Skylights shut down Tech
MSU-N’s wild weekend in the Armory ends in heartbreak to LC State

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It’s been a roller coaster type of season for the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team. And the ride got crazier this weekend at the Armory Gymnasium.

The Skylights put on a dominating second-half performance to beat Montana Tech 54-41 Friday night, then had a victory snatched away from them by the Lewis-Clark State Warriors in a double-overtime classic on Saturday night. The home split left Northern at 3-4 in the Frontier Conference and tied for fourth place in the league standings.

And though MSU-N won by double-digits Friday against the Orediggers, the game itself was an emotional ride as well. The Skylights had to shake off a 15-point first half performance in which they trailed Tech 22-17 and shot just 20 percent from the floor.

However, a spark off the bench by true freshman Kacie McKeon, as well as Rachelle Bennett and Maurisha McKissic helped the Skylights storm their way back.

“The comeback really started with our defense,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “Tech is a very good offensive team and can be even great at times. So to hold them to just 19 points in the second half, that shows we did some things right on defense tonight. And once again, our bench came in ready to play. They really gave us a spark. Maurisha (McKissic) came in and presented Tech with a matchup problem, and Kacie (McKeon) and Rachelle (Bennett) came on and gave us some instant offense. And those are kinds of things we needed.”

McKissic scored six points in the first six minutes of the second stanza, helping Northern take the lead at 28-26. From there, the lead would change hands five more times until senior Jordan Bruursema capped off a scoring-spurt of her own with a nifty runner in the lane which put the Skylights ahead 34-32 before Tech tied it one more time on a Kelsey DeWit lay-in.

Knotted at 34-34 with 8:45 to go, it looked like the game was going to go down the final possession, just as it has the last two year’s when Northern and Tech met in Havre. However, McKeon and the Skylights had other ideas.

McKeon bombed in a go-ahead 3-pointer and followed a Bennett score with her second triple of the night. Bennett scored again right after that and all of a sudden, the Skylights were out in front 44-34 with under four minutes to go. MSU-N would eventually extend its lead as McKeon made on more shot and Kylee Denham wound up capping a 16-2 run with a layup of her own. From there, Nikki Tresch made six free throws to put the game away.
McKeon finished the game with eight points, all coming in three-minute span. Bennett added four during that stretch and McKissic scored six of her eight points in the final stanza.

“It feels good to come off the bench and help get us going,” McKeon, a Butte native said. “We needed some momentum at that point in time and it feels really good to contribute to that.

“I think everything just started to click for us,” she added. “We were moving the ball a lot better and everyone was finding the open shooter. We just really played together and really started clicking on offense.”

And the Skylights needed to start clicking after a dismal first half on offense against the Orediggers. MSU-N fell behind 17-8 after Tech went on a 7-0 run, and though the Skylights pieced together a 7-0 run of their own late in the half, the Orediggers finished with two buckets to lead by seven at the half. On one hand, Northern was happy about giving up just 22 points to one of the top scoring team’s in the Frontier, but the offensive struggles Friday night seemed to carry over from last weekend’s difficulties on the road.

“Despite the fact I thought we came out and played really well on defense,” Mouat said. “We seemed to have a bit of a hangover from last weekend offensively, and that can happen. We did not shoot the ball well at all in the first half. We were missing point-blank shots and really open looks. We just shot the ball very poorly.

“So I’m really proud of our kids for what they did in the second half,” he added. “Lesser team’s could have folded right there with how we were struggling. But our kids kept after it. They came out and got going in the second half and that was really nice to see.

“He (Mouat) just told us to go out and play our game in the second half,” McKeon added. “We knew we just needed to go out there and give it our all. We knew what we had to do, and we were able to do it in the second half.”

The Skylights did indeed dominate the final 20 minutes. MSU-N held Tech to 25 percent shooting, one three and a 28 percent shooting for the game. The Skylights also held the Diggers’ to their lowest scoring total of the season, despite 18 points and 10 rebounds from DeWit. Tech’s other two stars, Mandy Machinal and Danielle Devenny were averaging a combined 25 points per night, but together, they scored just nine.

On the other end, Bruursema finished with a 13-point, 12-rebound double-double, while Tresch added 11 and Denham scored six to go along with the tremendous bench play. MSU-N also crushed Tech on the boards, 47-33, as McKissic added eight rebounds and Denham had six.

“Obviously, Kacie’s play gave us a really big spark, and that was nice to see,” Mouat said. “I also thought Jordan Bruursema really showed really led us tonight. She took the game over for a stretch and she ended up having a huge night.
“But overall, I’m just really proud of this team for their effort and for not going away after a really rough first half,” he continued. “They really hung in there and found ways to get going. And once we finally got the offense going, we were able to run away a little with how well we played on defense and how well we rebounded the basketball. So I’m just really proud of the total team effort tonight.”

Warrior Heartbreak

If the Skylights walked off the floor on Friday night feeling the highest of high’s, the end to Saturday night’s battle with Lewis-Clark State was the lowest of lows. The Warriors waged a thrilling and fierce battle with Northern which wound up needing 10 extra minutes before LC State finally prevailed, 78-76 in double overtime.

In a second half which saw the lead change 14 different times, the Skylights had to overcome a scary final few seconds just to get the game to overtime. Laci Keller put MSU-N ahead 58-57 with :20 left only to see LCSC’s Kelli Rice bury a 3-pointer in the corner to lift the Warriors to a 60-58 lead. After a timeout, Northern had just :05 to respond, and the Skylights did as Kylee Denham executed a perfect out-of-bounds play, throwing the ball over the top to a wide-open Jordan Bruursema for a layup, leaving the game tied at 60-60 after Annie Kane missed a desperation heave.

Almost the same scenario took place in the first overtime. Northern took a 67-66 lead in a huge 3-pointer by Nikki Tresch, but Rice answered with another cold-blooded triple of her own, leaving the Skylights trailing 69-67 with :16 left. But MSU-N refused to back down and Keller made a layup with :05 to play tying the game at 69-69 and sending it into a second extra frame.

In the second overtime, Kassie Barta and Taylor Cummings hit huge shots to keep the Skylights in the game, but trailing 77-75 with under two minutes to go, MSU-N would miss four critical foul shots, as well as a couple of opportunities of off offensive rebounds, and that left LCSC leading 78-76 with only a few ticks left. Northern tried a game-winning shot but it was off the mark, and the Warriors escaped with the thrilling victory, while the Skylights were left with a gut-wrenching defeat.

“We had some untimely turnovers and some missed free throws down the stretch and in both overtime, and that led to making it a crazy game at the end,” MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said. “It hurts that we weren’t able to find away to finish it off, but at the same time, I’m so proud of the way our kids responded tonight, as did LC. It was a great game and we went punch-for-punch with them, and they were the last one’s standing.

“I think we grew up a lot tonight,” LCSC head coach Brian Orr added. “We’re a young team, we’re playing without one key player, and we’ve been through some tough games this season. But I’m just really proud of the way our kids battled every possession tonight. Northern is a very good team, I think we’re a very good team, and it was a battle all night long, and I’m just happy our kids were able to get out of here with a win.”

The game was indeed a battle from the opening tip.

Bruursema and Nikki Tresh drilled back-to-back three’s to get the Skylights off and running, while Barta and McKeon added trey’s which would eventually give Northern a solid 24-12 first-half lead. However, LCSC, even without star guard Brittany Niebergall, showed it was going to be a fight to the end. Kane scored eight points in the final two minutes of the half, and the Warriors closed on a 14-4 run to cut MSU-N’s lead to 31-28 at halftime.

“I thought we got off to a great start,” Mouat said. “We knew after watching how well LC played at Great Falls last night (Friday) that we were going to have our hands full. And I thought we responded well to that. We came out and shot the ball really well and we played good defense again for much of the first half. Annie Kane is a tremendous player though and her ability to score the ball really hurt us at the end of the first half.”

The Warriors took the lead early in the second half on another big shot by Kane. From there however, the game was a toss-up the rest of the way. Tresch hit three big triples in the second half, while Barta poured
in big shots, as did Bruursema and Keller. And when Tresch nailed her final three in regulation, the Skylights were in front again 52-50 with under six minutes left. But Northern had trouble answering the monstrous efforts of Kane and LC’s 6-2 center Ornela Bacchini, who wound up scoring a game-high 28 points. And Rice’s three near the end of the game set up the wild finish, which included Bruursema fouling out early in the first OT.

“I’m really happy for Kelli Rice,” Orr said. “She’s a really good shooter who’s been struggling lately. But we said we needed someone to step up big tonight and she did that. It was a great game to be a part of and it turned out to be a really good weekend for us.”

Tresch hit four three’s and led the Skylights with 20 points. Barta added three trey’s and 11 points off the bench, while Keller had a double-double with 16 points and 11 boards. Bruursema added 13 points and Cummings scored six as Northern dropped to 11-8 overall.

“They (Warriors) hurt us on the block and on the perimeter at different times,” Mouat said. “Credit Kelli Rice for stepping up and making some huge shots tonight. I was really proud of our kids for giving a great effort and matching a great effort by LC. We did almost enough to win, but in the end, the wrong things went wrong for us at the wrong time. So now we’ll just have to look at the positives we can take away from this and keep moving forward.”

The Skylights are back in action Thursday night when they travel to Great Falls for a matchup with struggling UGF. Northern then travels to Lewiston, Idaho Saturday for a rematch with the Warriors. The Skylights return home Feb. 1 to face the Great Falls Argos.

Skylights are 3-4 in the Frontier, 11-8 overall; Next Up: At Great Falls Thursday

Skylights 54, Montana Tech 41

MT – Kelsey DeWit 8-13 2-2 18, Lisa Laslovich 0-7 0-0 0, Brooke Pokorny 3-14 0-0 7, Danielle Devenny 0-7 0-0 0, Mandy Machinal 4-15 0-0 9, Shaye Murphy 3-6 0-0 7. Totals: 18-63 3-3 41.

MSU-N – Jordan Bruursema 5-8 3-4 13, Laci Keller 2-6 0-0 4, Nikki Tresch 2-8 7-8 11, Taylor Cummings 0-2 0-0 0, Kylee Denham 3-7 0-0 6, Kassie Barta 0-3 0-0 0, Kacie McKeon 3-5 0-2 8, Rachelle Bennett 2-4 0-0 4, Maurisha McKissic 4-11 0-0 8, Michaela Howe-Cobb 0-3 0-0 0. Totals: 21-57 10-15 54.

Halftime: Tech 22-15. 3-point field goals: MSU-N 2-12 (McKeon 2), MT 2-16 (Pokorny 1, Murphy 1). Rebounds: MSU-N 47 (Bruursema 12, McKissic 8), MT 33 (DeWit 10). Fouls: MSU-N 8, MT 14. Fouled out: None.

LC State 78, Skylights 76 2OT

LCSC – Loree Hill 1-10 2-2 4, Tanis Fuller 6-16 4-4 16, Ornella Bacchini 11-14 6-6 28, Shelby Barnes 1-1 0-0 2, Annie Kane 6-16 7-8 19, Kelli Rice 2-4 0-0 6, Laurenna Plourd 1-1 0-0 2, Mckenzie Heaslet 0-3 1-2 1. Totals: 28-65 19-25 78.

MSU-N – Jordan Bruursema 4-9 4-4 13, Laci Keller 7-13 2-3 16, Nikki Tresch 6-15 4-8 20, Taylor Cummings 3-5 0-0 7, Kylee Denham 0-6 0-4 0, Kassie Barta 4-9 0-0 11, Kacie McKeon 1-5 0-0 3, Rachelle Bennett 1-2 4-5 6, Michaela Howe-Cobb 0-1 0-0 0. Totals: 26-65 14-24 76.