Griffin buzzer-beater stuns Skylights
George Ferguson, Havre Daily News sports
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For the last five years, the Westminster College women’s basketball team has been at or near the top of the Frontier Conference. And in that time, the MSU-Northern Skylights have had their chances to upset the Griffins.

Perhaps no chance was better than Friday night as the Skylights led the No. 9 Griffins 66-64 with just five seconds left in the game. But Westminster has a big-shot team and that came back to haunt the Skylights as Griffin sophomore Nicole Yazzie raced the floor, pulled up and buried a 3-pointer at the buzzer as Westminster staved off Northern’s upset bid 67-66 Friday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

It was a gut-wrenching loss for a Northern team which has been scarred by injuries and near misses all season long. And it hurt even worse give the fact the Skylights outplayed the powerful Griffins for nearly 40 minutes. But in the end, Northern missed a couple of key free throws in the final minute, as well as some other key plays which allowed the Griffins to have a chance for Yazzie’s dramatic game-winner.

“The bottom line is, it’s a 40-minute game,” MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said. “And we made several mistakes down the stretch that allowed them to have a chance at the end. But as much as not finishing the game off was maybe our fault some, it was also a great last shot by a great player. Yazzie makes those kinds of shots, she wants those kinds of shots and it was a play by her and a great finish by Westminster. So I give them all the credit in the world for that.”

As big a shot as it was by Yazzie, the Skylights had plenty of great moments of their own Friday night. Northern looked as thought it would follow up last Saturday’s thrashing of Carroll College in Helena, with another big win Friday night, especially in the first half.

The Skylights got three straight 3-pointers from Jordan Bruursema, and two from Samm Schermele as they went on an 11-0 run to lead 25-14 midway through the first stanza. Laramie Schwenke also drilled a triple and Schermele scored the last five points of the half as Northern led 35-25 at the break. In all, the Skylights made six three’s in the first 20 minutes and not only were the shots falling, but they were playing great defense on the Frontier’s premier offensive team.

“It was a great start,” Mouat said. “We executed very well on both ends of the floor. To hold them to 25, when they are so explosive, that is a big feat for any defense. And overall, I thought our defense was pretty good throughout the game. We just didn’t follow up in late in the game. We just didn’t finish.”

Westminster quickly turned the tide in the second half, cutting the lead to one on a Michelle Pace three. But Taylor Keller answered with a triple of her own and after a 6-0 run, the Skylights were back in front 51-45. From there the game was a seesaw affair. Westminster took the lead on two different occasions, while Northern grabbed it back late. There were also five ties in the last seven minutes. And the Skylights appeared to regain control for good when Schwenke made a steal and score to go up three, then two more Westminster turnovers gave Northern even more life. The Skylights led by three again with :16 left, but Pace made another shot, and two missed free throws gave the Griffins the window they needed, and Yazzie broke through.

Schermele poured in a game-high 24 points on three treys, while Schwenke was also outstanding, scoring 16 points, with two steals and five assists. Bruursema had a good game as well, scoring nine points and grabbing seven rebounds. Dana Bates led the league champion Griffins with 14 points, while Yazzie chipped in with 12, none bigger than her last three.
The loss was heartbreaking as well, considering the Griffins beat the Skylights in similar fashion last year in Havre, and overall Northern lost two last-second game in the last two weeks. The Skylights also fell to Rocky Mountain College by one point last two weeks ago.

“We played very well for a lot of this weekend,” Mouat said. “So losing in that way certainly hurts. We played well enough to win for much of both games against two great teams and I’m proud of us for that. Now, we just have to regroup and find a way to play that well again on Tuesday night.”

The Skylights seventh-place finish in the final Frontier standings means they will travel to Lewis-Clark State for the first round of the Frontier Conference women’s playoffs on Tuesday night in Lewiston, Idaho.