High-scoring Lions will test MSU-N defense
By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team is no stranger to the NAIA national tournament. And inside Kansas City’s Municipal Auditorium, the Lights have faced some very talented and very tough basketball teams the last few years.

Northern’s opponent for the 2014 Buffalo Funds NAIA national tournament is no exception to that. The No. 23 Lights will face No. 9 Freed-Hardeman in the opening round of the national tourney next Thursday morning, and like several other teams the Lights have faced in Kansas City, Freed-Hardeman is big, physical, athletic and talented.

“That’s what jumps out at you right away,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “They (Lions) are really athletic. They have good size, but it’s their athleticism that you notice right away. They have guys that are long and quick and they really can move up and down the floor at a good pace.”

In the last two national tournaments, the Lights have faced a pair of teams that were methodical, half-court oriented and relied on the presence of a true center and timely shooters. Those teams, Columbia in 2012 and Evangel in 2013, found ways to get past the Lights, but the Lions are different.

While Northern will hang its hat on its trademark defense Thursday, the Lights will be challenged to put the ball in the hole because Freed-Hardeman likes to score. The Lions average 89 points per game, shoot better than 53 percent from the field, have attempted 566 3-pointers on the season and are coming off a game in which they scored 120 points in the first round of the American Midwest Conference tournament last week. In other words, Freed-Hardeman plays in a hurry.

The Lions play fast on both sides of the ball and they do it with talent and depth. Freed-Hardeman head coach Jason Shelton, who’s in his ninth season at the small private Christian school located in Henderson, Tenn., routinely plays 13 different players in a game, so depth is not an issue.

Neither is talent. The Lions are led by a pair of standout guards in Damien Wooten (5-9, So.) and Orlando Bass (6-1, Jr.). Bass averages 16 points per game for the high-scoring Lions, while Wooten is a strong-shooting points guard who chips in 10 per night. They’ve combined to make 17 3-pointers. But guard play is only half the equation for the Lions. They also get another 16 points per outing from 6-6 senior Kyle Tiechmann, who also pulls down seven rebounds per game. Swingman Reginald Gilmore (6-6) scores 11 points per outing and can play inside and out. Adding to a strong post presence, Chandler Mack (6-7) and Ben Meis (6-6) score another combined 15 points per game, while overall, the Lions will play six different players who are 6-6 or bigger.

So it’s no secret that Freed-Hardeman, the No. 10 overall seed in the tournament, and the runner-up from the AMC, can and will put points on the board, and will be a tremendous challenge for Northern’s great defense. But what might get overlooked is how well the Lions play defense. They will apply full-court pressure, but they’re also a strong rebounding team, and Tiechmann is an excellent shot-blocker.
“They like to put a lot of pressure on you,” Huse said. “They will pressure you with their defense and of course with the pace they like to play at. And they can do that because they have great depth. The run a lot of guys in and out. They really like to get after you on both ends of the floor.”

So once again, the Lights will have their hands full in the opening round of the national tournament. While the Lights and Lions don’t have a common opponent this season, they do have some similarities. They are two of the top 3-point shooting teams in the NAIA and they rely heavily on the play of exciting and talented guards.

But the similarities don’t stop with personnel. In Thursday morning’s game, both teams will be trying to exercise some Kansas City demons at the expense of the other. While MSU-N is 0-5 in its last five trips to the national tourney, the Lions have lost three straight first-round games in Kansas City. Like Northern, Freed-Hardeman is making its fourth straight appearance at the national tourney, but has yet to win a game while there. In contrast, the Lights have won three national tournament games their history, but none in their recent string of appearances.

Something will have to give when the stingy and physical Lights meet the high-flying Lions Thursday morning. Northern and Freed-Hardeman will tip off at 9:45 a.m. MST Thursday at the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City. The winner will face either seventh-seeded Talladega of Alabama or Evangel in the Sweet 16 next Friday at 1:15 p.m.

**Meet the Lions**

**Freed-Hardeman**

Head Coach: Jason Shelton (9th Season)

**Record:** 27-5, 18-2 in the AMC. Lost to Columbia College in the AMC championship game, 86-78 in OT.

Location: Henderson, Tenn.

Founded: 1869

Enrollment: 1,904

**Star Watch:** Kyle Tiechmann, 6-6 Sr., who averages 16 points and 7 rebounds; Orlando Bass, 6-1 Jr., who averages 16 points and has scored a career high of 32 this season