When two worlds collide
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*B*Skylights Samm Schermele and Taylor Keller came from two very different places in Montana. Together they are leaving Northern as great friends and great players, along with the magic they made for MSU-N fans.*

Montana State University-Northern senior basketball players Samm Schermele and Taylor Keller might both be from Montana, but they come from two different worlds. Schermele, a product of the bright lights of the Electric City of Great Falls, and Keller from the quiet, rural community of Custer.

In basketball, the duo’s world were as different as the towns they come from. Schermele was a product of Class AA Great Falls High, while Keller came from the unique world of Class C Montana girls hoops. Four years ago however, their world’s collided in Havre, and nothing has ever been the same.

This weekend, Schermele and Keller will likely play their final home games for MSU-Northern, and as emotional as it will be at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, saying goodbye to a pair of special Northern greats will be a celebration of just what their careers have meant to Skylight basketball.

“It’s a sad time, but it’s also a special moment for me personally,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat, who recruited both Schermele and Keller to Havre early in his MSU-N tenure said. “The fact that they are both from Montana, that they both played their high school basketball in this state, and that they have been four-year players here, it is something very special. And I couldn’t be more proud of both of them and what they’ve achieved here. They’ve represented Skylight’s basketball, themselves, their families, the community and our school with nothing but class and dignity. They are two very special people to me, and they will be missed when their career’s are over with. It’s difficult to even talk about it without getting emotional.”

**More than just teammates**

If Keller and Schermele didn’t have much in common based on where they grew up or who they played high school basketball for, that all changed when they put a Skylight uniform on. Schermele came to Havre five years ago and redshirted her first year in the MSU-N program. Keller came to play for Northern a year later, fresh out of high school and fresh off a severe knee injury she endured during her senior year at Custer.

But while Great Falls High is a long way from Custer, it didn’t take the two long to bond, on and off the court. And while the dynamic backcourt duo has formed a great partnership on the floor, it’s become that
much more off it. Together, Keller and Schermele have forged a great run at Northern, both leaving with all kinds of individual and team accolades — and they did it together.

“When Taylor came here, I had no idea who she was,” Schermele said. “I had never seen her play before. But it didn’t take us long to click on the court. Some people are hard to play with, but I think we clicked right away. And now, it’s second nature to play with her. We know each other so well on the court and we know what each other’s strengths are. It’s just made playing together very easy, and it’s been an amazing four years playing with her.”

And playing together, the two also developed a mutual respect for their approach to the game, mainly because it’s so similar. Mouat considers both players to be ‘super competitive, with a strong drive to win.’ And both players wound up admiring each other’s work ethic and each other’s desire to become better basketball players while at Northern. In turn, they wound up pushing each other to be better, and together they became great.

“The last four years with Samm have been great,” Keller said. “I just respect how hard she works to get better. She always has been really driven to be better and when I came here, that really motivated me to do the same. She motivates me still. Just the way she works so hard, I really have always admired that about her.

“And our bond and our friendship off the court helped with that too,” she added. “Because if I wanted to do something to get better, I always knew I could count on Samm to do the same. We spent a lot of time in the gym, in the summers over the years, shooting, running, just doing whatever we had to do to become better basketball players. We did a lot of that together, and it’s because of our friendship and how we both understand what we wanted to be as basketball players and how much we both wanted to help our team win.”

And through all of the good times playing together, the hard times too, classes, road trips, wins and losses, the two players from opposite ends of Montana became much more than just teammates, or even backcourt mates — they became close friends. Only other college basketball players truly understand what it’s like to be in another player’s shoes, and Schermele and Keller understand each other perfectly. And because of all of that, their college experience has bonded them into lifelong friends.

“We are very good friends,” Schermele said. “We’ve grown very close to each other. Taylor is someone I can always go to about anything, whether it’s basketball or anything else and she knows I’m there for her in the same way. As college basketball players, you go through so much together, and you just have a different level of respect for others who go through the same things. And that’s what Taylor and I have with each other. We understand each other and what we go through. And she’s just someone I respect and admire so much on and off the court and I know I can go to her with anything and I know I’ll always be able to count on her, like she can me. And that’s because of playing together here for the last four years. It’s really brought us very close together.”

College basketball isn’t easy

Whether it was playing for the Great Falls High Bison or whether it was playing at the Butte Civic Center in the Class C state tournament, when Schermele arrived in Havre to start her college career, and Keller a year later, there was no question things were going to be different.
The challenges were immense early on for both players, regardless of their great high school pedigrees. And they were both coming to a program has been the model of success in the Frontier Conference for over two decades.

And for both players, the transition wasn’t always easy. But they wound up not just becoming college players, but becoming great college players for a great program. Schermele is currently fourth on MSU-N's esteemed all-time career scoring list with 1,499 points, and will move into third all-time before her career is over. She’s already a two-time Frontier All-Conference First-Team performer, soon to be third, as well as an NAIA All-American in 2010. She’s already broke the Northern record for career free throws made, and will hold several other Skylight records by the time she’s done playing. Keller was averaging over 17 points per game and was on her way to an All-American season before a knee injury sidelined her for almost two months this year. Still, she’s scored 936 career points at Northern, is a two-time All-Conference Honorable Mention performer and one of the greatest on-ball defenders Northern has ever had.

But those numbers were just a dream when both Keller and Schermele started playing together four years ago.

“Coming here, I had high expectations for myself, but it didn’t take me long to realize just how tough it was or how good these girls at this level are,” Schermele said. “My redshirt year, we had a great team. We had Delayne Johnston and Chelsie Searle and Jenna Heggem and Jaci (Heny) was coaching here. That was a great team with great players and they had a special bond. I learned a lot from all of those players and that team, and it made me want to go on and be a part of teams like that. And I knew I had to get better in order to do that. So while I expected a lot from myself, I also learned I had to work very hard to get to where I’m at now.

“Class C basketball is a lot different than all of the other levels of high school basketball in Montana,” Keller said. “We had seven players on our team my senior year. But compared to college basketball, it’s night and day. Class C basketball is special in that the whole town follows your team, it means so much to everybody. And actually, it’s like that here at Northern. The support we’ve gotten over the years has been amazing, and it’s been really special.

“But the basketball is night and day in college compared to where I came from,” she added. “But I was fortunate to get to play right away my freshman year, behind Becky (Sorenson) who was a great point guard. I learned so much from her, and I respect her so much. So I was lucky having her to look up to and learn from. But when she graduated, I knew I was going to have a chance to start, and I knew a lot was going to be expected of me my sophomore year. But it was also in my freshman year that I really realized I could play at this level and do what was going to be expected of me. I came in in a playoff game against Western and did some good things, and that’s really when it hit me that I could be a good player at this level. So I knew I had to work really hard because I wanted to be that good player, I wanted to be a leader and help my team win. So I learned a lot that first year and I just kept working at it to get better. “

And four years later, Schermele and Keller are better. In fact, they’re very, very good. One can’t help compare the duo to Northern’s last great backcourt tandem, Heny and Camille Gardner. That tandem helped lead the Skylights to an NAIA national tournament appearance in 2005, and while Mouat won’t compare one player to the other, and rightfully so, he says that his latest backcourt tandem, who are about to end their playing careers at Northern, have earned the respect from everyone who’s anyone in NAIA women’s basketball.

“I hear it all the time, from other coaches in our league, that Samm and Taylor are a great backcourt, and in my opinion, over the years, they’ve been one of the best backcourts, if not the best in our league. And that’s pretty special in it’s own right considering all of the great guards who’ve played here and around our conference, and are playing in this conference now. But it’s also a credit to those two and their hard work and dedication to the game of basketball, to their teammates and to this program. They’ve worked hard for and earned everything they’ve gotten and they deserve that praise.”
For the duo, it’s hard for them to reflect on a career that isn’t over yet, but being mentioned in the same sentence as greats like Heny and Gardner mean the world to them. They have embraced Northern, they know it’s great history and tradition, they are a part of it. So to be compared to other Skylight greats is a huge honor that neither Keller nor Schermele take for granted.

“It is very flattering and it feels great to be mentioned alongside Jaci (Heny) and Camille (Gardner),” Keller said. “I know what they accomplished and I know they were both great players and they both meant so much to this program. So to be mentioned along with them feels great.

“I haven’t thought about those kind of comparisons much,” Schermele added. “But Jaci and Camille were great players who did so much for Skylight basketball, and Jaci is someone I really looked up to, so to be mentioned with them is a real honor and it’s something I’m very proud of.”

**Memories in a memorable four years**

When you are as good as Schermele and Keller have been for so long, it’s nearly impossible to pinpoint a moment in time which stands out above the rest. For the great Northern duo, it’s almost as hard to reflect on a career that’s still going. But with time winding down on the Skylights’ season, Schermele and Keller’s last, reflection is something which can’t be helped. And while each player has a lifetime full of basketball memories packed into four years, both individually, and together, the two have been spectacular in wowing Northern fans for a good portion of this decade, they were able to put their finger on a few moments that will forever be special to them.

“My favorite moment in my four years here, we had finished tied with LC State for second place in the 2008-09 season. We didn't start off great that year, but we had a great second half to the season and we played so well that last month. And the whole team is in coach Mouat's office for a conference call because they were flipping a coin for the tiebreaker with LC, to see who would get second place, and we got to call the flip. We called tails and it came up tails, and I just remember the whole team going crazy, screaming and hugging right there in the office. It was crazy, but that was a special moment because we had fought so hard that year and it really meant a lot to us to be in second place.

“I have two moments that really stand out,” Keller added. “My sophomore year, we had kind of dug ourselves a hole at the start of the season, and even the first half of the conference season. But the second half, we played awesome, and we swept Carroll and Rocky at home. That was an amazing weekend because it was so fun to play so well, and to play that well together against those two teams. That was just an awesome two days. The other was when I hit a 30-foot shot at the buzzer to beat Dickinson at home my junior year. It was a great moment because they had done the exact same thing to us the week before in Dickinson. So it felt good to be able to win a game like that.”

Interestingly, the duo thinks alike on their favorite time in their careers. But that’s Keller and Schermele. They are two special players from different worlds, bonded together now for life, because they became Skylights. And their experiences together have given all Northern basketball fans, as well as Mouat and the entire community of Havre four special years. It’s a four years no one will ever forget and it’s because Schermele and Keller are extraordinary young people, great basketball players, great friends, and two players who will live in Northern women’s basketball lore forever.

“My last four years with the Skylights has meant so much to me,” Keller said. “Coach Mouat has meant so much to me. If I could, I would keep playing. I love basketball, I love playing for the Skylights and I wish I could just keep playing. But this has been a special four years for me, four years I’ll remember forever. Every year I've had great teammates, great coaches and so many special people who have helped me and been there for me.

“To be able to go to school and play college basketball, that was always my dream,” she added. “So really, words can't describe what this experience has been like at Northern and in Havre. It's almost impossible to put it into words.

“I just feel extremely grateful for the opportunity I was given by coach Mouat and Northern,” Schermele said. “I’ve really grown to love this place, to love Northern and love being a Skylight. I can’t even describe how much I’ll miss all of this.
“I’m not ready for it to be done,” she added. “I feel like I could play for years still. I really don’t want it to be done. It’s really an emotional time for me, but it’s been a really great experience for me, a great time in my life and I’m going to miss all of this so much.”

And for all of us who were fortunate enough to witness what Keller and Schermele did for Skylight basketball the last four years, we’re going to all miss it too. With how great the duo from such different worlds have been after they collided at Northern, it will be impossible not to.

Samm and Taylor, together, they made sure they’ll never be forgotten.