Skylights, Lights face big challenges with rival Argos
UGF men and women both nationally ranked coming into Saturday’s games with Northern
By George Ferguson
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Playing nationally ranked opponents is becoming nothing new to both the Montana State University-Northern men's and women's basketball teams.

But it's rare that those opponents are the arch rival University of Great Falls Argos.

Yet, both the Lights and Skylights will be up against exactly that when they close out the first half of Frontier Conference play Saturday night in Great Falls.

The No. 10 Skylights (5-1, 20-2) will play their fourth nationally ranked opponent in as many weeks when they take on the No. 22 Argos (4-2, 17-4) Saturday night inside what will likely be a hostile McLaughlin Center.

Northern, which brings a seven-game winning streak against UGF, will look to bounce back from its first league loss - a double-overtime setback last Saturday night against Westminster. But bouncing back won't be easy. Even though the Skylights have been dominant against the Argos in a winning streak that dates back to January 2011, UGF is having its best season in school history, and the Argos are riding high, while certainly gunning for the Skylights.

"It's probably the biggest game we've ever had against them (Argos)," MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said. "This is the best team they've had, by a long way. They have two returning All-Americans in Erin Legel and Lindsey Abramson, and they're as good as it gets. But they also have a lot of talent around those two. All five of their starters average in double figures, and they have more depth than they've ever had. They are explosive, they are great on the boards, and they are defending really well right now. They are just a very complete basketball team, and we'll have our hands full down there."

The Argos are explosive. They lead the Frontier in scoring, and have the leading scorer in Legel. The junior averages 19 points per game, while Abramson (6-2) is the inside threat. She averages a double-double, scoring 13 points and grabbing 11 rebounds per contest. Add to that guards Darah Huertas-Vining, Steph McDonough and Nneka Nnadi all scoring 10 points or more per game, and the Argos have as lethal a starting five as anyone in the Frontier.

But the Skylights aren't too shabby either. Senior A'Jha Edwards averages 17 points and 13 rebounds per night, and her matchup with Abramson will be a huge key in Saturday's game. Belt native Taylor Cummings is playing her last game ever in the Great Falls area, and she averages 11 per game, while Natalee Faupel scores 13 and Megan Feldman adds 10. Northern also comes into Saturday's game road tested and having played in big games in consecutive weeks, the Skylights will be confident they can get the job done.
"UGF is very good, and they will have a big crowd. Coach Himmelberg has done such a great job with that program, with recruiting and with everything they're doing right now," Mouat said. "It will be a great atmosphere, and a tough one. They (Argos) will fight to defend their home floor.

"But I really think our kids are excited about the challenge," he continued. "They are still feeling the sting of last Saturday and they are anxious to get back out there and right the ship, and get things moving forward again."

The MSU-Northmen on the other hand, aren't looking to do anything but keep the momentum going when the Lights (2-4, 13-9) face off against the No. 12 Argos (5-1, 16-4) Saturday night. But while the Lights got the ball rolling with wins over Western and Westminster last weekend, the Argos have had the ball rolling for quite some time.

UGF also swept the Bulldogs and Griffins last weekend, and are on a four-game win streak, while the Argos sit in sole possession of first place in the Frontier standings. So, if Northern is going to win its third straight Saturday night, the Lights will have to topple what is the hottest team in the NAIA right now.

"They're (Argos) playing extremely well right now," said MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse. "They play really hard, they play together. They have a lot of talent and depth, and they are really doing a great job on both ends. They're always on the attack offensively, and they can be very explosive. But they are also very physical on the defensive end. They're playing much more man this year, and they really get after it. They're just playing very good basketball right now, and they’ve been extremely impressive."

Like the UGF women, the Argo men are off to one their best starts in school history. And they look the part of a Frontier championship caliber team. Led by senior guards T.J. Harris and Marcus Hurn, who combine to score 27 points per game, UGF is a talented, athletic bunch. But the Argos are also deep and balanced. While the backcourt duo of Harris and Hurn lead the way, they have a great supporting cast with the likes of Darren Lockett, Sigmond Farmer III, Matthew Hurn and Daniel Arcau all capable of leading the Argos on both ends of the floor.

And while the Argos are red-hot right now, and will certainly be excited about having their biggest rival come to their home gym Saturday night, Northern turned a corner last weekend. Led by Trevail Lee and Corbin Pearson's combined 26 points per game, as well as the steadily improving play of junior guard Warren Edmonson, the Lights seemed to have rebounded nicely from their 0-4 start to league play. And though Saturday night's game at UGF will be a huge challenge, it's one the Lights appear to be ready for.

"Last weekend confirmed everything we had been talking about," Huse said. "Specifically, that we were a very good team, too. Sometimes, when you go through losing streaks like we did, you start to wonder if what we're talking about and preaching is true or not. But I think this team really found out a lot about itself with those wins against two really good teams last weekend.

"Now we just have to keep getting better," he added. "We have to take all the positives from last weekend and build on them. UGF presents another huge challenge for this team because they are a very good basketball team. But I think our guys have really improved and have really started to grow, and they're excited for that next challenge."

Saturday night's battles between MSU-N and UGF at the McLaughlin Center in Great Falls start with the women's game at 5:30 p.m. The men's game is set to tip at 7:30 p.m.