Skylights and Saints open Frontier play
MSU-N women christen the new Armory tonight against Carroll
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Frontier Conference basketball in November. It’s a new concept, but its’ one that becomes a reality tonight at the Armory Gymnasium.

In the biggest game of a still young season, the Montana State University-Northern Skylights will host Carroll College tonight at 6 in the Frontier opener for both schools.

The league had to have every team each play one conference game before January, due to the unbalanced schedule, with the addition of Dickinson State. And tonight, it’s Northern and Carroll, and really, to kick off the Frontier season, it doesn’t get any better than that.

The Skylights (3-2) haven’t had a lot of prep time for the Saints in terms of actual games, but Northern head coach Chris Mouat is excited about tonight’s game for a myriad of reasons, including his team playing the game on the night the new-look Armory Gymnasium is being dedicated.

“Our schedule really got disrupted by losing those games against Culver-Stockton,” Mouat said. “At that point, I felt like we were really starting to find a rhythm, and we kind of lost that. But we have had some games, against Montana and the two games that we played in Great Falls, which certainly helped.

“So we’re ready for this game,” he added. “And there’s a lot to play for. It’s a conference game and conference games are always big. It’s the first conference game and the first one in our new gym. So we need to come out and play our very best and give a great effort. Because this is going to be a very exciting night.”

The schedule has not done Northern any favors as the Skylights have had long layoffs in between games, including 12 days since they lost a tough decision to San Diego Christian in Great Falls. But Northern has prepared well for tonight’s battle with Carroll, a team the Skylights have beaten six straight times dating back to two-plus seasons now. MSU-N swept the Saints a year ago, including a 55-48 win in Havre.

Northern comes into tonight’s matchup with Nikki Tresch leading the way in scoring at nearly 16 points per game, while Jordan Bruursema, Kylee Denham, Kassie Barta, Rachelle Bennett, Taylor Cummings, Kacie McKeon and Maurisha McKissic all average between seven and five points per outing. MSU-N also gets back Laci Keller after she was injured two weeks ago in Great Falls.

“This is a really important game, as all conference games are,” Mouat said. “But it’s also important for us because we still have some really tough non-conference games ahead of us. So we want to play our very best and get off to a good start in conference play. But we also want to use this game to get better. And what better opportunity to get better than to play a great team like Carroll.”

Indeed. The Saints are a great team, and their 3-3 overall record doesn’t really indicate just how good they are. Carroll has played a difficult early schedule, which, like the Skylights, included a game against the famed Lady Griz in Missoula.
“Carroll is as quality an opponent as we’re going to face,” Mouat said. “They are really good. They have three former players from Weber State, they are talented at every position and they are healthy for the first time in a long time. They have the ability to really shoot the ball well, they can go inside to some really good post players, and they are a great rebounding team.

“They’ve got all the pieces in place,” he added. “They can go 10-deep with their bench, and they are coming in here playing really hard and with a lot of confidence. So we’re going to have our hands full with them.”

The Saints do have talent at every position, and they are very good in the paint. Joey O’Neil (6-3), Jordan Bagley (5-11) and Allison Sullivan (6-2), along with 5-11 guard Megan Patterson give the Saints a powerful scoring punch. Add to the fact that shooting guard Bailey Snelling is playing at a high level, and do everything guard Torrie Cahill is having a breakout season, and the Saints appear very hard to stop. Cahill leads the Saints in scoring at 14 points per game, while Patterson averages 12 points and six rebounds per outing.

And though Northern is the top scoring defense in the Frontier right now, allowing just 52 points per game, and Carroll only averages 57 points per night, Mouat said his team is really going to have to play at a high level on both ends of the floor in order to stay with the Saints.

“We’ve got to really focus on both ends,” Mouat said. “Carroll can really shoot it and I think the x-factor for them is Torrie Cahill. She’s finally healthy, and she’s playing phenomenal basketball right now. She can hurt you in so many ways. So we have to be really good defensively and we can’t afford assignment breakdowns. And we have to be really tough on the boards. They (Saints) get after it on the glass, and get a lot of offensive rebounds, so not allowing that will be huge for us.

“And we have to make shots,” he added. “We have to score. We want to make sure we get good shots and execute our offense, but we also have to make those shots. It’s pretty simple. For us to win, we have to shoot the ball well and score.”

And scoring is something that has come and gone for Northern this season. The Skylights do shoot a solid 37 percent from the 3-point-line, but when they’ve been off shooting the ball, they’ve struggled. And Mouat says that’s something that can’t happen tonight against a really tough Carroll team, in what should be an emotional night inside the newly-renovated Armory Gymnasium.

“They (Saints) are going to come in here ready to play,” Mouat said. “They’ve been tested against a tough schedule and they’ve played some really good teams. So we’ve got to be ready to match that intensity and emotion.

“It’s an exciting night and it’s a great way to start conference play,” he continued. “So we need to come out and make sure we play the best we can and as hard as we can for 40 minutes.”

Tonight’s Frontier Conference opener between the Skylights and Saints will tip off at 6 in the Armory Gymnasium. Northern is on the road next week with three games in Oregon.