Huge games against Hawks, Bears
By George Ferguson
February 20, 2014

It’s now or never for the Montana State University-Northern Lights. At least that’s the way it will be if the Lights want to capture a third Frontier Conference regular season title in the last four seasons.

The No. 18 Lights are home for regular season finales tonight against Dickinson State and Friday night against No. 10 Rocky Mountain College. Both games tip at 8 inside the Armory Gymnasium, and both games will have huge implications on Northern’s postseason aspirations.

MSU-N (22-6, 10-4) enters tonight’s blackout game with the Blue Hawks (7-18, 2-11) in a second-place tie with Westminster in the Frontier standings. And with a huge showdown with Rocky looming Friday night, tonight’s game is a must-win for the Lights, who need to sweep at home in order to have a chance to win the Frontier title and clinch home court advantage in next week’s Frontier playoffs. A home sweep this weekend could also very well lock down at least an at-large berth to the NAIA national tournament, and while the Lights’ game with Rocky is a huge one, they can’t achieve anything without a win over DSU tonight.

“This game could be very important for us in many different ways,” MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. “We need to be focused and ready to go. Westminster did a very nice job with their comeback the other night, but we also made some subtle mistakes in the waning moments that we have not made in a long while. We need to rectify that this weekend.”

The Lights, who have won six of their last seven games, know full well that beating the Blue Hawks won’t be an easy task. It took a last-second shot in overtime for the Lights to get past DSU last month in North Dakota, and while the Blue Hawks have struggled to win games since, they are no less dangerous.

Junior Tevin Russell (6-4) is a versatile guard who averages nearly 17 points per night for DSU. And the backcourt tandem of Ty Ackelson and Robby Morey can shoot the lights out of the gym if left open. DSU also has plenty of size and strength, led by 6-7 Mackenson Odenier in the paint. As a team, DSU scores just over 70 points per night, but the Blue Hawks, who are in their final year of Frontier play, have struggled at times on defense.

Never-the-less, Huse knows his team will get a stern test tonight.

“Well, they (DSU) have weapons at all positions and we are certainly not fooled just because they are not at the top of the league right now,” Huse said. “We are very aware it took an extra stanza to overcome them at their place. I’ve said it about every team all year and I’ll say the same thing about them this second go-round, they are as capable as any team in the Frontier, and probably the NAIA, this year.”

Whether it’s DSU tonight, or Rocky Saturday night, the Lights will hang their hat on the defensive end of the floor. Home or away, MSU-N has been stellar defensively all season long. The Lights allow just 64 points per game, and despite being undersized, have really improved in the rebounding department. Offensively,
Northern is third in the NAIA with 352 3-pointers made this season, and when Northern shoots the ball well, the Lights are very hard for any team to guard.

Alfie Miller paces MSU-N at 15 points per game, and shoots nearly 47 percent from three. But Roshawn West, Corbin Pearson, Allan Brown and Jesse Vaughan give the Lights plenty of lift on offense, and Pearson has been especially good since conference play began last month. MSU-N’s depth will be a factor too, and when the Lights get production from the likes of Gabe Finley, Mike LaValley and Damian Robinson, they’re really tough to handle. Add in that a healthy Will Perry is playing some of his best basketball of his career on both ends of the floor, and Northern is the deepest team in the league right now.

Still, Friday night’s NAIA Game of the Week with RMC will be a barnburner no matter which way you look at it. The Bears (20-6, 11-3) are riding a seven-game winning streak and come to Havre with a chance to clinch at least a share of the Frontier title. They also possess a win over Northern last month in Billings, and they are as an explosive an offensive team as MSU-N has seen all season.

"Rocky is a very talented group that has proven to be as tough as any Frontier team in my memory," Huse said. "We know we are capable but it will take a very good effort to find success against them. Their statistical numbers speak for themselves."

Talent is the key word in describing the Bears. Led by 6-9 center Joel Barndt, who averages 18 points and nine rebounds per game, the Bears are as versatile as any team in the NAIA. Alongside Barndt, 6-6 Jeremy Nicholas can score from the outside-in, while transfer Tyree Anderson (6-3) has lit up the league this season and brings an 18-point per-game average into Friday’s contest. The Bears average a whopping 90 points per game, which is eighth in the NAIA and, like Northern, they are among the best 3-point shooting team’s in the country. Defensively, RMC does give up some points, but with their 31 boards per game, RMC is the best rebounding team in the entire country.

Numbers are only part of the story, though, and on an emotional senior night, in a gym where the Lights are rarely beaten, they do feel like they’ll have the upper hand. It will take a great effort and a well-played game to beat the Bears, but with two huge games at home to wrap up the regular season, the veteran Lights are in complete control of their own destiny.

“This, as well as Thursday’s contest could be very important in many ways ... just as every conference game has been all year,” Huse said. “Most importantly for us right now, we want to focus on finishing with a sprint at the finish line, leaving everything on the court for our special seniors in their final regular season contests, and playing the way we are capable of. This is a big weekend, and the guys are looking forward to it.”

Northern’s quest to capture the Frontier title and the No. 1 seed in next week’s league playoffs begins tonight at 8 when the Lights host the Blue Hawks in the Armory Gymnasium. Friday night’s senior night game against Rocky Mountain College will also tip off at 8 p.m.

**No. 18 Lights (10-4, 22-6) vs DSU (2-11, 7-18) and No. 10 RMC (11-3, 20-6) tonight and Friday 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, Sr. 6 ppg
- G Alfie Miller, Sr. 15 ppg
- G Roshawn West, Sr. 10 ppg
- F Corbin Pearson, Jr. 12 ppg
- F Jesse Vaughan, Jr. 8 ppg