Lights geared up for Diggers', Warriors
By George Ferguson
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It’s cold outside, it’s February, it’s crunch time in the Frontier Conference.

And that means it’s crunch time for the Montana State University-Northern Lights. With just six games left in the regular season, weekends like the one the No. 23 Lights (19-5, 7-3) are about to embark on don’t get any bigger.

Tonight, the Lights host upstart Montana Tech at 8 inside the Armory Gymnasium. And just 24 hours later, Northern will be back in the Armory to host Lewis-Clark State in another pivotal league showdown. And with the Lights sitting tied atop the Frontier standings, and nursing a three-game winning streak, it goes without saying, the next two games are the biggest two of the season thus far.

“It is a big weekend for us,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “But it is for everybody in our league right now. It’s just that time of year. For us, the big thing is, we have to keep the same mental approach we always do. We have to stay composed, not look ahead, and come into each game prepared to continue to do the things we’ve been doing to put ourselves in the position we’re in right now. And we have to be prepared to do that against two very good teams.”

Good is a word Huse could use to describe every opponent the Lights face during every weekend of this wacky Frontier season. Two weeks ago, the Lights were tied with five other teams in the league standings but had dropped all the way out of the NAIA Coaches Poll following a home loss to Westminster and a road loss at Carroll College. However, Northern bounced right back. The Lights won back-to-back games against nationally ranked Great Falls, then capped off last weekend’s road trip with an outstanding 78-71 win at LC State, a win Northern shot a scorching 66 percent from the floor during the second half.

Now MSU-N is back in first, tied with Rocky Mountain College. The Lights are back in the NAIA Coaches Poll, and they are in control of their own destiny as the league hits the stretch run. Still, Northern can’t afford to fall back, not even for one game. The Lights and Battlin’ Bears have a one-game lead on three teams and just a two-game lead on LCSC. So nothing is safe right now.

And even tonight’s visitor, the Orediggers (12-10, 4-6) are only three games out of first place. So there’s no way the Lights will overlook them, especially considering MSU-N needed a Roshawn West bucket in the final seconds of double-overtime to upend Tech, 83-82 last month in Butte.

“They (Orediggers) have proven they can beat anybody in this league,” Huse said. “We know first-hand just how good they are. We know from experience that they are a team that can’t be taken lightly or overlooked. After the game we played against them down there, we fully realize we will have to play as well, if not better, to have success against them the second time around.”
Tech is not the patient Tech of old, a team which would stall and run clock, limiting an opponent’s possessions. No, under new head coach Patrick O’Hern, the Diggers like to score and push the pace. Tech averages 77 points per game and has scored 80 or more seven different times this season. The Diggers have already attempted nearly 400 3-pointers this season, which is almost twice as many as they attempted at this point a year ago.

The Diggers are not just explosive offensively either, they are talented at every spot on the floor. Junior Adam Greger (6-6) is a force inside and out. He averages 18 points and five rebounds, but he can also shoot from beyond the arc. Greger has help too. Antonio Snow (6-2) is a quick and athletic guard who averages 16 points per night, while Bryan Bock (6-3) chips in with 15 points a night and Brandon Rydberg (6-3) averages another 10. That trio gives Tech a dangerous backcourt, while newcomer Travis Peevey (6-2) is yet another outstanding shooter, and true freshman Marcus Payne (6-7) from Livingston is playing like a wily veteran in the paint.

So just like in Butte, Tech’s offense will be a huge challenge for Northern’s top-rated defense. Corbin Pearson (11 ppg, 8 rpg), Will Perry, Jesse Vaughan and Gabe Finley will have to play excellent interior defense, while Northern’s offense will need to be up to the task as well. The Lights are near the bottom of the Frontier in scoring, but they’ve shown they can score when needed, like in Butte last month. Pearson has been on a tear as of late, while Alfie Miller leads the team in scoring at 15 points per game, West adds 10 points per game, and Finley and Mike LaValley are giving the Lights solid scoring off the bench. On last weekend’s road trip senior guard Allan Brown also hit some huge shots, and when he’s on, that makes MSU-N’s offense even more dangerous.

“They (Diggers) certainly can put points on the board,” Huse said. “They have players who can score at every position. They are a tough matchup for any defense. For us, we just have to be ready to execute. But it can’t just be on defense. You can’t expect to just beat a high-scoring team with just defense. We have to execute on offense. We’ll have to find ways to score because they have a lot of weapons, and you have to be ready to match that.”

The Warriors have weapons, too, and with Northern winning in Lewiston, Idaho, last Saturday night, the stakes in this Saturday’s game will be raised. Another loss would really damage LCSC’s Frontier title hopes, while the Lights want to not only bury the Warriors (18-7, 5-5) but also avenge a rare home loss to them a season ago.

Nevertheless, beating LCSC twice in seven days won’t be easy. The Warriors are another potent offensive team, averaging a shade over 80 points per game. Northern did well defensively for much of last Saturday’s game, but the Warriors can explode, and they have the depth and talent to do that, even in the Armory. E.J. Farris (6-2) scored 26 points against the Lights last Saturday night, so he’ll be a major concern. But MSU-N’s defense can’t solely focus on him. Guards Jacob Champoux (6-0), Brady Bagby (6-3) Jon Humphrie (6-2) and Robert Ellis (6-2) form one of the deepest backcourts in the league, and though they aren’t a big bunch, LCSC’s front line is formidable as well.

“I think both teams will make some adjustments, and both will be well prepared,” Huse said. “But at this point in the season, and having just played each other last week, no major changes will be made by either team.

“They (Warriors) are a very good, very deep team,” he continued. “They have a ton of athleticism, and they can shoot the ball. For us, it just comes down to execution, again on both ends. And trying to do the same things that worked well for us when we played them down there. We just have to execute and play well again.”

The Lights would love nothing more than to do that both nights. Two wins in the Armory would go a long way towards Northern’s hopes of grabbing the Frontier title, especially considering MSU-N plays four of its last six games on its home floor, with only a treacherous road trip to Western and Westminster looming next weekend. Yes, holding serve at home is crucial for the Lights right now and they sense it.

“Great sprinters run hard through the finish line, they don’t coast, even when they have a big lead,” Huse said. “For us, the finish line isn’t here yet, but it’s getting closer. So we want to make sure we’re running hard towards and through the finish line. In other words, we want to make sure we’re playing as well as we possibly can this weekend. That’s the goal for us.”
Tonight’s game between the Lights and Orediggers tips off at 8 in the Armory Gymnasium. Saturday’s game between MSU-N and LCSC also gets underway at 8 p.m. in Havre.

**No. 23 Lights (7-3, 19-5) vs Tech (4-6, 12-10) tonight and LC State (5-5, 18-7) Saturday night at 8 p.m. in the Armory Gymnasium**

**Radio**: 92.5 KPQX FM

**Streaming**: www.msun.edu/athletics

**Twitter**: Twitter/Havredaily

**MSU-N Probable Starters**
- G Allan Brown, 6-1, Sr. 6 ppg
- G Alfie Miller, 6-0, Sr. 15 ppg
- G Roshawn West, 6-1, Sr. 9 ppg
- F Jesse Vaughan, 6-5, Jr. 8 ppg
- F Corbin Pearson, 6-6, Jr. 11 ppg