Lights head to LC State for semifinals
By George Ferguson
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A year ago, the Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears won three straight road games to claim the Frontier Conference postseason championship. The Bears wouldn’t have went to the NAIA national tournament any other way.

Now, fast forward one season, and the Montana State University-Northern Lights are trying to do the same thing. And Northern can take the second step in that process with a win over the Lewis-Clark State Warriors Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho.

Northern (19-12) won its first-round playoff game on the road Wednesday night when the Lights knocked off fourth-seeded Carroll College 66-60 in Helena. It was a big win for the Lights, who had lost twice to Carroll during the regular season. And now the Lights will try and duplicate that feat against the top-seeded and 20th-ranked Warriors (23-7), who also swept the Lights this winter.

“I know we haven’t done it against LC (State) this season,” said Northern head coach Shawn Huse. “But I really feel like, right now, we can beat anybody we play. If we play like we have been the last month or so, we can compete against anyone on this league, even on the road. We’ve come a long way, and I feel like we’re really playing the way we envisioned this team playing when the season started.”

The Lights certainly played well against Carroll Wednesday night, especially when they bombed in 11 3-pointers, including nine in the second half. And down the stretch of the season, MSU-N has won some momentous games behind the steady play of the likes of Corbin Pearson, Trevail Lee, Nicholas Blount, Warren Edmonson, and reserves Pat Jensen, Dylan Tatarka and Damian Robinson, all of which made big plays in Wednesday night’s win. That group has also played well in do-or-die wins of late, including an overtime win at Montana Tech, a huge road win at Westminster two weeks ago, and of course, last Saturday’s overtime home win against UGF, which clinched a postseason berth.

But as much as the Lights have really come together in the second half of the season, winning eight of their last 11, one team that has given them fits is the Warriors. Northern lost to LCSC in a controversial finish at home way back in January, then the Warriors dismantled the Lights 79-52 last month in Lewiston.

Also, LCSC wound up winning the Frontier’s regular season title, and the Warriors have been a tough matchup for the entire league, not just the Lights.

Junior Jacob Wiley (6-7) has taken the league by storm after transferring from the University of Montana. He averages 15 points and seven rebounds per game, and inside, with Eric Diouf (6-8), who leads the Frontier in rebounding, and 6-10 Jamaal Thomas, the Warriors have one of the most dominant and athletic
Veteran guard Brady Babgy, as well as another Griz transfer, Nic Emerson, also give LCSC one of the most potent offensive teams in the country. The Warriors average 87 points a game, and that’s what the Lights’ defense, which is No. 1 in the Frontier, is charged with slowing down Saturday night.

“They’re good,” Huse said of the Warriors. “We know that first hand. They are big and athletic and they have a ton of offensive weapons. We’re going to have our hands full and we understand that.”

Northern is used to having its hands full, however, and the Lights are used to having their backs against the wall. It’s been that way since the Lights started league play 0-4, so a win-or-go-home game Saturday night won’t be anything out of the ordinary for the resilient Lights.

“I just feel like this team is really not going to be denied right now,” Huse said. “Of course, we have to go down there and play our best because LC is very good. But this team is confident right now and I think we have as good a shot as anybody to keep this going.”

Saturday night’s Frontier semifinal between the Lights and Warriors will tip off at 8 p.m. M.S.T. in Lewiston, Idaho. The winner will advance to Tuesday night’s Frontier championship game against either second-seeded UM-Western or third-seeded RMC. Those two teams meet in the other semifinal Saturday night in Dillon.