Once again, Lights are going to Kansas City
MSU-N men making a fourth straight trip to the NAIA national tournament
By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern Lights are getting to be old hands at traveling to Kansas City every spring. And with each trip to the NAIA national tournament, the Lights’ program grows more and more consistent.

Wednesday afternoon, Northern found out it will be making its fourth straight trip to the Buffalo Funds NAIA national tournament and the Lights’ fifth in the last six seasons under head coach Shawn Huse.

MSU-N (23-8) finished ranked No. 23 in the last NAIA Coaches Poll, and received the No. 7 at-large bid to the national tourney. Overall, Northern is 3-7 all-time in national tournament games, and the Lights are making their eighth appearance in school history.

“I told the guys today when we got word, that about 75 percent of all college basketball players won’t get to play in a national tournament of any kind this season,” Huse said. “And these guys won’t take this one for granted. They are very excited and are looking forward to this opportunity.”

Northern, which drew Freed-Hardeman (27-5), the runner-up out of the American Midwest Conference, in the first round, is taking largely the same team that earned an at-large berth to last year’s national tourney. The Lights lost in the first round a year ago to Evangel, and this season has been all about getting a chance to get back there.

The Lights survived one of the toughest Frontier seasons in recent history, going 11-5 and finishing in a tie for second place. MSU-N had a shot to win the league title outright on the last weekend of the regular season, and though they were upset by UGF in the first round of the Frontier playoffs, the Lights did enough to establish themselves as an at-large team.

“I’m really very proud of what this team has accomplished,” Huse said. “Yes, we sputtered at the end a little bit, but our body of work through the entire conference season was pretty impressive in my opinion.

“There was a time when it looked like no one was going to separate themselves,” he added. “This league was just so tough this year. It was really hard to win games, at home or away. But our guys took charge and won some important and tough games and eventually, we were one of three teams to finally get some separation, along with Rocky and Westminster. So we feel very fortunate we were one of those teams and I’m proud of the guys for making themselves one of those teams.”

Now, an experienced Lights’ squad heads back to Kansas City for a shot at redemption. In five trips to the national tourney in the last six seasons, the Lights have been on the losing end of some tough first-round games. But that doesn’t take away from the consistency of the program Huse has built, and receiving yet another bid to the NAIA’s big dance is a testament to what kind of program Northern is.
“This group takes the tradition we’ve built here very seriously,” Huse said. “And that’s why they have worked so hard and fought so hard this season. They wanted to continue the tradition that has been built here and they accomplished that this year.

“I’m just so proud of this team,” Huse said. “This has been a very challenging season and in a league so tough, there were times when it looked like we might not get here. But they stayed focused all year long and they did what they had to do to put themselves in the position they are in now, and they are really excited for the opportunity to go back and compete at the national tournament.

The Lights will face Freed-Hardeman of Tennessee in the opening round of the 2014 Buffalo Funds NAIA national tournament next Thursday at 9:45 a.m. at the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City. The winner will face either Talladega of Alabama or Evangel in the Sweet 16.

Note: For a first look at Northern’s first-round opponent, and the full NAIA national tourney bracket, see Friday’s Havre Daily News.

**Lights (23-8) VS Freed-Hardeman (27-5)**
**March 20 at 9:45 a.m. in Kansas City**

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From today through Wednesday's game at the national tournament, fans can follow Northern's journey to Kansas City with the Havre Daily News