Skylights try to stay hot at home

George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team is off to its best start in over a decade. And the Skylights are also a perfect 1-0 in Frontier Conference play to boot.

Never-the-less, Northern head coach Chris Mouat says his team can, and needs to play better, and it needs to start this weekend. Northern is at home again this weekend, where the Skylights will host the Montana Tech Orediggers tonight at 6, and the UM-Western Bulldogs Saturday at 6 p.m.

Both visiting teams will be huge challenges for the Skylights, and though they beat Great Falls by eight points last Saturday, Mouat said improving this weekend is key if Northern wants to have success against two Frontier rivals.

“The keys to both games this weekend are, we just have to play better, especially, we have to shoot the ball better,” Mouat said. “We have to clean things up, we have to finish at the rim, we have to make free throws and we have to make shots. We have to finish opportunities when we get them. We didn’t do a good job of that in the second half against Great Falls.

“So in order to be successful this weekend,” he added. “We have to show some maturity and poise offensively and not make life so difficult on ourselves on the defensive end. Because we have two very good, sound basketball teams coming in here.”

Defense has been Northern’s strong suit so far. The Skylights (14-1, 1-0) are yielding just 53 points per game, which is tops in the Frontier. Tonight’s game against Montana Tech will feature the top defense in the conference against the league’s worst offense statistically, as well as the worst defense. The Orediggers (5-9, 0-2) average just 65 points per game while they give up 69 points per outing. Tech also shoots just 29 percent from the 3-point-line, while the Skylights are shooting a Frontier-best 40 percent from beyond the arc.

However, numbers don’t always tell the whole story and Mouat says Tech will be as tough a team as the Skylights have faced at the NAIA level this season.

“Tech is a team loaded with players who have been to two national tournaments,” Mouat said. “Their starting five features great players at every position. Kelsey DeWit came in here and really hurt us last year and Brynn Hasquet is one of the best 3-point shooters in the league in my opinion. This is a seasoned team, who does a lot of things really well.”

DeWit, who stands 6-2 and Dannielle Devenny, who is 6-0 present big matchups for Northern post players Jordan Bruursema, Kelly Millager and Laci Keller. DeWit averages 11 points and nine rebounds per contest, while Devenny adds 11 per game. Hasquet also stands 6-0, while freshman guard Mandy Machinal has burst onto the scene, averaging 15 points per game. Tech also has a veteran bench, so the Skylights will have to be prepared to cover a deep, athletic and talented team with good players at every position tonight.

“Size-wise, they (Diggers’) present some matchup problems for us,” Mouat said. “They crash the boards and get a lot of second-chance points so we have to defend that really well. This is a team with two
national tournaments under their belt. Kelsey DeWit is a game changer and they've beaten or come close
to beating some of the best teams around this season. So we know we have to play well. We know we
have to be at our best.”

And win or lose tonight, the Skylights will be in for an even bigger test on Saturday night when UM-
Western comes calling. The Bulldogs (11-4, 1-1) have one of the best guard-center combos in all of NAIA
basketball in 6-3 junior Hayley Pettit and 5-10 sophomore Sammi Bignell. Pettit averages 16 points and a
Frontier-best 12 rebounds per game, while Bignell pours in 15 points per. Western also has a deadly 3-
point shooter in Nicole Tams as well as another shooter in Roxy Thurman. The Bulldogs have also had
Northern’s number at times recently, and Saturday night’s game should be a great one.

“This is another huge, rebounding team,” Mouat said. “Western crashes the boards hard and they give
themselves so many second-chance opportunities. We absolutely have to have a great night on the boards
to beat them. And they are another team that creates matchup problems, not just because of their size,
but because they have great team speed and really good perimeter players.

“Hayley Pettit and Sammi Bignell are two of the best players in our league,” he added. “But what makes
Western so good is their balance. They have talent at all positions and a lot of skill. They are having a
great season so far. So for us to be successful, we’re going to have to be at our very best for 40 minutes.”

The Skylights will be outsized in both games this weekend, but that’s been the case for most of the
season. Bruursema has played big all year, and she, Laramie Schwenke and Nikki Tresch combine to
average 45 points and 17 rebounds per game. But this weekend, the Skylights will also need balance. Laci
Keller is starting to come on strong and her presence will be key against two bigger teams. Kylee Denham
also averages eight points per game and is Northern’s lockdown defender. And MSU-N’s bench will be
called upon too. Northern is looking to win its eighth game in a row for the second different time this
season, as well as hold court at home.

“These are two big challenges for our team,” Mouat said. “I just want to see us be better than we were a
week ago. That’s always the goal. We have a tremendous amount of respect for both teams coming in
here and we know what we’re up against. But if we can clean up the things we didn’t do well the last few
games, we’ll have a chance to be right there.”

MSU-Northern vs Montana Tech and UM-Western
Tonight at 6 p.m and Saturday at 6 p.m.
MSU-Northern Fieldhouse

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM

Streaming: www.msun.edu/athletics

Twitter: www.twitter/havredaily

Skylights Probable Starters
G Laramie Schwenke, 5-8, Sr., 16 ppg
G Nikki Tresch, 5-5, Jr., 15 ppg
G Kylee Denham, 5-8, Jr., 8 ppg
F Kelly Millager, 6-1, Jr., 5 rpg
F Jordan Bruursema, 6-0, Jr., 14 ppg, 6 rpg

Tonight’s game between the Skylights and Orediggers tips off at 6 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.
Saturday’s game between Northern and Western also tips off at 6 p.m. The Bulldogs face UGF tonight in
Great Falls. Both Northern games can be streamed live at www.msun.edu/athletics.