The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team hasn’t played much at home this season. But the 10-1 Skylights will be a part of a lot of basketball this weekend.

Northern beings play tonight in the annual Duck Inn Classic when the Skylights take on Hope International of California at 8 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The three-day tournament starts tonight at 6 with Carroll College facing Minot State University. The tourney continues with the Saints playing Hope at 6 p.m. on Friday and UGF battling Minot at 8, and concluding Saturday with the Argos against Hope at 2 p.m. and the Skylights facing Minot at 4 p.m.

“It’s going to be a great weekend,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “We have a pair of very challenging games. But we’re excited about playing at home and we’re looking forward to these games.”

First is Hope International tonight. The Royals, who play in the famed Golden State Athletic Conference, have just two wins on the season, but they’ve played a murder’s row schedule and do have a win over Simpson University. Simpson is the only blemish on the Skylights’ record this season, and the Royals put up 100 points in their game against Simpson, so Mouat knows his team is in for a tough fight tonight.

“They’ve (Royals) played some of the best teams they could play at our level already,” Mouat said. “So they are going to be battle tested. What I really like about them is their balance. They have seven or eight kids who average from seven to nine points a game. They have some really nice players, mostly guards, but their kid in the middle as a real presence. And they have good depth.

“They are a very good team,” he added. “And we fully understand we’ll have our hands full with them.”

The Skylights have had their hands full with a lot of teams and a lot of injuries this season, but it hasn’t mattered. Northern is off to one of its best starts in quite some time, and now, with Laci Keller healthy again, as well as Kelly Millager really stepping up to join star Jordan Bruursema to help bolster the frontcourt, the Skylights are becoming a very tough team to defense – especially with such a great backcourt, led by Laramie Schwenke, Nikki Tresch and Kylee Denham.

But if the Skylights have their hands full tonight, they’ll have more than that when they take on Minot State on Saturday. The NCAA DII Beavers () have a long-standing rivalry with Northern and they’re led by former Skylight great Sheila (Green) Gerding. Minot also has a win in hand this season as the Beavers beat the Skylights 62-56 in an exhibition game last month in Billings.

Saturday’s game however, will be a counter for the Skylights.

“Their size (Beavers). They are very imposing. That’s what stand out right away about them,” Mouat said. “They do a great job on the offensive boards and they really know how to get the ball inside to their big kids.
“But their guard play is equally as good,” he added. “They are just a very complete team and they have transitioned really well to NCAA DII. They’ve already beaten some good teams this season. They are just a real handful for us.”

The Beavers are led in the paint by 6-2 forwards Christina and Carly Boag, both sophomores. Fellow sophomore Katie Hardy (6-0), a Fairview, MT native and the younger sister of Griz star tight end Greg Hardy is another force on the inside, while guards Sacarra Molina and Lauren Safranski can light it up from the outside.

But as good as the Beavers are, the Skylights gave them a run for it last month in Billings, and they come into this tournament playing very efficient basketball. So while Mouat says his team has a big challenge in front of it Saturday, it’s one his team is ready for.

“They (Beavers) are a very good team and they present a huge, huge challenge for our team,” he said. “But it’s a challenge I know our kids are looking forward to. We need that challenge, and both games we play this weekend will be a good test for us and will certainly help us continue to get ready for our conference.”

Tonight’s game between Northern and Hope International tips off at 8 p.m. at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse and will follow the first game of the Duck Inn Classic between Carroll College and Minot State.