On a roll: Lights win at Lewis-Clark State

MSU-N men win third straight, are tied for first in the Frontier

By George Ferguson

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Two weeks ago, the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team could have let the season get away when the Lights suffered a difficult loss at the hands of last-place Carroll College in Helena.

That didn’t happen.

Instead, Northern has stormed right back to the top of the Frontier Conference standings, and the Lights capped what is now a three-game winning streak with a 78-71 win at Lewis-Clark State Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho. The win over the high-scoring Warriors, coupled with back-to-back wins over nationally ranked Great Falls leaves MSU-N at 7-3 in the Frontier and tied with Rocky Mountain College for first place.

But, just as the climb back up the Frontier ladder hasn’t been, Saturday night’s victory in Lewiston didn’t come easy. Northern battled its way through a nip-and-tuck first half, then pulled away from the Warriors late, only to watch the home team come right back and make it a one possession game in the final two minutes.

However, the Lights went a stellar 19-of-22 from the free-throw-line, with Corbin Pearson, Alfie Miller and Roshawn West all making critical fouls shots down the stretch, and that turned out to the be difference in what was a crucial road victory.

"It’s funny how things work out,” MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse lamented. "We talked yesterday (Friday), we said we needed to be 10 points better on the road than we are at home. And you know, for much of the second half, it felt like we were. Our guys really responded and were able to keep it to that margin.

"Give LC all the credit in the world, they didn’t quit,” he added. "They found a way to really make a game of it at the end. But we were able to build a really solid lead in the second half, and that, plus some really clutch free-throw shooting turned out to be why we were able to hang on.”

The Warriors came into Saturday night’s tilt averaging 90 points per game, and with junior E.J. Farris averaging 21 per outing on his own, Northern knew its defense had to be sharp at the onset. And it was. In a tight first half, the Lights held the Warriors to just 33 percent shooting, while MSU-N was able to gain a 35-30 halftime edge with big shots from Miller, Allan Brown and Mike LaValley.

Those three, along with West, Pearson and Gabe Finley would all hit clutch shots as the Lights went on an 14-2 run midway through the second half. And when Jesse Vaughan capped the run with a bucket, the Lights had a commanding 64-40 lead with just over four minutes to go. LCSC however, wasn’t done. Farris hit a three, and the Warriors quickly went on a run of their own, cutting the lead all the way down to 68-64 with 2:20 to go. West and Farris would trade baskets from there, but leading 70-67 with just over a minute to play, the Lights were able to get some key defensive stops, some big rebounds and make foul shots the rest of the way.

"LC stormed back,” Huse said. "They made it interesting. But throughout the course of the game, I thought our guys were really composed. It’s a tough place to play, but our guys just didn’t get rattled by anything that happened through the course of the game, and they showed a lot of composure there at the end. That was big for us."
"I also thought we got key defensive stops when we needed them," Huse added. "And the stretch in the second half, where we had a lot of guys making big shots for us, I thought that took some of the wind out of LC’s sails. But, honestly, I just thought our guys were just really poised the whole game."

Big shots were the order of the night for the Lights, who were paced by Miller’s 18 points, including a 9-of-10 performance from the charity stripe, as well as another 14 from Pearson. He also pulled down a game-high 11 rebounds. West added 13 too, but the Lights may not have got their comfortable cushion if it weren’t for a combined five three’s from LaValley and Allan Brown. Brown finished with 11 points and three treys while LaValley scored eight and made two of MSU-N’s seven bombs.

Northern was also clutch on the defensive end. While the Lights shot a sizzling 60 percent from the field, LCSC was held to 41 percent and nearly 20 points below its season average. Farris did get a game-high 26 points, but the Lights held the equally dangerous Jacob Champoux to just 10, while no other Warrior reached double figures.

So, with a three-game winning streak intact, the Lights are tied with RMC atop a still-jumbled Frontier. Westminster, UGF and UM-Western all one game behind the Lights and Bears, while LCSC dipped to 5-5 in league play. But standings aside, Huse was just extremely proud of how his team played in a tough road environment on Saturday night, especially considering the Lights (19-5) will turn around and play the Warriors again this Saturday night in Havre.

“Very proud of our guys,” Huse said. “Very happy we got this win. It was a big one. But there’s also a long way to go. We still have a lot of work to do. But it was a really good win for us, and I’m just really proud of the way the guys responded on this road trip.”

Northern will be back in the Armory Gymnasium Friday night to host Montana Tech, while the Lights and Warriors will have a rematch Saturday night.

Lights are 7-3 in Frontier, 19-5 overall; Next Up: Vs Montana Tech Friday

Lights 78, LC State 71

MSU-N – Roshawn West 6-9 0-0 13, Nicholas Blount 0-0 0-0 0, Allan Brown 4-7 0-0 11, Corbin Pearson 4-8 6-8 14, Alfie Miller 4-7 9-10 18, Gabe Finley 2-3 0-0 4, Mike LaValley 2-2 2-2 8, Will Perry 1-1 0-0 2, Jesse Vaughan 3-7 2-2 8. Totals: 26-44 19-22 78.

LCSC – Trey Sobotta 0-0 0-2 0, Jon Humphrie 2-4 1-2 6, Robert Ellis 4-7 0-2 8, Tommy Sperry 1-2 0-0 2, Jacob Champoux 4-9 2-2 10, Brady Bagby 1-8 1-3 4, Gavin Kauffman 1-2 0-0 3, E.J. Farris 6-13 11-12 26, Jamaal Thomas 3-7 3-3 9. Totals: 23-55 20-27 71.

Halftime: Northern 35-30. 3-pointers: MSU-N 7-14 (West 1, Brown 3, Miller 1, LaValley 2), LCSC 5-14 (Humphrie 1, Kauffman 1, Farris 3). Rebounds: MSU-N 28 (Pearson 11), LCSC 27 (Bagby 8); Fouls: MSU-N 22, LCSC 19; Fouled out: Brown, Bagby.