In college basketball, or in any sport for that matter, it’s very hard to beat a team three times in one season. And the Montana State University-Northern Lights proved that theory correct, and because of that, they’ll get a chance to do it again Saturday night.

Wednesday, inside the Carroll College P.E. Center, the Lights toppled the host Carroll College Fighting Saints 66-60 in the first round of the Frontier Conference playoffs. The Lights have lost to Carroll twice during the regular season, but in the third meeting, Northern was up to the challenge. And with the win, MSU-N (19-12) will advance to the Frontier semifinals to take on top-seeded Lewis-Clark State, which also swept the Lights during the regular season.

“Just very proud of our guys,” said MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse. “They really dug deep tonight. I thought our effort and our focus was great. And we got a big lift from the great crowd we had here. For much of the game, we looked and played like the Northern team that has won eight of our last 11 games. And it was a lot of fun.”

For a time, Carroll, which has really risen back to Frontier prominence this season, was making it look like the theory of beating an arch rival three times might be just a myth. Behind 10 early points from sophomore guard Zach Taylor, Carroll 18-10 in the first 10 minutes of the game, and the Saints took a 31-24 lead into halftime. But Huse noted that though Carroll was playing well, MSU-N hit enough big shots in the first half, including a pair of 3-pointers from senior Pat Jensen, to not let the game get out of hand.

“I thought we made just enough big shots and got just enough key stops to at least keep it close in the first half,” Huse said. “There was a time there that the game could have gotten broke open on us, but we did just enough to stay in it.”

And it didn’t take the Lights long to get even closer in the second half, as the Lights, who went a blistering 11-of-21 from beyond the arc, hit a bunch of crucial 3-pointers. Corbin Pearson hit a big one, and Dylan Tatarka gave the Lights their first lead 37-35 when he bombed in a triple with 10:40 left. That flurry was part of a 10-0 run that left the Lights leading 42-37 with just over 10 minutes to go. Carroll answered with a 7-0 run to retake the lead at 44-42, but Trevail Lee’s steal, and subsequent triple put the Lights back up 45-44, and sparked an 8-0 run that gave the Lights a 50-44 lead with 4:40 left.

From there, Edmonson would drain two bombs of his own, and he and Nicholas Blount made key free throws to help hold the Saints off, and secure a berth in the Frontier semifinals for the 10th time in Huse’s tenure in Havre.

“Defensively, I thought we did a good job,” Huse said. “Holding them to 60 points, they’re a very good team, and that’s not easy. And in the second half, we settled down and took much better care of the ball, and that led to much better offense. We did hit some really big shots, and Nick and Warren and Corbin were all big for us at the foul line down the stretch. Our guys just played really well and were not going to be denied tonight.”
Pearson led the way with a team-high 18 points and three triples. Lee also hit three bombs and scored 11 while Edmonson knocked in two from downtown and added 11 as well. Blount scored eight points and made five key free throws in the final two minutes, while Tatarka and Jensen combined for three more treys and 13 points off the bench. The MSU-N defense held Carroll, which did get a herculean 26 points from Zach Taylor, to just 39 percent shooting in the second half, after the Saints had shot a scorching 52 percent in the first 20 minutes.

And now, with the quarterfinal win, the Lights will try and knock off another team which swept them in the regular season when they visit top-seeded LC State Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho. The winner will advance to next Tuesday’s Frontier championship game.

“I’m really proud of what this team did tonight because it’s not easy to go on the road and win in this league,” Huse said. “So credit our guys for having the focus and toughness and the character to do what it takes to get it done. And I really feel like we’re where we want to be. I feel right now like we have a chance to beat anybody if we play like this again.”

**Lights 66, Carroll 60**

**MSU-N** – Trevail Lee 4-7 0-0 11, Nicholas Blount 1-6 6-7 8, Corbin Pearson 6-8 3-5 18, Warren Edmonson 3-10 3-4 11, Dylan Tatarka 3-5 0-0 7, Damian Robinson 1-2 1-2 3, Pat Jensen 2-2 0-0 6, KJ Rech 1-3 0-0 2. Totals: 21-43 13-18 66.

**CC** – Zayn Kirkendoll 1-4 0-0 2, Zach Taylor 9-13 6-6 26, Lorel Johnson 1-4 0-0 2, Jake Hollifield 0-0 0-0 0, Ryan Imhoff 6-15 3-4 16, Oliver Carr 4-5 2-2 10, Alejandro Santos-Piqueras 2-4 0-0 4. Totals: 23-45 11-12.

Halftime: Carroll 31-24. 3-pointers: MSU-N 11-21 (Lee 3, Pearson 3, Edmonson 2, Tatarka 1, Jensen 2), CC 3-9 (Taylor 2, Imhoff 1); Rebounds: MSU-N 24 (Blount 6, Robinson 6); CC 21 (Imhoff 5); Fouls: MSU-N 14, CC 20; Fouled out: None.

*Havre Daily News website*