Frontier Notebook: Lights, Skylights off to a great start this season
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The Frontier Conference basketball season is still three weeks, and the Christmas Break away from getting underway. But things have already been plenty exciting around the league this fall and winter.

At MSU-Northern, the Lights and Skylights have a combined record of 22-3 to start the season. That’s the best combined record of any Frontier program so far.

The Skylights have been a bit of surprise, but maybe they shouldn’t have been at closer glance. Northern did win just four conference games a year ago, and the Skylights graduated MSU-N greats Samm Schermele and Taylor Keller. They also lost starter Courtney Blume as she decided to focus on academics this year.

But instead of a rebuilding year, Northern has stormed out of the gates in 2011. The Skylights have but one loss and so far, are making fools out of league coaches who picked them to finish fifth in the Frontier this season.

Balance and defense have been keys to Northern’s start. Transfer Nikki Tresch has made herself right at home at MSU-N, leading the team in scoring at just over 15 points per game. Senior guard Laramie Schwenke is averaging 14 points per game, but she missed four games with a knee injury, and since coming back, she’s been averaging almost 21 points per outing. Junior Kylee Denham has added to a productive Northern backcourt as well by scoring nine points per outing.

But a big key for MSU-N this season has been the explosive play of junior forward Jordan Bruursema. In her second year as a starter, Bruursema is averaging 15 points and six rebounds while shooting nearly 50 percent from the floor. Going up against bigger opponents almost every night, Bruursema’s defense has also been crucial to Northern’s start this season.

As a team, the Skylights are also doing great things this season. The Skylights are shooting nearly 60 percent from the floor and holding opponents to a stellar 53 percent from the field. Northern is also the Frontier leader in 3-point percentage at 41 percent per game, and the Skylights shoot better than 75 percent from the foul line.

With those kinds of numbers, it’s hard to understand why MSU-N isn’t ranked, but the Skylights only concern right now is to keep getting better.

On the men’s side, the Lights (12-2) are right where they were picked to be. MSU-N has lost two games this season by a combined seven points, and they go into a two-week break with a six-game winning streak.

And really, the Lights haven’t hit their stride as of yet. Northern shoots 35 percent from the 3-point-line and is just sixth in the Frontier in scoring offense. But the Lights haven’t missed a beat defensively. MSU-N is holding teams to an average of just 56 points per game and 41 percent shooting per outing. The Lights have also been a stellar rebounding team this year and have won the rebound margin in nine of their 14 games so far.

Northern, as expected, is balanced this season. Shaun Tatarka leads the team in scoring at 13 points per game while Devin Jackson averages 11. David Maddock comes off the bench to add 11 points per outing, while three more Lights average seven or more points per.
Northern is back on the floor Dec. 29-30 for the AmericInn Classic in Havre.

- There have been few surprises on the women’s side other than the Skylights. But the Frontier men have plenty to like so far. The University of Great Falls is off to its best start since the school reintroduced basketball 11 years ago. The Argos are 8-1 on the season and lost an exhibition game at the University of Montana by two points.

Winning isn’t a surprise at Westminster, but the Griffins made big headlines earlier this month when they beat defending Big Sky Conference champion Northern Colorado by 13 points in Greely, Colo. The Bears went to the NCAA Tournament last March, and while it may be a rebuilding year for them, it was still a huge win for the Griffins.

- Individual performances have also highlighted the nonconference portion of the basketball season.

UM-Western’s Brandon Brown, the 2011 Frontier Player of the Year, leads the league in scoring at 22 points per game, as well as steals at three per. Rocky’s Joel Barndt leads the league in rebounds (7 rpg) and blocked shots (2 bpg), while UGF’s Melvin Williams is tops at five assist per game.

LC State’s Jasmine Stohr is leading the Frontier women in scoring at 21 points per game while Western’s Haley Pettitt is averaging an NAIA best 11 rebounds per game.