Less than a week ago, the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team was riding high. But a series of devastating blows this weekend now has the Skylights searching for answers.

Northern’s eight-game winning streak was abruptly snapped in two different ways this weekend, as the Skylights lost a controversial game at home to Montana Tech on Friday night, then saw the UM-Western Bulldogs run away from them on Saturday at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

“It’s tough right now because coming in, these are two games we were capable of winning,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “Bottom line, we have a lot to clean up. This weekend, we missed too many shots again, too many easy layups, and we didn’t play as well as we could have defensively. We’re going to have to regroup and find a way to go out and play well on the road.”

Friday night will be a tough one for Northern to forget.

The Skylights lost 51-50 to Montana Tech on a pair of Danielle Devenny free throws with :09 left. Northern was ahead 50-49 and had the ball after Tech had thrown away what looked like a game-winning possession.

Tech had set up to foul Northern on the inbound, but instead, a foul was called on Northern’s Laci Keller nearly 50 feet away from the play, and before the ball had been thrown in bounds. Keller had become tangled with Devenny while running away from the play, and the whistle blew, shockingly giving Devenny two free throws. She calmly sank both and a running layup at the buzzer by Laramie Schwenke painfully rimmed out.

The gut-wrenching and inexplicable set of circumstances led Northern to its first conference loss of the season.

“Great job by Tech,” Mouat said. “They played hard, we played hard. Bottom line, you can’t turn it over 21 times and expect to beat anybody in this league and we did that tonight. And again, we didn’t finish shots and we didn’t make enough free throws. They executed and they made their free throws. So credit to them.”

Intelligently, Mouat wouldn’t comment on the call which led to Northern’s defeat. Instead, he chose to focus on other plays which made a difference in what was a tight game throughout.

“We played well enough on defense,” Mouat said. “I thought it was one of our best defensive games of the year. To hold a really good team like Tech to 51 points says a lot about how hard our kids played defensively, and I’m proud of them for that.

“But we turned it over too many times in the second half. Inexcusable
turnovers too. And for the third game in a row, we just didn’t finish on offense. We ran what we wanted and got great looks. But we missed wide open shots and wide open layups and that’s something we have to get cleaned up, and fast.”

The Skylights wrestled the lead away from the Orediggers on early 3-pointers from Laramie Schwenke and Jordan Bruursema, as well as Kylee Denham. And a triple by Schwenke at the 1:45 mark led to Northern leading 27-24 at halftime.

But like in its past two games, Northern went stone cold for a period of the second half.

MSU-N didn’t score for the first five minutes but its defense kept things close. Then, the two teams traded leads six times in the final seven minutes of the game, before Keller got the Skylights the lead back with a layup at the 2:04 mark. Then, down 49-48 with :48 to go, Bruursema stepped up and sank to huge free throws to give the Skylights a one-point edge. Nikki Tresch stole Tech’s ensuing in bounds pass, which helped milk more time off the clock. But The Skylights didn’t capitalize on the turnover, and Tech took possession with :16 to go.

However, Tabitha Tomlinson threw Tech’s game-winning possession away with :10 to play and it looked as though the Skylights were going to hang on, before the final foul was called on Keller.

Schwenke finished a productive game with 19 points and five rebounds, while Bruursema scored 15 points and grabbed four boards. Denham added five and Keller gave the Skylights four points and a team-high seven rebounds off the bench. Northern’s shooting woes continued however. The Skylights went just 7-of-23 from three, turned it over 21 times and shot just 36 percent from the field. Tech (2-2, 7-9) only shot 43 percent, but got 18 points from Devenny and 16 from Kelsey DeWit.

“Credit Tech, they just wouldn’t go away,” Mouat said. “And there’s lessons to be learned from everything we do. One thing we can take away from this experience is that we have to do a better job of controlling our own destiny. We had chances to do that tonight. We can’t allow games to come down to one play like that. That’s what we have to learn from this game and the outcome.”

**Bitten by the Bulldogs**

For one half, it looked as though the MSU-Northern women’s basketball team had put Friday night’s devastating loss to Montana Tech in its rearview mirror.

But basketball is two halves.

And in the second half, the UM-Western Bulldogs ran past and right through the Skylights en route to an 80-68 win Saturday night in Havre.

The loss dropped Northern to a difficult 1-2 in Frontier Conference play, and it was also the most points the Skylights had allowed to an NAIA opponent all season long.

“You aren’t going to beat anybody by giving up 80 points in this league,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “That’s our fault. They (Bulldogs) wanted to play fast and we didn’t adjust to it. Again, we missed wide open layups and easy shots and they transitioned those into really quick baskets on the other end. That’s unacceptable for us. We have to be better than that.”

The pace was fast and furious in both halves, but the difference was, Northern was up to the task offensively in the first 20 minutes.

The Skylight blistered the nets with Jordan Bruursema hitting two 3-pointers in the first eight minutes of the game. Then, off the bench, Micah Kirkpatrick nailed three triples of her own as the Skylights shot a blistering 50 percent from the field and from three on their way to a 41-36 halftime lead.

“I thought we did a great job of executing and limiting them in transition in the first half,” Mouat said. “We kept things how we wanted, really at our tempo and we were feeling pretty good about where we were at halftime. We got a great spark from Micah and we were shooting it very well. I was especially proud to
see our kids be able to come out and put Friday night behind them and play so well in the first half against a really good Western team.

“But once again, we went into a lull in the second half,” he added. “And that allowed Western to speed things up and once they got out in transition, we never responded. That was disappointing.”

Western star center Hayley Pettit was the first to heat up in the second stanza. She scored eight quick points, yet the Skylights still had a 48-47 lead after Laramie Schwenke banged in a three at the 14:22 mark. Nikki Tresch added a trey to put Northern up 53-51 with 12:20 to go, but from there, the Bulldogs ripped off a 16-2 run, and the Skylights found themselves trailing 69-55 with 4:23 to go.

Schwenke hit one more three and Northern twice got the lead back to nine points, but Western was off and running and Northern couldn’t mount enough of a charge to make it close down the stretch.

Schwenke led four Skylights in double figures with 18 points. Bruursema scored 14 and Kirkpatrick added 11. That trio combined to make nine of Northern’s 10 3-pointers. Tresch finished with 10 points, Laci Keller had six and Kelly Millager grabbed a game-high 10 rebounds.

Western (12-5, 2-2) got 21 and 10 from Pettit and 16 points from Nicole Tams. The Bulldogs shot a hot 50 percent from the field in the second half and reached 80 points while only making three trey’s the entire game. The Skylights came in as the top-rated defense in the Frontier.

“That four or five minute span in the second half really hurt us,” Mouat said. “Western is very good at what they do and they did it very well in the second half. So credit to them.

“But there’s also no excuse,” he added. “We threw the ball away too many times and we are putting way too much pressure on ourselves defensively with these lulls we are going through offensively. We have to get that fixed. We have to get better.”

In one weekend, the Skylights went from a team on the verge of a national ranking to 1-2 in conference play. But Northern is still a stellar 14-3 overall and there’s a lot of season left to play.

Thursday, the Skylights will travel to Helena for a game against struggling Carroll College, then head to Billings for a game against Rocky Mountain College on Saturday night.

Skylights Notes: To make a bad weekend even worse, the injury bug once again bit the Skylights. After her best game of the season, Kirkpatrick left Saturday’s contest with what appeared to be a serious knee injury. No official word has come from the Frontier Conference, but it sounds as though the officials from Friday night’s game against Tech were suspended by the league for one game. The Skylights came into the weekend holding teams to just 51 points per game and they bettered that on Friday night, despite the loss. Schwenke is now averaging 17 points per game. MSU-N gets another crack at the Orediggers on Feb. 11 and Western the night before.

Skylights are 1-2 in Frontier, 14-3 overall; Next up: at Carroll on Thursday, at Rocky on Saturday

Montana Tech 51, Skylights 50

MT — Erika Jenkins 0-1 0-0 0, Tabitha Tomlinson 2-6 1-2 5, Brianne McClafferty 3-7 1-1 8, Laini Kalumbi 1-4 0-0 2, Kelsey DeWit 5-7 6-6 16, Bryn Hasquet 1-5 0-0 2, Mandy Machinal 0-3 0-0 0, Dannielle Devenny 5-8 7-7 18. Totals 17-41 15-16 51.

MSU-N — Tresch 1-6 0-0 3, Laramie Schwenke 7-16 1-1 19, Kylee Denham 2-5 0-0 5, Rachelle Bennett 0-0 0-0 0, Taylor Cummings 0-2 0-0 0, Jordan Bruuresma 6-13 2-2 15, Micah Kirkpatrick 0-2 0-0 0, Kelly Millager 1-3 2-2 4, Laci Keller 1-3 2-4 4. Totals 18-50 7-9 50.

Halftime: Northern 27-24. 3-pt FG:MT 2-6 (McClafferty 1-2, Hasquet 0-2, Machinal 0-1, Devenny 1-1), MSU-N 7-23 (Tresch 1-5, Schwenke 4-9, Denham 1-2, Cummings 0-2, Bruuresma 1-4, Kirkpatrick 0-1).

UM-Western 80, Skylights 68

UM-W — Hayley Pettit 7-15 7-7 21, Sammi Bignell 6-12 1-2 14, Alecia Wilson 3-7 2-2 8, Roxy Thurman 2-3 0-0 4, Nicole Tams 4-6 8-8 16, Kassi Kerbs 1-2 0-0 2, Morgen Thacker 1-2 0-0 3, Breyenne Mosey 0-0 0-0 0, Kaci Matthies 1-1 0-0 2, Brittney Leibenguth 0-2 0-0 0, Jenna Banks 2-4 1-2 5, Kelsey Callaghan 2-5 0-0 5. Totals 29-59 19-21 80.

MSU-N — Nikki Tresch 4-9 1-1 10, Laramie Schwenke 5-13 4-6 18, Kylee Denham 1-3 3-4 5, Rachelle Bennett 0-0 0-0 0, Taylor Cummings 0-0 0-0 0, Jordan Bruuresma 3-11 6-6 14, Micah Kirkpatrick 4-9 0-0 11, Kelly Millager 1-3 2-2 4, Laci Keller 3-5 0-0 6. Totals 21-53 16-19 68.