Skylights battle Bears, Saints
George Ferguson
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It’s been a roller coaster of a Frontier Conference ride for the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team. And now that ride is pulling into the home station for the final time this regular season.

Tonight, the Skylights play the first of a final two-game homes stand when they take on the powerful Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears at 6 inside the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. Northern plays its final home game of the regular season, and will honor senior Laramie Schwenke when it takes on arch rival Carroll College at 5:30 p.m. on Saturday.

And though this weekend marks the final home games of the regular season for the Skylights, they’ll be fighting for a home game in the upcoming conference playoffs. Northern (5-5, 18-6) currently sits alone in fourth place in the Frontier standings and two wins this weekend would go a long way towards securing that coveted home playoff game.

However, that task will be easier said than done. Last month, the Skylights gutted out a 55-50 win at Carroll, but then were promptly dismissed by the Bears 61-38 two nights later in Billings.

"Both teams come in here playing well,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. "And what’s really difficult about this weekend is, these are two completely different teams. A lot of times in our league, you play back-to-back games against similar opponents. But this weekend isn’t one of them. They (Bears, Saints) are both very talented, but they aren’t similar in any way and that makes this weekend very challenging."

The challenges start tonight with RMC (6-4, 17-8). The Bears have been one of the premier team’s in the Frontier this season and are trying to play their way right into the NAIA national tournament.

Rocky is loaded with talent, including star guards Austin Hanser and Mickey Scally, who combined to score 25 points per game and shoot better than 41 percent from the 3-point line. But the Bears aren’t just guard oriented, they are also big, athletic and deep. Ali Blake (5-11) averages 11 points per game, while players like Callie Eike (5-10) and Jillian Stanek (6-1) are formidable down low. Then, Rocky will bring talent of the bench, including guard Brittany Kumm, who exploded for 17 points against the Skylights last month in Billings.

So in order to play with Rocky tonight, and Carroll for that matter on Saturday, the Skylights will have to be their usual self on defense, as well as be consistent on offense. Northern leads the Frontier in scoring defense, allowing just 55 points per game. Conversely, the Bears average 70 points per outing, which is third in the Frontier, while Carroll scores a league low 60 points per night. The Skylights also lead the Frontier, and are second in the NAIA in 3-point percentage at 39 percent per game, while they are 13th in the country in 3-pointers made per game.

Individually, the Skylights will need their inside-out game. Schwenke is having a monster season, averaging 15 points, six rebounds, four assists and two steals per game. Jordan Bruursema has continued to stand tall in the paint, averaging 13 points and six boards per night, while Nikki Tresch adds 12 points per game. The Skylight shave also been getting huge rebounding efforts from Kylee Denham, who has 37...
rebounds in her last three games, while Laci Keller is finally coming on strong, averaging seven points and four rebounds per game, but 11 points and six boards over her last five outings.

“Both nights, are defense will be up against two very explosive teams with a lot of weapons,” Mouat said. “So we have our work cut out for us on that end. But we also understand we need to be better offensively. We have to put the ball in the hole more effectively, because both these teams have the ability to scoring in bunches. So we have to be at our best shooting the ball, so that we can counter of some of that and not just continue to put so much pressure on our defense.

“The loss at Rocky was probably one of our worst performances in a long time,” he added. “And you have to credit them for some of that. They are a really talented team, having a great season and they have a ton of weapons. They have five or six kids that can get double figures on you, they play fast, they shoot it well and they rebound it really well. And they are still playing well at this point in the season, if not better than they were the first time we faced them. So there’s no question we’re going to have to be ready to play much better than we did the first time around.”

While MSU-N is looking to turn things around against the Bears tonight, it will be Carroll looking for that revenge on Saturday. The Skylights and Saints waged a great battle last month in Helena, a game Northern played extremely well in down the stretch. But that was also last month and Mouat expects a very good Carroll team to come into the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse for what will be the Skylights’ final guaranteed home game this year. The Skylights have beaten the Saints the last four times they’ve met in Havre in the regular season, while Carroll won in Havre in the 2010 Frontier playoffs.

“Carroll has a lot of weapons,” Mouat said. “They are a balanced team and I think they have learned to play and be effective now without Alysha Green, who was obviously a big loss for them. They (Saints) are big, physical team. Jeni Guertin is one of the best post players in our league. But they also have some outstanding guards and when they get going, they are tough to stop.”

Guertin (6-1) averages nine points and six boards for the young Saints, who are also getting a combined 12 points per game from freshmen Bailey Snelling and Kalee Junkermeir. Jordan Bagley (5-10) is another strong inside player, while point guard Torrie Cahill leads the team in scoring at 10 points per game.

“This is obviously a huge weekend for us, for all three teams really,” Mouat said. “At this point, every game is big and both teams we’re facing are very, very good.

“I think our kids are excited about being back at home after a tough stretch of road games,” he continued. “So we are looking forward to these challenges and playing in front of our fans again. And of course, we want to go out and play well for our senior, who’s given an awful lot to this program during her time here.”

Tonight’s game between the Skylights and Bears will get underway at 6 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. Saturday’s game between MSU-N and Carroll will tip off at 5:30 p.m. Senior Night will take place following the game.

**MSU-Northern vs RMC and Carroll**

**Tonight at 6 p.m and Saturday at 5:30 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., 15 ppg, 6 rpg
G Nikki Tresch, 5-5, Jr., 12 ppg
G Kylee Denham, 5-8, Jr., 6 ppg
F Laci Keller, 6-1, Jr., 6 ppg
F Jordan Bruursema, 6-0, Jr., 13 ppg, 6 rpg