Skylights topple Bears, then Saints

George Ferguson
Monday, February 20th, 2012

The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team has had ups and downs through the duration of Frontier Conference play.

In fact, the resilient Skylights haven’t put together back-to-back wins all conference season long.

That all changed this weekend in Havre.

In Northern’s final regular season home games of 2012, the Skylights put together a pair of impressive performances, thrashing Rocky Mountain College 73-51 on Friday night, then returning to the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse on Saturday to send senior Laramie Schwenke out with a scrappy 55-48 win over Carroll College.

Friday night’s win may have been the Skylights’ most impressive and complete victory this season. Northern was clicking offensively, and its trade-mark defense held the normally high-scoring Bears to just 35 percent shooting and three made 3-pointers. Conversely, the Skylights shot 50 percent from the field and went 8-of-18 from three.

“That was a pretty complete game,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “And against a very good Rocky basketball team too. We really didn’t have any lulls offensively. And you see what type of team we can be when we make shots. Tonight, we put together a pretty complete performance and it’s a big win for our kids.”

Northern’s dominance over the Bears, who beat the Skylights badly last month in Billings, started early, and it was balanced.

MSU-N went up 10-4 at the start, then got late 3-pointers by Schwenke and Jordan Bruursema to cap a blistering 33-22 first half performance.

Schwenke opened the second half with another three, and Nikki Tresch followed right behind with one of her own, and the rout was on.

The Skylights kept up the offensive pressure with another bomb from Tresch at the 12:45 mark, then another trey from Kylee Denham which put Northern ahead 60-44 with 7:47 to go. The 21-point final margin was the Skylights’ biggest lead on a night when they tied the much taller Bears on the boards, 31-31 and forced the normally disciplined Bears into 14 turnovers.

“Against good teams like Rocky, you have to play well and you have to make shots,” Mouat said. “We did that tonight. I thought we got a great lift from Kelly Millager in the first half, and Taylor Cummings and Rachelle Bennett also played well off the bench. We were balanced, we were sharing the ball and we made shots. For us to beat Rocky this way was really nice. I’m very proud of our kids and very happy for them.”
Schwenke led four Skylights in double figures with 18 points, as well as six rebounds. Bruursema added 13 points, while Denham and Laci Keller scored 11 each. Keller added eight rebounds and Millager scored eight, including a big run in the first half. Tresch hit two triples and added eight points as well.

“I think we came in really well prepared for this game,” Keller said. “We were focused. It was a total team effort. We played together the whole game.”

RMC (7-5, 18-9) had been a roll as of late, but the loss to Northern pulled the Bears back into a third-place tie with the Skylights. The Bears were led by Alli Blake’s 24 points and seven rebounds.

“Can’t say enough about the respect we have for Rocky and what they’ve done this season,” Mouat said. “And I think they didn’t play as well as they are capable of playing. But we did play well and I’m proud of the kids for that. It was a big win for them.”

Skylights down Saints

As spectacular as the MSU-Northern women played on Friday night, Northern head coach Chris Mouat knew his team would be in for a fight during an emotional Senior Night game against Carroll Saturday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

The Skylights were set to honor Laramie Schwenke, while Carroll came to Havre stinging from an upset loss to UGF Friday night in Great Falls.

And like Mouat thought, Northern’s seven-point win over the Saints was a battle right from the start.

“We knew we would take their (Saints) best shot,” Mouat said. “They came in here and played very hard, played very well and were well-prepared for us. I thought we played well too, especially on the defensive end, because Carroll is talented and has a lot of weapons. Fortunately, we had enough in the tank to hold on that end.”

Actually, the Skylights had to fight just to stay ahead to the end.

In a defensive battle, Carroll led 25-23 at intermission, and was back in front again 43-42 with 4:57 left in the contest. From there however, the Skylights outscored the Saints 15-6. Helping the way was Kylee Denham with two great drives to the basket, as well as timely Jordan Bruursema shot as the shot-clock expired.

Then, inside of a minute, a huge Kelly Millager rebound and two free throws after Carroll had missed three chances at point-blank range when only trailing by two, as well as a steal by Denham added to Northern’s cause to hold off the Saints. Fittingly, it was Schwenke who would finish the game with two swished free throws.

“It seems like our games always come down to this,” Schwenke said. “One stop on defense, one big rebound. We take pride on our defense and we know it gets us through these tight games.

“Tonight, Kelly Millager got a huge rebound and she stepped up and made big free throws. This was a great effort by the whole team and I’m really proud of all of them.”

The first half was up-and-down and just as close as the second.
Schwenke buried three trey’s in the first seven minutes as the Skylights led 11-6 early on. But late three’s by Carroll freshmen Bailey Snelling and Kalee Junkermeir gave the Saints a 25-23 halftime edge, and capped off an impressive 11-2 run by Carroll.

“Carroll played very well,” Mouat said. “I knew they would. They have so much talent. But I was really proud of our ability to defend and rebound down the stretch. To win on the boards against them is a big accomplishment. And then, we did just enough offensively towards the end of the game.”

It was an emotional night for Schwenke, though it won’t be her last game in Havre. With the two wins this weekend, the Skylights are at least locked into fourth place, if not better and will host a Frontier Conference playoff game in two weeks.

Still, it was Schwenke’s night and she led the way with 18 points, seven rebounds and two assists. She also hit four critical 3-pointers, while Nikki Tresch scored 11 and hit three trey’s. Bruursema and Laci Keller each added eight points. The Saints (3-9, 15) got 13 points each from Junkermeir and Jenni Guertin.

“I wanted this game bad,” Schwenke said. “It means a ton to me. My teammates and coaches mean the world to me and I would have none of these accomplishments without them. It was an emotional game and I’m just glad we came out on top. Just really, really proud of my team for this.

“You try to not let them get wound up in the emotions of things but you could see our kids wanted this one for Laramie badly,” Mouat added. “They all played very hard and I think you can see how much they care about her and how much they want to play hard for her. That says a lot about how they all feel about her and about how they all feel about each other.”

After surviving an emotionally exhausting win over the Saints, the Skylights have now reeled off three straight wins. Northern is 7-5 in the Frontier and an impressive 20-6 overall.

The Skylights will play their final two regular season games on the road, including at Westminster on Thursday night and Lewis-Clark State on Saturday.

“Just very proud of what we accomplished this weekend,” Mouat said. “We beat two very good basketball teams, and more importantly, I thought we were consistent in our play. You have to play well in February, and I think for the most part, we’re doing that right now. So I’m just really proud of the kids for their play and their focus this weekend. It was a great two nights in our gym.”

Skylights Notes: Northern has now beaten the Saints in eight of their last nine meetings. The Skylights had lost to Rocky three straight times, including a 61-38 setback last month in Billings. Schwenke is now averaging 16 points per game, which is second-best in the Frontier. While undersized all weekend, the Skylights were big on the boards. Northern grabbed 62 rebonds over two games. With tough road wins this weekend, the Skylights could finish third in the final league standings, but can do no worse than fourth.

Skylights are 7-5 in the Frontier, 20-6 overall; Up next: at Westminster Thursday, LC State Saturday

Skylights 73, Rocky Mountain 51

RMC — Haleigh Crnkovich 1-3 0-0 3, Kelcy Lott 1-4 1-2 3, Brittany Kumm 0-4 0-0 0, Alli Blake 8-14 8-12 24, Austin Hanser 4-12 0-0 8, Callie Eike 0-0 0-0 0, Micki Scally 2-8 1-2 7, Breanna Todd 1-1 0-0 2, Amie Jensen 0-0 0-0 0, Jillian Stanek 1-5 2-2 4. Totals 18-51 12-18 51.

MSU-N — Nikki Tresch 2-8 2-2 8, Laramie Schwenke 5-11 5-5 18, Kylee Denham 4-6 1-1 11, Rachelle Bennett 1-1 0-0 2, Taylor Cummings 0-1 0-0 0, Leah Olson 0-0 0-0 0, Jordan Bruursema 4-7 4-4 13, Kelly Millager 3-7 2-2 8, Michaela Howe-Cobb 1-1 0-0 2, Laci Keller 4-7 3-4 11. Totals 24-49 17-18 7

Skylights 55, Carroll 48

**CC** — Torrie Cahill 1-5 2-2 4, Jeni Guertin 2-5 9-9 13, Kalee Junkermier 4-9 2-2 13, Jackie Mee 0-0 0-0 0, Jackie Gebhardt 0-0 0-0 0, Bailey Snelling 4-6 2-2 12, Jill Jagelski 1-5 0-0 2, Amy Allen 1-8 0-0 3, Jordan Bagley 0-3 1-2 1. Totals 13-41 16-17 48.

**MSU-N** — Nikki Tresch 3-7 2-2 11, Laramie Schwenke 5-11 4-4 18, Kylee Denham 2-7 2-4 6, Rachelle Bennett 0-0 0-0 0, Taylor Cummings 0-0 0-0 0, Jordan Bruuresma 3-11 2-5 8, Kelly Millager 0-0 4-4 4, Laci Keller 3-4 2-3 8. Totals 16-40 16-22 55.