Skylights take on Horns' in season debut
Opening weekend for Northern women’s hoops starts tonight with Lethbridge
By George Ferguson
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The men’s basketball team at Montana State University-Northern has three games under its belt already. The women’s team has had to wait a little longer.

But the wait is over and the Skylights will make their highly-anticipated season debut tonight when the host the University of Lethbridge Pronghorns at 7 inside the Armory Gymnasium. Tonight’s game is the first of a two-game weekend for Northern, which will host Mount Royal University on Sunday afternoon.

"This is a big pair of games for us," veteran MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said. "We are really excited to get started, and especially at home. Both Lethbridge and Mount Royal already have a bunch of games under their belt, and are going to be tough. Both teams are athletic and get up and down the floor."

Tonight, the Skylights will debut a very new-look team after going 17-13 a year ago, finishing fourth in the Frontier Conference and reaching the tournament semifinals for the second year in a row. MSU-N is breaking in four new starters after losing the likes of Jordan Bruursema, Nikki Tresch, Kylie Denham and Laci Keller to graduation. That foursome represented nearly 70 percent of MSU-N’s scoring.

Only junior point guard Taylor Cummings (5-5) returns from last year’s starting lineup, 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.

Newcomers making their debut tonight will be 6-5 center A’Jah Edwards, as well as Megan Feldman (6-1) and Tabra Teeters (6-0) all from the junior college ranks. Meanwhile, true freshmen Natalee Faupel, a 5-10 guard/forward from Butte High, and Molly Kreycik, a 5-6 guard from Douglas, Wyo., are also likely to have an instant impact on the Northern lineup.

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

Getting to that ceiling starts tonight with the Pronghorns. The Skylights lost to Lethbridge 66-61 last year in Havre, and the Horns’ return their top two scorers from that team in Kim Veldman and Ali Cameron. Both
are outstanding scorers who can post big numbers, and both will be focal points for Northern's defense tonight.

"Lethbridge has excellent talent and is a very well-coached team," Mouat said. "They gave us fits last year, and their top two returners (Kim Veldman and Ali Cameron) are proven, quality players. They have some other really good returners and a few newcomers who really stand out. We will have to do all we can to limit their easy looks, especially in transition."

Mount Royal is a bit of a mystery, but like Lethbridge, is a CIS team so Mouat expects another tough game on Sunday. The Cougars have already played six games this season and will face Carroll College before coming to Havre.

"Mount Royal has a new coach this year and a lot of new faces on their roster," Mouat said. "They have already picked up a couple of big wins, including a win over the University of Calgary. They are playing fast and pressuring a ton. Taking care of the basketball will be vital."

And getting off to a good start will be vital for the Skylights, especially considering Northern will play nearly the entire month of November on the road, including four games against upper-level competition. So tonight's game, and Sunday's game against Mount Royal will certainly give the Skylights a good measuring stick for where they're at and where they need to be.

"Both games give us a chance to really see where we are at right now," Mouat said. "We will see a wide variety of things from two quality opponents."

"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."

Tonight's game between Northern and Lethbridge tips off at 7 in the Armory Gymnasium. Sunday's game in Havre between MSU-N and Mount Royal starts at 3:30 p.m. The Skylights hit the road next week.