Skylights topple Bears; Lights fall
By George Ferguson
January 3, 2014

During a difficult non-conference schedule, the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team played some stellar defense. It appears, that great defense has now carried over to Frontier Conference play.

The No. 24 Skylights started the new year off in style, beating the Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears 52-48 Thursday night at the Fortin Center in Billings. The win pushed the Skylights to 2-0 in league play and came by way of yet another dominant defensive performance.

Coming into Thursday night’s game, MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said defending Rocky at the 3-point-line would be key. And though the Bears rallied late, behind a Brittany Kumm three, the Skylights held them to just 26 percent from beyond the arc, as well as 34 percent from the floor. Northern’s tenacious defense also forced RMC into 19 turnovers, and the Skylights out-rebounded the Bears 35-31.

“We did play really good defense,” Mouat said. “Rachelle (Bennett) did a really nice job guarding Brittany Kumm. She’s a player we felt we needed to focus on, and Rachelle defended her really well.

“Also, we were able to build a pretty nice lead in the second half,” he continued. “And then we weathered the storm down the stretch.”

While Northern was playing great defense on one end, the Skylights were lifted offensively by the play of true freshman Natalee Faupel. The Butte native drilled MSU-N’s only two triples, while going 7-for-11 from the floor and scoring 17 points. She was particularly good in the second half, where Northern pushed a 27-20 halftime lead to as many as 13 points in the final frame.

Faupel finished the night with her first double-double, also grabbing a game-high 11 rebounds. Bennett finished with nine points, while A’Jha Edwards added eight points and eight rebounds. Megan Halstead led the Bears (0-2, 7-4) with 14 points.

“I was really pleased,” Mouat said. “Our perimeter defense, our post defense and our transition defense was all very good tonight.

“And I have to say, Natalee (Faupel) was outstanding,” he continued. “She took big shots and made big shots. She really played great on both ends of the floor, and that’s not easy for a freshman to come in and do in this league. I was just really proud of her.”

The win, which was also spurred on by a partisan Northern crowd, was also big because the Skylights aren’t just unbeaten in league play, but they got a rare win in Billings and built some more momentum heading into Saturday’s showdown at Dickinson State.

“Our crowd was great, and that really helped us tonight,” Mouat said. “It’s been tough for us here (Billings) the last couple of years. Rocky is very good at the Fortin Center. So this is a big win for us. I’m really proud of the kids, especially for the way they played down the stretch tonight.”

The Skylights (13-2) will be back in action Saturday at 2 p.m. when they take on DSU in Dickinson, N.D. MSU-N is home next Thursday to host the UM-Western Bulldogs.

Battlin’ Bears 74, Lights 63
While the MSU-Northern Skylights let their defense carry them in Billings, the Rocky Mountain offense was too much for the equally as good Northern men’s defense Thursday night.

After a back-and-forth first half, the No. 10 Battlin’ Bears pulled away from the No. 16 Lights Thursday night at the Fortin Center. RMC won the battle of nationally ranked teams, 74-63, handing Northern its first Frontier loss of the season.

MSU-N did well to keep things tight in the first 20 minutes. Rocky led 8-0 after just two minutes of play, but the Lights charged back on two Roshawn West 3-pointers, and eventually led 18-10. In all, Northern went on an 18-2 run, and things were looking good for the Lights.

However, RMC is one of the most potent offensive teams in the country, and the Bears showed why. Rocky closed the half on a big run and led 34-32, then followed that up with an 11-4 run to start the second half. RMC led by double digits for much of the final 20 minutes, but with under six minutes left, the Lights closed the gap to 60-55 and were still very much alive. However, RMC out-scored Northern 14-8 the rest of the way.

"It felt like we had really established ourselves midway through the first half," MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. "We felt pretty good about where we were at at halftime. But the bottom line is, Rocky made all the shots when it counted, it felt like they just couldn't miss, and you have to give them a ton of credit. They played very well offensively.

"I thought we played pretty well defensively," he continued. "But you’re not going to get a stop against a team that talented every time down the floor. You can't just rely on good defense. Sometimes, against the heavyweights, you have to exchange blows, and we didn't do enough of that. We didn't make enough shots, especially down the stretch."

While RMC’s offense did the trick Thursday night, a disadvantage at the foul line and on the boards also hurt the Lights. RMC out-rebounded Northern 34-24, while the Bears also went 22-of-26 from the charity stripe as opposed to Northern taking just nine foul shots all night.

Offensively, the Lights were good for much of the game, but down the stretch, they went cold. Gabe Finley came off the bench to lead Northern with 17 points, while Alfie Miller scored 13 and Corbin Pearson added 10. Despite the loss, the return of Will Perry, who’s missed the last month and a half with a knee injury was big for MSU-N. Perry scored nine points in limited action. In all, the Lights shot 48 percent from the field and made nine threes.

However, it wasn't enough to overcome RMC’s talented offense, and its size inside. Jeremy Nicholas scored a game-high 21 points and grabbed eight rebounds, while center Joel Barndt added 14 and eight. From the outside, Tyree Anderson chipped in with 17 points as Rocky improved to 2-0 in the Frontier and 11-3 overall.

"It's a tough loss," Huse said. "Again, we just didn't shoot it well enough and Rocky did. But there's a lot of season left. We just have to regroup and get ready for the next game. We have to just be ready to step up and play better offensively."

The loss dropped the Lights to 1-1 in league play and 13-3 overall. Northern will be back on the floor when the Lights face Dickinson State Saturday at 4 p.m. in Dickinson, N.D. The Lights return home to host UM-Western next Thursday and Westminster next Saturday night.

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Skylights 54, Rocky Mountain 48

**MSU-N** – Kassie Barta 0-9 0-0 0, Natalee Faupel 7-11 1-1 17, Rachelle Bennett 2-10 5-5 9, Taylor Cummings 1-7 4-4 6, Megan Feldman 3-9 0-2 6, Molly Kreycik 1-2 0-0 2, A'Jha Edwards 4-11 0-0 8, Taybra Teeters 3-4 0-0 6. Totals: 21-63 10-12 54.

**RMC** – McKenzie Webinger 1-3 1-2 4, Kayla Lucas 1-4 1-2 3, Kelsey George 1-4 4-4 7, Brittany Kumm 2-5 1-2 6, Peyton Spencer 3-6 0-0 7, Taylor Kufeld 0-4 0-0 0, Katie Fitzpatrick 2-4 0-2 5, Megan Halstead 5-9 4-6 14, Mya Perrow-Donovan 0-3 2-2 2. Totals: 15-43 13-20 48.

Halftime: Northern 27-20. 3-pointers: MSU-N 2-15 (Faupel 2), RMC 5-19 (Webinger 1, George 1, Kumm 1Spencer 1, Fitzpatrick 1); Rebounds MSU-N 35 (Faupel 11, Edwards 9), RMC 31 (Kufeld 7); Fouls RMC 11, MSU-N 15; Fouled out: None.

Rocky Mountain 74, Lights 63
**MSU-N** – Roshawn West 2-6 0-0 6, Nicholas Blount 2-7 0-0 4, Allan Brown 0-4 0-0 0, Corbin Pearson 3-12 4-4 10, Alfie Miller 4-7 2-2 13, Gabe Finley 7-9 0-0 17, Mike LaValley 0-0 0-0 0, Will Perry 4-6 1-1 9, Jesse Vaughan 1-6 1-2 4, Pat Jensen 0-0 0-0 0, Xavier Shaw 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 23-57 8-9 63.

**RMC** – Sian Lane 5-8 4-7 15, Derek Graves 0-0 2-2 2, Tyree Anderson 6-12 4-4 17, Malachi Roberts 1-7 3-4 5, Rob Nyby 0-2 0-0 0, Joel Barndt 5-10 3-3 14, Jeremy Nicholas 7-9 6-6 21, Danny Little 0-1 0-0 0. Totals: 24-49 22-26 73.

Halftime: Rocky 34-32. 3-pointers: MSU-N 9-22 (West 2, Miller 3, Finley 3, Vaughan 1), RMC 4-11 (Lane 1, Anderson 1, Barndt 1, Nicholas 1); Rebounds: MSU-N 24 (West 4, Vaughan 4), RMC 34 (Barndt 8, Nicholas 8); Fouls: MSU-N 20, RMC 13; Fouled out: None.