Skylights strike down Warriors
MSU-N women split after stunning nationally-ranked LC State

George Ferguson
Monday, January 30th, 2012

The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team has been in some dramatic games this season.

But no game the Skylights have won or lost has been as dramatic as Northern’s wire-to-wire upset of the No. 6 Lewis-Clark State Warriors Friday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The Skylights toppled the mighty Warriors 55-48, which started a weekend that also saw them lose to the No. 20 Westminster Griffins Saturday night on the same floor in Havre.

But a split against the top two teams in the Frontier is nothing for Northern to hang its head about, and Friday night’s win was as big as it gets.

"I was really proud of our kids," Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. "First and foremost, LC (Warriors) is a great team, loaded with great players, so anytime you can find a way to beat them, you’ve done something. But our kids were also able to dust off what was a really poor performance last Saturday night at Rocky, and that’s not always an easy thing to do. So I am just really proud of them for that, and for the way they played tonight."

Northern’s start and finish to Friday night’s game were both paramount. And so were the rebounds. LC, with 6-3 Kirsi Voshell and 6-2 Alyssa Fierro, wasn’t just the highest scoring team in the Frontier Conference, but the Warriors were also the top rebounding team in the NAIA. And the Skylights outdid them in both categories right from the start.

Northern got three offensive rebounds in the first three minutes of the game, and that set the tone for a fabulous start. Nikki Tresch buried an early 3-pointer which capped a 9-2 start for the Skylights, then MSU-N’s defense kept LC at bay, and the Skylights built a commanding 18-4 lead on a Rachelle Bennett trey.

The Warriors rallied behind a 10-2 run and closed the gap to 27-20 at halftime, but the Skylights gave themselves exactly what they wanted, a lead on one of the best teams in the country halfway through.

"I thought we did a great job on defense and rebounding early in the game," senior Laramie Schwenke said. "Our focus tonight was on their bigs, doing the best job we could to first deny them in the post and then make sure we hold them to one shot by getting rebounds. And I felt like we executed that really well. That’s why I’m so proud of our post players tonight. They did an amazing job."

Indeed. Jordan Bruursema, Laci Keller and Kelly Millager were certainly up against it as an undersized unit Friday night. But together, the trio of Northern posts helped the Skylights outrebound the Warriors 34-28 and they held Voshell and Fierro to just 17 points combined.

The Warriors rallied behind a 10-2 run and closed the gap to 27-20 at halftime, but the Skylights gave themselves exactly what they wanted, a lead on one of the best teams in the country halfway through.

"Every single minute those three posts were on the floor, they had their hands full," Mouat said. "Kirsi Voshell and Alyssa Fierro are two of the more dominant post players in the country, on both ends of the floor. But our three posts executed all night long. They battled and fought and hustled and just did an outstanding job on them tonight."

Northern didn’t trail at any moment in the game, but the Warriors didn’t back down either. Halfway through the second half, the Skylights looked like they were in full control after Schwenke nailed a three
which put them up 44-34. And minutes later, Bruursema connected on a huge triple which made the score 47-39 with 8:23 to play. From there however, Northern’s offense stalled and things got interesting.

The Warriors chipped away at the lead as Northern went cold from the field, and when Voshell laid in an easy two at the 2:08 mark, all of a sudden, the Skylights led just 48-46. However, MSU-N’s defense rose to the occasion, just as it has so many times this season. And clinging to a four-point lead, Bruursema made a possibly game-saving defensive play. After being knocked to the deck and everyone else had run down the floor, Bruursema got up, came sprinting down the floor and stole the ball from LC’s Tasha Bishop. The steal and subsequent free throws from Tresch and Kylee Denham preserved perhaps MSU-N’s biggest win since it knocked off the Warriors in overtime two years ago in Havre.

“Huge play by Jordan (Bruursema),” Mouat said. “I can’t say enough about her toughness and effort. She really came up big in a few different situations tonight. But I think our entire team did.

We had kids step up and hit big shots, make big plays, get rebounds and just do all the little things you have to do in order to beat a team like LC. Just very, very proud of them.”

Aside from the rebounding edge, the Skylights held LCSC to just 37 percent shooting and five made three’s on the night. Northern also did an outstanding job of handling the Warriors’ pressure defense. Schwenke finished with 16 points and a pair of three’s to go along with four assists. Tresch scored 14 points while Denham chipped in with eight points and seven rebounds. Bruursema added seven boards and Keller had four.

The Warriors (5-2, 19-3), who were dealt just their third loss on the season, got 14 points from freshman Brittaney Nibergall, who was impressive all night.

“I think we did a lot of really good things defensively,” Mouat said. “That team has a lot of weapons, so to hold them to 48 points, and to do what our post players did tonight, that’s pretty special.

“LC is a seasoned team and they didn’t go away. They made it a two-point game and seemed to have a lot of momentum,” he added. “But our kids stayed poised and stood tall on defense. And we did just enough with free throws to hold them off. So we’re going to be very proud of this win.

“Before the game, our focus was making sure we got better tonight,” Schwenke said. “No matter what the outcome was, we wanted to make sure we played better than we did at Rocky. We were really focused tonight and the whole team did a great job. This was a big win for us. LC is a great team, but everybody on our team stepped up and contributed tonight and I’m just proud of the whole team.”

**Griffins shoot down Skylights**

Northern was riding high after Friday night’s stunning win over LC State. But the nationally-ranked Westminster Griffins came in and spoiled the party.

Like MSU-N did to LCSC just 24 hours earlier, the No. 20 Griffins led Northern from the opening tip to the final buzzer in a 56-39 win Saturday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

The win pushed Westminster into first place in the Frontier, while the Skylights fell to 3-4 in league play and into a logjam in third place.

“Give Westminster a ton of credit,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “They are loaded with great players and they played great tonight on both ends of the floor. But we’re also disappointed right now because we felt like we had built some good momentum on Friday night and we just didn’t show up ready to play again tonight. We weren’t very good at the start of the game and from there, we were forced to play from behind.”

The Griffins have hurt the Skylights in recent games, in particular, two-time Westminster NAIA All-American Nicole Yazzie. And she was up to her old tricks again on Saturday night.
Yazzie scored 12 of her game-high 22 points in the first 11 minutes, and the Griffins rode her coat tails to a 15-4 lead to start the game. On the other side, Northern’s offense was sluggish until Schwenke and Tresch each knocked down three’s to make the score 17-12 with nine minutes left in the first half.

But Yazzie followed Tresch’s three with another one of her own, and Westminster responded to a Bruursema triple with another shot by Yazzie, and that was the story of the night for the Skylights…they just couldn’t seem to get over the proverbial hump.

Westminster led 27-18 at halftime, but the Skylights quickly cut that lead to four on a three by Schwenke early in the second half. Westminster however, kept on answering. On defense, the Griffins forced Northern into 20 turnovers and on two different occasions in the second half, they answered when MSU-N had the lead to a manageable five points.

The Skylights trailed by just five with 12 minutes to play when Yazzie hit another bomb. Then, Northern cut the lead to 44-39 with five minutes to go, only to see the Griffins finish the game on an 11-0 run.

“That was really disappointing because we had chances,” Mouat said. “We were within four early in the second half and within five late, but they (Griffins) had an answer for us every time. They kept coming back and making shots and we could just never get any offensive momentum it seemed. So credit them for that.

“But we also didn’t score a single point in the last five minutes of the game,” he added. “And that’s unacceptable. We, as a team, as a coaching staff, as a whole, have to look in the mirror and understand we have to be better than that. Scoring 39 points and going on those big lulls at the end of a game just isn’t going to get it done. So that’s something we have to fix. We don’t have a choice.”

The Skylights did make six three’s on the night and got a double-double from Bruursema, with 11 points and 10 rebounds. Schwenke added 11 points and Denham scored eight. But Northern was held to just 37 percent shooting from the night, got outrebounded 31-28 and the 20 turnovers proved costly.

The Skylights did stand tall again on defense. They held the Griffins to 10 points under their scoring average, but the start to the game and the performance by Yazzie was too much to overcome. Amy Krommenhoek also scored 10 points off bench for the Griffins, who improved to 6-1 in the Frontier and 13-7 overall.

With the weekend split, the Skylights are still a sparkling 16-5 overall, and they will certainly be proud of Friday night’s win over the Warriors, especially since Northern will play five of its last seven games on the road.

“It would have been nice to play well against Westminster,” Mouat said. “We had the opportunity to really gain some ground on our home floor and we didn’t do that. But I’m proud of the way the kids played on Friday night and that was a huge win for us. Now, we just have to refocus and get ready to go back on the road.”

The Skylights start a three-game road trip with a visit to rival UGF next Saturday night in Great Falls.

**Skylight Notes:** Even with Saturday night’s loss to Westminster, the Skylights are smothering teams on defense. Northern allowed a combined 104 points to a pair of nationally-ranked teams who were averaging a combined 136 points per game coming in. LC State played without reigning NAIA Player of the Year Jasmine Stohr Friday night, but the Warriors still beat Westminster last week without her. Bruursema was integral all weekend, including blocking shots. She had three blocks in two games this weekend. The Skylights went the final seven minutes of Friday’s game without a FG and the final four minutes the same way on Saturday.

**Skylights are 3-4 in the Frontier, 16-5 overall; Next up: at UGF Saturday**
Skylights 55, LC State 48

**LCSC** — Alyssa Fierro 2-7 3-4 7, Kirsi Voshell 5-12 0-0 10, Tasha Bishop 3-6 0-0 7, Annie Kane 1-2 0-0 2, McKenzie Heaslet 1-2 0-0 2, Tanis Fuller 1-6 1-2 3, Kelli Rice 1-3 0-0 3, Brittaney Niebergall 4-11 3-4 14. Totals 18-49 7-10 48.

**MSU-N** — Nikki Tresch 4-8 5-6 14, Laramie Schwenke 5-16 4-4 16, Kylee Denham 2-6 4-4 8, Rachelle Bennett 1-1 0-0 3, Taylor Cummings 0-2 0-0 0, Jordan Bruuresma 2-6 0-0 5, Kelly Millager 1-1 3-4 5, Laci Keller 2-5 0-0 4. Totals 17-45 16-18 55.


Westminster 56, Skylights 39

**WM** — Allie Eastman 0-0 0-0 0, Nicole Yazzie 8-12 3-3 22, Brooke Larsen 1-5 0-0 2, Jenteal Jackson 2-5 0-1 5, Dana Bates 2-9 5-6 9, Rebecca Beaudoin 0-0 0-0 0, Cydney Tibbitts 2-7 0-0 4, Amy Krommenhoek 4-6 0-0 10, Shelby Ellsworth 2-6 0-0 4, Tia Pappas 0-1 0-0 0. Totals 21-51 8-10 56.

**MSU-N** — Nikki Tresch 2-5 0-0 5, Laramie Schwenke 4-9 0-0 11, Kylee Denham 4-9 0-1 8, Rachelle Bennett 0-0 0-0 0, Taylor Cummings 0-0 0-0 0, Jordan Bruuresma 4-11 1-2 11, Kelly Millager 0-1 2-2 2, Laci Keller 1-5 0-0 2. Totals 15-40 3-5 39.