

## Skylights gear up for a new season

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George Ferguson Havre Daily News sports editor [gferguson@havredailynews.com](mailto:gferguson@havredailynews.com)

Last year, the Montana State University- Northern women's basketball team had a strong regular season. But it was the postseason, or better put, the way the season ended which left the Skylights wanting more. After playing a brutal early season schedule, the Skylights started 3-7 in 2007-08, but then won 15 of their last 20 games to finish 18-12 overall and 10-4 in the loaded Frontier Conference. Northern also went 6-1 at home in conference games and wound up tied for second in the league with nationally-ranked Lewis- Clark State. But in the first round of the Frontier playoffs, UM-Western took down the Skylights 52-50 in Havre, and just like that, it was over. And with it, also over were the careers of senior All-American Stacie Barker, the NAIA's all-time leader in shots blocked per game, who also averaged a double-double the past two years, as well as second-team all Frontier guard Kaylee Shaw. Also gone from last year's team are key players like Jennie Lee and Jordan Kambich, as well as starting forward Danielle Trower. And as the Skylights prepare to open their season on Friday in Havre, veteran head coach Chris Mouat is looking at a fairly new but talented team with plenty to work on, and plenty to look forward too. "We have some major holes to fill in some key spots for us to be successful," Mouat said. "It is extremely hard to replace the numbers that Stacie Barker brought on a nightly basis, and we're not expecting one person to do that. It will take a combined effort by many players. "We have a lot of new players in our program this year, and their contributions will need to be immediate, especially in the post area. Our strength, at least early on, should be our perimeter play. With the return of two all-conference guards, we have a very good start. Add to that some returners who played significant minutes a year ago, and things look very promising. " Indeed, with the return of junior guards Samm Schermele and Taylor Keller, both all-conference players a year ago, the Skylights get back not only experience and one of the NAIA's best backcourt tandems, but also the bulk of their perimeter offense from a year ago. The two combined for 24 points per game last season, and in the final two months of the year, Schermele was the top scorer in the Frontier. MSU-N also gets back sharpshooter Awilda Hernandez, forward Zivile Gaizutyte, point guard Laramie Schwenke, who missed much of 2008-09 with an injury, and redshirt freshman Jordan Bruursema. But on the front line, the Skylights will have a new look this season. Newcomers Jessica Montgomery (6-1), Katie Kuntz (6-0), Casceal Swaggard (5- 10) and Big Sandy prep star Laci Keller (6-1), along with guard Kori Bingham will all be expected to contribute for the Skylights right away. "I think that one of our strengths is going to be the ability to shoot the ball from the perimeter. We have 7-8 kids capable of knocking down the open three," Mouat said. "I also like the way that we move the ball and make the extra pass. Defensively, we will probably have to mix it up quite a bit. I like some of the things we have done on the defensive end of the floor so far. "We don't have the same type of post players that we've had in the past, and getting points on the block is going to be a focus for us all season long," he added. "I like the way that we are progressing in the paint. I don't know if I'd say post play is a weakness, but more a focus of improvement. We have the potential to be effective inside, but have a lot of work to do to get there." And while the Skylights are working towards gelling as a team, Mouat understands the process takes time, and will be a work in progress, especially considering the strength of their nonconference schedule. MSU-

N opens its season at home against nationally-ranked Azusa Pacific, and has games against Vanguard University and Southern Oregon, two more NAIA tournament teams from a year ago. Dickinson State, another national tournament team is on MSU-N's early schedule twice, and the Skylights also play at Montana State in Bozeman in December. But the rough nonconference schedule should provide the Skylights with more than challenges. It should make them a better team and bring them even closer together as they prepare for the always-difficult Frontier schedule starting in January. "Thus far, our chemistry has been good. We have a group of players that genuinely seem to like each other," Mouat said. "Getting everyone on the same page is always a challenge, and this year is no different. I like the way that they have responded to things thus far and feel like chemistry will be a strength for us as the season progresses. "Without a doubt, this team is a work in progress," he added. "We are very new in a lot of ways, and getting everyone to buy in and be on the same page is an ongoing part of our growth. Obviously, the faster we grow, the better. Unfortunately, our schedule does not provide a lot of breathing room, so we'll need to get better quickly. The Skylights, who were picked to finish fourth in the Frontier this season, will open play on Friday at 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse against No. 10 Azusa Pacific.