It’s only January. It’s early in the Frontier Conference women’s basketball season, but home games don’t get much bigger for the Montana State University-Northern Skylights.

Tonight, the No. 18 Skylights (3-0, 13-2) put their perfect conference mark on the line when they host the UM-Western Bulldogs at 6 inside the Armory Gymnasium. And if that game isn’t big enough, Northern welcomes in No. 4 Westminster, the five-time defending conference champion Saturday night.

MSU-N comes into the weekend fresh off a stellar start to league play. Northern was able to grind out a road win at Rocky Mountain College last Thursday, then the Skylights nailed 13 3-pointers in a blowout victory at Dickinson State Saturday afternoon. The win at DSU was particularly impressive considering the Blue Hawks had been playing at a high level and had beaten upstart UGF just two days before.

However, things will take a dramatic turn for the streaking Skylights this weekend, as both Western and Westminster bring high-powered and experienced offensive teams to Havre. Still, the Skylights, who are the top-rated defense in the country, allowing just 48 points per game, will be ready. Northern is also the sixth-best rebounding team in the NAIA, and the Skylights rank in the Top 20 in the NAIA in 11 different statistical categories.

“We’re playing well,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “I really like where we’re at right now. But this is a very challenging weekend for us, even at home. The two teams coming in here are both very, very well coached, and both have very, very good players. So it’s going to be a tough two games.”

Of course, Northern has very good players, too, including the rise of true freshman Natalee Faupel. On last weekend’s road trip, Faupel scored 17 points and grabbed 11 rebounds at RMC, then she drilled six 3-pointers and scored 23 points against DSU. Faupel moved into the starting lineup back on Nov. 30, when sophomore guard Kacie McKeon went down with an ankle injury, and has played brilliantly since. And with McKeon getting close to being 100 percent, the Skylights could get even more dangerous, especially with A’Jha Edwards averaging 11 points and 10 rebounds per game, and with senior Kassie Barta shooting so well from the 3-point-line. Barta also hit six threes at DSU and scored 20 points. Juniors Taylor Cummings and Rachelle Bennett combine to average 18 points per game for an MSU-N team scoring 66 points per game and a squad which is beating teams by an average of 18 points per night.

But as well as things have come together for the Skylights thus far, tonight’s game, and Saturday’s for that matter, will be a different kind of test.

The Bulldogs (1-2, 7-6) may have somewhat of a benign record right now, but they are simply one of the most dangerous teams in the Frontier, and the reason why is senior forward Sammi Bignell (5-11). Bignell is scoring 17 points and pulling down eight rebounds per game for a Western squad which averages 62 points per game. The Bulldogs have talent around Bignell, including 5-10 forward McCall Hasquet,
sharpshooter Roxy Thurman and sophomore guard Melody McCloud. But no Bulldog averages in double figures besides Bignell, so stopping her will be a major key to MSU-N’s success.

“Western is very well-coached, they run really good stuff,” Mouat said. “And it all starts with Sammi Bignell. She’s as good as it gets in our league. She really makes them go. They have kids around her who play well, but she’s certainly the focal point. She can do so many things and hurt you in so many ways.

“Western also defends really well,” he added. “So we have to be very good on both ends of the floor. We can’t just rely on being good offensively, or just being good defensively. We have to put a complete game together. Their record is very misleading, too. They’ve played a very tough schedule, so this game is going to be a heck of a challenge.”

As challenging as tonight’s game will be for the Skylights, Saturday’s showdown with Westminster (3-0, 9-2) will be even more so. The Griffins have a Frontier regular season record of 42-4 dating back to the start of the 2010-11 campaign, and that means they rarely lose, at home, or on the road. And to complicate matters further, Northern hasn’t beaten Westminster since 2007.

Saturday night however, could be MSU-N’s best chance to knock off the mighty Griffins for the first time in six seasons. Westminster suffered heavy losses to graduation, including 2013 Frontier Player of the Year Nicole Yazzie, among others. The Griffins still have talent and, most importantly, balance. They are paced by senior forward Alli Blake’s (5-11) 13 points per game, while Shelby Ellsworth (5-11), who missed last season with an injury, averages 11. The Griffins will also get good production from Tia Pappas (5-7), Amy Krommenhoek (5-7) and Kelsey Wells (5-9).

But as good as Westminster still is individually, the Griffins’ system is what makes them really go. Saturday night will be an interesting battle as Northern’s defense goes head-to-head with the top 3-point shooting team in the NAIA. Westminster shoots 42 percent from beyond the arc as a team. The Griffins also allow just 58 points per game, which makes them dominant on both ends of the floor, and a very tough team to figure out.

“They (Griffins) lost some great ones last year,” Mouat said. “But they are still Westminster. They have talent and depth. As always, they are super-well coached.

“They (Griffins) are the number one 3-point shooting team in the country,” he continued. “And they flat out guard you. They are great on defense. So we’ll have our hands full on both ends. We have to not only guard the perimeter well, but we have to stay with them in transition. They are fast and athletic, and they can really get out and run. And we have to put the ball in the hole. You have to execute and make shots in order to have any success against them.”

Northern will indeed have its hands full with both the Griffins and Bulldogs this weekend. But both teams will certainly have their hands full with the Skylights as well. Northern is riding high right now, ranked as high as an MSU-N women’s team has been in seven years, and the Skylights are firmly entrenched in the thick of the Frontier race. Not to mention, MSU-N has the home-court advantage, an advantage the Skylights relish. And that should make for an exciting weekend of hoops.

“We’re really pumped for these games,” Bennett said. “They are against two really good teams, and they’re big games. It will be really exciting. We’ll have all our fans back and that really motivates us. The support we get at Northern is so amazing.”

Tonight’s game between the Skylights and Bulldogs tips off at 6 in the Armory Gymnasium. Saturday night’s tilt against Westminster will also tip at 6 p.m. The Skylights return to the road to face Montana Tech and Carroll College next weekend.

No. 18 Skylights (3-0, 13-2) vs UM-Western (1-2, 7-6) and No. 4 Westminster (3-0, 9-3) Tonight and Saturday night at 6 p.m in the Armory Gymnasium

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM

Streaming: www.msun.edu/athletic
Twitter: Twitter/Havredaily

MSU-N Probable Starters

G Taylor Cummings, 5-5, Jr. 8 ppg
G Rachelle Bennett, 5-7, Jr. 9 ppg
F Natalee Faupel, 5-10, Fr. 9 ppg
F Megan Feldman, 6-1, Jr ., 6 rpg
C A'Jha Edwards, 6-5, Jr ., 11 ppg