Skylights host battle-tested Carroll Saturday
By George Ferguson
November 29, 2013

The Frontier Conference season won't really get fired up until after New Years. But fans will get a sneak peek Saturday night when the Montana State University-Northern Skylights and the Carroll College Fighting Saints open league play in Havre.

Saturday's Frontier opener between the Skylights (6-0) and the Saints (5-2) marks the second straight season in which the two bitter rivals have opened league play against each other. Tipoff is slated for 6 p.m. in the Armory Gymnasium.

Northern comes into its conference opener battled tested. The Skylights have played exhibition games against the University of Wyoming and the University of Montana, as well as Wednesday night's 74-59 loss at MSU-Billings. The Skylights also get to play at home for the first time since the end of October, but they'll do it against an equally battled-tested Carroll squad coming off an NAIA national tournament appearance last spring.

"They're (Saints) a national tournament team, a team that went to the Sweet 16 last year," MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said. "And even though they graduated some really good players from that team, there's literally been no drop off. They've played a really tough schedule, they'll come in here ready to go. Hopefully we will too. I think we've also played a tough schedule, and the hope is, it's prepared us for this game, and for the rest of what will be a very tough Frontier Conference schedule."

The Saints, who beat MSU-N three times last season, including a walloping in the Frontier semifinals last March, did indeed lose some key players from a year ago, including Megan Patterson, Torrie Cahill and Joey O'Neil, the Saints' top three scorers.

However, Carroll has seemed to not miss a beat. Veteran guards Bailey Snelling (5-8) and Kalee Junkermeier (5-10) combine to average 21 points per game so far this season. They also help the Saints shoot better than 37 percent from the 3-point-line. And while Carroll isn't a high-scoring team, averaging close to 67 points per game, the Saints have plenty of firepower and depth. Senior Jordan Bagley (5-10) is a strong scorer and rebounder in the post, while senior guard Jordan Pfau (5-10) is an excellent inside-out scorer. Junior Allison Sullivan (6-3) also makes up for the loss of O'Neil in the paint, and is an excellent rebounder and defender.

"They've had a lot of kids step up and do a really nice job," Mouat said. "Offensively, they throw a variety of things at you during the course of a game, and they are really good from the three. They are a talented and athletic bunch, and they'll come in here very well prepared."

And while Carroll can certainly be a dangerous offensive team, the Saints like to hang their hat on defense. The Saints are allowing just 58 points per game, and teams are shooting just 38 percent from the floor against them. Carroll is also out-rebounding its opponents by more than six per night.
"They really get after it defensively and on the glass," Mouat said. "They are just very sound defensively, just very solid on that end of the floor.

"So for us, we have to make sure we execute," he continued. "We have to take care of the ball, and make shots when we get those opportunities. Defensively, I've been really pleased with how we've played so far this season. But this will be a new challenge for us."

And make no mistake, the Skylights are playing well, even with a daunting schedule which has seen them play four NCAA teams on the road this fall. MSU-N is much like Carroll, in that it's not a high-scoring team, but the Skylights shoot the three well, and they play great defense. Northern is the third-best rebounding team in the Frontier, and the Skylights are holding their opponents to a scant 51 points per game.

The addition of 6-5 A'Jha Edwards has been key on both ends of the floor. Edwards is averaging 13 points and nine rebounds per outing, and she already has three double-doubles on the season. Her play Saturday night will be critical to Northern's success, while Rachelle Bennett has also really stepped up. Bennett is scoring nine points per game, while grabbing five rebounds per night. Guards Taylor Cummings and Kacie McKeon average eight points each, while Kassie Barta is giving Northern six points per game off the bench.

And like Carroll, Northern's schedule should help the Skylights be ready for Saturday night's Frontier opener. It's an unusual start to the Frontier season, and MSU-N will go back to playing a non-conference schedule for the rest of December. But for one night, it's all about getting off to a big start in conference play, and Northern defending its precious home court against a bitter rival.

"It's early to have a big game like this," Mouat said. "But it's what it is, and I think we're ready for it. It's exciting to be coming home finally. The kids have been looking forward to this game. We've been on the road a lot the last month, we've played a very difficult schedule, and it doesn't get any easier with this game against Carroll.

"But I feel really good about where we're at right now," he continued. "And we'll come out and be ready to play against a very good Carroll team."

Saturday night's Frontier Conference opener between the Skylights and Fighting Saints tips off at 6 p.m. at the Armory Gymnasium. The rematch is set for Jan. 18 in Helena. The Skylights go right back on the road following Saturday night's game, playing back-to-back games at Augustana of Alberta Dec. 6-7.

Early Opener

**MSU-Northern (6-0) vs Carroll College (5-2)**
Saturday, 6 p.m.
Armory Gymnasium

**Projected MSU-N Starters**

G Taylor Cummings, 5-5, Jr.
G Kacie McKeon, 5-4, So.
F Rachelle Bennett, 5-8, Jr.
F Taybra Teeters, 6-0, Jr.
C A'Jha Edwards, 6-5, Jr.

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