Lights win a big one at Westminster

By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team was on the brink following Thursday night’s loss at UM-Western. The Lights had dipped to two games below .500 and were in danger of not making the Frontier Conference playoffs.

And all of that made Saturday night’s road game at Westminster even more of a challenge than the trip to Salt Lake City usually is — and it’s always challenging. But, as the Lights have done so often this season, they rose to the challenge, as they pulled off a stunning 58-51 come-from-behind victory over the Griffins.

The win improved the Lights’ conference record to 6-7 with one game to play. It also gives Northern a chance to clinch a playoff berth this Saturday when the Lights host the UGF Argos at the Armory Gymnasium. The Lights are currently tied with the Argos for fifth in the Frontier standings, and a win over UGF Saturday night would mean Northern will finish ahead of the Argos in the league standings. MSU-N also holds all tiebreakers of Westminster in the event that the Griffins would tie the Lights in the final league standings.

So Northern’s prospects of reaching the Frontier playoffs are looking much better after Saturday night’s win in Salt Lake City, and much, much better since the Lights’ 0-4 to start to league play. Since that time, the Lights have gone 6-3 and have won huge road games at UGF, Montana Tech and now Westminster.

"I am as proud of these guys tonight as I have been of any team I have coached here (at MSU-Northern)," Northern head coach Shawn Huse said after Saturday’s win. "We may not be a team in the position going into the last weekend of the season that we have been in for so many years, but this group is just as resilient. Coming out of Westminster with a win is not easy to do, and especially when so much is on the line for every league squad. Our backs have been against the wall and we have just kept fighting."

And the Lights fought admirably against the Griffins. Northern’s shooting slump, which started with a loss at Carroll last weekend, and continued against UM-Western Thursday night, seemed to rear its ugly head again in the first half against Westminster. The Lights shot just 24 percent in the first 20 minutes and trailed the Griffins 29-22 at intermission.

In the second half, MSU-N did all it could to hang around, despite not shooting at a high level. The Lights made just six 3-pointers Thursday night, but when they needed one the most, they got it. Trailing by two with just under three minutes to go, Pat Jensen nailed a go-ahead 3-pointer, and thanks to superb defense and near-perfect free-throw shooting, the Lights never let that lead go, and they left Salt Lake with perhaps their biggest win of the season thus far.

Northern went a sparkling 22-of-24 from the foul line, including many important ones down the stretch. Defense was also critical as the Lights got stop after stop in the second half to keep the game within their grasp, and they also out-rebounded the Griffins 33-29.

Offensively, junior Warren Edmonson scored 14 points, while senior Corbin Pearson was sensational, scoring 13 points, going a clutch 7-of-8 from the charity stripe, and pulling down 13 rebounds. The Lights also got a big lift from their bench as Jensen, Dylan Tatarka and Brett Thompson combined for 15 points and three of MSU-N’s six triples.

And with the huge road win, the Lights (17-12) can now turn all their attention to the massive senior-night showdown with the Argos. The game will likely be an elimination game for the Frontier playoffs.
"As everyone knows, there is a great deal of parity in the Frontier Conference this year," Huse said. "We know we have played as tough as anyone since our 0-4 conference start, and are focused to keep it going. It will take an effort next weekend, just like usual. We are working this week to keep improving step by step, taking this marathon one snap at a time."

**Griffins Prevail**

Also in Salt Lake City Saturday night, the No. 11 Montana State University-Northern Skylights saw their stellar five-game winning streak come to a grinding halt at the hands of the third-ranked Westminster Griffins.

Northern has been playing without starting shooting guard Jacy Thompson for over a month now, and Saturday night, the Skylights were without senior star A’Jha Edwards. And that, plus the Griffins being at home, was too much to overcome as MSU-N fell 59-44.

The game was a result of two big Westminster runs. The Griffins jumped out to a quick double-digit lead in the first half, and the result was a 25-14 halftime advantage. Northern closed the gap for a time in the second half, but Westminster started to pull away again in the final 10 minutes. And MSU-N just couldn’t catch up from there.

While Northern did play outstanding defense on the high-powered Griffins, Westminster was even better on that end. The Griffins held MSU-N to 32 percent shooting on the night, and without Edwards in the lineup, the Griffins held a 40-30 rebounding edge, something that doesn’t happen to the Skylights too often.

Offensively, MSU-N got 12 points and six rebounds from senior Megan Feldman, while Taylor Cummings had nine points, two assists and two 3-pointers. Brandy Lambourne and Taryn Norby also came off the bench to hit threes for the short-handed Skylights, who fell to 10-3 in the Frontier Conference and 25-4 overall. Despite the loss, the Skylights will still finish in second place in the Frontier and will be the No. 2 seed in the upcoming Frontier playoffs. That won’t change in the final game of the regular season, which is Saturday night when they host the UGF Argos at the Armory Gymnasium.

**Lights 58, Westminster 51**

**MSU-N** – Nick Blount 3-9 1-1 8, Warren Edmonson 3-11 6-6 14, Trevail Lee 0-4 4-4 4, Corbin Pearson 3-7 7-8 13, KJ Rech 2-3 0-0 4, Pat Jensen 1-2 2-2 5, Dylan Tatarka 2-3 0-1 5, Brett Thompson 1-3 2-2 5. Totals: 15-42 22-24 58.


**Westminster 59, Skylights 44**

**MSU-N** – Taylor Cummings 3-8 1-2 9, Natalee Faupel 3-133 2-3 8, Megan Feldman 5-12 2-2 12, Molly Kreyck 2-8 0-0 5, Taybra Teeters 1-4 1-2 3, Makhayla Farmer 0-0 0-1 0, Brandy Lambourne 1-2 1-2 4, Taryn Norby 1-3 0-0 3. Totals: 16-50 7-12 44.

Halftime: Westminster 25-14. 3-pointers: MSU-N 5-19 (Cummings 2, Kreyck 1, Lambourne 1, Norby 1). Rebounds: 30 (Feldman 6); Fouls: MSU-N 17, WC 13. Fouled out: Teeters.