Big Nights in the Armory: Skylights face Diggers', Warriors
George Ferguson
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Frontier Conference women’s basketball is too good for teams to look too far ahead, or to dwell on the past. In order to be successful, it’s all about living in the present.

That’s what the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team will do this weekend as the Skylights (2-3, 10-7) host the Montana Tech Orediggers tonight at 6 inside the Armory Gymnasium, and the Lewis-Clark State Warriors Saturday evening.

MSU-N certainly can’t afford to dwell on what happened on the road last weekend. With two very good teams coming to Havre, the Skylight have to quickly put two blowout losses to UM-Western and Westminster College behind them, and they have to do it in a hurry.

“I think that falls on leadership,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “And our seniors play a big part in that leadership role. We’ve worked very hard to learn from last weekend and move forward, and we’ll rely heavily on our senior leadership this weekend, and the rest of the kids will rally around them. It’s a long season, there is a lot of Frontier Conference basketball left, and as long as we learned from last weekend, we’ll be fine.”

Despite giving up over 72 and 64 points last weekend, the Skylights can still lean on one of the best defenses in the country against two powerful opponents this weekend. Northern allows only 54 points per game, and the Skylights don’t allow teams to shoot the three well against them. On the other end however, MSU-N must find more offense on a consistent basis. The Skylights can be explosive and they are one of the top 3-point shooting team’s in the league. But at other times, they struggle to get going offensively.

Individually, Nikki Tresch leads the way. The senior guard is averaging 15 points per game, she shoots better than 47 percent from three and is among the NAIA leaders in free-throw shooting at better than 87 percent. Seniors Jordan Bruursema and Kylee Denham are also playing well. Bruursema averages 11 points and six rebounds, while Denham and Laci Keller combine to score 14 points and grab 13 rebounds per night.

And consistency on offense will be every bit as crucial as the Skylights’ trademark defense, especially tonight against the Orediggers. Tech (3-2, 10-7) is on a roll right now, and the Diggers’ are perhaps as talented as any team in the Frontier. They average 66 points per outing and give up just 57, so tonight’s game could be decided on which team is better on the offensive end, as well as which team takes better care of the ball.

Individually, the Orediggers have weapons. Sophomore guard Mandy Machinal is second in the league in scoring at 16 points per game, while forwards Danielle Devenny (6-0) and Kelsey DeWit (6-3) are both fierce in the interior and have given the Skylights plenty of trouble the past two seasons. Add in point guard Brooke Pokorny and a host of talented role players and the Diggers’ will certainly be tough to stop tonight.
“They (Orediggers) have a lot of depth and talent,” Mouat said. “It seems as though they have a bunch of different kids who can get them double figures on a given night. Mandy Machinal is even better this season and she was great last year. She’s a real handful. Kelsey DeWit is someone we’ve really struggled to handle in the past, and the x-factor for them this season has been the improved play of Laina Kalumbi. She’s really playing well for them and is one of the most athletic players in our league.

“So they have all the pieces in place,” Mouat said. “They have strong, physical post play, they defend and rebound, they have quick guards who can shoot it, and they have veteran leadership. They are the real deal and we’re going to have to play at a very high level against them.”

After the battle with Tech tonight, the Skylights will turn their attention to another bitter rival in the form of the Lewis-Clark State Warriors (1-4, 4-15). It’s been a rebuilding year for LCSC, a team which has long dominated the Frontier Conference. The Warriors are near the bottom of the Frontier and have lost more games this season than they lost in the past two combined.

And it’s no wonder the Warriors have struggled. LCSC graduated three all-conference post players a year ago, as well as two-time Frontier scoring champion Jasmine Stohr. And while the new-look LCSC team has struggled to find its way so far, Mouat and the Skylights don’t see it that way.

“We're not fooled by their record,” Mouat said of the Warriors. “This hasn’t been a typical year for them, but they are going to turn the corner sooner than later. They have too much talent, they have quality kids and they are too well coached not to. They are still big and physical and they rebound like all the LC teams of the past. They have good scorers and they have kids like Brittany Neibergall, who is as tough as they come.

“Night in and night out, anybody can beat anybody in this league,” Mouat added. “And LC has the talent, the coaching and the tradition to do that. So we’re not looking at their record or anything like that. We’re prepared to have our hands full with them just like we always do.”

Neibergall (5-3) is the catalyst for LCSC. She’s a talented and super-quick point guard who can flat-out shoot the ball. Returnees Annie Kane (5-5) and Tannis Fuller (5-10) also combine to score 23 points per game, and once again, the Warriors are one of the better rebounding teams in the Frontier.

“They (Warriors) are going to present a tremendous challenge,” Mouat said. “And obviously so is Montana Tech. These two games are going to be tough for us, and hopefully, we'll get back to doing the things we do well. We have to rebound, we have to not turn the ball over as much and we have to handle defensive pressure. Those things are critical for us.

“We’re excited to be back at home, playing in front of our great fans,” he continued. “And we’re excited to get back on the floor, put those last couple games behind us and move forward.”

Tonight’s game between Northern and Montana Tech begins at 6 inside the Armory Gymnasium. It’s a “Blackout” night at Northern so all fans are asked to wear black. Saturday night’s game between the Skylights and Warriors is a “Whiteout”, and also tips off at 6 p.m.

**Skylights (2-3, 10-7) vs Tech (3-2, 10-7) tonight at 6 p.m.; vs LC State (1-4, 4-14) Saturday at 6 p.m.**

**Radio:** 92.5 KPQX FM

**Internet:** msun.edu/athletics

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**Skylights Probable Starters**
G Nikki Tresh, 5-5, Sr.
G Taylor Cummings, 5-5, So.
G Kylee Denham, 5-7, Sr.
F Jordan Bruursema, 6-0, Sr.
F Laci Keller, 6-1, Jr.