It’s pretty safe to say the Montana State University-Northern Lights have had the Great Falls Argos’ number recently. Especially in Frontier Conference postseason games.

But, as talented as the Argos have been, and are this season, the good times were bound to end for the Lights. And they did Friday night as the Argos put together a dominating second half and knocked off the No. 18 Lights 64-54 in the Frontier quarterfinals at the Armory Gymnasium.

For now, the loss brings Northern’s (23-8) season to an end as the Lights will have to wait two weeks to find out if they earn an at-large berth to what would be their fourth straight NAIA national tournament. It’s also the earliest exit the Lights have suffered in the postseason since 2006, while the Argos (18-12) advanced to the semifinals where they’ll face top-seeded Rocky Mountain College this Friday.

It was a stunning end for the Lights, who lost their last two games at home and three of their last four overall. But what was more stunning was the way it went down. UGF out-scored the Lights 35-21 in the second half, MSU-N shot a dismal 0-for-6 from three in the final 20 minutes and the Lights committed an uncharacteristic six turnovers in the final 10 minutes of the contest.

“First and foremost, give Great Falls credit,” MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. “They came in here determined. They wanted to get us tonight. They did a great job of disrupting us with their defense and they played extremely well in the second half.

“Having said that, we did not execute like we’re capable of,” he continued. “We have things in place for everything they threw at us tonight and we just did a poor job of handling the key situations. We had moments where we were still very good, but not nearly enough of them. And that’s disappointing. It was a tough one tonight. Not much more you can say about it.”

It didn’t start out that way for the Lights, who had beaten UGF three straight seasons in the playoffs and twice during the regular season this year. MSU-N got an early Allan Brown 3-pointer, then back-to-back triples by Alfie Miller to go in front of the Argos 14-7 early on. UGF responded with a 12-2 run, but the Lights had already gotten hot and there was no stopping Miller.

The senior from Seattle countered an explosive 18-point first half by Argo senior Marcel Towns by hitting six treys in the first 20 minutes. He want back-to-back for the second time in the half to give the Lights a 24-23 lead with six minutes to go, then he drilled two more bombs to help lift the Lights to a 33-29 halftime edge.
Northern went into the break feeling good, but the Lights never could have predicted how rough things would get from there.

"Alfie’s first half was big,” Huse said. “He really got us going. But with the exception of him and Corbin’s (Pearson) scoring, we just did not play well as a unit tonight. We made some really costly mistakes in the second half, and we couldn’t overcome them.”

The Lights couldn’t overcome Towns or a determined Argos defense, either. To start the second half, Towns and Naren Maynerd combined to send the Argos on a 9-0 run which pushed UGF to a four-point lead. Pearson battled hard in the paint and at the free-throw-line to keep Northern in the contest, and in the middle of the half, the Lights and Argos switched leads six different times. But when Towns answered a Pearson layup with a driving floater of his own, UGF led 48-47 and things really unraveled for the Lights in the final 6:51.

Northern turned the ball over on four straight possessions, then, Maleek Singleton got free to knock down a trey which put UGF up 53-49 with three minutes to go. T.J. Harris made two free throws, then caught an errant MSU-N pass and raced the other way to put the Argos ahead 57-51 with 2:13 left. Pearson cut the lead back down to three with a layup, but after another MSU-N turnover, Shawn Williams nailed a wide open trey with :17 left, and it turned out to be the final blow in a disappointing end to Northern’s home schedule.

Turnovers and missed shots were the story of the second half for the Lights. MSU-N only committed 13 turnovers for the game, but nine of them came in the second stanza. The Lights didn’t make a single three in the second half, and Miller never even attempted a shot after going 6-for-9 in the first half.

“They (Argos) did a good job of switching up their defense,” Huse said. “They switched from zone to man, and it stymied us. But, it was also something we knew was coming. We had prepared for it. But we did a really poor job of executing when we actually had to face it.”

Pearson ended the game matching Miller’s 18 points to lead the Lights. He also made six of Northern’s nine free throws, while Brown added 11 including the only other trey the Lights hit on the night. But after that, the production dropped off rapidly. The rest of the Northern lineup went a combined 3-for-16 for the entire game. MSU-N averaged 68 points per game all season, but only managed 54 points in each of its three games against the Argos.

“We’ve leaned on our leaders all season long, and for much of it, they have come through in big situations,” Huse said. “But tonight, with the exception of Alfie’s first half and Corbin’s 18 points, it just didn’t happen. We couldn’t get going and never really got going with our bench either. It was just one of those nights when it just didn’t click for us, and that’s disappointing because we know we can play much better.”

The Argos meanwhile, leaned heavily on Towns, who scored 30 points on 12-of-25 shooting. Maynerd chipped in with 10 for a UGF squad who’s only hope of reaching the national tournament will be to win the Frontier title. The Argos also played a clean game, committing just three turnovers and shooting a solid 49 percent from the field in the second half.

As for Northern’s national tournament hopes, the Lights will have to play a long waiting game. An at-large berth will depend heavily on where the Lights fall in the final NAIA Coaches Poll, which comes out March 12.

The Frontier tournament continues this weekend with UGF’s game at RMC and Lewis-Clark State visiting Westminster. The Warriors
upset UM-Western Friday night in Dillon. The Frontier championship game is set for March 10.

*Lights are 23-8 overall. Next Up: Eliminated from Frontier playoffs*

**Great Falls 64, Lights 54**

**UGF** – Reid Tramelli 1-5 0-0 2, Naren Maynerd 3-4 4-4 10, T.J. Harris 2-8 3-4 7, Maleek Singleton 2-5 3-4 8, Marcel Towns 12-25 6-7 30, Shawn Williams 2-5 2-2 7. Totals: 22-53 19-23 65.

**MSU-N** – Corbin Pearson 6-10 6-7 18, Jesse Vaughan 0-3 0-0 0, Roshawn West 1-6 0-0 2, Allan Brown 4-10 2-2 11, Alfie Miller 6-9 0-0 18, Nicholas Blount 1-1 0-0 2, Gabe Finley 0-0 0-0 0, Mike LaValley 0-1 0-0 0, Damian Robinson 0-1 0-0 0, Will Perry 1-4 0-0 2. Totals: 19-45 8-9 53.

Halftime: Northern 33-29. 3-pointers: UGF 2-10 (Singleton 1, Williams 1), MSU-N 7-21 (West 1, Miller 6); Rebounds: UGF 24 (Towns 5), MSU-N 27 (Perry 6); Fouls: UGF 13, MSU-N 17; Fouled out: Perry.