MSU-N Women's Basketball Preview: New-look Skylights are tough and talented

Northern women will be a mix of key returnees and outstanding newcomers

By George Ferguson
October 22, 2013

As one of the most successful women's basketball programs in Frontier Conference history, the Montana State University-Northern Skylights know what it's like to go through change.

And entering the 2013-14 season, change is something the Skylights will have to get used to, and get used to quick.

Veteran head coach Chris Mouat is back for his ninth season at the helm of the Northern program, but beyond that, the Skylights will have a new look and feel this winter. MSU-N went 17-13 a season ago, finished fourth in the Frontier and reached the Frontier semifinals in March. But, Northern graduated four starters from that squad which means Mouat will be looking at a relatively new lineup this season, as well have to meld a large class of newcomers with a solid group of returnees.

"We have one starter coming back, and all our returning players are guards," Mouat said. "We have a big class of new players and this class has the potential to be very good. So early in the preseason, we will have to really work on gelling as an entire team. But I really like this team. They are fun to coach and be around every day. Their chemistry has been great so far, and I think the potential for this team is very high."

Only junior point guard Taylor Cummings (5-5) returns from last year's starting lineup, which means the Skylights have to replace about 70 percent of their scoring from a year ago. Gone are guards Nikki Tresch and Kylie Denham, as well as forward Laci Keller. Northern also said goodbye to all-conference forward Jordan Bruursema, who was a three-year starter and MSU-N's top scorer a year ago.

But the Skylights do return experience beyond Cummings, who really blossomed last season in her first year as a starter. Reserve guards Kassie Barta (5-8, Sr.), Kacie McKeon (5-4, So.) and Rachelle Bennett (5-8, Jr.) all saw significant minutes a season ago, and all three will play key roles in Northern's backcourt this season. Barta is a stellar outside shooter, while Bennett can play inside-out. McKeon saw heavy minutes as a true freshman a year ago, and really gave Northern an outstanding spark off the bench. Red-shirt freshmen Taryn Norby (5-5) and Jordan Powers (6-0) will also add to Northern's depth this season as will freshman Cydney Auzenne (5-10), who's currently a redshirt on the MSU-N volleyball team.

But aside from playing an even bigger role this season, Mouat also expects his returnees to be leaders, on and off the floor.

"I think, being our point guard, it's been natural for Taylor (Cummings) to kind of assume that role. She is our leader on the floor because of the position she plays, and I think she's really grown more comfortable in being a leader of this team."
"But as a group, they all lead really well," he continued. "They are experienced. They all played key roles on our team last year, and they all had important minutes in big games last season. Those roles are going to increase this season, and they are ready because of the experience they gained last year."

Of course, there will be plenty of new faces on the floor this season too. Mouat signed a large recruiting class, loaded with players he expects to have an immediate impact on the program.

At the top of that list is 6-5 transfer A'Jha Edwards, who averaged a double-double on her way to NJCAA All-American honors at Pima Community College in Arizona last season. Not since Stacie Barker have the Skylights had an inside presence like Edwards, and she should give Northern an immediate boost on both ends of the floor.

"She (Edwards) brings a lot to the table," Mouat said. "She has great size, she moves well and she can shoot it from the perimeter. She does a great job finishing around the rim and she can rebound the ball. She is going to have a tremendous impact on our team for sure."

And Edwards isn't alone. Also from the junior college ranks, the Skylights added Megan Feldman (6-1) and Tabra Teeters (6-0) to give MSU-N even more power on the inside. Meanwhile, true freshmen Natalee Faupel, a 5-10 guard/forward from Butte High, and Molly Kreycik, a 5-6 guard from Douglas, Wyo., where former Skylight great Jaci Heny coaches, will also be called upon to contribute right away.

"Megan is a tough post player," Mouat said. "She finishes and she can guard bigger players. Tabra might be undersized in the post, but she's very savvy around the rim and she is a really good outside shooter.

"Molly comes to us from a great high school program," he added. "She's got great vision, she's very mature and very unselfish. And Natalee is just an outstanding athlete. She can do so many different things and she has the potential to be a very special player. I think this entire class is really solid. They are good players, good students and good people. And the upside for this group is really high."

**New and the Old**

With a perfect mix of returners and talented newcomers, Northern will, at times, run the same systems it has run in recent years, but at other times, the Skylights could look very different.

MSU-N is known for its trademark defense, as the Skylights have been one of the top scoring and field goal defensive teams year-in-and-year-out under Mouat. And actually, with a bigger presence in the post, Mouat said this year’s team has a chance to be even better on defense.

Offensively, Northern will also throw out some new wrinkles with its added height and athleticism in the paint. The Skylights will still be an unselfish, ball movement type of team, and they'll still shoot their share from the outside (MSU-N has been one of the top 3-point shooting teams in the Frontier in each of the last three seasons), but Mouat noted that personnel on the floor will also dictate how MSU-N plays teams offensively.

"I think on defense, we have a chance to be a bit quicker this year," Mouat said. "I think we have a little more quickness and obviously we have more length. So I expect us to be very good defensively, and I think we'll be a much better rebounding team this season.

"Offensively, what we run will depend on who’s on the floor," he added. "We'll still run a lot of what we have been the last few years, but it will also depend on the lineup on the floor. You're going to see some different things from us this year, based on the players we've added. We'll have some different looks offensively. I think that's one of the nice things about this group. We have the opportunity to be pretty diverse. We can go with a lot of different combinations on the floor. We have a lot more depth."

**Early Challenges**

Mouat has always put together a rigorous non-conference schedule, with the idea that his team will be battle-tested come January, when Frontier play begins for good. And this year’s non-conference schedule will be no different. With the Frontier being deep and talented yet again, Northern's early-season schedule will surely get the Skylights ready.
MSU-N opens with powerhouse teams from Canada in Lethbridge and Mount Royal, both CIS contenders. But when the calendar turns to November, the Skylights will play a tough a schedule as any NAIA team in the country.

Northern opens the month with a game against NAIA power Eastern Oregon in Spokane. Then, the Skylights play back-to-back games against NCAA Division I powers. MSU-N faces the University of Wyoming Nov. 8 in Sheridan, Wyo., while two nights later, the Skylights make their annual trek to Missoula to face the famed Lady Griz of the University of Montana. Northern will also battle NCAA DII stalwart Nebraska-Kearney in Great Falls, and road trip to Billings to face MSU-B, another DII powerhouse. The month finally ends with the Skylights' Frontier opener against Carroll College Nov. 30 in Havre.

"We have four games against upper-level opponents," Mouat said. "Our two home openers are against really good Canadian teams, plus we play Eastern Oregon who is coming off a fantastic season last year. That schedule, especially November is going to be really tough.

"But we can learn from every one of those games," he added. "And that's the important thing. Early in the preseason, we just want to get our feet under us, establish an identity and continue to gel. And this schedule will certainly help us do all of that."

In December, the Skylights host the MSU-Northern Duck Inn Holiday Classic, and also have road trips to Canada and Las Vegas right after Christmas to wrap up the non-conference season. And all of it should really let the Skylights know who they are and what kind of team they can be as Frontier play rolls around after New Year's.

"If we grow, get better and use all of the experience we'll get in the pre-season, we should be in good shape for conference play," Mouat said. "I feel like this team has a lot of potential. We have a lot of talent and a lot of players who can do really good things for us.

"There's a lot of potential in this group," he continued. "I think our ceiling is very, very high, and I'm really excited about this team and what it can accomplish this season."

The Skylights open their season Thursday night against the University of Lethbridge Pronghorns in the Armory Gymnasium.

**MSU-N Quick Facts**

Skylights went 17-13 overall and 8-8 (4th) in the Frontier a year ago. MSU-N defeated RMC in the Frontier tournament, then lost to Carroll in the Frontier semifinals. Northern has reached the Frontier semis in back-to-back season. The Skylights have finished fourth or better in the Frontier under Mouat seven times. Former All-Conference guard Laramie Schwenke is the new top assistant for MSU-N.

**Skylights 2013-14 Basketball Schedule**

Oct. 24 vs Lethbridge  
Oct. 27 vs Mount Royal  
Nov. 1 vs Eastern Oregon At Spokane  
Nov. 2 vs Corban College At Spokane  
Nov. 8 at Wyoming At Sheridan, Wyo.  
Nov. 10 at Montana  
Nov. 15 vs Pacific Union At Great Falls  
Nov. 16 vs Nebraska-Kearney At Great Falls  
Nov. 27 at MSU-Billings  
Nov. 30 vs Carroll College  
Dec. 6 at Augustana  
Dec. 7 at Augustana  
Dec. 19 vs New Hope Christian -Duck Inn Classic  
Dec. 21 vs NW Indian College - Duck Inn Classic  
Dec. 27 vs Regina At Las Vegas
Dec. 28 vs McGill University At Las Vegas

Jan. 2 at Rocky Mountain
Jan. 4 at Dickinson State
Jan. 9 vs UM-Western
Jan. 11 vs Westminster
Jan. 17 at Montana Tech
Jan. 18 at Carroll College
Jan. 24 vs Great Falls
Jan. 30 at Great Falls

Feb. 1 at Lewis-Clark State
Feb. 7 vs Montana Tech
Feb. 8 vs Lewis Clark State
Feb. 13 at UM-Western
Feb. 15 at Westminster
Feb. 20 vs Dickinson State
Feb. 21 vs Rocky Mountain
Feb. 25-March 3 Frontier Conference Tournament

Daniel Horton

Junior Rachelle Bennett and the Skylights have been to two straight Frontier semifinals. This season, they’ll look to take it further.