The Big Sandy boys basketball team made a magical run this past weekend at the Northern C boys divisional tournament in Great Falls. And that Pioneer magic seemed to carry over to the Armory Gymnasium on Tuesday night.

Playing in the do-or-die Frontier Conference playoffs, the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team got a monumental night from junior forward and former Big Sandy star Laci Keller, as the Skylights dismantled Rocky Mountain College 76-57 Tuesday night in Havre. The win pushed the Skylights (17-12) into the Frontier semifinals for the second straight season, and thanks to UM-Western’s upset of Montana Tech Tuesday night, Northern will get a crack at second-seeded Carroll College Friday night in Helena.

Keller was the catalyst for MSU-N as she scored a career-high 27 points and grabbed a monstrous 16 rebounds, also a career high. But the entire Northern team played well from tip to finish, and from the onset, appeared ready to avenge last Thursday night’s loss to the Battlin’ Bears in Billings. And the Skylights also appeared ready to make sure their season didn’t end in Havre.

“Our kids were very prepared,” MSU-Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “I felt it all day, I felt they were ready to go and I felt it in warm-ups. Rocky came in here playing really good basketball too, so we needed to be ready. And I just felt like our kids really bought into our game plan and our preparation and they were ready. I’m just really proud of them for their focus and their sense of urgency tonight.

“And of course, the big story was Laci (Keller),” he added. “She had a breakout game against a Rocky team who has really good post players. Brittany Myers is a great player and she had a good game too. But Laci really out-played them all. I’m just really happy for her. The game she had tonight was huge.”

Keller wasted little time in getting the Skylights going. She scored the first bucket of the game for the Skylights and pumped in eight total points in an early 11-2 run which saw MSU-N take the lead and never give it back.

Jordan Bruursema also knocked in two triples in the first half, and Kassie Barta sparked an 8-2 Northern run with a three of her own later in the first stanza. MSU-N shot 50 percent from the floor in the first 20 minutes, and thanks to two big runs, the Skylights held a 34-26 lead at intermission.

And Keller already had a double-double by halftime to boot.
“Our crowd really helps us,” Keller said. “We love playing at home and they are in the game with us. I think we came into this game understanding we had to play well and that we didn’t want it to be our last game.

And we also understood we didn’t play our best against them (Bears) last week and we had a point to prove.”

And Keller and the Skylights hammered that point home in the final 20 minutes. Keller’s second bucket of the second half gave MSU-N a 45-30 lead with 14 minutes to go and the Skylights never took their foot off the gas. Taylor Cummings hit a big three with 10:46 to play, while Bruursema and Keller continued to pour it on in the paint. By the time Keller hit a running bank shot with 4:04 to play, the Skylights were ahead 63-49 and they never looked back.

Keller’s career night included an 11-for-19 performance from the field, while she also went 5-of-6 from the foul line. Add to that her rebound total and it was as good a game as the Skylights have had in the post in a long time.

“My teammates were just finding me,” Keller said. “I thought we worked the ball as a team really well. It was great ball movement all night, and when I got open, they gave it to me. So it worked out really well.”

Bruursema buried three trey’s and scored 16 points in what was likely she, Kylee Denham and Nikki Tresch’s final game in the Armory. Bruursema also grabbed five rebounds and dished out five assists, while Cummings scored in double figures for the third straight game with 11 points. Myers had a big game in what was Rocky’s season finale, scoring 18 points, but the Skylights’ vaunted defense shut down sharp-shooter Brittany Kumm and the rest of the dangerous Rocky guards.

“Our point guard (Cummings) has really grown up, and she and all of our guards did a great job of handling Rocky’s pressure and their quickness,” Mouat said. “It’s not easy to execute against them, and I thought Taylor and all of our guards did a great job tonight. They took care of the ball for the most part and moved it really well. That was a big key, and I’m so proud of them for handling the pressure tonight. I’m just very proud of this whole team tonight. This was a pretty complete performance against a very good team.”

And with such a high level performance, the Skylights can feel good heading into their semifinal showdown with the Saints Friday night in Helena. The winner of that game will have a chance to play either Westminster or Western for the Frontier title.

But for now, Northern was reveling in the satisfaction of taking care of business on its home floor. It was a great home finale, if indeed it was the final home game, and the Skylights made sure they went out in style.

“The goal all season was to get a home playoff game, and we worked hard to get that,” Keller said. “Then the goal was to win that game and keep our season going and we did that tonight. If this was the last game at home, it was a lot of fun, and I’m so proud of my team and the way we played tonight.”

Friday’s Frontier Conference semifinal between the Skylights and Saints is slated for 7 p.m. at the Carroll P.E. Center in Helena. The winner moves on to the Frontier championship game on Monday night.
Skylights are 17-12 overall; Next Up: at Carroll Friday night

Skylights 76, Rocky 57

RMC – Taylor Hurst 2-5 1-2 6, Brittany Myers 6-14 6-7 18, Haleigh Crnkovich 2-7 0-0 4, Kelcy Lott 3-5 0-0 8, Brittany Kumm 1-7 3-4 6, Kalli McCloskey 1-8 2-2 4, Anyslee Stuart 1-2 2-2 4, Megan halstead 2-5 2-2 6, Marisa Morais 0-1 0-2 0. Totals: 18-54 16-21 57.

MSU-N – Jordan Bruursema 5-15 3-4 16, Laci Keller 11-19 5-6 27, Nikki Tresch 2-7 1-2 5, Taylor Cummings 3-3 4-4 11, Kylee Denham 2-5 0-1 4, Kassie Barta 2-4 2-2 7, Kacie McKeon 1-3 0-0 2, Rachelle Bennett 0-1 0-0 0, Leah Olson 0-0 0-0 0, Maurisha McKissic 2-3 0-0 4, Michaela Howe-Cobb 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 28-60 15-19 76.