If the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team is going to make one final push towards the Frontier Conference’s postseason, than this weekend would be a good jumping off point.

Tonight at 6, the Skylights host the UM-Western Bulldogs, then turn around and play Montana Tech on Saturday night, and a sweep would go a long way towards helping the Skylights improve their standing in the conference as the stretch run ensues. The Skylights (3-5, 12-12) are just a game out of third place in the conference and tonight marks the start of four of their last six games at home. And make no mistake, MSU-N plays well at home.

And a sweep is what the Skylights are gunning for, and it starts tonight with the Bulldogs (2-7. 6-15).

Northern lost to Western last month in Dillon, but the Skylights should be at near full strength tonight. Senior guard Taylor Keller returned from a knee injury and only added to the fine play of senior Samm Schermele, who comes into the weekend averaging 19 points and five rebounds per game. Schwenke has also been playing at a high level since conference play started, and if the Skylights get Jordan Bruursema back as well as sharp shooter Monica Hollowell, they will finally be at full strength for the last three weeks of the season.

But full strength or not, the Bulldogs are a handful, despite their record. Western is one of the top rebounding teams in the NAIA, and forwards Chloe Mosey (6-0) and Hayley Pettit (6-3) are a load on the inside, and on the glass. So Northern will have to counter with Courtney Blume, Val Gee and Stren Tramelli. Gee has been playing very well as of late, as has Blume, who’s averaging almost 15 points per game in conference play. But like Northern, Western is also very balanced. Nicole Tams is a stellar shooter, and the Bulldogs have a plethora of talented, young guards, all of who can shoot the ball.

“Western is a really tough matchup for us,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “They are one of the top rebounding teams in the country and those teams have caused us problems this year. Their bigs are really good, they are a very athletic team, and they have our full attention.

And while Western presents matchup problems for the Skylights, Montana Tech (4-5, 15-9) does as well.

Northern had chances to beat Tech last month in Butte, but the Diggers’ pulled away late, and they’ll look to do the same to the Skylights tonight. Tech, despite recent struggles, has one of the most talented teams in the Frontier and it starts with 5-9 senior guard Taesha Higbee, one of the top offensive players in the league. But the Orediggers have scorers all over the floor, including sophomore guard Brooke Pokorny and 6-0 forward Meghan Eisenmann. Tech also has a deep and talented bench, so the Diggers’ present plenty of challenges to the MSU-Northern defense.

But defense is one of the things the Skylights have hung their hat on. Through all of the injuries and tough road trips, Northern’s defense has been a constant, and the Skylights will use that as the backbone
of this weekend’s home stand – a home stand in which Northern could make some major progress, especially towards hosting a playoff game next month.

“Tech is as explosive as it gets in our league,” Mouat said. “And in my opinion, Taesha Higbee is the most athletic players in our league. When she’s rolling they are very tough to beat because they have so many explosive players around her. So we are going to have to be at our very best defensively.”

Tonight’s game between the Skylights and Bulldogs tips off at 6 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The Skylights also face Montana Tech at 6 p.m. on Saturday night.