Skylights cage Battlin’ Bears

George Ferguson
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The start to Frontier Conference play didn’t go exactly how the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team planned. A close loss to Carroll College back in November coupled with a roller coaster of a win over Dickinson State on Thursday night was not exactly how the Skylights wanted to be playing at this point in the season.

But on Friday night, Northern turned it all around.

The Skylights put together an impressive all-around performance, beating Rocky Mountain College 64-46 Friday at the Armory Gymnasium in Havre. The win pushed Northern to 2-1 in league play and a solid 10-5 overall. It also gave the Skylights a home sweep in the first full week of conference play.

“It feels good to get this win,” Northern senior Nikki Tresch said. “You need to win at home in conference and we got two important wins this weekend. This game was good because we really got going. We played really well tonight as a team. So we can take this win and keep building off of it.”

The Skylights did get rolling, especially Tresch, who scored a game-high 18 points and hit all four of her 3-pointers in the second half.

Leading 31-24 at halftime, MSU-N saw Rocky come out strong to start the second half, with Brittany Kumm tying the game at 33-33 on her third triple of the night. From there however, it was all Skylights.

Tresch nailed her first three at the 13:04 mark, which capped off a 10-0 Skylight run. She hit another bomb two minutes later, and a third at the 5:41 mark to put the Skylights ahead 54-40. Her final triple, with 4:33 remaining gave MSU-N a commanding 17-point lead and the Battlin’ Bears had no answer.

Northern’s dominance in the second half also came with outstanding inside play from Laci Keller and Maurisha McKissic, and an MSU-N defense which really turned up the intensity in the final 20 minutes.

“We had a lot of kids really step up on both ends of the floor in the second half,” MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said. “Nikki (Tresch) played really well and got us going, and I think the whole team fed off that. Everybody was making plays to help us kind of extend the lead we were able to build and that was nice to see.

“Credit Rocky’s defense,” he continued. “They put a lot of pressure on us tonight, but I was really proud of the way our kids not only handled it, but responded to it. And tonight, under duress, we were able to knock down some big shots and execute really well.”

The Skylights out-scored RMC 33-22 in the second half, and a big key was Northern’s defense. MSU-N out-rebounded a much-bigger Rocky team, and the Skylights were able to grab 13 boards on the offensive end. Northern also held the Bears to just 24 percent shooting for the game, and an abysmal 17 percent in the second half, as well as one only one made three in the final stanza.
And the 3-point stat was key considering Rocky knocked in five three’s in the first half.

RMC came out of the gates red-hot, hitting a total of five long-range bombs in the first 16 minutes. But Northern answered early with a three by Jordan Bruursema to give her team an early 9-6 edge. From there, the team’s traded leads six times until the Skylights put together an 11-3 run behind some fine play by McKissic and Bruursema in the post. And point guard Taylor Cummings grabbing rebound after rebound, and making three free throws after being fouled on a 3-point attempt at the buzzer, gave the Skylights a seven-point lead at intermission.

“Rocky started off really well,” Mouat said. “They came out smokin’. They were ready to go and hit a bunch of big three’s. They really had us on our heels early. Fortunately, we played a lot better tonight offensively, and that was big. I thought we did a great job on the boards, we shot the ball well, especially in the second half, and when you couple that with getting stops on the other end, things worked out really well for us.

“Tonight we came out and really believed in our defense,” Tresch added. “We really clamped down on defense, and that allowed us to get stops and those turned into buckets on the other end. We just got into a nice rhythm tonight and it was really good.”

Tresch was the catalyst but Northern got big contributions all the way around. Cummings finished an outstanding game with nine points, a game-high 10 rebounds, including five offensive, to go along with a 7-for-7 performance from the free-throw-line. Bruursema also scored nine points and grabbed seven boards, Kylee Denham totaled eight points and nine rebounds, while Keller and McKissic each scored seven. The Bears got 15 points from Kumm in the loss.

“It was just a really good, all-around game for the entire team,” Mouat said. “Taylor Cummings played a great game from the point guard position, and I was really proud of the way the whole team rebounded tonight. It was a solid effort all the way around, and we had a lot of kids step up big tonight against a very good Rocky team.”

As it turned out, it was a big weekend for Northern, which got on a roll at home. And that’s important because the Skylights will embark on a road trip which takes them to rival UM-Western on Thursday night and nationally-ranked Westminster on Saturday.

“We feel like we already let one slip away when we lost to Carroll,” Mouat said. “And we dodged a big bullet against Dickinson. And tonight, the kids came out very focused. This weekend was about getting to 2-1 in the conference and the kids made sure that happened tonight. I’m really proud of them for coming out and playing so well and being so focused. They wanted to get two wins this weekend and they did that.”

The Skylights will be back at home Jan. 18-19 when they face Montana Tech and Lewis-Clark State.

**Skylights are 2-1 in the Frontier, 10-5 overall; Next Up: at Western Thursday**

**Skylights 64, Rocky Mountain 46**

RMC – Brittany Myers 3-8 0-0 7, Haleigh Crnkovich 1-3 0-0 2, Brittany Kumm 4-14 4-4 15, Aynslee Stuart 2-5 2-4 7, Kalli McCloskey 0-9 2-2 2, Taylor Hurst 1-6 1-2 4, Kelsey George 0-0 3-4 3, Marisa Morais 2-6 2-2 6. Totals: 13-54 14-18 46.
MSU-N – Jordan Bruursema 4-11 0-0 9, Laci Keller 3-9 1-4 7, Nikki Tresch 6-9 2-2 18, Rachelle Bennett 0-1 0-0 0, Taylor Cummings 1-3 7-7 9, Kassie Barta 1-2 2-2 5, Kacie McKeon 0-2 0-0 0, Kylee Denham 2-12 4-4 8, Leah Olson 0-0 0-0 0, Macey Cox 0-0 1-2 1, Maurisha McKissic 3-3 1-2 7, Michaela Howe-Cobb 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 20-52 18-23 64.

Halftime: Northern 28-21. 3-point field goals: MSU-N 6-16 (Bruursema 1, Tresch 4, Barta 1), RMC 6-23 (Myers 1, Kumm 3, Stuart 1, Hurst 1). Rebounds: MSU-N 40 (Cummings 10, Denham 9, Bruursema 7), RMC 34 (Hurst 6). Fouls: MSU-N 13, RMC 17. Fouled out: None.