Lights brace for rematch with Argos
By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern Lights struck the first blow in their 2014 series with the University of Great Falls Argos. Now, just six days removed from the intense battle in Havre, the Lights will try and do it again.

Northern (5-3, 17-5) travels to No. 25 UGF (5-3, 14-7) tonight in a rematch of last Friday night's 54-50 win at the Armory Gymnasium. The game marks the start of a critical road trip for the Lights, who also visit Lewis-Clark State Saturday night.

Last Friday's game between the Lights and Argos was a barnburner, and fans should expect nothing less in tonight's rematch. The two teams are bitter rivals, they're coming off an emotional battle against each other last week and they are tied for first place in the Frontier Conference standings. Also, a hostile and big crowd is expected tonight in Great Falls, so this game should be just as intense as last Friday's was.

"This is a unique challenge, having to play UGF back-to-back," Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. "But it is for them (Argos) too. They had one game after they played us, but essentially, we're seeing each other twice in six days. So it's a challenge for both teams.

"Both teams have only had a few days to look at last week's game," he continued. "Both teams have only had a few days to come up with ideas on how to play better than last week. So it will be a challenge for both teams for sure."

Both teams would likely like to play better offensively tonight. The normally high-scoring Argos were held to just 50 points by the MSU-N defense, which is No. 2 in the NAIA in points allowed per game. The Argos then turned around and scored just 54 in a 54-52 win against UM-Western last Saturday night. In both games, Marcel Towns scored 18 points, but Northern did a great job of making sure he didn't go on any big scoring runs on Friday, and didn't allow him to take over the game in the final five minutes, something Towns has done a number of times already this season, and did again when he made the game-winning shot to beat Western.

But the MSU-N defense will have to be prepared for a possible UGF onslaught tonight. Towns can go off, but the likes of Shawn Williams and T.J. Harris are dangerous as well. Meanwhile, UGF has to be prepared for Northern to possibly heat up from the outside. Corbin Pearson has been on a tear, averaging 18 points and eight rebounds over his last six games. But MSU-N would like to see its 3-point bombers like Alfie Miller, Roshawn West, Allan Brown and others get going tonight, like they did a year ago when the Lights ambushed the Argos in Great Falls. In that game, Northern made 11 3-pointers in the first half en route to 62-49 win.

However, with the two teams being so familiar with each other, and having just played a great game six days ago, Huse said the key to victory is pretty simple.
"This game will come down to whoever executes better on both ends of the floor," he said. "And whoever makes the least amount of key mistakes. There won't be many surprises in this game. It's all a matter of who plays better for a full 40 minutes."

While the Lights are very familiar with the Argos, the difference between this week's rivalry matchup and last Friday's emotional win in Havre is this one is part of a difficult road swing. On Saturday night, MSU-N will be in Lewiston, Idaho to face the LC State Warriors (4-4, 17-6), a team which swept Northern in the regular season a year ago.

Before last January, the Lights had won three straight in Lewiston, but LCSC has really come on strong under head coach Brandon Rinta, and the Warriors, who are just a game out of first in the Frontier standings, will be geared up for the Lights come Saturday night.

"LC is a tough place to play," Huse said. "I guess for us, it starts with the fact we just want to play better than we did last year. A lot of these guys feel like we did not play our best either time we played LC last season. And the guys remember that. So I expect our guys to go in there very focused and very determined."

Of course playing well against LCSC is difficult because the Warriors are talented and explosive. They have an exciting star in 6-2 guard E.J. Farris, who averages 21 points per game and shoots a sizzling 47 percent from the 3-point-line. Farris, a transfer from Utah State, has really added to the Warriors deep and talented backcourt, as they also return All-Conference senior Jacob Champoux to go along with sharp-shooting Brady Bagby and senior point guard Robert Ellis. The Warriors aren't a big team, but they do play well in the paint and are solid on the defensive end. LCSC is fifth in the league in scoring defense and fifth in rebounding.

Still, what LCSC does best is score points. The Warriors are averaging 92 points per game, they shoot 42 percent from three as a team, and they have attempted a whopping 596 treys so far this season. So the key to Saturday for Northern is playing traditional, great Northern defense.

"We have to defend for 40 minutes," Huse said. "They (Warriors) have a bunch of really good guards who like to shoot the three and consistently shoot it well. We can't take their post play lightly either, but they really like to shoot the ball and they like to score in a hurry. So we have to go in there ready to defend a talented and athletic team."

Tonight's game between the Lights and Argos tips off at 7:30 inside the McLaughlin Center in Great Falls. Northern's game at Lewis-Clark State Saturday night will tip at 8:30 p.m. M.S.T. The Lights return home to face Montana Tech next Friday and LCSC Saturday.