Showdown in Great Falls: Skylights hope to hold UGF down

George Ferguson
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It was quite the weekend for the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team. An emotionally-charged win over Montana Tech last Friday and a devastating, double-overtime loss to Lewis-Clark State Saturday.

Now, the Skylights turn around and do it all over again – only this time they’re on the road.

Tonight, Northern (3-4, 11-8) is in Great Falls to battle the UGF Argos at 5:30. MSU-N also has a rematch with LC State Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho.

And while it’s a short turnaround for the Skylights, MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat is hoping his team learned plenty from last weekend’s home games.

“We have to take a lot away from last weekend, especially Saturday night,” Mouat said. “We have to learn from the things that hurt us. But at the same time, we need to take the positives and keep building on them. There’s a lot of season left.”

Tonight’s game between the Skylights and Argos is a big one. Northern is battling to stay in the Frontier Conference playoff hunt, while the Argos (1-6, 11-10) are trying to keep their head above water.

A month ago, UGF was closing in on a national ranking and 1-0 in the Frontier. But now the Argos have lost six straight and would love nothing more than to start a turnaround against their biggest rival (MSU-N). And though UGF is on a major skid, the Skylights aren’t preparing for a team that is struggling. Instead, Mouat sees the Argos as an athletic, high-scoring squad with plenty of size, playing on their home floor.

“They (Argos) two big’s really present some challenges for us,” Mouat said. “The way they get after it on the offensive boards really jumps out at me. But then again, they can hurt you from the perimiter too. They have five guards who on any given night, can shoot it really well from the three.

“They (Argos) have been having a tough stretch lately, but they are a talented and dangerous team,” he continued. “They can hurt you in a lot of different ways and they can score. So we certainly will have to be on our toes and we can’t fall asleep defensively.”

UGF is paced by the inside play of Kindra Jones (6-3) and Lyndsey Abramason (6-2), who average a combined 22 points and 16 boards. Guard Erin Legel (5-5) averages a team-high 13 points, while fellow guards Taylor Stratten (5-8), Donica Chrest (5-4) and Sydnee Burke (5-5) can all shoot and drive to the basket.

MSU-N will counter with Nikki Tresch, who is averaging 15 points per game, which is third-best in the Frontier. Jordan Bruursema adds 11 points and seven boards per game, while Laci Keller scores eight per night and is coming off a huge double-double against LCSC.
And speaking of the Warriors, Northern will get a chance to atone for last Saturday’s loss in what was an epic game. The Warriors (3-4, 6-15) upended the Skylights 78-76 in two OT’s, and the game was a back-and-forth affair nearly the whole way.

In that instant classic, LCSC 6-2 center Onerla Bacchini scored 28 points, and the Skylights will have to do a better job against her this Saturday. But, for as tight as the game was, and for how soon the two team’s will meet again, Mouat says it’s a simple matter of who will play better.

“It’s a real quick turnaround playing them (Warriors) again,” Mouat said. “Our kids are certainly going to have to put what happened last Saturday behind them. We need to learn from that game, but we can’t dwell on it either.

“We have to take the good we did away from that game, and correct the things that hurt us,” he added. “That won’t be easy playing at their place. But because of the short turnaround, neither team is really going to be any different. So what it really comes down to is who plays the best that night.”

Tonight’s game between the Skylights and Argos tips off at 5:30 at the McLaughlin Center in Great Falls. Northern’s rematch with Lewis-Clark State is set for 6:30 p.m. Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho. Both games can be viewed by going to www.msun.edu/athletics. The Skylights return home to face UGF Feb. 1.