Westminster turns back Skylights in Salt Lake
George Ferguson
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If it weren’t for a seven-game winning streak by the Westminster women’s basketball team, the Montana State University-Northern Skylights would have been the hottest team in the Frontier Conference heading into Thursday night’s showdown in Salt Lake City.

The Skylights were riding a three-game Frontier Conference winning streak, with big wins over Montana Tech, Rocky Mountain College and Carroll College in the last two weeks. But instead of keeping that going, the Skylights became the eighth straight team to lose to the Griffins as No. 16 Westminster beat Northern 62-41 Thursday night in Utah.

The win clinched Westminster’s fourth straight Frontier regular season championship, but also did little to dash the Skylights’ playoff position. Northern is still tied with RMC for third place and locked into at least a fourth-place finish, and a first-round playoff game at home against either Carroll, UM-Western or Montana Tech depending on what happens Saturday night around the Frontier.

The Skylights, who were beaten badly by Westminster last month in Havre, played a strong first half, as junior Nikki Tresch buried three 3-pointers in the first 20 minutes. Northern found itself trailing the powerful Griffins just 28-25 at intermission, and the MSU-N defense was doing a solid job against the highest scoring team in the Frontier, just as the Skylight defense did the first time they played the Griffins.

However, like in Havre, the second half was a different story Thursday night.

The Griffins went on an 11-2 run to start the second half and in the process, put some distance between itself and Northern. Eventually, the Griffins would shoot 61 percent in the second half and outscore Northern 34-16 on its way to a 21-point and home-court advantage throughout the Frontier playoffs.

Northern didn’t have a single player reach double figures, with Tresch tops in scoring with nine points. Kylee Denham and Laci Keller each scored eight points for the Skylights, while senior Laramie Schwenke was held to a tough night, scoring just six. Schwenke came into the game averaging 16 points per contest. Westminster (12-1, 19-7) got 15 points from Cydney Tibbitts and 11 from Nicole Yazzie in the win.

While the loss was tough, as Northern (7-6, 20-7) still hasn’t won in Salt Lake since the Griffins joined the Frontier over a decade ago, the Skylights still have a chance to finish third in the final Frontier standings and can finish no worse than fourth. Northern has another tall order on Saturday night when it travels to No. 13 Lewis-Clark State, but a win and a RMC loss to Montana Tech would give the Skylights third place outright. A loss and an RMC win would give the Skylights fourth, while if both teams lose Saturday, they would tie for third and the tie would be broken with head-to-head tiebreakers.

The Skylights and Warriors will tip off at 6:30 M.S.T. Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho. Northern upset the then No. 6 Warriors 55-48 last month in Havre. The game can be heard locally on 92.5 KPQX FM and viewed live on the internet at www.msun.edu/athletics.

Westminster 62, Skylights 41
