George Ferguson Column: Both Northern teams should be flying out today

From the Fringe...
George Ferguson
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Without question, the Skylights are an NAIA national tournament caliber team

There is nothing but excitement, jubilation and pure joy surrounding the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team and the upcoming trip to the NAIA national tournament this week in Kansas City.

It’s as it should be.

The Lights have been on a remarkable ride and they have a chance to do even more incredible things over the coming days at the national tournament.

However, I think I would be remiss if I didn’t take a moment to remind folks that Northern should have had both its basketball teams boarding planes today, bound for national tournaments.

And that’s because the MSU-Northern women had a season worthy of a trip to Jackson, Tenn., and the NAIA women’s national tournament.

Now I might not be Joe Lunardi (ESPN college basketball bracket expert), and I’m only a novice bracketologist, but even the great Lunardi couldn’t convince me that the Skylights weren’t worthy of a national tourney bid.

It’s quite simple to me.

Northern went 21-9 on the season, finished third in probably the second-best conference NAIA Division I, rode several long winning streaks this season, knocked off two NCAA Division II teams, beat then sixth-ranked Lewis-Clark State, the eventual Frontier postseason champion, and reached the semifinals of the Frontier Conference tournament.

What I just rattled off is called a basketball resume and to me that resume says Northern was one of the 32 best teams in the country this season. But when it came to the national rankings, none of what Northern did this season seemed to matter.

Instead, the Frontier Conference rater chose to ignore the Skylights and by doing that, he actually hurt the Frontier because, while I’m sure he agrees with me that the league is probably second to just the GSAC (Golden State Athletic Conference) from top to bottom, it was his doing that the Frontier now only has two teams in this week’s big dance.

By ignoring the Skylights’ hot start to the season, and not ranking them in November and December, he basically gave MSU-N little chance to reach an at-large bid when things were all said and done.

I’ve already written how I feel about the way the NAIA conducts its business when it comes to rankings and when it comes to selecting at-large bids for the postseason, so it would be redundant for me to go back over it.

But in this season alone, that system, the system I think is so flawed, has failed both the men’s and women’s teams at Northern — just as I’m sure it has done to many others around the country.
But in the case of the Skylights, the system never gave them a chance. The system left Northern too far behind in the middle of the season to have a chance to reach Tennessee by season’s end.

And that’s a shame because one of the 32 best teams in the country doesn’t get a chance to show what it can do this week.

So while we’re all excited about the Lights and what they have in front of them this week in Kansas City, it’s important to remember that this was a great season of basketball across the board at Northern. Because the Skylights were really good too.

And just because the NAIA’s way of doing things failed them in the end, the Skylights did the opposite, they won, they won a lot and they should always be remembered that way – as winners.

So to coach Mouat, his staff and the players who poured their heart and soul into this season, thanks for a great year of women’s basketball, and thanks for, along with your male counterparts, making this truly a season of winners at Northern.