Skylights set for round three with Bulldogs
George Ferguson
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A year ago, the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team had to make a long trek to Lewiston, Idaho to play in the first round of the Frontier Conference playoffs. That didn’t go so well.

But what a difference a whole year can make.

Tonight, the Skylights are back in the first round of the league playoffs, only this time they are at home to face the UM-Western Bulldogs as the No. 3 seed in the tournament. Tip-off for tonight’s game is set for 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

Northern (7-7, 20-8) went 3-2 down the stretch, including knocking off a red-hot Rocky Mountain College team two weeks at home. That fine play allowed the Skylights to share third place and host at the very least, tonight’s first-round game.

“It says a lot about what this team has accomplished, how hard they’ve worked,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “To be at home in the playoffs, in our league, it means you’ve played well and won some big games and our kids have done that this year. We got to 20 wins and I think we’ve played well at the right times. The really dug deep, they gelled quickly and they found ways to win games and the reward is getting one more game at Armory.”

Though the Skylights were swept by Westminster and Lewis-Clark State last weekend, the top two teams in the Frontier, the scores don’t indicate how well MSU-N played on the road. Northern was within three points of the Griffins at the half and led LC State at the break on the Warriors’ Senior Night. In all, MSU-N has played at a high level the last three weeks, evident by still leading the Frontier in both scoring defense and 3-point shooting, all the while seeing scoring offense and field goal percentage rise over the course of the last five games.

Individually, the Skylights are a balanced group. Laramie Schwenke averages a team-high 15 points per game, while Jordan Bruursema kicks in 13 points and team-best six rebounds. Nikki Tresch is third in scoring at 12 points per game, but the play of Kylee Denham, Laci Keller and Kelly Millager has been key too, especially considering Northern didn’t have a lot of depth and has even less since Micah Kirkpatrick tore a knee just over a month ago.

“Going back to the Tech game in Butte, I feel we’ve played pretty well,” Mouat said. “There are certainly areas we need to be better and we will continue to work on getting better. But overall, we’ve found ways to win down the stretch and we’ve competed at a high level in the games we didn’t win. That’s nice to go into the playoffs knowing you’re playing at a pretty high level, and I think for the most part we’re doing that.”

There’s irony in how well the Skylights have played and earning a No. 3 seed in the playoffs. Because tonight’s opponent, the sixth-seeded Bulldogs (5-9, 15-12) swept the Skylights during the regular season. And they torched Northern’s top-rated defense for 80 points in both victories.
Though Western went through a stretch of losing five straight league games, the Bulldogs have certainly shown their record doesn’t reflect the kind of team they can be and the Skylights know that first hand.

“To be playing Western in the first round, a team that beat us twice, that shows how good our league has been this year,” Mouat said. After Westminster and LC, everybody was fighting each other and Western was right in that group.”

Though the Bulldogs didn’t have the season they were hoping for, they are certainly a team which could make a deep run in the playoffs. And Western has won playoff games in Havre before so being on the road won’t be a concern for the Bulldogs, who are led by a pair of super stars in 6-3 Haley Pettit and 5-10 Sammi Bignell. Pettit averaged 16 points per game and led the Frontier in rebounding at 12 per night. Bignell added 15 points per game and is versatile a player as there is in the league. Add in sharp-shooting guard Nicole Tams, who averages 12 points per game, and Western has three scorers who can go off on opponents in its fast-paced offense.

The Bulldogs like to speed the game, and in both wins over the Skylights, they overtook halftime Skylight leads by getting out and running the break. Mouat said in order for things to be different tonight, the Skylights must find ways to slow the game to some degree.

“They (Bulldogs) scored 80 on us both time, and it was about pure tempo,” Mouat said. “The tempo in both games really favored them and they will want to do the same to us this time around. And the thing is, they have scored that way on just about everybody they’ve played. They score a lot of points, they have three great scorers and a great supporting cast around those three. So our hands are full for sure.

“I think the biggest keys will be trying to get the pace of the game more in our favor,” he added. “We need to try and get them to play more the way we want to play. And when they do get out in transition, we need to answer it, because they are too good to just stop all night. We have to have answers to their transition game and we need to make sure we rebound well.”

And those are all things the Skylights are capable of doing. With the exception of Westminster and Western, Northern has knocked off every team in the Frontier this season, a season in which the Skylights were picked to finish sixth in the conference. So MSU-N has proven itself through the course of the last two months.

But now the Skylights want to keep the ride going and that starts tonight against Western.

“This team has done some remarkable things this year,” Mouat said. “They have beaten and played at a high level against some very good teams. We’ve also been through a lot of adversity with injuries and things like that. So it’s already been a great season. And it’s a great reward to get to play at least one more night at home. I know we’re looking forward to it and it should be an exciting game.”

Tonight’s game between the Skylights and Bulldogs will tip off at 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. If Northern wins, the Skylights will likely travel to LC State for the semifinals on Saturday.

**MSU-Northern vs UM-Western**
**Tonight at 7 p.m**
**MSU-Northern Fieldhouse**

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM
Streaming: www.msun.edu/athletics
Twitter: www.twitter/havredaily

**Skylights Probable Starters**
G Nikki Tresch, 5-6 Jr., 12 ppg
G Laramie Schwenke, 5-9, Sr. 15 ppg
G Kylee Denham, 5-9, Jr., 7 ppg
F Jordan Bruursema, 5-10, Jr. 13 ppg, 6 rpg
F Laci Keller, 6-0, So., 7 ppg, 5 rpg