Playoff Bound: Lights sink Argos

MSU-N men clinch playoff berth with a thrilling senior night win over UGF in overtime

By George Ferguson

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The Montana State University-Northern Lights didn't know it at the time. But a three-point comeback, and a 16-9 run in overtime against arch rival University of Great Falls Argos saved their season.

On senior night, Saturday night at the Armory Gymnasium, the Lights forced their way into this week's Frontier Conference playoffs with a 62-55 win over the arch rival Argos. Had MSU-N lost the game, the Lights would have been on the outside looking in at the six-team playoff, which starts Wednesday night when the Lights will pay a visit to the Carroll College Fighting Saints. The win improved Northern's Frontier record to 7-7, but a loss to the Argos would have meant the Lights' season would have been over because of Montana Tech's win over Westminster Saturday night.

"With where we already knew we were, and with it being senior night, and UGF coming in, there was a lot on the line tonight," said Northern head coach Shawn Huse. "That was as much pressure as it gets in one game, and as it turned out, we had to win it in order to keep playing. So I'm very proud of our guys for stepping up. It takes a great deal of character to make the plays they did in a game of this magnitude."

The Lights did make a series of season-saving plays in the final few minutes of regulation Saturday night. In a defensive slug fest with the Argos, Northern found itself trailing for much of the second half. Yet, the Lights were not going to fold.

MSU-N was already down 26-22 at intermission, and while big 3-pointers from Pat Jensen and Trevail Lee gave the Lights brief leads in the second half, UGF seemed to have the upper hand for much of the last 20 minutes, and when a big Corbin Pearson trey was immediately answered by one from UGF's Marcus Hurn, the Argos were back in front 43-41 with 3:39 left.

Senior Nick Blount, who would come up big in overtime, tied the game at 43-43 with two free throws, but with 2:19 to go, T.J. Harris hit the bottom of the net from deep, and the Argos led 46-43. The score seemed to stay that way forever, and it seemed like the Lights had to play defense forever, then in the waning moments, MSU-N made two crucial plays to stay alive.

First, Pearson bullied his way to the basket and got fouled after a made layup. He calmly sank the free throw to tie the game with 1:02 left. But from there, UGF had the ball for the rest of the way. The Argos ran the clock down to :33 and got fouled. Because they weren't in the bonus, it allowed UGF to hold for the final shot, and the Argos did. But excellent team defense and strong one-on-one pressure from Dylan Tatarka forced a Harris miss with :01 left, and the Lights were on their way to overtime.

"We don't panic, that's one thing," Blount said. "The other is our defense. That's what really keeps us in games. We knew if we just got that one stop, we could come down and score. But we had to get that one
stop first, and we did that. So it was really all about our defense. I mean, we held them to 55 points in 45 minutes. That's all about how hard this team works on defense."

Defense and a timely 3-point play might have gotten the Lights into overtime, but once they were there, the offense put the Argos away. Northern went up 50-46 on a Pearson tap-in, and the lead grew to seven when Pearson raced up the floor and found Blount in the corner for a dagger of a triple. That shot brought the sold-out Armory to a deafening roar, and from there, the Lights finished off the Argos for the second time this season with near-perfect free throw shooting.

"I knew when we won the jump ball to start (OT), we were going to be fine in overtime," Huse said. "That's important in overtime, to start off with the ball, and we did and I think we scored off of it. I just had a sense our guys weren't going to be denied tonight. And they just stepped up and made some big plays on both ends. If this was our last home game, it was a great way for these guys to go out, and I'm proud of them."

Fittingly, all of Northern's seniors, who were honored before the game, came up big in the win. Jensen knocked down a big three in the first half, while back-to-back threes by Warren Edmonson and Lee kept the Lights within striking distance in a half that ended with a buzzer-beating triple by Harris that sent UGF into the locker room with a 26-22 edge.

Jensen would finish the game with eight points in his final home appearance for the Lights, while Damian Robinson played great defense and pulled down key boards.

But the senior tandem of Pearson and Blount really finished the emotional night with a flurry. Pearson scored all of his game-high 18 points in the second half, while he also pulled down eight rebounds. Blount scored just five points, but all were huge, including his OT try that really cinched the win for the Lights. Edmonson also came up clutch with 17 points and three triples, as the Lights shot 50 percent from downtown and were a stellar 14-of-17 from the charity stripe.

The Argos, who still got into the six-team playoff despite Saturday night's loss, got 18 from Harris, but no other UGF player reached double figures on a night when the MSU-N defense held the Argos to 37 percent shooting and just five threes. The Argos still made the playoffs, but lost their last six conference games on the way to the postseason.

"Defensively, I thought we were very good tonight," Huse said. "UGF can be a very explosive team, as we saw when they nearly came all the way back on us at their place. So to hold them to 55 points in 45 minutes, that's a very commendable job and it's a credit to how focused our guys were tonight."

For Northern (18-12) to come back and win a must-win game against a bitter rival is also commendable. And for the Lights to now be in the Frontier postseason after an 0-4 start to league play, that speaks volumes about the character and attitude the Lights bring to each and every game, and each and every practice.

"Everybody on this team fights till the end," Blount said. "Nobody every gives up. We just fight every night. Nobody ever gets down. We pick each other up when anything bad has happened to us this season. We've just kept our heads up and have never given up this season. And we didn't tonight either."

And now the Lights live to fight another day. Northern will head to Carroll Wednesday night. The Lights and Saints, who finished fourth in the Frontier standings, are also bitter rivals, and Carroll has beaten MSU-N twice this season.

"Our guys have stayed focused and stayed hungry," Huse said. "They have always known we're a team that's capable of having a lot of success this season. Our backs have been against the wall for a lot of the conference season, but our guys have just kept working hard, kept trying to get better, and have always taken things one step at a time. And now it's a brand new season, and we have an opportunity to go win another game on Wednesday night."
Lights 62, UGF 55 OT

UGF – Daniel Arcau 1-3 0-0 2, T.J. Harris 5-14 5-8 18, Marcus Hurn 4-11 0-0 9, Sigman Farmer III 2-8 2-2 6, Matt Hurn 4-9 1-2 9, Steven Daho 1-2 0-0 2, Darren Lockett 1-2 2-2 4, Dalton Groenwold 1-3 0-0 3, Maleek Singleton 0-0 2-2 2. Totals: 19-52 12-16 55.

MSU-N – Corbin Pearson 7-15 3-3 18, Pat Jensen 3-5 1-2 8, Trevail Lee 2-8 2-3 8, Nicholas Blount 1-3 2-2 5, Warren Edmonson 4-7 6-6 17, Jermaine Graves 0-1 0-0 0, Dylan Tatarka 1-3 0-0 2, Brett Thompson 0-0 0-0 0, Damian Robinson 1-2 0-0 2, KJ Rech 1-2 0-0 2. Totals: 20-45 14-17 62.

Halftime: UGF 26-22. 3-pointers: UGF 5-12 (Harris 3, Marcus Hurn 1, Groenwold 1), MSU-N 8-16 (Pearson 1, Jensen 1, Lee 2, Blount 1, Edmonson 3); Rebounds: UGF 26 (Arcau 5), MSU-N 29 (Pearson 8); Fouls: UGF 19, MSU-N 17; Fouled out: None.

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