Skylights embark on another big road trip
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The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team is still perfect in 2011. But the Skylights will have their hands full with more than just turkey on Thanksgiving weekend.

Today and Saturday, the 7-0 Skylights will be in Billings for a tournament hosted by Montana State University-Billings. In that tourney, the Skylights will play exhibition games against a pair of NCAA Division II stalwarts in Minnesota-Moorhead and Minot State University. The Skylights will then head east for a Monday night battle with future Frontier Conference rival Dickinson State University.

Northern has been the surprise of the Frontier Conference so far this season – not only because of its unbeaten record through two months of the season, but because the Skylights have persevered with a host of new players and plenty of injury problems. At different times this season, Northern has been without starters Laramie Schwenke, Laci Keller and Kylee Denham.

“The really good thing about this stretch of games is that we’ve been pushed in every one of them,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “We haven’t played a game yet where we were able to coast. And we’ve won through adversity. We have had injuries, we’ve had to go with different lineups and that’s a big credit to our kids. We’ve had kids step and be leaders, we’ve had young players step up and have big performances when we needed them too. And we’ve really played well as a team.”

This week, the Skylights are back at full strength, and they’ll need to be in all three contests.

Tonight’s 5 p.m. game against Minnesota-Moorhead and Saturday’s 2 p.m. against Minot in Billings won’t count towards Northern’s record, but the games will be huge challenges nonetheless. Moorhead is a prohibitive favorite in the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference are 1-0 on the young season. The Dragons boast a talented roster led by 6-2 Angie Jetvig. Moorhead has an abundance of size with seven players who stand 6-0 or taller.

The Beavers (2-4) are a more familiar opponent to the Skylights. The two teams have been playing nonconference games against each other for many years and MSU is led by former Skylight All-American Sheila (Green) Gerding. But this Minot team will be different than the one’s Northern has seen in the past. MSU is transitioning to DII and will also compete in the NSIC. And being an NCAA program now, Mouat expects an even better Minot team than the one the Skylights have faced in the past.

“They (Beavers) are very good,” Mouat said. “They are really strong inside and they go 6-0 or better with three starters. But they are a deadly perimeter team too. So they’ll challenge or defense.

“We’re excited at the chance to play Moorhead too,” he added. “They will present a team that is built a lot like LC State, so it’s good for us to go up against that type of team. They are a very, very good team with size and athleticism. They are physical and big and they create real matchup problems for us. Both of those teams do. This will be a big challenge for us defensively.”
While both outings in Billings won’t count towards Northern’s record, Monday night’s trip to Dickinson will. And it’s the first of a home and away series between the two long-standing rivals. Northern plays host to the Blue Hawks on Dec. 8 in Havre.

DSU, which will join the Frontier Conference next season, is off to a 3-3 start this season, against mainly Frontier teams. The Blue Hawks have split with Montana Tech, lost to UM-Western and beaten UGF so far this fall. Last year, DSU swept the Skylights including an 89-50 dismantling in Dickinson. The Blue Hawks are talented again this season with guard Kelsey Boedeker and forward Mandy Mullock leading the way.

“They (Blue Hawks) are good,” Mouat said. “They have had mixed results against Frontier team this season but they are a talented team. They have very good guard, and when they get going from the outside they are deadly. And they always defend really well. Our loss last year at their place one of the worst we’ve had in my years here, so we’re going to have to go in there and play very well to come away with a win.

“But we feel good about where we’re at right now, especially defensively,” he added. “We haven’t always been as sharp as we’d like to be offensively, but for the most part, our defense has been very good and that’s what we’re going to focus on again this weekend.”

And the Skylights have been stout defensively, holding opponents to an average of just 54 points per game and less than 40 percent shooting from the field. Offensively, Northern is getting double figure scoring from Jordan Bruursema, Nikki Tresch and Schwenke since she returned from a knee injury. And with Keller healthy again, she adds an even bigger offensive punch for the Skylights.

“This weekend will really test us on both ends of the floor,” Mouat said. “These are three really athletic teams who defend really well. So we’ll have to execute really well offensively. Defensively, they all create matchup problems for us. But these games will be good for us. They will give us three more games against quality opponents, and that’s really good for us the closer we get to the start of conference play.”

The Skylights play in Billings today at 5 and Saturday at 2 p.m. Monday night’s game against the Blue Hawks is set for 7 p.m. in Dickinson. Northern is also on the road next week in Salt Lake City.