If here was any panic, any worry, any stress or doubt about their four-game losing streak to start Frontier Conference play, the Montana State University-Northern Lights sure didn't show any signs of it in what was the biggest game of their season thus far.

With an 0-5 start to league play, and in all likelihood, the opportunity to advance to the Frontier Conference playoffs slipping away, the Lights responded - and they responded against one of their most bitter rivals, who just happened to be the No. 9 team in the country.

Friday night, inside a raucous Armory Gymnasium, the Lights picked up win No. 1 in the Frontier play by turning back the No. 9 UM-Western Bulldogs, 68-56.

It was a much-needed victory, and not just because they were playing the Bulldogs, a team that the Lights have had fierce battles with over the years. No, Northern had to win Friday night, for a multitude of reasons. And win the Lights did.

"It's really huge," MSU-N senior Corbin Pearson said. "With the slow start we got off to in conference, this really became a must-win game for us. We basically just had to come out and find a way to win this game. Western's a great team, but I thought we played great tonight. I think we really figured some things out on defense, and playing really hard defense was the key tonight."

The Lights may have figured out a thing or two defensively, but it didn't hurt that they bombing in 13 3-pointers on the high-scoring Bulldogs. Yes, Northern held Western to just 29 percent shooting in the first half, and nearly 30 points under the Bulldogs' season average. And yes, the Lights out-rebounded Western 34-22, but the spark came on the offensive end, and it came in waves.

"We did play great defensively," Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. "We have struggled with that at times, and Western is a very explosive offensive team. And I thought our guys really took charge on the defensive end. We played really hard, and we played with a lot of energy. We got a lot of rebounds, offensive boards and loose balls. That comes from playing really hard. And I'm very, very proud of our guys for that."

"But I also felt like we got into a nice rhythm offensively," he continued. "We shared the ball really well, found the right man, and we made shots consistently. And that was big for us."

Big shots were the order of the night for a Lights' team which leads the Frontier Conference in 3-point shooting, but is also last in scoring offense.

Trevail Lee opened the game with a triple, and Jermaine Graves added one early to keep the Lights close. The middle portion of the first half was a seesaw affair, where the lead changed hands four times. But when
Lee dropped in his second three of the game, everything changed. His trey at the 7:44 mark gave the Lights a 21-20 lead and just moments later, senior Jesse Vaughan buried one of his own. From there, the Lights never looked back. Northern wound up ripping off an 18-4 run in the final seven minutes of the stanza - the run included two more bombs by Pearson and Blount, while Western made just one field goal in the final six minutes. The result was a 37-24 Lights lead at intermission.

"We got off to kind of a slow start," Pearson said. "But we really worked hard all week and making sure we played hard on defense. So we knew, if we did that, we could get going. And that's kind of what happened. We got off to a slow start again in the second half, but our defense was still there, and eventually, we made some shots, and got it going again. Overall, I just think our defense really was a key tonight. I thought everybody just really did a good job of playing hard on defense."

The Lights did start slow in the second half, something that's plagued Northern throughout the first three weeks of Frontier play. And while the Bulldogs rattled off 10 unanswered points, including two treys by Stephen McCall, unlike in past games, the Lights didn't relent.

Western had closed the gap to 40-36 after a Dexter Williams Jr. lay in, but from there, Northern regained control. Warren Edmonson hit three triples in a three-minute span, and also scored on a layup off a Pearson blocked shot. That run put the Lights back in front 56-43, and Western never threatened again, while a big crowd was deafening in the grand ole Armory.

"Credit to our fans tonight," Huse said. "When they get going like that, there's no better atmosphere in our league. We just have the greatest fans, and I know they helped our guys out a ton tonight. Our crowd was fantastic."

So were the Lights. Northern shot a blistering 50 percent from beyond the arc, shot 44 percent for the game and went a stellar 17-of-18 from the free-throw line. The Lights also held a commanding edge on the boards and forced the Bulldogs, who brought a 13-game winning streak into Friday night's game, into 16 turnovers.

Lee paced a balanced MSU-N attack with 17 points and four trey's. Edmonson also hit four triples, all in the second half, and scored 14 points, while Pearson dropped in 14 and grabbed eight rebounds. Blount chipped in with eight points as well, while the Bulldogs got a game-high 19 points from Williams Jr., but were held to just four threes and eight missed foul shots.

"Hats off to our guys," Huse said. "It may not seem like it, but this team is pretty young experience-wise. So they just had to stay the course. They just had to keep working hard, and eventually things would come around. It's easier said than done when you lose four tough games like we did the past couple of weeks. But our guys did it. They stayed the course, they've just stayed focused on the task at hand. They played hard tonight, and it was one of those nights where they were rewarded for it. So I'm really proud of them for this win."

"This win shows us we're a good team," Pearson added. "We know we're a good team, but when we play like we did tonight, it shows us, and the rest of the conference that we're still a team that should be feared."

**The Comeback**

The Lights may have showed that they're a team to be feared, but the Westminster Griffins didn't get the memo as they rolled into the Armory Gymnasium Saturday night.

Instead of fearing the Lights, the Griffins tried to blow Northern out on its home floor, and kill any momentum the Lights had gained from Friday night's win over the Bulldogs. In the end, the Lights showed they weren't just a flash of brilliance but, instead, that they're a gutsy, gritty team with plenty of fight. Northern rallied from a 16-point second-half deficit to beat the Griffins 68-63 in front of a frenzied Armory crowd.

"We knew we just had to keep fighting," said Northern junior Trevail Lee, who pumped in six 3-pointers Saturday night. "We don't look at the score, we just keep fighting no matter what the score is, or how much time is left. That's what we did was keep fighting, keep doing what we do best. We just knew we had to battle and fight, and we did that."
Northern certainly did just that. The Lights trailed by just seven at the half, and that wasn't bad considering the Griffins shot a blistering 57 percent in the first 20 minutes. But things got almost too far out of reach early in the second. As Westminster kept scoring, the Lights went cold, and all of a sudden, they trailed by 17 points with just over 13 minutes to play, and were still down 53-41 with 8:20 left.

"Our team has a lot of fight to them," said MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse. "I didn't think we were playing great defense for portions of the game, and give credit to Westminster because they played near flawless basketball for a lot of the game. But our guys did just enough to hang around, and once we got a few stops, then it seemed like more shots started to fall, and we kind of got the ball rolling.

"And I have to say, Nikola (Ivanovic) gave us the spark we really need," he continued. "His play in the second half really triggered us emotionally. It kind of woke us up and our guys really fed off that."

The seldom-used Ivanovic came in and gave the Lights a three-point play, and not only did it spark the team, it also ignited the crowd, which was just waiting to erupt after an emotional women's game earlier in the evening.

From there, both the Lights, and the fans surfed the tidal wave of momentum, and the Griffins were powerless to stop it.

Lee backed up Ivanovic's old-fashioned 3-point play with two triples in a row, and all of a sudden, the Lights were back in the game at 54-50. Moments later, red-shirt freshman Dylan Tatarka capped what was a 15-3 Northern run with his third trey of the night, and the score was 56-55 with 5:33 to go.

The Griffins didn't buckle though as Quincy Bair kept making big plays on the other end. However, the Lights had taken the momentum and they weren't giving it back. After two misses and two offensive boards, Corbin Pearson finally got loose in the corner for a three that tied the game at 58-58, and he would score on a layup off of a Warren Edmonson diving save to tie it again at 60-60 with 1:37 left.

And just a few seconds later, Edmonson would do even more damage as he knocked in a 3-point bomb of his own to give Northern its first lead since the 15-minute mark of the first half, at 63-63 with :49 left. On Westminster's ensuing possession, Jesse Vaughan was plowed over on a screen, and he made two clutch free throws to put the Lights ahead 65-62 with :38 left. And free throws would cinch the win as Pearson calmly sank two more with :26 left, which put the finishing touches on an emotionally charged comeback on an emotional night in Havre, while handing the Griffins a third straight loss in what was likely their last-ever visit to the Armory Gymnasium.

"A lot of guys stepped up and made big shots tonight," Lee noted. "A lot of guys made big plays. We just kept fighting. We got big stops and then made big shots."

"Very proud of the way our guys just hung in there and kept finding ways to stay in it," added Huse. "We had guys make big plays all over the place down the stretch. We made hustle plays and got second chances because of how hard we played and how hard we battled on the boards. The effort from this team was tremendous tonight. And I have to say, I'm really proud of the way we shot free throws. We had struggled shooting free throws the last couple of weeks, but last night and tonight, we made our free throws, and really, that was the difference tonight."

Free throws and threes were the story for the Lights. They made 12-of-13 foul shots in the second half, as well as seven bombs. Conversely, it was the Griffins who were red-hot early on. Northern did bury six threes in the first half, but the Lights couldn't slow down Bair, who hit three triples in the first half alone, including one with 15 minutes left, which gave the Griffins a lead they wouldn't relinquish until deep into the second stanza.

Lee led the way for the Lights with 19 points and four assists, while Pearson added a hard-fought 13 points and 11 rebounds, while trying to fend off Bair, who scored a game-high 32 on 10-of-13 shooting and four trey's. Tatarka and Edmonson each chipped in with nine points, while Ivanovic added five in his stint off the bench in the second half.

With the startling comeback, Northern is right back in the thick of the Frontier standings. With wins over the Bulldogs and Griffins, the Lights improved to 2-4 in the Frontier and 13-9 overall. MSU-N also hopes it's
gained some much-needed momentum, and all-important confidence after sweeping two bitter rivals at home.

"The thing is, we knew we were a good team," Huse said. "It was a rough start, and we only had ourselves to blame for that. But we also knew, we were in every game, and they were all good games. And these were two more really good games against two very good teams, but this time, I think we played much more poised and we made the plays when we had to to win these games. So I’m really proud of our guys for that. They are growing up fast, and hopefully, that continues going forward."

"I feel like this is only the beginning," Lee, a transfer from Memphis, Tennessee added. "We said, OK, we have 10 games left, and, to turn it around, we need to win the next two. And we did that. I definitely feel like we got ourselves over the hump with these two wins, and it's only the start. Now we just have to keep it rolling."

The Lights will try to keep it rolling when they travel to Great Falls this Saturday for a showdown with their biggest rival - the nationally ranked University of Great Falls Argos. It's the start of a three-game road trip which also includes visits to Lewis-Clark State Feb. 5 and Montana Tech Feb. 7.

**Lights 68, UM-Western 56**

**UM-W** – Dexter Williams Jr., 8-16 3-6 19, Stephen McCall 5-12 3-3 15, Quinn Smith 2-4 1-4 5, Jordan Overstreet 1-2 1-2 4, Kris Castro 1-1 0-0 2, Shyke Smalls 1-6 0-0 2, Tim Lott 1-3 2-2 4, Connor Woodill 2-3 0-0 5. Totals: 21-49 10-18 56.

**MSU-N** – Corbin Pearson 4-11 5-5 14, KJ Rech 0-1 0-0 0, Trevail Lee 6-9 1-2 17, Nicholas Blount 2-2 2-2 8, Warren Edmonson 5-11 0-0 14, Jermaine Graves 1-2 3-3 6, Dylan Tatarka 0-3 2-2 2, Damian Robinson 0-1 0-0 0, Tim Lott 1-3 4-4 7, Nikoila Ivanovic 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 19-43 17-18 68.

Halftime: Northern 37-24. 3-pointers: UM-W 4-15 (McCall 2, Overstreet 1, Woodill 1), MSU-N 13-26 (Pearson 1, Lee 4, Blount 2, Edmonson 4, Graves 1, Vaughan 1); Rebounds: UM-W 22 (Williams Jr. 5), MSU-N 34 (Pearson 8); Fouls: UM-W 15, MSU-N 17; Fouled out: None.

**Lights 68, Westminster 63**

**WC** – Quincy Bair 10-13 8-9 32, Jordan Pryor 4-12 1-2 11, Casey Evans 1-1 0-0 2, Colton Moon 0-2 2-2 2, Nick Jenson 1-4 4-6 6, Kenny Woodard 1-4 0-0 2, William Walker 4-5 0-1 8. Totals: 21-42 15-20 63.

**MSU-N** – Corbin Pearson 3-7 6-6 13, KJ Rech 1-1 1-2 3, Trevail Lee 6-13 1-1 19, Nicholas Blount 2-5 3-4 8, Warren Edmonson 3-12 1-2 9, Jermaine Graves 0-1 0-0 0, Dylan Tatarka 3-6 0-0 9, Damian Robinson 0-0 0-0 0, Tim Lott 1-2 2-2 2, Nikoila Ivanovic 2-2 1-1 5. Totals: 20-48 15-18 68.

Halftime: Westminster 32-27. 3-pointers: WC 6-16 (Bair 4, Pryor 2), MSU-N 13-35 (Pearson 1, Lee 6, Blount 1, Edmonson 2, Tatarka 3); Rebounds: WC 27 (Jenson 10), MSU-N 25 (Pearson 11); Fouls: WC 21, MSU-N 17; Fouled out: None.

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