Lights, Skylights go back to work
MSU-N men host Northwest Indian College tonight, Saturday; Northern women visit Las Vegas
By George Ferguson
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It’s back to work for the nationally ranked Montana State University-Northern basketball teams. And this weekend marks the end of non-conference play.

Following this weekend’s home games for the MSU-Northern men and a road trip to Las Vegas for the Northern women, Frontier Conference play will begin for good.

The No. 16 Lights (11-2, 1-0) are home for a pair of games against Northwest Indian College. The Lights host the Eagles tonight at 7 and Saturday at 11 a.m.

Northern has had 20 days off coming into tonight’s contest. The Lights last played when they swept Augustana of Alberta Dec. 6-7 in Canada. So MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse expects his team to be a little but rusty this weekend. But he also said playing the Eagles is a perfect warmup for league play, which starts next week at Rocky Mountain College.

The Eagles are playing their first season as a four-year institution, and they come to Havre battle tested. The Eagles have played a host of Frontier Conference teams this season, as well as tough NCAA Division II schools like Alaska-Anchorage. NWIC also road tripped to Montana State a season ago, so the Eagles certainly won’t be intimidated by the nationally ranked Lights this weekend.

Meanwhile, Northern is riding a solid win streak, and looking to build momentum heading into the new year. MSU-N’s last loss came back on Nov. 16, meaning the Lights have won five straight. Northern is led in scoring by Alfie Miller, who puts in over 15 points per game. Corbin Pearson, Roshawn West, Jesse Vaughan and Nicholas Blount all average close to 10 points per outing. But the Lights truly hang their hat on defense, and will look to do so against an Eagle squad which likes to get up the floor quickly, as well as shoot the 3-pointer.

Meanwhile, the MSU-N women are just hoping to play tonight in Las Vegas. The No. 24 Skylights (12-0) had travel issues on Wednesday, and had to fly out of Great Falls this morning. When Northern arrives in Sin City, the Skylights will play two Canadian powerhouses in the University of Regina and McGill University.

Regina is currently ranked No. 6 in the CIS, which is Canada's highest level of college basketball. The Cougars have also been to the CIS Final Four in four of the last six seasons. McGill will be no pushover either. Currently ranked No. 8 in the CIS Top 25, the team will present a stern test for Northern on Saturday night.

Still, the Skylights should be ready. Northern is allowing just 47 points per game, which is the best defensive effort in all of NAIA basketball. The Skylights are playing well on offense too, as evidenced by last Saturday’s win over NWIC, where the Skylights made a school-record 14 3-pointers. Northern is led in
scoring by A’Jha Edwards, who also averages 10 rebounds per game, but Taylor Cummings, Rachelle Bennett, Natalee Faupel and Kassie Barta all score around nine points per game, giving head coach Chris Mouat a very balanced offense.

"These two teams we're playing in Las Vegas are legit," Mouat said. "They are two of the best programs in all of the CIS, and they will be very tough games, both of them. But that's exactly what we need right now, so the timing is perfect. These two teams will certainly be a great warm-up to what we're going to face in our league over the next three months."

The Skylights are scheduled to face Regina tonight 5:30 in Las Vegas. Northern takes on McGill at 3:30 p.m. Saturday.

Tonight's men's game at the Armory Gymnasium between MSU-N and NWIC will tip at 7, and the rematch will start at 11 a.m. on Saturday. Both the Lights and Skylights travel to Rocky Mountain College on Thursday and Dickinson State next Saturday.