MSU-N hoops ready for home debut
Skylights, Lights host Lethbridge tonight
George Ferguson
Friday, October 26th, 2012

In the early part of a brand new season, both the Montana State University-Northern men’s and women’s basketball teams have ventured deep into Canada, and have gone a combined 7-0 in doing so.

Now, the Lights and Skylights will get to show their fans what they’re all about as they make their home debut tonight at the Armory Gymnasium. The Skylights take on the Lethbridge Pronghorns at 5 and the Lights and Horns’ will battle at 7.

For the Skylights (2-0), tonight’s game will be just their third and their first since a win over the King’s College back on Oct. 13 in Edmonton, Alberta. And Northern has a formidable foe in Lethbridge, which should be a top contender in the CIS Canada West this season, which is Canada’s highest level of college basketball.

“Lethbridge has a new coach this year and a lot of new faces,” MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said. “They also have some kids returning who we are very familiar with after playing them a couple of times last year. What really impresses me about them is their overall size. They are tall, long and athletic up front. And they have three lightning-quick guards who can really get up and down the floor, can finish at the rim and shoot the three. They definitely cause some matchup problems for us.”

The Horns’ already have a win over Great Falls this season, as well as two close losses to a very good UM-Western team. So there’s no doubt they can compete at the Frontier level.

And in the paint is where the Horns’ could have an advantage tonight, as they start a pair of 6-1 forwards in Kim Veldman and Erin Skippon. Stephanie Inman is a 5-11 wing who can play inside and out, and guard Ali Cameron leads the team in scoring.

Meanwhile, the Skylights are still in the early stages of building up. Northern returns four starters in Jordan Bruursema, Kylee Denham, Nikki Tresch and Laci Keller, but the Skylights are also mixing in new faces with the likes of Kassie Barta and Maurisha McKissic. But two bench players have also been key for Northern so far this year as sophomores Rachelle Bennett and Taylor Cummings both appear to be coming on strong. Bennett had a solid two-game road trip to Canada two weeks ago.

Still, as talented and veteran as the Skylights are, Mouat knows his team will have their hands full in their first game in the newly refurbished Armory tonight.

“Transition and rebounding are going to be huge keys for us,” Mouat said. “This team (Pronghorns) has competed with and beaten some Frontier teams, so they are very familiar with the style and level of play in our league.

“It is a great challenge for us and we’re really excited to get going again,” he added. “We’ve had a good couple of weeks to clean some things up.”

Finally home
Unlike the Skylights, the MSU-Northern Lights haven’t had much time off.

Northern played three games against CIS teams last weekend in British Columbia, only to return home on Monday night and have just three days to prepare for the Pronghorns.

Northern comes into tonight’s home debut a perfect 5-0 and ranked No. 21 in the NAIA, but head coach Shawn Huse is expecting a battle from Lethbridge.

"Lethbridge has a great deal of experience and veteran leadership,” Huse said. “They have a very balanced attack so we’ll need to play well defensively at every position, if we are going to have success.”

And the Lights are playing well defensively, as expected. Northern is holding teams to under 40 percent shooting from the floor and under 30 percent from the 3-point-line. Conversely, the Lights are averaging 11 made three’s per game, and are getting good production from a host of different players. Senior Devin Jackson is coming off two 20-point outings in Canada, while junior Jesse Vaughan scored in double figures in all three games last weekend. Savion Udeh, Nilson Santana, Roshawn West, Alfie Miller, Corbin Pearson and Will Perry are also giving MSU-N quality minutes each night right now.

But Lethbridge will present a stern test. The Pronghorns are 0-3 against Frontier Conference opponents this season, but they had chances to win games at UGF and Western, two teams which should be very tough in the Frontier this season.

Lethbridge returns 12 players from a team which went to the CIS playoffs last year and finished above .500 for the first time in league play in a long time, so expectations are high this season. Derek Waldner, a 6-7 post player is averaging a double-double this season, while 6-10 center Nikola Kovac is a load in the paint. Guards Morgan Duce and Alex Fletcher are also dangerous outside shooters.

But as much as Northern needs to be concerned with the Horns’ tonight, the Lights are still trying to build themselves. They’ve done well so far, having won some tight games on the road last weekend. But Huse said, it’s still early, there’s lots to work to do and this young and new MSU-N team is very much a work in progress.

“We are still learning about each other, working together, and improving as a brand new team,” Huse said. “At this point, for us, it's more about that than anything else. But we’re certainly excited to be playing at home for the first time.”

Tonight’s games begin with the MSU-N women taking on Lethbridge at 5. The Skylights will then have another lengthy break before hosting Culver-Stockton on Nov. 9. Tonight’s men’s game between the Lights and Pronghorns tips off at 7 at the Armory Gymnasium. The Lights are home next Saturday to face Warner-Pacific.