The Montana State University-Northern Lights have been here before. In fact, they've been here many times. But this Lights’ team wants to rewrite the ending to a story that’s become all too familiar.

Thursday morning, the No. 23 Lights (23-8) take on the No. 9 Freed-Hardeman Lions (27-5) in the first round of the Buffalo Funds NAIA national tournament at the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City. It’s the fourth straight first-round game for the Lights, and the 2013-14 Lights team is a team with nine players who saw action in their first-round loss to Evangel a year ago.

And that’s what Northern is trying to change Thursday morning against the high-powered Lions, who were the runners-up in the American Midwest Conference. The Lights are trying to win a first-round game for the first time in what is now the fifth trip to K.C. in head coach Shawn Huse’s tenure.

“We got a lot of good experience by making it last year,” said junior Jesse Vaughan. “We came up short and it hurt. But we’re going back with pretty much the same team, and a lot of seniors. So we have a lot of confidence that we can go down play well. We believe we can win. We know it won’t be easy. But we’re confident.”

Vaughan, who averages seven points and four rebounds per game, and the Lights should be confident. MSU-N is coming off its eighth straight 20-win season, and the Lights have won numerous tough and close games. Also, the Lights do have veteran national tourney experience. Alfie Miller, who averages 15 points per game, Corbin Pearson, who scores 12 points and grabs seven rebounds, Roshawn West, who chips in with nine points per night, and Allan Brown make up a Lights’ starting lineup of whom all played in K.C. a year ago. Northern’s deep bench includes senior Will Perry, who started in K.C. last year, as well as Mike LaValley, who also played a key role on last year’s squad. Add in the play of Nick Blount, Gabe Finley and Damian Robinson and the Lights are a team on the verge.

“It is nice to take a team with the kind of experience we have, the kind of leadership we have,” Huse said. “That should really help us. But at the same time, every year at the national tournament is different, with different challenges. But we do have an experienced group.”

The challenge the Lights face Thursday morning will be daunting. The Lions average 89 points per game which is fourth-best in the NAIA. They shoot 37 percent from three and have attempted a whopping 566 threes this season. They also shoot 50 percent from the field as a team, so there’s no doubt, these Lions roar on offense.
“They (Lions) can hit you in a number of ways,” Huse said. “They can score from anywhere on the floor, they have talented players who always seem to be in position to score the ball. They get out and run, they score in transition, they shoot the three, and they can play patient and get the ball inside. Offensively, they can do it all, and when you watch film on them, you quickly see why they are where they are.”

The Lions will test Northern’s No. 4 scoring defense, which allows just 61 points per outing, with the inside-out tandem of 6-1 Orlando Bass and 6-6 Kyle Teichmann, who both average 16 points per game. Reginald Gilmore (6-6) averages another 11, while point guard Damion Wooten (5-9) scores 11 per game. The Lions are also rich with talent and size, and when the likes of 6-7 Chandler Mack and 6-6 Ben Meis are on the floor, they don’t miss a beat offensively.

But as good as Freed-Hardeman is, and as badly as Northern wants to win a first-round game at the national tournament, the Lights won’t change who they are or what they do. Northern is a patient, defensive-minded team, a team bent on getting stops, on sharing the ball and knocking down 3-pointers. That’s what the Lights are, and the formula has worked well so far.

“We’re focused on what we have to do,” Huse said. “We can’t stray too far from what we are. We need to focus on playing our style of basketball. To be successful, we have to defend for 40 minutes, win the 50/50 loose balls, rebound and make open shots when we get them. That’s who we are. We are scrappy, tough and resilient and those things don’t change no matter who we’re playing.

“Having said that,” he continued. “One of the things I think we’ve done well all year is, adjust and find an angle that plays to our strengths against certain opponents. Freed-Hardeman is a really good, really complete team, and we will have to be ready to adjust at times throughout the game. And this team has done a good job of that all season long. But at the end of the day, it will still come down to who plays better, who executes better and who plays the hardest the longest. It’s still just basketball, and our guys understand that. They are focused and determined and they will play well.”

“It all starts with our focus and effort on defense,” Pearson added. “That’s where everything starts for us. They (Lions) are a really good offensive team, so we have to slow them down. Once we do that, everything else can fall into place for us.

“This team is a great group of guys,” he continued. “And we are going down there focused and in the right mind-set. We’re going in there to play one game at a time. They (Lions) are a really good team, but we’re ready for this. This what we’ve been working for all season long.”

The Lights and Lions will tip off at 9:45 a.m. MDT Thursday at the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City. The winner will advance to Sweet 16 to face either No. 7 seed Talladega (28-5) or Evangel (23-10) Friday at 2:35 p.m.

**Game Time**

_**No. 23 Lights (23-7) vs No. 9 Freed-Hardeman Lions (27-5)**_  
Thursday at 9:45 a.m. M.S.T. In Kansas City

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