

Blue Hawks seek revenge tonight in Havre

Lights, Skylights host future Frontier rival tonight

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In some ways, tonight will be a historic night of basketball at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. In others, it will be a look to the not-so-distant future.

Tonight, the MSU-Northern Lights and Skylights will play Dickinson State University for the final time – as a nonconference opponent. At this time next year, the Blue Hawks will be a full-fledged member of the Frontier Conference.

Tonight's games start with the Skylights at 5 and the Lights take the floor at 7.

Northern and Dickinson have had a long-standing rivalry of nonconference games over the years, and already this season has been no exception.

The Skylights (9-1) throttled the Blue Hawks (3-6) 78-49 back on Nov. 28 in Dickinson, N.D. The win was part of an eight-game winning streak for MSU-N, but Northern head coach Chris Mouat knows tonight could be a different story.

"Dickinson is a very good basketball team," Mouat said. "And we know they will come in here ready to make things different this time around. They are too good to have that type of game against us again.

"The first time we played, it was one of those nights for us," he added. "We weren't just executing really well, but the shots were falling for us all night. We'd like to see that happen again, but we also understand that this game is going to be a battle. It will be very tough and very hard-fought."

MSU-N's road win at DSU last month was spurred by the play of guards Laramie Schwenke, Kylee Denham and Nikki Tresch. All three players have been on a tear is of late, with Schwenke averaging 22 points over her last six games. Northern is also getting improved play from post Kelly Millager, while Jordan Bruursema has been steady from the opening tip of the season. Bruursema is averaging 14 points and a team-high seven rebounds per outing.

And while the Blue Hawks have struggled to start the year, they aren't without plenty of firepower. Guard Jessica Nieves and 6-0 forward Mandy Mullock are among the DSU leaders. The Blue Hawks are known for their trademark defense and they have always played well in Havre.

"They (Blue Hawks) defend really well," Mouat said. "So in order to be successful against them, you have to take care of the ball and not get forced into a bunch of turnovers. Offensively, they have really good post players and they rebound well. But they also can really lights it up when their shooters get going. So it's going to be a challenge for us on both ends of the floor."

The No. 17 Lights (10-2) will also be tested by the Blue Hawks tonight. Northern topped DSU (5-7) 74-67 back in October at a tournament in Dillon, but MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse expects another tough test tonight.

"Their (Blue Hawks) record does not reflect anywhere near how good of a team they are," Huse said. "The first time we played them, we really had to gut it out. They are a very good team with outstanding 3-point



Montana State University-Northern's Devin Jackson (right) drives to the basket during a men's college basketball Oct. 8 in Havre. The Lights host Dickinson State tonight.

shooters. They defend really well and their big guy (Matthew Lee) is an absolute force. So we know we have our hands full on Thursday night."

Indeed, Lee (6-6) is a beast. He went for 30 points against Northern the first time out. He's a former Weber State transfer who's now had three big games against Northern in the past year and a half. And the Blue Hawks present matchup problems for Northern because they play six players who are over 6-6, including 6-10 power forward Destry Sterkel.

"They have a ton of size," Huse said. "Having said that, I thought we did a good job with handling that in Dillon. But they definitely have us out-sized, so we'll need to be very efficient on the defensive end, especially rebounding the basketball."

Northern may not have the size that Dickinson has, but the Lights have the shooters to make a difference. MSU-N got off to a slow start this season from the 3-point-line, but the Lights have heated up as of late. Guards Shaun Tatarka, Devin Jackson, LaVon Myers and David Maddock have all been shooting the ball well from the outside, but the inside play of Joe Simpson, Sean Kelly, Ben Mitchell, Chris Brown, Jordan Harris and even Corbin Pearson will come in handy tonight.

"They (Blue Hawks) remind me of all the other teams in the Frontier," Huse said. "They are big and physical, they are very tough and they defend and play hard every night. They are going to fit right in in this league."

Tonight's game between the Skylights and DSU tips off at 5 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The Lights and Blue Hawks are slated to get underway at 7.