Skylights brace for rivals Carroll, Rocky
"White-Out" at MSU-Northern Tonight
George Ferguson, Havre Daily News sports editor
Friday, January 21st, 2011

The going has been tough so far for the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team. The Skylights are off to an 0-3 start in conference play and have been bitten by the injury bug to boot.

And while Northern is happy to return to the friendly confines of the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, starting tonight, thing’s are about to get even more challenging. The Skylights host No. 25 Carroll College tonight at 6 then turn around and play Rocky Mountain College on Saturday night in Havre.

Northern has struggled out of the gate this conference season and comes into tonight’s game with a 9-10 overall record. The big concern for the Skylights has been their ability to make big shots at key moments in the game. In all three losses in the last two weeks, the Skylights have shot in the 30’s as far as field goal percentage, but it’s been when they’ve missed shots which has plagued them, especially when MSU-N had chances to seize control of all three league games it’s played so far. And scoring will be at a premium this weekend against two of the more powerful offensive teams in the league.

“It’s been pretty tough so far because we feel like we have been right there in every game,” MSU-N head Chris Mouat said. “I think it’s just that we have had trouble getting baskets when we really needed them, at times when we had chances to really get momentum or to try and hold on to leads.

But we just have to remain positive and confident that the shots will start to fall for us,” he added. “Because we’ve been playing very good defense. I am really proud of the effort we’ve been giving on the defensive end of the floor every night. Now we just have to start to knock down some shots and that will really help us get this thing turned around, because we believe when we’re playing like we’re capable of on both ends of the floor, we can play with any team in this league.

And the Skylights will get to showcase that tonight when they face the Saints (1-2, 14-5), who are without head coach Shawn Nelson. He was ejected from last Saturday’s home loss to LC State and is suspended for tonight’s game. But not having Nelson shouldn’t effect the Saints, who are deep and loaded with talent. Carroll has outstanding guards in veterans Alysha Green and Alex Dunn, two deadly shooters. But it’s been the play of former Chester/J-I star Jessica VanDyke, as well as Jill Jagelski, which really stands out to Mouat. VanDyke, a true freshman, is averaging nine points a game, but since she was inserted into the starting lineup, she’s scoring 13 points per outing and is shooting the 3-pointer at an outstanding clip.

“They (Saints0 have a wealth of talented guards,” Mouat said. “Obviously, Alysha Green is as good as it gets in our league. She’s a great player, a pure scorer, and when she gets going, she’s as good a shooter as there is in our league. But the way Jessica (VanDyke) is playing right now really jumps out at me. She shoots it as well as anybody, but she’s also a physical player who can rebound and defend from the guard position.
“And Carroll can really hurt you from the outside,” he added. “But they are also a complete team. They have good size, they rebound it well, and they defend and get out in transition. They are just solid from top to bottom and are really playing great basketball this season.”

The Skylights and Saints have a memorable series going when it comes to games in Havre. Carroll has hit last-second three’s to stymie Northern in recent years, and the Skylights have had dramatic wins as well, including a 12-point win last year in Havre on the final night of the regular season — a win that gave Northern a first-round home rematch with the Saints the following week.

And Northern will look to recall some of that magic tonight. The Skylights will need a typical, hard-nosed defensive effort against the powerful Saints, but they’ll also need to be sharp offensively. Samm Schermele averages 19 points per game on the season, while Laramie Schwenke has really come on strong. But players like Jordan Bruursema, Courtney Blume, Val Gee and shooters Nicole Wilk and Monica Hollowell will also be needed this weekend, especially on the offensive end.

And they’ll be needed on both nights, because the Saints aren’t the only challenge awaiting MSU-N. Rocky (1-2, 8-10) has struggled in the win-loss column at times this season, but the Bears are as dangerous as any team in the Frontier. They have the reigning Frontier Player of the Week in MSU-B transfer Callie Kautzmann as well as a sharpshooters in freshman Austin Hanser and junior Dani Hosking. Add to that a huge front line via players like 6-3 Laura Beach and 6-0 Amie Jensen, and the Bears become a team hard to defend.

“They have a ton of athletes,” Mouat said. “They have really good size, and Kautzmann is having a tremendous season for them. They have good guards, they are quick and yet they are big and they rebound the ball.. They are another complete team, and we are going to have to be very good defensively, especially rebounding.

“But the bottom line is, we have to be able to put the ball in the hole,” he added. “We’ve got to put some points on the board and give ourselves a chance to be in these games down the stretch. That’s what we’re hoping happens for us this weekend.”

Tonight’s Frontier Conference women’s showdown between MSU-N and Carroll tips of at 6 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. Saturday night’s game between the Skylights and Bears also get underway at 6 p.m. These are Northern’s only two home games in January.

Tonight’s Frontier Conference men's and women's basketball games at MSU-Northern will be a "white-out". For Northern's games against the nationally-ranked Carroll College Fighting Saints, all fans are being asked to wear all white to the games at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The women's game starts at 6 and the men tip off at 8.