Skylights battle past Argos in Great Falls
George Ferguson
Monday, February 6th, 2012

GREAT FALLS — The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team has been a resilient bunch all season long. From injuries to heartbreaking losses, the Skylights have always bounced back.

Saturday night in Great Falls, Northern did just that once again.

Coming off a loss at home to Westminster College last Saturday night in Havre, the Skylights rebounded once again by beating a very good University of Great Falls squad 59-55 at the McLaughlin Center. With the win, Northern improved to 4-4 in league play and grabbed sole possession of fourth place in the Frontier Conference.

And being a resilient team was absolutely necessary because the Argos certainly didn’t make anything easy for MSU-N. UGF twice erased double-digit Northern advantages and had the game tied 50-50 with 2:55 left to play. But that's when Northern senior Laramie Schwenke stepped up and drilled an assassin-like 3-pointer to give the Skylights the lead back for good.

“I credit our team for getting big stops towards the end of the game,” Schwenke said afterwards. “Holding on to win wasn’t about just one shot. It was about getting stops, about defending them (Argos) inside and about getting big rebounds. I’m really proud of our whole team tonight.”

Indeed. The Skylights did a lot right in many facets of the game, including tying the much-taller Argos on the boards, with each team grabbing 34. One of those big performances came from junior Kylee Denham who grabbed a career-high 13 rebounds, many of them coming down the stretch when Northern was trying to hold of a UGF squad which had stormed back to tie the game behind a pair of Sarah Sciascia three’s in the closing minutes.

“It was a pretty gutsy effort by our kids,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “Great Falls played well. They cut our double-digit leads twice tonight. They never quit and we could never quite put them away and that shows you what kind of team they have.

“Fortunately, we had enough in the tank to keep answering them,” he added. “Laramie’s shot was huge and it gave us a chance to make some free throws at the end of the game when we needed them. I thought we did a great job on the boards. Kylee Denham’s effort was really impressive. For a 5-7 guard to get 13 rebounds against a really good rebounding team like UGF is awfully special. It was just a really great effort by our entire team tonight and I’m proud of them for responding the way they did.”

At different times, it looked like there wouldn’t be any drama in Saturday’s night rematch of a game the Skylights edged the Argos back on Jan. 7 in Havre.

Northern got off to a red-hot start with two Schwenke 3-pointers and nice inside play by Laci Keller. MSU-N led 15-4 early on and it looked as though the Skylights might be in for an easy night.

“Getting off to that kind of start was huge,” Mouat said. “Credit our kids for coming in here ready to play. But I think having such a great crowd there really helped. We had great support from the Northern fans and I think they gave our kids a great lift all night.”
As good a start as the Skylights got off to, UGF was at home and the Argos were never going to go quietly into the night.

UGF clamped down on defense and held the Skylights to nearly six minutes without a field goal towards the end of the first half, while the Argos started to chip away on offense. By the time Jordan Bruursema hit a 10-footer with :26 left in the half, the Skylights were up just 26-19.

However, Northern again asserted itself offensively at the start of the second half. The Skylights opened on an 8-2 run and led 34-21 with 15:54 left in the game. UGF came right back though. The Argos got big buckets from Khayla Gladney in the paint, and six straight points from star senior Kezia Ford made the score 38-34 with 10 minutes left.

"Again, credit UGF for never quitting,” Mouat said. “They really got going for a stretch there and when they get rolling like that, they are pretty tough to stop.”

Nikki Tresch answered Ford’s run with a triple to put Northern back in front by seven, and she hit another dagger to put the Skylights up 46-38 with eight minutes to go. But the Argos responded yet again, this time with Sciascia scoring 10 straight points for the Argos, two coming on deep three’s, the final one which left the game tied at 50-50. In that same stretch, Keller had two big scores for Northern, including an put back on an offensive rebound, or the Skylights would have found themselves trailing late in the game.

“I’m really proud our bigs,” Schwenke said. “Jordan, Laci, Michaela (Howe-Cobb), and Kylee really battled tonight. Rebounding was a big focus for us, and our bigs did an amazing job.

“I think everything comes back to our defense tonight,” she added. “We know we have been up and down shooting the ball and scoring, but our defense has been very consistent and it was huge for us tonight.”

Free throws also played a key role as the Skylights made six foul shots in the final 30 seconds, ensuring UGF couldn’t make a final push.

Schwenke led four Skylights in double figures with 17 points. She also had six assists and two steals four three’s. Northern was again short-handed, playing without backup forward Kelly Millager, but Keller had a big night, scoring 13 points and grabbing six rebounds. Tresch was huge as well, scoring 13 points and hitting two trey’s. Bruursema finished with 11 points and six rebounds, while Northern grabbed 34 rebounds, committed just nine turnovers and forced UGF into 16 miscues.

“This one was big because it keeps us within our goal of hosting a home playoff game,” Schwenke said. “We are focused on playing one game at a time and just really focusing on handling our own business. And we did that tonight. This was an important win for us.”

UGF (1-7, 7-14) got 16 points and eight rebounds from Ford, while Sciascia added 12 points, all in the second half, just as she did last month in Havre.

Saturday night’s win avenged Northern’s loss in Great Falls last January, but more importantly, it keeps the Skylights on track in the Frontier standings. Northern is two games behind Rocky Mountain College for third place, but the Skylights are a full game ahead of Carroll and Montana Tech with two more road games upcoming.

“I’m just proud of the effort,” Mouat said. “Our kids responded to more adversity, just as they’ve done all season. Everybody stepped up tonight in different situations and it was a really gutty, team effort.”

Northern is back on the road Friday at struggling UM-Western, then the Skylights visit Montana Tech Saturday night in Butte.

**Skylights are 4-4 in Frontier, 17-5 overall; Up Next: at Western Friday, Montana Tech Saturday**

Skylights 59, UGF 55
**MSU-N** — Laramie Schwenke 5-15 3-4 17, Nikki Tresch 3-12 5-7 13, Kylee Denham 1-8 2-4 4, Jordan Bruursema 5-14 0-0 11, Laci Keller 6-7 1-3 13, Rachelle Bennett 0-0 1-2 1. Totals 20-59 12-20 59.

**UGF** — Lindsey Abramson 2-8 0-0 4, Sydnee Burke 0-4 3-3 3, Kezia Ford 4-14 7-7 16, Chelsea Adams 1-3 2-2 4, Shorty Ramos 3-6 1-2 7, Sarah Sciascia 4-8 2-2 12, Khayla Gladney 2-4 4-5 9. Totals 16-53 19-21.