Every successful college basketball team has that one player, that one who is similar to the drummer in a band. He might not steal the headlines, he may not be front and center all the time, but he does all the hard work and is essentially the heart of the group.

And when that one guy gets ripped away from the group, things just don’t seem to work like they should.

Will Perry is that guy for the Montana State University-Northern Lights. And wherever he’s gone, he’s always been that guy, on any basketball team he’s played on. Perry does the dirty work. He gets the big rebound, he defends an opposing team’s best player, and he doesn’t see too many open shots throughout the course of a game, yet he draws the attention of the opposition, so much so, it opens things up for everyone else. Perry is the one diving on the floor for a loose ball, or getting a big box-out to help get second-chance points. In essence, Perry does a lot of the things that don’t show up in the box score and don’t get him the kind of awards other players get.

And for much of his career, that’s been just fine with the Bremerton, Wash., native. He doesn’t mind being that type of player. But what Perry does mind is not being able to be on the court to do all the things he does to help the Lights win basketball games. And that happened to Perry, this season, a season in which his life has changed in so many different ways.

Perry, who has averaged five points and four rebounds over the course of two seasons with the Lights, was lost to a knee injury back in November. It was a devastating blow to him, and to a Lights’ team that counts on him for so many different things. The injury was severe enough that, at one point, doctors were telling him he might not play again this season, and in essence, his college basketball career would be over. That would have been a tough pill to swallow, but it also wasn’t the answer Perry, or the Lights were looking for.

“I think we all saw our season maybe hitting the skids when that happened to Will,” said Northern head coach Shawn Huse. “He’s literally that important to this team, on and off the floor. In my opinion, he is by far the most underrated player in our league. But he’s not underrated at all on our team. Everybody looks at Will to lead us, to help us win basketball games, and when we lost him, I think it shook our team up at first. We did regroup and we somehow managed to win some key games without him, but in my opinion, we probably wouldn’t be where we are right now if he was unable to come back and play this season.”

And where the Lights are is in Kansas City for their fourth straight trip to the NAIA national tournament. It was a trip Perry insisted he was going to do everything in his power to be a part of.
"It was pretty devastating when it happened," Perry said of the injury he suffered during the Lights’ road trip to Arizona. “I was thinking, there’s no way my basketball career can end like that. But I had a doctor telling me I might not be able to play this season and that was pretty hard to hear.

“But fortunately, it got better,” he said. “And I was going to do anything it took to come back and play. As long as I wasn’t damaging anything that would affect me later in life, I was going to play.”

Perry has always done whatever it took to be on the basketball floor, and it’s paid big dividends. He may an undersized post player, but his superior athleticism has allowed him to find a niche in the game of basketball he loves so much. And his athleticism isn’t the only advantage he has. He’s as unselfish a player as you’ll find, and he never gets out-worked. Those traits have carried him far.

“My role on the basketball court has always been to be a role player,” he said. “I do the things other guys might not like to do. My job is to go out there and get the tough rebounds, take charges, play as hard as I possibly can on defense. Those are the things I’ve always tried to do my entire career.”

“Will being able to come back was a huge turning point in our season,” said fellow Seattle area native Alfie Miller. “Without him, we lost our way for a while. But as soon as he came back, you realize, he was that missing piece. He does so many things for our team. So it was huge to get him back. His presence is so important to our team.”

Indeed. With Perry back in the lineup, the Lights would win eight of their next 10 Frontier Conference game, ultimately setting them up to make a run at yet another national tournament. And that’s just fine with Perry, who’s having a pretty incredible senior year. On March 1, not long after Perry and his fellow seniors were honored at the Armory Gymnasium on Senior Night, his fiance’, Chelsea Ostergard, gave birth to the couple’s daughter, Willa. It was a moment Perry will never forget, and just like being able to make one last trip to the national tournament with his teammates, being there for the birth of his first child was something he was so thankful for.

“It’s a life-changing experience,” he said. “To be there for my child’s birth is something I will always be thankful for. It was something I was worried about, because playing basketball, you’re on the road a lot. So I’m so thankful I was able to be there for that. It’s changed my life.”

And with one great experience, Perry is on to the next. He and the Lights got another chance to play in the national tournament, and it’s something that probably wouldn’t have happened if Perry wasn’t able to come back from the knee injury he suffered earlier this season.

“It’s been a great senior year, my whole experience at Northern has been great,” Perry said. “This has been an amazing time in my life. I’ve grown up a lot since coming here and a lot has changed for me. And I’m just thankful for the opportunities I’ve had while I’ve been here. It’s been a great ride.”

“Will being able to come back and play for us, and everything he’s been through, I’m just so proud of him,” Huse added. “All of the success he’s had, on and off the basketball court, it couldn’t have happened to a nice guy. We say it a lot, where there’s a Will, there’s a way. It’s a huge cliché, but for us, it’s so true. He means so much to our basketball team, and we wouldn’t be where we are without him.”

Will Perry goes up for a shot in a Frontier Conference men’s game against Lewis-Clark State last month in Havre.