Lions stop Lights in Kansas City

Freed-Hardeman holds off Northern in NAIA national tourney first-round game

By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern Lights did everything they could to avoid that stinging feeling of a season coming to an end in a dark lockerroom in the bowels of the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City.

But as hard as they tried, it happened all the same.

For the fourth straight year, Northern’s season ended in the first round of the Buffalo Funds NAIA national tournament as the No. 23 Lights lost to No. 10 Freed-Hardeman 71-63 on Thursday morning in Kansas City. The loss ended Northern’s year at 23-9, while the Lions (28-5) advanced to play No. 7 Talladega in a Sweet 16 game this afternoon.

“It’s tough, you feel for the seniors,” said Northern head coach Shawn Huse, who has led the Lights to five national tourney appearances in the last six years. “I thought we played very hard today. Our effort was tremendous. And we did everything we needed to do to win that game. Everything but make shots when we had to have them.”

The Lights made big shots for stretches of Thursday’s tight battle, which saw neither team lead by more than eight points until there was less than a minute to go. But in the end, Northern shot just 37 percent from the field, while the Lions, the runners-up in the American Midwest Conference, shot a sparkling 50 percent, including 61 percent in the second half. And that was it. Shooting turned out to be the difference.

“We executed really well on both ends,” Huse said. “Offensively, we got the right shots, we got the shooters we wanted taking those shots in the right position. We executed our game plan really well today. We just didn’t get enough shots to fall. There really isn’t anything more I can say.”

Northern’s effort was tremendous, especially early on when the Lions jumped out to a 10-2 lead and looked like they were going to blow the Lights out of Kansas City all together.

But out of a timeout, the Lights gathered themselves. Roshawn West started an 8-0 run and Nicholas Blount, who scored a team-high 15 points off the bench, ended it a three of his own. From there, the first half was back-and-forth. Corbin Pearson and Jesse Vaughan nailed triples to keep the Lights close, while a West layup gave MSU-N its first lead of the day with 7:30 left in the half. MSU-N got three’s from Allan Brown and Alfie Miller to stretch the lead to four with just :45 left in the half, but the Lions finished in a flurry. After a Reginald Gilmore 3-point play cut the Lights’ lead to one, Orlando Bass, who poured in a game-high 24 points, stole an MSU-N inbounds pass and went coast-to-coast, lifting the Lions to a 35-34 halftime lead.

But despite trailing at intermission, Huse felt good about where his team was at that point.
“I thought we did a really good job with our team defense,” Huse said. “They (Lions) are a team that can score in the 90’s or higher, but I thought we had the game at our tempo, and that was a result of playing extremely well on the defensive end. We did a good job of slowing them down.”

The Lights did slow the high-scoring Lions down, but at critical junctures, the Lions were in control. Bass’ steal and score gave Freed-Hardeman some momentum, and the Lions ran with it, turning a 5-0 run at the end of the half, into an 11-0 run early in the second.

Eventually, Freed-Hardeman would lead by as many as six, but Northern kept responding. Big three’s by Blount and Pearson got the Lights back to within two with 11 minutes left in the game. The Lions would answer and would continue to hold a 4-6 point lead for much of the rest of the way. Northern did manage to get within two on three different occasions inside of four minutes, mostly thanks to great plays by Blount, Pearson and Gabe Finley.

But two points was as close as the Lights would get. Bass hit a running shot with 2:12 left to put the Lions back up by five, and from there, Northern was forced to foul to stay in the game, and the Lions made nine free throws in the final two minutes to put the contest out of reach.

“Freed-Hardeman is a very good basketball team,” Huse said. “Hats off to them, they shot the ball extremely well. They are talented and athletic and they played very well.

“But I thought we did, too,” he continued. “We just needed to shoot the ball better than we did. If we hit a few more shots down the stretch, it might be a different outcome. We did everything we needed to do, except that.”

Blount finished with four triples, while Pearson had two and scored 14 points, while also pulling down a game-high 10 rebounds. Finley added 10 off the bench for the Lights, while Vaughan and West each scored eight. Miller was put in check by the Freed-Hardeman defense, as he scored just three points on the day. The Lions had four in double figures, with Wooten adding 13 to Bass’ 24. The Lions also out-rebounded Northern 33-30, but the Lights did grab 12 offensive rebounds and they also only committed just five turnovers.

With the loss, another brilliant MSU-N season, Huse’s eighth in a row of 20 wins or more, came to a gut-wrenching end. The Lights will lose Miller, West, Brown, Will Perry and Mike LaValley, but return Pearson, Vaughan and nearly all of their bench. And with the bitter taste of another tough loss in the national tourney, MSU-N will quickly turn its attention to next season.

“We’ll work hard and come back and get ready for next season,” Huse said. “This is a tough loss because we feel like we played well, we executed well. The game was there for us. It’s tough right now.”

**Lights finish the season 23-9**

**Freed-Hardeman 71, Lights 63**

**F-H** – Daniel Gravatt 2-4 0-0 4, Kyle Teichmann 4-8 2-2 10, Ben Meis 2-4 0-0 5, Damion Wooten 4-8 4-4 13, Orlando Bass 9-13 4-5 24, Reginald Gilmore 4-6 2-5 10, Chandler Mack 2-3 0-0 4, Isaiah Harrison 0-0 1-2 1. Totals: 27-47 14-22 71.

**MSU-N** – Corbin Pearson 4-11 5-6 14, Jesse Vaughan 3-6 1-2 8, Roshawn West 3-14 1-2 8, Allan Brown 1-6 0-0 3, Alfie Miller 1-5 0-0 3, Nicholas Blount 5-7 1-2 15, Gabe Finley 4-9 2-2 10, Mike LaValley 0-1 0-0 0, Damian Robinson 0-0 0-0 0, Will Perry 1-2 0-0 2, Pat Jensen 0-0 -0-0 0, Anfernee Standing Rock 0-0 -0-0 0. Totals: 22-61 10-14 63.

Montana State University-Northern's Corbin Pearson flies in for two of his 14 points in Thursday's NAIA national tournament game between the Lights and Freed-Hardeman in Kansas City.
Halftime: Freed-Hardeman 35-34. 3-pointers: F-H 3-11 (Meis 1, Bass 1, Wooten 1), MSU-N 9-29 (Pearson 1, Vaughan 1, West 1, Brown 1, Miller 1, Blount 4); Rebounds: F-H 33 (Teichmann 9), MSU-N 30 (Pearson 10); Fouls: F-H 10, MSU-N 19; Fouled Out: Vaughan.