It’s the middle of February. There’s two big games in the Armory Gymnasium this weekend. It’s crunch time in the Frontier Conference.

But for the Montana State University-Northern Lights, it’s really been crunch time for the last four weeks, and this weekend is no different. After falling into an 0-4 hole in the Frontier to start the season, the Lights (4-5, 15-10) have scratched and clawed their way back into the fight. And this weekend, MSU-N has a chance to make even more headway.

Tonight, the Lights play host to the Rocky Mountain College Battlin Bears at 8 inside the Armory, while the Carroll College Fighting Saints come to Havre for a Valentine’s Day rivalry game Saturday night. And having lost to both RMC and Carroll last month, and with the Lights, Bears and Saints part of a current four-way tie for fourth place, regular season games don’t get any bigger than these two in the Armory.

However, as pressure-packed as the Lights’ two home games are, MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse feels like his team is gaining confidence and momentum. The Lights have won four of their last five, and return home for this weekend’s “White-Out” games fresh off a 71-68 overtime win at Montana Tech.

Two big reasons why the Lights have surged in the last month is their defense and free-throw shooting. Those have always been two trademarks of Lights’ basketball, but early in the Frontier season, Northern struggled there. Now however, the Lights rank second in the Frontier in scoring and field goal defense, and clutch free-throw shooting has secured close wins over Westminster, UGF and Tech in the last three weeks. Add to that, Northern is still the top 3-point shooting team in the Frontier, as the Lights make 41 percent of their threes and have hit 253 bombs on the season, and it’s no wonder MSU-N is right back in the hunt for the top spot in the Frontier. Despite being 4-5, the Lights are just two games out of first place with five games left in the season.

“I do feel like we’re a different team than when we played Rocky and Carroll the first time around,” Huse said. “We’re much better defensively and we’re shooting the ball more consistently now. I think we’ve grown a ton since those road games last month. I’m sure Rocky and Carroll feel that they have grown and improved, too, but our guys are excited about the way they’re playing right now, and they’re looking forward to the challenges ahead.”

Northern should be excited, as the Lights have a chance to really put themselves in the heat of the Frontier title chase this weekend. Led by Corbin Pearson, Trevail Lee and Warren Edmonson, who average 12 points per game each, the Lights are extremely balanced. And they’re deep. Dylan Tatarka and senior Pat Jensen have really stepped up off the bench for the Lights, while Damian Robinson and Jermaine Graves are also giving Northern key minutes every night. MSU-N will also be back to full strength this weekend, as Nick Blount returns after missing two games with illness.

Of course, the Lights, while confident, also know just how strong both of their opponents are.
RMC (4-5, 15-8), like MSU-N, got off to a poor start in league play, but the Bears have come roaring back. Included in RMC’s resurgence was a 66-56 win over the Lights last month in Billings. Rocky is a potent offensive team with a collection of stars. The Bears average 86 points per game, and they have four players who average double figures, led by Malachi Roberts’ (6-4) 14 points per night. Frontier Preseason Player of the Year Tyree Anderson (6-3) also averages 14 points and leads the conference in assists and steals, while Sian Lane (6-0) and Zach Hinton (6-6) combine to average another 23 points per night. Like Northern, Rocky also has depth. Taylor Longo leads the charge of five more Bears who average between nine and six points per outing.

“Everything starts with their guards,” Huse said of the Bears “Their post players do a good job with their roles, but their guards are really dangerous. Rocky is a team who has a lot of firepower offensively. They know how to score. So we have to be ready to guard them. We have to find a way to slow them down. For us, it starts there, because they’re an explosive offensive team.”

While the Bears have been a thorn in Northern’s side of late, and have won two in a row in Havre, Carroll College will come into the Armory on Saturday night having not win in Havre since 2004. But, the much-improved Saints (4-5, 15-8) did knock off the Lights 89-83 in overtime last month in Helena, in a game the Lights had full control of in the second half, until Carroll made a late comeback.

“We feel like we let that one slip away,” Huse said of the loss in Helena. “We had a pretty good lead in that game. But, that game has no bearing on this one. We’ve improved. Carroll has improved since then. It’s a new game.”

Carroll has been improving all season under second-year head coach Carson Cunningham. The Saints are a deadly 3-point shooting team, and they are efficient on the defensive end and on the glass. The Saints only score 70 points per night, but they allow just 68, which is right behind the Lights, who allow 67. And yet, they’re just as dangerous on the offensive end.

Sophomore point guard Zach Taylor (6-0) is having a huge season. He averages 18 points and shoots better than 42 percent from three. Freshman Oliver Carr averages 14 points per night, while Carroll has strong support with senior guard Zayn Kirkendoll (6-2), junior forward Jake Hollifield (6-5) and freshman swingman Ryan Imhoff (6-6).

“They’re playing extremely well,” Huse said of the Saints. “They play great defense, and they execute their offense really well. They have a bunch of guards who can really shoot it, and they seem to have great chemistry. They play really well together.

“So, while we feel like we’ve grown up a lot since that game in Helena,” he continued. “We know they (Saints) aren’t going to come in here and give it to us. We know we have to earn it. Both teams coming in here are just like the rest of our league … teams capable of beating anybody on any given night. So we understand we’ll have to be at our very best to keep this momentum we’ve built going.”

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Battlin’ Bears tips off at 8 inside the Armory Gymnasium. Saturday night’s game between Northern and Carroll also tips off at 8. Fans are encouraged to wear white to both games. Northern will take its final road trip of the season next weekend when the Lights visit UM-Western and Westminster.

**Lights (4-5, 15-10) vs RMC (4-5, 15-8) Tonight at 8 p.m.;**

**vs Carroll College (4-5, 15-8) Saturday at 8 p.m.**

**at the Armory Gymnasium in Havre, MT**

**MSU-Northern Starters**

G Trevail Lee, 5-9, Jr., 12 ppg  
G Nick Blount, 6-3, Sr., 9 ppg  
F Warren Edmonson, 6-2, Jr., 12 ppg  
F Corbin Pearson, 6-6, Sr., 12 ppg, 6 rpg  
F KJ Rech, 6-5, Jr, 5 ppg, 5 rpg
Havre Daily News website