Skylights hope to rebound at Carroll and Rocky Mountain

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After a devastating weekend on their own court, the Montana State University-Northern Skylights will have to regroup. And they’ll have to regroup on the road.

The Skylights suffered a controversial and heartbreaking defeat at the hands of Montana Tech last Friday night in Havre, then saw a four-point halftime lead turn into a 12-point loss to the UM-Western Bulldogs just 24 hours later.

It was a tough blow to the Skylights, who came into last weekend having won eight straight games and were on the verge of a national ranking in the NAIA.

But Northern (1-2, 14-3) must get past last weekend’s difficulties and get back to playing the kind of basketball the Skylights were playing earlier. That however, will be easier said than done as they play Frontier Conference road games tonight at Carroll College and Saturday at Rocky Mountain College.

“We absolutely have to put last weekend behind us,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “We have pushed the kids all week to move forward. It’s time for us to get back on the road and get back to playing the way we’re capable of.

“These are two very good teams we’re playing this weekend,” he added. “And we have a lot to clean up. We have to shoot the ball much better and we have to be very good on the boards. But we’ve been very successful on the road this season and that’s we need to do this weekend, we need to get back to playing the way that’s made us successful this year.”

MSU-N has been a solid road team this season, losing just once. The Skylights are also still the top-rated defense in the Frontier, despite giving up 80 points to Western last Saturday. However, Mouat wants to see his team improve at scoring the basketball and commit less turnovers. The Skylights are shooting a Frontier-best 40 percent from the 3-point-line, but they only average around 57 points per game. Laramie Schwenke leads Northern at 17 points per while Jordan Bruursema and Nikki Tresch average 15 points each.

Turning things around quickly is a priority for the Skylights, but it’s never easy in the Frontier.

Tonight, Northern will face another team which is reeling in the Saints. Carroll (0-3, 7-9) has struggled this season, but things got really bad when the Saints found out they lost star guard Alysha Green to a season-ending knee injury before last weekend’s losses to Westminster and Lewis-Clark State. Green had been averaging 15 points per game for the Saints.

But even with the devastating injury, the Saints are still talented. Carroll has point guard Torrie Cahill playing well, while forwards Jen Guertin and Jill Jagelski lead a big Saints’ front line. Guertin averages nine points and seven rebounds for the Saints, while Cahill is scoring nine per game. Jordan Bagley also averages nine points per for the Saints, who were swept by the Skylights in a pair of blowout losses last season.
“They (Saints) are coming back from a long road trip where they competed very well,” Mouat said. “And that’s good enough for me. Any time you can go and play at high level at Westminster and LC, you’ve done something right and that’s what Carroll did last weekend.

“They will certainly fall off a little with the loss of Alysha (Green) who’s a great player and leader. But they’ve also had a few games to adjust now and we know they are deep and very talented. They have great players and great depth, so we know what we’re in for and we know we’re going to have to be at our very best against them.”

And if a bounce-back game against the Saints wasn’t daunting enough, Northern will also play a good Rocky Mountain team Saturday night in Billings.

The Battlin’ Bears (1-2, 12-6) have been nationally-ranked this season and are a formidable foe.

Rocky will be another size mismatch for the Skylights with 6-2 center Erin Cooke, 6-1 Jillian Stanek, 5-11 Amie Jensen and 5-11 Callie Eike all capable post players. Then there’s top guards Austin Hanser and Mickey Scally. Both players average 13 points per game and both gave the Skylights fits in games last season.

“Rocky is as athletic as anyone in our league,” Mouat said. They have a number of guards who can get 20 points in a game. And their size is definitely a concern. They have beaten and played really good teams all year and they have all the pieces in place to be a great team.

“In both games this weekend, we have to be on our toes defensively, as well as clean up the things on offense we’ve been struggling with,” he added. “We can’t allow these teams to get hot on us, but at the same time, we have to get back to playing the type of basketball on offense we’re accustomed to. If we can do those things, we’ll be in a position to win two road games this weekend.”

Tonight’s game in Helena between Northern and Carroll will tip off at 5:30. Saturday night’s game between MSU-N and RMC will also get underway at 5:30 p.m. in Billings.

Both games can be heard locally on 92.5 KPQX FM or streamed live at www.msun.edu/athletics.