Four-game losing streaks don’t happen to the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball program often. Neither do 0-4 starts to league play. And snapping that skid against one of the top team’s in the country doesn’t make things any easier.

And that’s exactly what the MSU-Northern Lights are facing as they take on the No. 9 UM-Western Bulldogs (15-3, 3-0) tonight at 8 inside the Armory Gymnasium. Northern will then conclude its most recent home stand with a battle against the Westminster Griffins (8-8, 1-2) Saturday night.

And while tonight’s game pits two of the most successful teams in the Frontier over the last decade against each other, it’s also a matchup of two squads heading in completely opposite directions.

The Lights’ rare losing streak has been a tale of unfinished business. In all four of Northern’s losses the last two weeks, the Lights have had solid leads at one point or another. But shooting woes in the second half have derailed those leads. Northern has also lost games with bad luck, like in its home loss to Lewis-Clark State two weeks ago, as well as its overtime setback at Carroll College last Thursday night. But, as difficult as things have been, MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse isn’t looking for excuses — instead, he’s just looking for his team to stay strong and be resilient.

“It’s not time to panic,” Huse said. “It’s too early to make drastic changes or completely revamp everything we’re doing. When you do things like that, or think like that, or worry about the past losses or the future and where you’re going to end up, you press, you play tight, and good things can’t happen that way.

“Right now, our guys just have to stay the course,” he continued. “Focus on the things we can control. The good news is, we’ve been right there in every game. They’ve been really good games. We have no one to blame but ourselves for the results in those games, but we’ve been right there. And if we continue to stay strong and stay together, it will turn around for us. I believe that.”

Fortunately, the Lights have veterans to lean on during the tough times. Senior Corbin Pearson, who averages 11 points and six rebounds per game, has seen it all when it comes to Frontier play. Fellow seniors Jesse Vaughan and Nick Blount are crafty veterans who average nine and six points per night, respectively, while Warren Edmonson and Trevail Lee combine to score 27 points per game. Northern has also been getting a good spark from freshman Dylan Tatarka off the bench. But, if the Lights are to get back on track, they’ll have to be more consistent on both ends of the floor. While MSU-N still leads the Frontier in 3-point shooting, the Lights are dead last in the conference in field goal percentage, shooting just 44 percent from the floor, and they have dipped to sixth in the Frontier in scoring defense. Northern has led the league in scoring defense the last four years.
Meanwhile, UM-Western has had a completely different kind of streak, and the Bulldogs want to keep it going tonight. Head coach Steve Keller’s team has won 13 straight games, is unbeaten in conference play and hasn’t tasted defeat for over two months. Western was picked to finish just fifth in the Frontier this season, but the Bulldogs have been on a tear, and they will be tough to stop tonight.

“I feel like they are the most unselfish team in our league,” Huse said of the Bulldogs. “They play together and they play with a lot of energy. They are a great example of not having to have all the size in the world or the perfect players to be successful. They are the perfect example of, if you play hard and play together, good things will happen. They are having a great season, and we’re going to have to match their energy level for 40 minutes.”

The Bulldogs don’t have gaudy numbers, but they get the job done night in and night out. They average 84 points per game and they give up 69. They are in the middle of the pack in the Frontier in rebounding and 3-point shooting, and their top scorer, junior Dexter Williams Jr., (6-4) averages a mild 14 points per game.

However, Western, which knocked off the No. 1 team in the country, Cal-State San Marcos earlier this season, has depth and great role players. Senior point guard Stephen McCall (5-8) averages 13 points per game, while senior shooting guard Jordan Overstreet (6-2) chips in with 11. Fellow shooting guard Ryan McCarty (6-2) averages another 10 per night, while Shyke Smalls (6-0), Kris Castro (6-4) and Tim Lott (6-3) add to one of the deepest backcourts in the country. Western also has a strong presence in the middle with 6-10 forward Quinn Smith averaging eight points and seven rebounds per night.

And while things have been tough enough on the Lights and will be extremely challenging with the Bulldogs coming in tonight, Saturday’s game won’t be any easier.

Westminster was picked to win the Frontier this season – the Griffins last at the NAIA level. And while their record doesn’t show it, the Griffins, who played a rigorous schedule before conference play even started, can be every bit the team that the rest of the league feared when the season started.

“When you look at them, or seem them play, you realize, they’re a little like us,” Huse said of the Griffins, who will be moving to NCAA Division II next season. “They have been a victim of a very difficult Frontier Conference schedule so far. But I fully expect them to make a lot of noise in this conference, and we know we’ll have our hands full with them Saturday night.

“They have great size at the guard position,” he continued. “They are very athletic and active. They have a ton of athletic, multi-dimensional players. They are balanced offensively. They really don’t have any weaknesses you can try to exploit. And they play really hard on the defensive end. They are very active and very good defensively. So the key is, you have to be very precise on every possession against them. You make a mistake, and they’ll make you pay for it.”

Like Western, the Griffins don’t play an overly big lineup, but they have experience and depth. Offensively, Westminster averages 77 points per game, and shoots 37 percent from beyond the arc. Also like Western, the Griffins have four players scoring in double figures, led by junior sharp-shooter Jordan Pryor (6-2). He averages 13 points per game and is a three-year starter for Adam Hiatt’s club.

But Pryor has plenty of weapons around him. Forward Quincy Bair (6-5) and point guard Kenny Woodward (5-10) both average 12 points per night, while swingman Casey Evans (6-5) averages 10. Hiatt will also go deep into his bench with the likes of Colton Moon (6-2), Nick Jenson (6-6) and William Walker (6-6) adding to Westminster’s talented roster.

So like with tonight’s game against the Bulldogs, Westminster will have no sympathy towards the Lights’ early season struggles in conference play. But as tough as both games will be this weekend, Huse said his team is showing fight, character and resiliency, and that’s what they need to do right now.

“We can’t look back at what has happened,” Huse said. “We can only focus on what’s in front of us, and that’s two very good teams at home this weekend. I think our guys have done a really good job of that this week. They have had good practices and are very focused and very determined.

“The guys are doing a good job of staying the course right now,” he added. “And they know and believe it will happen for us. In these next two games, we just need to play hard, play loose and play together, and if we do that, we’ll be fine. Good things will happen for this team.”
Tonight’s rivalry game between Northern and UM-Western kicks off at 8 inside the Armory Gymnasium. Saturday night’s tilt between the Lights and Griffins starts at 8 p.m. as well. This weekend at MSU-N is also Coaches vs. Cancer Weekend, as it is across all of college basketball. All coaches will be wearing sneakers this weekend in support of the cause. Northern is on the road next Saturday at arch rival UGF.

**Lights (11-9, 0-4) vs No. 9 UM-Western (15-3, 3-0)**  
Tonight at 8 p.m.;  
**vs Westminster (8-8, 1-2) Saturday at 8 p.m.**  
**at the Armory Gymnasium in Havre, MT**

**MSU-Northern Starters**  
G Trevail Lee, 5-9, Jr, 13 ppg  
G Nick Blount, 6-3, Sr, 9 ppg  
F Warren Edmonson, 6-2, Jr., 14 ppg  
F Corbin Pearson, 6-6, Sr., 11 ppg  
F KJ Rech, 6-5, Jr, 4 rpg

*Havre Daily News website*