The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team has been fighting for its postseason life for nearly two months now. An 0-4 start to Frontier Conference play meant Northern would play the rest of the regular season with its back against the wall.

However, following an overtime win against the Great Falls Argos in their regular season finale last Saturday night in Havre, the Lights (18-12) could finally take a deep breath as they earned their spot in the Frontier playoffs.

And with that spot secured, the fifth-seeded Lights know they can accomplish great things over the next week, and that quest starts with tonight’s first-round game at fourth-seeded Carroll College. The game between MSU-N and Carroll tips off at 7 in Helena, with the winner advancing to Saturday night’s semifinal round.

“I sensed in the locker room (Saturday night) that our guys are ready for this,” said MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse, who’s Lights have been to the Frontier semis in nine of the last 10 seasons. “There’s wasn’t a lot of celebration after beating UGF, because our guys know it’s a brand new season, and we have a great opportunity in front of us.”

It is a brand new season and what happened during the regular season is now rendered meaningless. And in a Frontier Conference where the top two teams finished at just 9-5, and of the six teams in the playoffs can win the Frontier championship.

But while it is indeed a new season, Northern will have to figure out how to solve Carroll, a team that swept the Lights during the regular season. After two straight losing seasons, second-year head coach Carson Cunningham got the Saints back to being a Frontier power. They finished fourth in the Frontier standings and went 18-10 overall. Carroll also beat the Lights 89-83 in overtime in January in Helena, then came to Havre and bested Northern 60-58 three weeks ago in the Armory Gymnasium. In both those games, the Lights had solid leads at one point, but the Saints fought back and stole two wins from the Lights, who like Carroll, went 7-7 in league play.

“Carroll is a good basketball team,” Huse said. “We’ve seen that first-hand this year. And they’re tough at home. This time of year, we know each other well, and these games come down to execution. Carroll executes really well, and we’re going to have to match that Wednesday night.”

The Saints do execute, and while they’re not an overly high-scoring team, they still have plenty of weapons, including sophomore point guard Zach Taylor, who finished the regular season averaging 17 points per game. Freshman forward Oliver Carr has also been outstanding, averaging 15 points and seven rebounds per night, and he scored 20 the last time the Lights and Saints met.
But as good as Carroll can be offensively, the Saints make hay on defense, just like the Lights do. Northern comes into tonight’s game leading the Frontier in scoring and field goal defense, while Carroll is third in both categories.

So, just like last month when the two teams met in Havre, tonight’s game could be a defensive struggle, and in a game like that, Northern must deliver with clutch offense, much like it did when the Lights came roaring back to beat UGF last Saturday night.

Senior Corbin Pearson, who recently became the 18th player in schools history to join the magical 1,000-point club at Northern, leads the Lights with 13 points and seven rebounds per game, while Warren Edmonson also averages 13 and Trevail Lee and Nick Blount each average nine. The Lights have also been getting strong contributions from their bench, including spark from Pat Jensen, Dylan Tatarka and Damian Robinson.

And they’ll need all hands on deck tonight, because the Frontier playoffs are win-or-go-home, and for both Northern and Carroll, that’s a literal term because neither team is in line for an at-large berth to the NAIA national tournament later this month. Both Northern and Carroll know they have to win the Frontier title to punch a ticket to Kansas City, and that makes tonight’s game one of the biggest in the storied rivalry between the Lights and Saints.

“It’s going to be a challenge, but it’s one our guys are looking forward to,” Huse said. “I feel like this team has played with its back against the wall all season, and they’ve responded to that really well. To see where we were in early January, and where we are now, it’s really amazing how far we’ve come. So we know this is going to be a big challenge for us, but our guys will be well prepared and up for that challenge.”

Tonight’s Frontier Conference playoff game between Northern and Carroll tips at 7 in Helena. The winner will advance to play at either UM-Western or Lewis-Clark State Saturday night, depending on the outcome of tonight’s other first-round game between Rocky Mountain College and UGF in Billings.

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