Third time is a charm for Skylights
MSU-N women finally collar Bulldogs; Advance to Frontier semis
George Ferguson
Thursday, March 1st, 2012

Whether it’s this season, past seasons or playoff games, the UM-Western women’s basketball team has simply been a thorn in the side of the Montana State University-Northern Skylights.

On Wednesday night, inside a loud and raucous MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, the Skylights finally pulled that thorn out and threw it away. In the first round of the Frontier Conference playoffs, Northern held Western off, 67-63, advancing to Saturday night’s semifinals in the process.

The win was MSU-N’s first in the playoffs since 2006, and it was also sweet revenge because the Bulldogs, though finishing in sixth place in the Frontier, had beaten the Skylights twice during the regular season and scored 80 points against Northern’s top-rated defense in both outings.

“We talked all week about the third time being a charm,” Northern junior Kylee Denham, who scored a huge 14 points said. “So Western was the team we really wanted in the playoffs. I just think we came in confident, we went out and we played together all game. And we’re feeling really good right now.”

It took everything Northern had to finally collar the Bulldogs, because Western wouldn’t go away late.

The Skylights trailed 36-33 at halftime, but quickly overtook the Bulldogs via a 15-3 early in the second half. During the run, Nikki Tresch hit a big 3-pointer and Jordan Bruursema hit to buckets on back-to-back trips down the floor. Bruursema then answered a Roxy Thurman triple with one of her own, and the Skylights found themselves leading 51-44 with 13 minutes to go. Two minutes later, Tresch nailed another bomb, and Northern seemed to be in command, ahead 54-46 with under 12 minutes play.

“I thought we did a really good job of extending our lead, and we never gave it back,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “And we needed that execution we got during that stretch because Western wasn’t going to quit coming at us. They are so talented, so explosive offensively, and you saw that because they came back in a hurry.”

The Bulldogs did chip away at the Skylights lead, and by the time Kelsey Callaghan and Sammi Bignell hit back-to-back three’s the Skylights were leading 65-63 with only 1:28 left in the contest. Those three’s came on the heels of two great scores by Denham, who drove to the basket time and time again Wednesday night, as well as a huge three by Bruursema, who had returned to the game after going down with an ankle injury with 11 minutes left.

“I just saw things open up for me,” Denham said. I feel like we had the right plays called and I was able to get to the basket a few times.
"Kylee did a great job of giving us some instant offense tonight," Mouat said. "She was really good going right to the basket and we needed that. Jordan and Nikki’s three’s in the second half were big too. We needed all of that to hold off an explosive Western team."

But as good as Denham and the MSU-N offense was, Northern had to survive a wild final minute.

Western had point-blank looks at game-tying baskets on seven different occasions over the course of two possessions. However, the Bulldogs couldn’t get a shot to fall and the Skylights grabbed a huge board, which eventually sent Laramie Schwenke to the foul line with :03 left on the clock. In what was her final free throws inside the Armory Gymnasium, Schwenke calmly drilled both, sending the Skylights into the Frontier semifinals.

"Everybody stepped up and made big plays tonight," Mouat said. "I thought the kids played loose and played confident. Western played really well and they just kept coming at us. But we did things right offensively at crucial times, and we got just enough stops and some big rebounds. And it was fitting that our senior was on the foul line making two free throws to win the game for us. She (Schwenke) has meant so much to our program, and that was special for her to finish the game like that."

As usual, the Bulldogs and Skylights played a crazy, fast-paced first half too. But this time the roles were reversed. In both regular season games, Northern had led the Dawgs’ at the break, only to be on the losing end of the score when all was said and done. On Wednesday night, Western started strong, jumping out to a 7-2 lead. A pair of Schwenke three’s kept pace for MSU-N, and a layup by Bruursema capped off an 11-0 run for the Skylights, who led 28-23 late in the first. Western responded though, finishing the half on a 7-0 run, and taking a 36-33 lead into the locker room.

"Western came in here ready to play," Mouat said. "I think we were ready too. But we had to weather an early storm from them. Actually, we had to weather a couple of their storms tonight. They are just too good offensively and on the boards, you're not going to just hold them down for 40 minutes. But I thought we did a lot of little things better tonight. We handled their transition game much better than in the first two games, and we rebounded better. Those things were critical.

"I’m just very proud of our kids for hanging in there, and ultimately, finding a way to win one more game," he added.

Schwenke paced the Skylights with a game-high 20 points, as well as seven boards and three assists. She, along with Bruursema and Tresch accounted for the Skylights’ six three’s on the night. Bruursema was huge despite being injured. She scored 15 points and grabbed seven rebounds, while Denham added 14 points and six boards. Tresch finished with eight points. The Skylights shot a scorching 54 percent from the floor and missed only two free throws, while holding Western to just 34 percent shooting. Bignell and Thurman each scored 11, while Pettit grabbed 12 boards as Western’s season ended at 15-14.

With Wednesday night’s thrilling win over the Bulldogs, the Skylights won their 21st game of the season, and earned a date with No. 2 seed Lewis-Clark State in the semifinals. Northern will play in Lewiston, Idaho on Saturday night with a chance to go to the Frontier title game on the line.

"We just found a way tonight, and I’m proud of our kids for that," Mouat said. "That’s been our trademark this season, just finding ways to win. It’s not always pretty, and we have a lot of flaws, but we sure do play hard every single night and I love this team for that. I think they played their hearts out tonight and found a way to get themselves at least one more game."
“It’s awesome to win this one at home,” Denham added. “We wanted to win this game, four our fans, and ourselves too. It had been a long time since this program had won a playoff game and we wanted this won badly. So we’re feeling pretty good about that. But we have another game to play and we’re just going to focus on that and try and go out and win again.”

Skylights Notes: The Bulldogs didn’t just have the Skylights’ number during this regular season. They also ousted Northern from the playoffs in both 2008 and 2009, both games being played in Havre. One was in overtime and one was by one point. Schwenke has averaged 18 points per game in her last seven outings. Bruursema, Laci Keller and Kelly Millager did an outstanding job on Pettit, forcing her to go just 4-of-12 from the field. She never went to the foul line either. The Skylights split the season series with LCSC, and just played them to a 53-46 game last Saturday in Idaho.

Skylights are 21-8; Up Next: at LC State on Saturday

Skylights 67, Western 63

UM-W — Hayley Pettit 4-12 0-0 8, Sammi Bignell 5-15 0-0 11, Alecia Wilson 3-8 3-4 9, Roxy Thurman 3-8 4-4 11, Nicole Tams 2-8 5-6 10, Kassi Kerbs 1-1 0-0 3, Kaci Mattheis 1-3 1-2 3, Brittney Leibenguth 1-2 0-0 2, Jenna Banks 1-5 0-1 3, Kelsey Callaghan 1-2 0-0 3. Totals 22-64 13-17 63.

MSU-N — Nikki Tresch 3-7 0-0 8, Laramie Schwenke 6-11 6-6 20, Kylee Denham 7-9 0-1 14, Rachelle Bennett 0-0 0-0 0, Taylor Cummings 0-1 0-0 0, Jordan Bruursema 6-10 1-2 15, Kelly Millager 2-3 0-0 4, Laci Keller 3-9 0-0 6. Totals 27-50 7-9 67


Frontier Playoffs

First Round
Westminster 72, Great Falls 49
MSU-Northern 67, Western 63
Carroll 52, Rocky Mountain 42
Lewis-Clark , Montana Tech 63-51

Saturday
Westminster vs Carroll
Lewis-Clark vs MSU-Northern