Skylights race by Argos
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Just a little over a week ago, the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team used a second-half surge to get past the University of Great Falls Argos in a critical Frontier Conference road win.

And while the venue switched from Great Falls’ McLaughlin Center to the famed Armory Gymnasium in Havre, the story remained the same.

Northern out-scored UGF 47-41 in a fast-paced second half to turn away the Argos 73-67 Friday night in Havre, improving to 6-4 in the Frontier. The Skylights also made it a season sweep of their rival from the south, while also maintaining their third-place position in the conference standings.

“I was really proud of the way we started the second half,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “We honestly felt very fortunate to be tied at halftime, considering how poorly we shot the ball in the first half. But we came out and executed our offense really well in that first 10 minutes of the second half. And we got some stops on defense, so we were able to build a nice lead.

“We didn’t finish the way we would have liked,” he continued. “We let them (Argos) get back into it with missed free throws and turnovers and that’s unacceptable. We know we have to do better than that to consistently win in this league. Fortunately, we played well enough early in the second half and the lead was big enough that we didn’t totally let it get away from us.”

While MSU-N didn’t play as well as it would of liked for stretches of the first half, as well as at the end of the game, the Skylights caught fire when they needed to most.

Nikki Tresch broke a 26-26 halftime tie with a 3-pointer to start the second stanza. And that was just the start of what turned out to be a torrid second half by both teams. Kylee Denham also drilled a triple which put MSU-N up five points with 17 minutes to play, but Northern did most of its damage on a 10-2 run, which got jump-started by a Kacie McKeon three. By the time the run ended with a Laci Keller layup, the Skylights were in front 60-44, and another 9-0 spurt minutes later, which included another three by Tresch, gave MSU-N a 67-48 lead with four minutes to play.

From there, the game turned into a foul fest as the Skylights and Argos went to the free-throw-line a combined 15 times in the final three minutes. And though UGF chopped the Skylights’ lead in half, Northern was able to send the Argos to their ninth straight loss.

“We just came out hot in the second half,” MSU-N senior Jordan Bruursema said. “At halftime, we felt like we weren’t playing as well as we had hoped, but we came together and looked at the game like it was 0-0. We just started over and for a good stretch in the second half, we played really well. I think that shows the maturity of this team, because we’ve been able to put together some good stretches even when we
weren’t playing as well as we would have liked. And we did that tonight. I thought our leaders really stepped up.”

Northern did need to turn things around, much in the same fashion it did last week when the Skylights fell behind UGF by 12 points in the first half.

Friday night, the first 20 minutes was more of a defensive battle, with Taylor Cummings making a 3-pointer to give the Skylights an early 10-2 lead. But two triples by Sydnee Burke and another by Taylor Statton helped UGF stay close, and though Cummings nailed another three just before halftime, the Argos managed to catch the Skylights and even things up at intermission.

“The game had a lot of ups and downs to it,” Mouat said. “The first half, we just didn’t shoot it well. We missed wide open looks and wide open layups. And credit UGF. They made some big shots early and they did a great job to battle back at the end of the game. Fortunately, we played well in that big stretch in the second half, and I’m proud of our kids for responding to some adversity again tonight. Because things were not clicking for us in the first half.”

While things didn’t click for MSU-N in the first half, they sure did in the second. In the final 20 minutes, the Skylights shot a blistering 60 percent, which offset an abysmal 17 percent in the first half. And though they were out-rebounded by seven boards, Northern did a stellar job on the glass, totaling 28 with Keller grabbing nine, Denham eight and Bruursema seven.

Bruursema also paced a balanced MSU-N with 16 points, including going 12-of-14 from the charity stripe. She also had four assists, two steals and one blocked shot. Tresch and Keller added 15 points each, while Denham chipped in with 12, and McKeon hit two three’s off the bench. UGF, which ended its losing streak by beating UM-Western Saturday night in Great Falls, got a game-high 17 points from freshman Erin Legel.

And with another hard-fought win over the Argos, the Skylights (14-8) have now posted three straight victories, and have won four of their last five. And that’s key heading into the home stretch of the season where Northern plays four of its last six games on the road.

“We have to be pleased with where we’re at right now,” Mouat said. “I’m proud of this team for finding ways to get wins and they did that again tonight. There’s a long way to go, but we’ve managed to put ourselves in a pretty good position with tonight’s win and with how we’ve played the last couple of weeks.”

“Our focus has to be on just one game at a time, one possession at a time really,” Bruursema added. “That’s what we tried to do tonight and that’s what we have to keep doing. It’s easy to look ahead and try to figure out where we’re at or where we might end up, but we just have to remain focused on one game and continue to get better.”

The Skylights head back on the road for games at Montana Tech on Friday night and Carroll College on Saturday.

Skylights are 6-4 in the Frontier, 14-8 overall; Next up: At Tech Friday
Skylights 73, Great Falls 67
UGF – Lindsey Abramson 4-11 2-2 10, Kindra Jones 2-6 0-1 4, Erin Legel 5-13 5-6 17, Mackenzie Owens 0-2 2-2 2, Taylor Statton 5-9 2-2 14, Sydnee Burke 3-13 0-3 9, Darah Huertes-Vining 0-6 5-10 5, Mary Wilmore 3-7 0-0 6. Totals: 22-67 16-23 67.

MSU-N – Jordan Bruursema 2-11 12-14 16, Laci Keller 6-10 3-6 15, Nikki Tresch 3-10 7-10 15, Taylor Cummings 2-8 0-1 5, Kylee Denham 4-5 3-9 12, Kassie Barta 0-0 0-0 0, Kacie McKeon 2-4 0-0 6, Rachelle Bennett 0-1 4-4 4, Maurisha McKissic 0-2 0-0 0. Totals: 19-51 29-44 73.