Big playoff test awaits Skylights tonight
MSU-N women begin postseason play tonight at LC State

George Ferguson, Havre Daily News sports
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The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team played their hearts out this past weekend in Havre. And on top of that, the Skylights played perhaps two of their best games all season long.

And still, Westminster College and Lewis-Clark State left Northern with little to show for it. And now, after two heartbreaking defeats on the last weekend of the regular season, Northern (13-17) has to turn right around and play LC State tonight in the first round of the Frontier Conference women’s playoffs.

The Skylights play LC State tonight at 8 in Lewiston, Idaho, just three days removed from LC’s 57-47 win in Havre. The 10th-ranked Warriors (25-4) are the No. 2 seed in the single-elimination playoffs, while the Skylights enter tonight’s game seeded seventh.

And not only did the Warriors sweep Northern again this season, but the Skylights haven’t won in Lewiston, so Northern head coach Chris Mouat knows the task ahead of his team tonight is difficult, to say the least.

“We know this is going to be a tough trip,” Mouat said. “LC State is a great team anywhere, but they are particularly tough at home. This is going to be a totally different environment then the one we just played in here, and our kids understand that. So it’s going to be tough.”

But one thing the Skylights have going in their favor tonight is the fact they know they can play with the Warriors. In their 10-point loss on Saturday night, MSU-N was in front of LC for much of the contest. Northern led 25-18 at the half, and the Skylights were pouring in 3-pointers, six in the first 20 minutes alone.

But the Warriors did what they always do, which is use their pressure defense and their size to wear MSU-N down. It worked on Saturday night, and the Skylights will have to guard against that tonight.

“We’re going to have to throw a few new wrinkles at them,” Mouat said. “Obviously, their size is the biggest issue. They just kill you on the boards, especially on the offensive glass. So somehow, we have to combat that, and we have to make shots for 40 minutes, something we didn’t do in this last game.”

In their last meeting with the Warriors, the Skylights played tremendous defense, holding LC’s big gun, 5-10 Jasmine Stohr to just eight points. The Warriors held Northern’s big gun, Samm Schermele to just five points as well, but both teams had players step up. Laramie Schwenke, Courtney Blume and Taylor Keller were all in double figures against LC last Saturday, while 6-3 Kirsi Voshell had a huge game for the Warriors.

Schermele finished the regular season atop the conference in scoring at 19.2 points per game, while Stohr was second at 19 ppg. The warriors also get double figures scoring from Voshell and Alyssa Fierro. Northern gets 11 points per game from Schwenke, while Keller’s average was around 17 points per outing before a knee injury sidelined her for 12 games. Since coming back, Keller has averaged around eight
points per contest. Jordan Bruursema has come on strong as of late, averaging 11 points and seven boards in her last five games.

Tonight, however, both teams will look to get their top scorers involved, and for Northern, the Skylights are hoping to pull off the big upset in a game they’re not expected to win.

“We know we can play with them, we should go into this game confident,” Mouat said. “And the nice thing about this situation is, we’re the team with nothing to lose. We have the opportunity to go in there and let it fly, not worry about anything and just play. That’s something that’s in our favor, so we’re going to be loose and ready to play, and we’ll see what happens.”

Tonight’s Frontier playoff game in Lewiston, Idaho between MSU-N and LC State tips off at 8 p.m. M.S.T. The game can be heard locally on 92.5 KPQX FM.