Final home stand for Skylights
Bulldogs, Griffins invade the Armory
George Ferguson
Thursday, February 14th, 2013

The MSU-Northern women’s basketball team may have had its four-game winning streak snapped at Carroll College last Saturday night. But the Skylights are still one of the team’s with the most momentum in the Frontier Conference.

And that makes tonight’s Valentine’s Day special with the UM-Western Bulldogs a huge one inside the Armory Gymnasium. Northern, which has won six of its last eight league games, beings its final home stand of the season against the struggling Bulldogs tonight at 6. The Skylights close out the weekend with a visit from the nationally-ranked Westminster Griffins Saturday night at 6.

MSU-N comes into tonight’s matchup playing very well, and also sitting in a tie for third place in the Frontier at 7-5, a good spot to be in. The Skylights have been good on the road, as shown in a dominating win over Montana Tech last Thursday night I Butte, and they’ve been equally as good at home in recent games, as displayed by their last performance, a win over Great Falls two weeks ago.

“Being at home is always a big boost for our kids, and we’ve had a good week of preparation. Both teams present a great challenge for us,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said.

And MSU-N (15-9) will present a big challenge to both of the visitors as well. Northern is the 10th-best defensive team in the NAIA, allowing just 55 points per game. The Skylights are also in the top 20 in the nation in most 3-point shooting categories, while senior Nikki Tresch leads the way, averaging 15 points per night, which is fourth-best in the conference. Jordan Bruursema, another senior playing her final home games, adds 12 points and a team-high seven rebounds, while senior Kylee Denham scores eight and grabs six rebounds per night. Laci Keller adds eight points and six boards, while Taylor Cummings averages a team-high three assists and two steals per game.

But playing well and holding serve at home tonight isn’t the only story line between the Skylights and the Bulldogs.

Western (4-8, 12-14) lambasted the Skylights 75-49 last month in Dillon, and the Bulldogs have a history of playing well against Northern, even in Havre. Still, the bulldogs haven’t been the same since that Jan. 10 win over Northern. They’ve lost five straight games, and have really struggled on offense, averaging a league-worst 51 points per game. They do however, have one of the best weapons in the conference in 5-10 junior Sammi Bignell, who averages 15 points and seven rebounds per. Bignell can score from anywhere, while she gets good out-side shooting help from the likes of Roxy Thurman (5-8) and Alecia Wilson (5-11), who combined to score 17 points a game.

“Western is a really dangerous team, and they do a great job running their offense,” Mouat said. “They have some big wins this season over some top teams, and have been very competitive in nearly every game this season, including last week at Westminster. Defensively, they do a lot of really good things in both man and zone. Obviously, Sammi Bignell is a major concern for us as one of the top players in the
entire conference. They also have very good players around her and can put a lot of points on the board. They played great against us in the first game, and we need to fix a lot of things defensively this time around in order to be successful.”

The Bulldogs were indeed successful the last time they faced the Skylights, and MSU-N's opponent on Saturday night, the Westminster Griffins, made that January road trip go from bad to worse. The Griffins (11-0, 22-2) beat the Skylights 72-43 last month in Salt Lake City and have only gotten better. And ranked fourth in the NAIA and riding a 14-game winning streak, Westminster will come to Havre looking to spoil MSU-N's senior night.

“This is as complete a team as I’ve seen in the league in a long time,” Mouat said of second-year coach Shelly Jarrard’s Griffins. They are deep and talented, with a number of NCAA Division I transfers. They also have Nicole Yazzie, who literally can do it all. Offensively, they are very balanced, and have had a lot of different players lead them on different nights, so focusing on just one or two kids really isn't very realistic.”

“Our approach to team defense with them has to be better than the first time around,” he continued. “They finish in transition as well as any team we’ve faced, and they execute on offense at a high level nearly every night out. They don't have a lot of flaws. Where they stand out to me the most is their defensive schemes. They play great team defense, and have limited even the most high-scoring teams very well.”

The Griffins are indeed complete. Defensively, Westminster is second in the NAIA in scoring, allowing a scant 47 points per night. The Griffins are also second in the nation in rebounding, pulling down 30 boards per game. Offensively, the Griffins aren't as fast-paced as they once were, as they average a mortal 66 points per. But they have a collection of talent unlike any other team in the Frontier. It starts with Yazzie, a senior who averages 13 points, while she’s complimented by 6-1 center Cydney Tibbetts, who scores 13 and grabs a league-best eight rebounds per outing. Kelsi Wells (5-9) also averages double digits, while Tia Pappas ((5-7), Shelby Ellsworth (5-11), Allie Eastman (5-9) and Amy Krommenhoek are all capable of scoring at any given point in a game.

So there's no doubt the Skylights are up against it in both games this weekend, but especially Saturday night. Still, the focus is on tonight's game against Western, and it's a game that could really put Northern in an ideal position heading into the final week of the regular season, if the Skylights can secure a win.

“Both nights, it will be imperative that we avoid mental breakdowns,” Mouat said. “Both UM-Western and Westminster make you pay if you make mistakes. They are well-coached and make great in-game adjustments. And, both teams are a challenge on the boards. We did not play well the first time around against either team, and our kids our fully aware of that fact.”

Tonight’s game between the Skylights and Bulldogs tips off at 6 in the Armory Gymnasium. Northern’s final home game of 2013 against Westminster will begin at 6 p.m. Saturday. MSU-N’s seniors will be honored before Saturday night as well. The Skylights are on the road to face Rocky Mountain College next Thursday and Dickinson State next Saturday.

_Skylights (7-5, 15-9) vs Western (4-8, 12-14) tonight at 6 p.m., No. 4 Westminster (11-0, 22-2) in the Armory Gymnasium_

_Radio:_ 92.5 KPQX FM

_Internet:_ www.msun.edu/athletics

_Twitter:_ Twitter/Havredaily

_MSU-N Probable Starters_

G Nikki Tresch, 5-5, Sr.
G Taylor Cummings, 5-5, So.
G Kylee Denham, 5-7, Sr.
F Jordan Bruursema, 6-0, Sr.
F Laci Keller, 6-0, Jr.