George Ferguson Column: Skylights showing plenty of toughness and heart of late

From the Fringe...
George Ferguson
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It’s truly been an interesting season for the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team.

And by no means has it been easy. In fact, MSU-N’s road to where it is now has been down right difficult.

The Skylights started the year having to re-load after the loss of all-everything guard Laramie Schwenke, while they also lost two regular season non-conference games early because a team decided they didn’t want to drive all the way to Montana.

In fact, Northern’s non-conference season was a bit of a test in patience as it seemed like the Skylights would play one or two games, then have 10-15 days off before we would hear from them again. A schedule with so many interruptions made it pretty tough for Northern to adequately prepare for the rigors of the Frontier Conference season.

Then there’s the injuries.

Northern has lost senior Kylee Denham to injury several different times this season, and junior starting forward Laci Keller has missed significant time as well, as has junior forward Maurisha McKissic.

But with so much adversity this season, the Skylights, led by talented head coach Chris Mouat, have been able to maintain. They’ve managed to keep themselves in the thick of the Frontier Conference race as the second half of the season begins this weekend.

And a big reason why Northern is still among the top half of the league standings is what the Skylights were able to achieve on last weekend’s road trip.

First up was a daunting test in Great Falls last Thursday night. Northern was coming off a bitter double-overtime home loss to Lewis-Clark State just five days prior, and the host Argos were like a cougar caught in a trap. UGF was one a six-game slide and wanted desperately to snap that streak against the Skylights, the Argos biggest rival.

And for a time in Great Falls, the Skylights looked as though they were going to falter. UGF built an early double-digit lead and MSU-N seemed to have no answer on offense. But down by 12 points midway through the first half, the Skylights decided they’d had enough, and they collectively decided to take their season in a different direction.

Freshman Kacie McKeon helped spark Northern on an 18-2 run, which ultimately helped the Skylights to a narrow 63-60 victory in Great Falls.

The comeback win in Great Falls might just turn out to be a watershed moment in Northern’s season, because if the Skylights hadn’t of come back to win that game, I’m not certain what would have happened two days later in Lewistown, Idaho, or beyond.
“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,” Denham said after the win over UGF. “We came in here wanting this game badly, and we really played together and won for each other tonight.”

And the victory seemed to ignite Northern because two night’s later, the Skylights got their revenge on LC State. MSU-N went into Lewiston and won for the first time since 1997, a span of 16 games. The victory gave Northern three victories in its last four league games and catapulted them back up the Frontier standings.

The victory at LCSC, a team which stunned the Skylights seven days earlier in Havre, was also huge because it, coupled with last Thursday’s win over UGF, showed Northern has some moxie. It showed the Skylights have some toughness and some willingness to fight with their backs against the wall.

In basketball, words like heart, toughness and character get thrown around a lot, but until a team actually goes out on the court and displays it in adverse situations, it’s really just lip service.

This past weekend, on the road, in two difficult environments, the Northern women certainly put on a display of heart, toughness and character. Northern was indeed at a crossroads in its season, and the Skylights certainly chose the right direction by beating a pair of big rivals on the road.

And while I was impressed, I wasn’t all that surprised. Those are the kinds of things I’ve come to expect from a Chris Mouat coached team. When the game is on the line, when the going gets tough, Mouat usually pushes the right buttons, and his team’s always seem to respond. I’ve covered the Skylights now since Mouat’s first year in Havre, and what his team accomplished this past weekend on the road is what his team’s have always done over the years – which is rise to the occasion under high-pressure circumstances.

Now, Mouat will be the first to tell you that, while he was certainly proud of his team’s results this past weekend, there’s a lot of season left, and he’s right. But had the Skylights gone in a different direction on their last two road games, many of those games remaining might not have mattered as much.

However, Northern rose to the challenge on the road and the Skylights are in the hunt. They may not be able to catch national powerhouse Westminster for the league title, but then again, no one else in the Frontier will either. But, thanks to last weekend’s road sweep, thanks to so much toughness and grit by this group of Skylights, Northern has a chance to make a bold move in the Frontier and make this season yet another shining one.

In basketball, being tough and giving yourself a chance is paramount. And that’s exactly what the Skylights were last weekend, and that’s exactly what they gave themselves. So stay tuned, because these Skylights may just have the rest of the Frontier right where they want it right now.