, Naren Maynard 1-1 0-0 2, TJ Harris 1-9 0-0 2, Maleek Singleton 2-5 1-2 5, Marcel Towns 7-21 1-3 18, Shawn Williams 2-5 5-6 10, Daniel Arcau 3-5 0-0 6. Totals: 19-51 7-11.

MSU-N - Corbin Pearson 9-15 0-1 18, Jesse Vaughan 1-7 1-2 4, Roshawn West 2-5 1-3 5, Allan Brown 0-1 0-0 0, Alfie Miller 6-15 4-5 19, Nicholas Blount 0-2 0-0 0, Gabe Finley 3-4 0-0 6, Mike LaValley 0-2 0-0 0, Will Perry 1-2 0-0 2. Totals: 22-53 6-11.


MSU-Northern's Alfie Miller, left, dribbles towards a Great Falls defender during Friday night's Frontier Conference showdown at the Armory Gymnasium in Havre. Miller scored a game-high 19 points as the Lights beat the Argos 54-50.