Lights out-fight Argos
Northern men sink UGF with late free throws for third straight win
By George Ferguson
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GREAT FALLS — If through the first four games of the Frontier Conference play, the Montana State University-Northern Lights hadn’t found what they were looking for, they have sure found it now.

Saturday night, in front of a boisterous crowd at the University of Great Falls’ McLaughlin Center, the Lights used a stingy defense, timely 3-point shooting, and near perfection from the free-throw-line to subdue the No. 12 UGF Argos 60-58. And after starting out 0-4 in league play, the Lights have now won three straight, and all in barn burners.

“If we’ve ever had a team that exemplifies that it’s not over until it’s over, it’s this one,” said MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse, who’s Lights have now knocked off two nationally ranked rivals in the last 10 days. “I feel like our teams have always fought to the end. That’s always been a characteristic of Northern basketball. But this team just really seems to have that fight to the end in them, and they had it again tonight. I’m just really proud of them.”

And the Lights had to fight until the bitter end to beat the Argos.

Northern was in full control of the contest, leading 46-32 with just over 12 minutes to go. But T.J. Harris would bury four 3-pointers in the next four months, igniting a furious Argo rally. And by the time the rally was done, UGF had ripped off a 15-2 run, and with a mere 2:50 left, Marcus Hurn would add a 3-pointer of his own to put the Argos ahead 58-50.

“For a time, there was nothing we could do to stop them (Argos),” Huse said. “We didn’t have an answer for anything they did. They played so well down the stretch, and just when we thought we had all the momentum, they came right back and took it away from us.”

But just like the Lights didn’t fold in a 16-point comeback win against Westminster last Saturday in Havre, they didn’t fold down by four on the road Saturday night.

After Arcau’s improbable three, Corbin Pearson sank two foul shots on the other end to pull the Lights to within two points at 58-56. Then, MSU-N buckled down on the defensive end, and wound up getting a steal that ended up in Trevail Lee’s hands. He would find Edmonson racing up the floor alone, and UGF’s only hope was to foul. But the Argos were a little overzealous on the foul and it was called an intentional foul. That meant Edmonson would go to the line for two shots, and Northern would get the ball as well with :19 left in the game.

From there, things got interesting, and dire for the Lights. Warren Edmonson, who would play a key role down the stretch, tied the game with a baseline jumper, but 6-9 backup forward Daniel Arcau put the Argos right back in front with an open layup. Then, Arcau would really look like the hero as he nailed a triple from the left corner with 1:07 to go, and all of a sudden, the Lights found themselves trailing 58-54.

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And while free throws had been one of Northern’s weaknesses during their four-game losing streak, they were the opposite against the Argos. Edmonson shook off the hard foul and calmly sank both shots to tie the game at 58-58. From there, Northern ran a play for the win, and the ball ended up in Pearson’s hands underneath the basket, and he too was fouled with four seconds left. The senior from Big Sandy, playing his last Frontier game in Great Falls, made both to lift the Lights to another spectacular comeback. All they had to do was force a miss from UGF on the other end, and they did as Harris missed a desperation heave.

"First, you have to give credit to UGF," Huse said. "They almost pulled off a great comeback. But in the end, our leaders stepped up. Corbin and Warren made some huge free throws for us. We got an important defensive stop, and just in general, the whole team really executed when we had to. This was a great effort by our guys. I’m just really proud of them.”

It was a tremendous effort, as Pearson and Edmonson went a perfect 6-for-6 from the charity stripe in the final minute. But it was also an all-around team effort by the Lights, who, for the second straight week, stopped a team that was arguably the hottest in the Frontier. Last Friday, Northern snapped UM-Western’s 13-game winning streak in Havre, and the Lights ended a five-game streak by the Argos Saturday night. And they did it with great defense, great shooting, and big plays from their bench.

In a physical first half, Northern got a key 3-pointer from senior reserve Pat Jensen, which capped off a 7-0 run. Later, Nick Blount made it an 11-0 run after he knocked in one of MSU-N's eight threes. And, with Northern absolutely stifling the high-powered Argo offense, which shot just 29 percent in the first 20 minutes, former Great Falls High star Dylan Tatarka came off the bench and put an exclamation point on the first period with a three that sent the Lights into the locker room with a 27-21 lead.

Things got even better in the first eight minutes of the second stanza. And again, it was defense and the Lights’ bench that were key. During what would become a 14-2 MSU-N run, Jensen knocked down his second bomb, while Damian Robinson scored five straight points, including a breakaway dunk that really silenced a charged-up UGF Homecoming crowd.

The run, keyed by Northern’s reserves, gave the Lights a 14-point lead, setting up the dramatic final 12 minutes.

“We always have a great energy on our bench,” Tatarka said. "We just stay ready, and when it’s our turn, we go in and try to make big plays to help the team. And tonight, I thought we did that. Damian and Pat were great tonight. They played huge for us.

“[Our bench was certainly big tonight],” Huse said. "Those guys are always ready to go. They always do such a great job of staying focused and being ready to go. They give us great energy, and tonight, all of those guys came in and gave us a huge lift. It was just another great, all-around team effort by our guys. They never quit, and they found a way to get it done.”

On both ends, Northern got it done. The Lights shot 50 percent from three, made clutch free throws, forced the Argos into 18 turnovers and withstood a wild comeback that saw Harris finish with a game-high 17 points and five triples.

Edmonson and Pearson would pace the Lights with 14 points each, while Jensen gave MSU-N eight off the bench. Tatarka and Robinson combined for another 12, and Jermaine Graves hit an important three as well. Sigman Farmer III added 15 points and nine boards for the Argos, who slipped to 5-2 in league play, and lost for just the fifth time this season.

And with the win over their biggest rival, the Lights have now won three straight in league play, and are 3-4 and 15-9 overall. Northern is right back in the hunt for a Frontier playoff berth, and is clearly playing the best basketball of its season. And now, with another big road trip coming up, the key is to keep the ball rolling.

“This one was big,” Tatarka, who grew up watching his older brother Shawn play in heated games against the Argos, said. "It was a dogfight, just like it’s supposed to be. UGF is a big rival, but in this league, it’s so tough, I think everybody is your rival. But it’s a big win for us, and now we just have to try and keep it going.”
The Lights will be back on the road Thursday night when they start the second half of Frontier play at Lewis-Clark State. Northern will also visit league-leading Montana Tech Saturday night in Butte.

**Lights 60, UGF 58**

**MSU-N** - Corbin Pearson 3-6 7-8 14, KJ Rech 1-4 0-0 2, Trevail Lee 1-5 2-3 4, Nicholas Blount 1-1 0-2 3, Warren Edmondson 5-1 2-2 14, Jeremaine Graves 1-2 0-0 3, Dylan Tatarka 2-4 1-3 6, Damian Robinson 2-2 2-3 6, Pat Jensen 3-5 0-0 8. Totals: 19-40 14-21 60.

**UGF** - Steven Daho 1-2 0-0 2, T.J. Harris 6-15 0-0 17, Marcus Hurn 4-9 1-2 10, Darren Lockett 1-3 2-3 4, Sigman Farmer III 6-12 3-4 15, Sergio Berkley 1-2 3-4 5, Daniel Arcau 2-4 1-2 5. Totals: 21-51 10-15 58.

Halftime: Northern 27-21. 3-pointers: MSU-N 8-16 (Pearson 1, Blount 1, Edmonson 2, Graves 1, Tatarka 1, Jensen 2), UGF 6-13 (Harris 5, Hurn 1); Rebounds: MSU-N 24 (Robinson 6), UGF 34 (Farmer III 9); Fouls: MSU-N 15, UGF 21; Fouled out: None.

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