

MSU-N hoops teams cap nonconference play

Lights host Alberta in AmericInn Classic tonight; Skylights play Mount Royal Saturday

George Ferguson

Friday, December 30th, 2011

One week from tonight, the Montana State University-Northern men's and women's basketball teams will open Frontier Conference play at home, against rival UGF.

But before the Lights and Skylights can get to that, they have some unfinished business to take care of this weekend.

Tonight, the Lights will close out nonconference play against the University of Alberta in the second day of the AmericInn Classic. On Saturday, the Skylights will host Mount Royal University in their nonconference finale – and both teams are looking to cap off a great first part of the year.

Tonight's game between Northern and Alberta, which travels to Havre from Edmonton, should be a good one. The No. 19 Lights (12-2) are coming off a layoff which last saw them beat Dickinson State by 30 points back on Dec. 8 in Havre. Northern was set to return to action on Thursday, but Concordia College of Alberta pulled out of the AmericInn tourney, so the Lights will finish nonconference play tonight against the Golden Bears, and they should receive a forfeit for their cancelled game against Concordia.

And the Golden Bears should be a tough test for the Lights. Alberta is ranked No. 6 in the most recent CIS Top 10. CIS is the highest level of basketball in Canada. And the Golden Bears (8-7) pushed UM-Western to the end in a game Thursday afternoon in Havre.

"They (Bears) are off to a good start this season," Huse said. "And they play with teams like Saskatchewan and Regina, two teams that played us very tough, so say no more. They are a very good team and they will be a great opponent this weekend."

The Bears are indeed talented enough to push the Lights tonight. Guards Matthew Cardoza and Daniel Ferguson are solid outside shooters, and the squad has good overall size, led by inside-out player Todd Bergen.

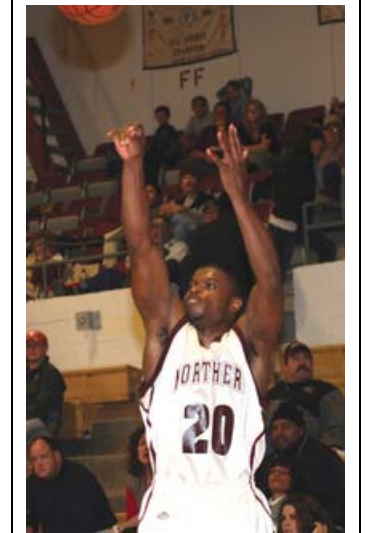
The Lights will also have to try shake off the rust from a 22-day layoff, and hope to keep the momentum they built during their current seven-game winning streak. Northern hasn't lost since Nov. 5.

"Alberta is a really solid team," Huse said. "They have a good starting lineup, they have good athletes and really good size. We'll have our hands full with them."

"I think our guys have come back from the break really focused and hungry though," he added. "Practices have gone really well and the guys are really ready to get back to playing games. And this should be a good test for us. I expect this game to be a lot like a Frontier Conference game for us, and we need that right now."



MSU-Northern's Nikki Tresch and the Skylights finish nonconference play when they host Mount Royal Saturday at 3 p.m.



MSU-Northern's Devin Jackson launches a shot during a men's basketball game against Dickinson State on Dec. 8 in Havre. The Lights host Alberta in the AmericInn Classic tonight at 6.

The Skylights (12-1) are also coming off a similar layoff, though they last played on Dec. 17 when they upset Minot State 69-61 in Havre. On Saturday, Northern will look to put the finishing touches on its best start under head coach Chris Mouat. The Skylights have lost just once and have two wins over NCAA DII opponents this season.

Northern also has a win over Mount Royal, Saturday's opponent. The Skylights beat the Cougars 67-60 in October in Calgary, and they did it without senior guard Laramie Schwenke. And Northern may be without Schwenke again on Saturday as she injured her ankle in the win over Minot and her availability Saturday is questionable.

Still, MSU-N has been resilient all season with major contributions from Nikki Tresch and Jordan Bruursema, as well freshman Taylor Cummings. But with or without Schwenke in the lineup, Mouat expects another tough game against the Cougars, and that's what his team needs as Frontier play steadily approaches.

"This is a very good Canadian team we're playing," Mouat said. "We really had to gut it out against them the first time we played them, and we had to do it without Laramie and Laci (Keller) and the majority of the game without Kylee (Denham). But they really played us tough the whole way and that game could have gone either way.

"They (Cougars) are 10-1 in their league right now," he added. "They have excellent, quick guards and a lot of athletic players. They can get to the rim and they can make shots. They really hurt us with dribble penetration the last time we played them and they rebound well. They are just a really solid team and this will be a tough game for us. But our kids are excited and anxious to play. They are excited to be at home and we're looking forward to this one."

Tonight's AmericInn Classic game between Northern and the University of Alberta will tip off at 6 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The Skylights will take on Mount Royal at 3 p.m. Saturday in Havre. Both Northern teams host UGF next Friday night.