Big Win: Skylights best UGF
George Ferguson
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It’s never easy to rebound from a loss like the one the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team suffered last Saturday night in Havre. And for a moment Thursday night, it looked like the Skylights weren’t going to.

But an 18-1 first-half run, two huge 3-pointers and some clutch free-throw shooting down the stretch will usually cure what ails a team. And that’s exactly what the Skylights did in an impressive 65-62 win over the University of Great Falls Argos Thursday night inside UGF’s McLaughlin Center.

Northern started the game flat, and quickly fell behind by as many as 11 points in the first half. But for the second time in three games, freshman guard Kacie McKeon and reserve forward Maurisha McKissic came in and gave the Skylights a much-needed lift, and the result was a tidal-wave of momentum which seemed to carry the Skylights for much of the contest.

“I credit our bench for the spark in the first half,” MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said. “UGF came out and played great. They jumped on us right away. But then Maurisha inside, Kacie’s scoring and some tough plays by Rachelle Bennett really gave us the lift we needed. And once that happened, the starters got on track too, and were able to build a nice little lead.”

Trailing by eight points with less than six minutes remaining the first half, the Skylights got a much-needed 3-pointer from Nikki Tresch and tough jumpers from Jordan Bruursema to shave the UGF lead a little more. Then, in the final four minutes, McKeon and McKissic exploded to out-score the Argos 16-0 by themselves. McKeon drilled to three’s in the closing minutes of the half, and the Skylights wound up ripping off an 18-1 run and leading the Argos 34-29 at halftime.

“With the start to the game, we felt fortunate to be up five at halftime,” Mouat said. “UGF played well. They were beating us in transition and on the boards. But once we got some shots to go in, and we got some stops on defense, things turned around for us.”

“The game didn’t start out the way we wanted,” MSU-N senior Kylee Denham, who came up big in the second half, said. “But we stayed focused and we stayed together, and we played through it. We played really hard on defense and we stuck together, which is something we talk about doing in every huddle. We play together and that was a big key for us tonight.”

Bruursema hit a couple of jumpers to start the second half, extending Northern’s run to 23-3 over a nine-minute stretch. But, UGF, which came in on a six-game losing streak, wasn’t going quietly into the night, especially with a large home crowd behind the Argos.

MSU-N led 54-44 with under 10 minutes to play, before the Argos made a final push. UGF cut the lead down to four points with under four minutes to go, but Denham and Kassie Barta each stepped up and hit big three’s while Bruursema continued to knock down key mid-range shots.
Still, when UGF’s Erin Legel, who poured in a game-high 23 points, drove the lane and scored with :44 left, the Skylights found themselves ahead 63-62 and facing a crossroads in their season. But Denham made sure MSU-N found the high road as she calmly knocked down two foul shots which endured UGF would have to take a couple of last-season three’s to try and force overtime. And neither attempt fell, as the Skylights fought off the Argos and turned last Saturday’s double-overtime heartbreaker against Lewis-Clark State into some Thursday night redemption.

“We needed this win,” Denham said. “We were really at a turning point in our season tonight and we knew we could either make something out of last weekend and have it motivate us, or we could let it really hurt us going forward. We came in here wanting this game badly, and we really played together and won for each other tonight.”

Bruursema led four Skylights in double figures with 14 points and eight rebounds, while Tresch finished with 13 and McKeon hit three trey’s and scored 12 off the bench. McKissic added 10 points off the bench, while Denham added nine and Laci Keller grabbed seven boards. UGF, which has now lost seven straight and is 1-7 in the Frontier played well, but the stingy Northern defense held the Argos to just 35 percent shooting and one three for the night.

“We had a lot of kids really step up tonight,” Mouat said. “Jordan Bruursema made some big shots and really helped us keep our head above water for a while there. And obviously, Kylee Denham made a huge three and some clutch free throws down the stretch and I’m really happy for her and proud of her for coming through. She was huge for us tonight. I just thought everybody really played hard, was focused tonight and it was a great all-around effort.

“I was also really proud of the kids for clamping down on defense,” he added. “We got stops, big stops when we needed them down the stretch. UGF is a dangerous offensive team, but defensively, I thought we made it pretty tough on them once we got the lead. Our kids just played really hard tonight and I’m proud of them for coming down here and responding to some adversity tonight.”

The win got Northern back to .500 in league play at 4-4 and pushed its overall record to 12-8 heading into Saturday’s rematch with the Warriors in Lewiston, Idaho. LCSC beat the Skylights 78-78 in double overtime last Saturday in Havre.

“It feels good to come down here and play well, and get a win we really needed,” Denham said. “We wanted to win this game badly and it feels good to come down here and get the job done.”

The Skylights will be back in Havre Feb. 1 for a rematch with the Argos.

**Skylights 65, UGF 62**

**MSU-N** — Jordan Bruursema 7-14 0-1 14, Maurisha McKissic 4-4 2-2 10, Nikki Tresch 4-12 4-7 13, Taylor Cummings 0-4 4-4 4, Kylee Denham 1-2 6-10 9, Kassie Barta 1-2 0-0 3, Kacie McKeon 3-7 3-4 12, Rachelle Bennett 0-1 0-0 0, Laci Keller 0-2 0-0 0. Totals 20-48 19-28 65

**UGF** — Mary Willmore 1-2 0-0 2, Kindra Jones 3-5 3-7 9, Erin Legel 6-14 11-11 23, Mackenzie Owens 0-7 0-0 0, Taylor Statton 4-10 1-2 10, Darah Huertas-Vining 1-4 0-0 2, Ashley Crippen 0-1 0-0 0, Donica Chrest 0-1 0-0 0, Lindsey Abramson 6-14 4-5 16. Totals 21-58 19-25 62.