

George Ferguson Column: Skylights getting a raw rankings deal

From the Fringe...

George Ferguson

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Needless to say, I've had problems with how the NAIA ranks its basketball teams for years now. It all started in 2007-08 when the Montana State University-Northern men's basketball team was left out of the NAIA national tournament.

Call me a homer, but when a Northern team is deserving of better, I'll stand up and try to be heard every time.

This is one of those times.

The MSU-Northern women's basketball team is off to its best start in over a decade. The Skylights are 14-1 and 1-0 in the Frontier Conference. Northern rattled off eight straight wins to start the season, and that was in spite of graduating stars Samm Schermele and Taylor Keller, in spite of solid forward Courtney Blume opting to leave basketball to focus on academics and in spite of losing key role player Val Gee to a season-ending injury before the year began.

And Northern has kept on winning, in spite of many things.

The Skylights have won multiple games without the services of senior guard Laramie Schwenke, who's battled injuries her entire career. They've won games without sophomore Laci Keller in the lineup, and she's their biggest post player. And they've won games without starting guard Kylee Denham too.

MSU-N has won games while building a team mixed with veterans and newcomers, while playing freshman like Taylor Cummings and Rachelle Bennett in key minutes. The Skylights have won games on the road, they've won them at home, they've beaten two NCAA Division II teams, they've won a myriad of close contests and at other times have dominated opponents.

And through all this, they haven't gotten any respect in the NAIA Women's Coaches Poll, and that's a travesty.

The latest poll was released on Monday, and Northern's name finally made an appearance for the first time this season. But it wasn't anywhere near where it should have appeared. The Skylights received a measly three votes, while teams like Westminster (9-6), Campbelsville of Kentucky ((12-6) and Bellhaven of Mississippi (12-5) are all in the Top 25. And Northern's winning percentage alone, which is the best in the Frontier, outshines them all.

But in complaining about the Skylights not getting respect, it's imperative to talk about the process itself, because that's what I have the biggest problem with.

Each conference in NAIA DI basketball has a rater, who's chosen to rank the teams in his or her conference, then submit those rankings to the rest of the raters, who then fill out their ballots for each new poll. So it really starts there, and for much of the early part of the season, despite having the best winning percentage in the conference, Northern wasn't getting ranked high enough in the Frontier for the rest of the NAIA's raters to take notice.

This week, that changed. The Skylights moved up to No. 3 in the Frontier rankings, which given that Westminster is 9-6, isn't high enough in my opinion. Never-the-less, the Frontier rater tried to move the Skylights up in the polls this week, but others around the country weren't buying it.

And that's another problem. The NAIA is so spread out that it's almost impossible for raters in California, Texas and Illinois to really know anything about the Skylights and where they truly deserve to be ranked, and that's why the NAIA needs to change the process, or hold conference raters more accountable. Each conference has an oversight committee for the ratings, but those too are generally coaches within the league, sometimes athletic directors, and let's face it, they all have a personal stake in this. The whole process just seems out of balance with how things should be done, and are done at other levels of college athletics.

Now, some might be saying: "Who cares about a stupid poll, it doesn't mean anything anyway."

But that's the rub. The NAIA Coaches Poll really does matter.

The single goal of every basketball team is to win the NAIA national championship. You can't get to that point though if you don't get to the national tournament and if you don't win your conference championship, you don't get to the national tournament without the coaches poll.

Unlike NCAA basketball, which selects its postseason tournament at-large bids through a selection committee each March, the NAIA uses the final coaches' poll to determine at-large bids to its national tournaments. Another huge problem I have with the NAIA, because obviously, the poll never reflects a true vision of who the top teams in the country are.

What really bothers me is, the current body of work isn't being taken into account by the Frontier rater or the rest of the NAIA.

Poll's are supposed to determine who's hot and who's not in the present. It's fine that the preseason poll is strictly based on the previous year's final results, but after that, it's about a team's current body of work. That's it. Period.

A coaches poll shouldn't be about who has star players, it shouldn't be about shooting percentages and it definitely shouldn't be about past reputation. It should clearly reflect how teams are playing in the current season, and that's clearly not happening with the case of the Skylights.

They've kept winning, they've played a tough schedule, including an exhibition game against the University of Montana, as well as wins over NCAA DII's Minot State and Minnesota-Moorhead, and the highest ranked Frontier team, Lewis-Clark State (No. 6), has about the same strength of schedule as MSU-N. In fact, LC State and Northern have losses to the Lady Griz in common, as well as wins over Lethbridge and Hope International and yet none of that has seemed to matter much to the raters and that's disappointing.

Bottom line, the Skylights are getting no respect, from the Frontier rater and from the rest of the country and that's a fact. A 14-1 team in a power conference like the Frontier that isn't ranked nationally is almost inexcusable at this point in the season. And because of the system that's in place, if things continue on, the Skylights won't be a very strong at-large candidate come March. And if Northern stays hot, that won't just be a shame, it will almost be criminal.

Yes, the Skylights have really been getting the short end of the proverbial NAIA stick this season, and it's too bad because there is no way there are 33 teams in the NAIA that have better resumes' than they do right now, yet that's what the raters are telling us.

I might be coming across as a homer, but as much a problem as I have with the Skylights not being ranked, I've had a problem with the system for a lot longer. And just to be fair, I thought the system, which is virtually the same for NAIA football, was unfair to Eastern Oregon this past fall too, when the Mounties weren't taken as an at-large team in the football playoffs.

I see the NAIA use a lot of mottos, like "Champions of Character". I don't see a lot of that in how they go about ranking teams however, and it's time to look long and hard at fixing that. That's what you do when something's broke, you fix it. And as far as what's happening to the Skylights right now, things are definitely broke.