Unbeaten Skylights home tonight
MSU-N women play host to Duck Inn Holiday Classic
By George Ferguson
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When the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team takes the floor tonight for the first of two games in the annual Duck Inn Holiday Classic, the Skylights won’t just be putting an unbeaten start to the season on the line. Instead, they’ll also be playing their first games as a nationally-ranked team in five years.

The 9-0 Skylights bring a No. 24 national ranking into tonight’s tilt with New Hope Christian College. The game starts at 8 at the Armory Gymnasium, following a game between Rocky Mountain College and Northwest Indian College. Northern also faces NW Indian at 7 p.m. on Saturday.

Not only do the Skylights bring a perfect record into what will be their final home stand before Frontier Conference play gets going in January, but they bring the NAIA’s top-rated defense into the weekend. MSU-N is allowing just 50 points per game, and in their nine wins, the Skylights haven’t allowed more than 58 points in a single contest. Northern is also sixth in the NAIA in rebounding and 11th in free-throw shooting.

To say MSU-N is playing well right now would be an understatement.

“From where we were picked to finish at the start of the season, to where we are now, we’ve made up a lot of ground,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “We’ve played some good teams and we’ve had some really nice wins. I think the exhibition games against the DI and DII teams helped us a lot. So I’m very happy with where we’re at right now.”

The Skylights also come into the weekend fresh off a week of rest. Northern last played on Dec. 6-7 when it won two games at the University of Alberta-Augustana, and Mouat said the rest was good for his team, in particular, giving more time for sophomore guard Kacie McKeon to heal an injured ankle. McKeon is questionable for this weekend’s game, but she’s certainly on the mend.

If McKeon can’t go this weekend, true freshman Natalee Faupel will continue to start in her absence, while veteran guards Taylor Cummings, Rachelle Bennett and Kassi Barta will carry the outside load. The trio combines to average about 20 points per game, while Barta has been shooting the 3-point shot very well as of late.

But the Skylights continue to make the most progress in the paint. Northern is led by A’Jha Edwards (6-5), who is averaging a double-double. Edwards scored 12 points and grabs 10 rebounds per game. Her rebounding average is second-best in the Frontier right now. Bennett can also play in the post, as can Faupel, and junior transfer Megan Feldman is giving MSU-N a real boost with her rebounding, hard-nosed defense and timely scoring.
"I feel like we’re playing pretty well right now,” Mouat said. "We’re the number one defensive team in the country, and I think we’ve earned that. We’re defending really well right now. There’s always things we can do better. We need to shoot the ball better, we need to execute better, things like that. But I like how this team is playing right now, and hopefully that continues this weekend."

As for Northern’s opponents, New Hope Christian and Northwest Indian College, both teams will certainly present challenges. Tonight’s game with the Deacons is a return trip and MSU-N is keenly aware of what they can do, considering MSU-N lost to them 68-64 last year in Eugene, Ore.

The Deacons are a member of the National Christian Collegiate Athletic Association, but they’ve played a difficult schedule, meaning they’ll be well-prepared tonight. New Hope has a star guard in Lea Lolohea, who Mouat says can score big and do pretty much everything for her team.

Northwest Indian is a little more of an unknown to the Skylights, though the Eagles, who hail from Bellingham, Wash., have played three Frontier teams already this season.

"New Hope is a good perimeter team, and Lolohea is a very dangerous player,” Mouat said. She can go off and she can score from anywhere. They are a very good defensive team and they play hard. We know them well, as they beat us last year. So we have a pretty good idea of what we’re up against.

"We’re not as familiar with Northwest Indian,” he continued. "But we were able to see what they did against some of the other teams in our league last week. They will play very hard, and they have a couple of kids who will hurt you if you don’t defend. This is their first year as a four-year college, and we’re excited to have them come up here and play us."

Northern’s two games this weekend are the final two home games before MSU-N returns for conference play in January. In all, there are six games on the slate this weekend at the Armory. The Duck Inn Holiday Classic also features games between RMC and New Hope and UGF and NW Indian on Friday, as well as UGF playing New Hope before the Skylights take on NW Indian on Saturday night.

"We’re looking forward to getting back on our own floor,” Mouat said. "And hopefully continuing to play well. I like where we’re at right now, but we also understand, it’s a long way to February and March, so we need to continue to strive to get better. And we have an opportunity to do that this weekend."

Tonight’s game between the Skylights and Deacons is set to tip at 8. RMC and NW Indian face off at 6. Saturday’s game between Northern and NW Indian starts at 7 p.m. The Skylights wrap up the non-conference season with two games in Las Vegas, Dec. 27-28.