Westminster turns back Skylights
George Ferguson
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The Westminster Griffins are ranked fourth in the NAIA for good reason. And through 13 wins in the Frontier Conference, their average margin of victory has been a staggering 19 points. In fact, in no league game this season has Westminster even had to win by less than 10 points.

So it stood to reason that the Montana State University-Northern Skylights were up against a juggernaut in their home finale Saturday night at the Armory Gymnasium. And that Westminster juggernaut rolled right through the Armory, beating the Skylights 70-53. The loss was Northern’s third straight, but the Skylights are still 7-7 in league play and are still in a solid fourth place heading into their final two games of the regular season.

And while Northern played a solid second half in which it out-scored the Griffins 33-32, the start doomed MSU-N according to head coach Chris Mouat.

“Westminster is the real deal,” Mouat said. “And they proved that in the first 10 minutes by coming out and jumping all over us. They are a very impressive team. They’ve done this to a lot of very good teams this season. They are as efficient as any team I’ve coached against in this league.”

Efficient, methodical, overwhelming, those are all great adjectives to describe how the Griffins play, and that’s exactly what they were against the Skylights in the first half.

The Griffins nailed seven of their eight 3-pointers in the first 20 minutes, they got three bombs from Allie Eastman as they built up an 18-5 lead in the first seven minutes of the game, and they played a smothering brand of defense which gave Northern trouble even getting a good look at the basket. Northern tried to respond late in the half with some strong plays by Jordan Bruursema and Kylee Denham, and the Skylights were within 12 points at 30-18 nearing halftime. But Eastman and Kelsi Wells closed the half with two more triples, and gave Westminster a daunting 38-20 lead.

“They really came out and dismantled our game plan early,” Mouat said. “They really picked apart our zone with their shooting and their ball movement. So we made an adjustment and tried to grind it out man-to-man the rest of the way. I thought our kids really dug their heels in and played much better in the second half. We made some shots and that seemed to fuel our defense and we did get some stops.”
“So I was happy with the way we played in that second half,” he continued. “But at the end of the day, there are no moral victories, and the fact is, we were down 18 points to a really efficient and talented team at halftime and it was going to be awfully tough to come back from that.”

Never-the-less, on senior night, the Skylights did make a valiant attempt at a comeback. Westminster led 51-26 with 13:10 to play, but from there, the Skylights out-played the Griffins, as Nikki Tresch and Denham nailed three’s and Laci Keller scored eight points in the paint down the stretch. Still, it was a perfect case of too little, too late, as the Griffins left Havre with their 16-game winning streak intact.

Bruursema finished the game with a stellar 16 points and five rebounds, Denham added 11 points and six boards and Tresch finished with seven before all three left to a standing ovation. Keller totaled eight points and seven rebounds, while the first-place Griffins got a game-high 18 points from Eastman, and went a sizzling 8-for-13 from beyond the arc. In all, the Griffins had four players score in double digits. MSU-N did win the rebounding margin 30-20, while the game was clean with only a total of 15 turnovers.

“Jordan played a really nice game tonight,” Mouat said. “And Kylee was very aggressive and scored some big baskets for us. Actually, all three of our seniors played really well and were very aggressive tonight. Westminster’s defense just makes it so tough to get shots though, and that, coupled with how well they shot it tonight, was the key difference in the game.”

Northern (7-7, 15-11) has two games left, starting with a Thursday night trip to Billings to take on Rocky Mountain College. The Skylights will wrap up the regular season at Dickinson State Saturday night. MSU-N has a two-game lead on fifth-place Lewis-Clark State, and is way ahead of anyone chasing the Skylights for playoff berths in winning percentage.

Webster University is 7-7 in Frontier, 15-11 overall; Next up: at RMC Thursday

**Westminster 70, Skylights 53**

**WC** – Kelsi Wells 4-7 0-0 11, Cydney Tibbetts 2-8 3-4 7, Brooke Larsen 2-6 0-0 4, Allie Eastman 7-12 0-0 18, Nicole Yazzie 3-9 5-5 12, Amy Krommenhoek 4-9 2-2 10, Tia Pappas 1-3 2-2 4, Brooke Blonquist 1-3 0-0 2, Olivia Perice-Eiselein 1-2 0-0 2. Totals: 25-59 12-12 70.

**MSU-N** – Jordan Bruursema 5-10 6-8 16, Laci Keller 4-7 0-0 8, Nikki Tresch 1-3 4-4 7, Taylor Cummings 1-3 0-0 2, Kylee Denham 3-11 4-4 11, Kassie Barta 0-1 0-0 0, Kacie McKeon 0-1 0-0 0, Rachelle Bennett 2-6 1-1 5, Leah Olson 0-0 0-0 0, Macey Cox 0-0 0-0 0, Maurisha McKissic 2-5 0-0 4, Michaela Howe-Cobb 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 18-47 15-17 53.

Halftime: Westminster 38-20. 3-pointers: MSU-N 2-10 (Tresch 1, Denham 1), WC 8-13 (Wells 3, Eastman 4, Yazzie 1). Rebounds: MSU-N 30 (Keller 7), WC 28 (Four with four each). Fouls: MSU-N 12, WC 15. Fouled out: None.