The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team knew its matchup with the UM-Western Bulldogs wasn’t going to be a walk in the park, regardless of how well the Skylights had been playing coming in.

And while it was by no means easy, the Skylights sure made it look that way in the final 10 minutes of the contest.

The No. 18 Skylights outscored the Bulldogs 17-2 in the final seven minutes in a 66-43 victory Thursday night at the Armory Gymnasium. The win over Western pushed MSU-N to 4-0 in league play and in a first-place tie entering Saturday night’s huge showdown with the No. 4 Westminster Griffins.

“Western came in ready to play. They were fired up,” Mouat said, “and they played very hard and really played well. So the final score definitely doesn’t tell the whole story.

“But I thought our kids did a real nice job of executing, especially in the second half. And because of that, we were able to get a lead and then build on it. Once again, we defended really well,” he continued. “And then, in the second half, I thought we moved the ball much better, we got made better shots and we made more shots.”

It was a tale of two halves indeed, but one thing that was constant was the MSU-N defense, and center A’Jha Edwards, who pulled down a remarkable 21 rebounds, to go along with 10 points, while junior Rachelle Bennett was able to slow down Western star Sammi Bignell, to the tune of just 12 points and five boards. Bignell came in averaging 17 points and eight boards per game.

“A’Jha’s effort on the boards tonight was tremendous,” Mouat said. “She really did a great job in the paint all night, against what I thought was a really scrappy and physical team from Western. And once again, Rachelle Bennett was challenged with guarding a great player. Sammi (Bignell) is one of the best, if not the best in our league right now, and I thought Rachelle did an outstanding job, on both ends of the floor. I’m really proud of her.”

As good as Bennett, and the entire defense was, limiting Western to 36 percent shooting, only two 3-pointers and forcing 15 turnovers, for a time, it looked like Bignell and the Bulldogs were going to take over.

Following Kacie McKeon’s first basket since mid-November — the junior missed over a month with an ankle injury — the Skylights were out in front 19-11 with just 7:20 to go in the first half. However, Bignell got the Bulldogs going, and only a Kassie Barta trey with :42 left in the half kept Western from pulling ahead with 20 minutes left. Barta’s three gave Northern a slim, 26-24 edge at the break.
"I thought were really tight against their zone in the first half," Mouat said. "And credit Western for coming out and playing really hard and defending us right way. But I felt like we just were a little tentative, and we just weren’t executing as well as we could have."

That all changed early in the second stanza.

Bennett scored seven points right away, and her first three gave Northern a 40-30 lead with 14:50 left. Western hung tough for a few more minutes, but the Skylights finished with a vengeance. Barta was knock in two more triples, while Bennett and Natalee Faupel each hit one more. Molly Kreycik capped the run with a bomb, while Western was held without a field goal for the final 6:43 of the contest.

“We have a lot of respect for Western,” Edwards said. “And we knew Sammi (Bignell) can really score. And I just think, in the second half, we locked her up more and that really helped us. Once we did that, we were able to get more going on offense.”

As for her big night on the boards, Edwards was unaware of her accomplishment. She was more concerned with the victory, and with how well her team played as one.

“I just try to grab every board I can,” she said. “That’s my mentality every game. This team just plays really well together. We have great balance, we have a great inside-out game, and I think we got that working for us tonight.”

Bennett paced the Skylights offensively with 14 points, including a pair of Northern’s seven three’s. Barta added 12 points on 3-of-6 shooting from beyond the arc, while Taylor Cummings chipped in with nine and Megan Feldman added seven points and seven of Northern’s whopping 44 rebounds.

Thursday night’s victory gives the nationally ranked Skylights a stellar 14-2 overall record, but perhaps more importantly, it gives MSU-N even more momentum heading into Saturday’s bout with the Griffins. Northern has now won back-to-back Frontier games by double digits, and the Skylights’ top-rated defense has held three of its four Frontier opponents under 50 points.

“We definitely played well tonight, especially in the second half,” Mouat said. “And this was a big one for us, because Western is a very good basketball team, and they are going to win a lot of games in our league this season. Saturday night will be a very tough game for us. Westminster is awfully good. But right now, I’m just proud of our kids for their approach to this game and for getting another win under their belt.”

Northern and Westminster will meet Saturday at 6 p.m. inside the Armory Gymnasium. The Griffins play at UGF tonight.

**Skylights are 4-0 in Frontier, 14-2 overall; Next Up: vs Westminster Saturday**

### Skylights 66, Western 43

**UM-W** - Kacie Matthies 3-9 0-0 6, Sammi Bignell 5-11 2-5 12, Roxy Thurman 2-9 1-1 6, Jenna Banks 2-5 2-3 6, McCall Hasquet 4-7 0-0 9, Baylie Smith 1-2 0-0 2, Breyenne Mosey0-1 2-2 2. Totals: 17-53 7-13 43.

**MSU-N** - Megan Feldman 3-6 1-2 7, A’Jha Edwards 4-11 2-4 10, Natalee Faupel 2-9 0-0 5, Rachelle Bennett 4-7 4-4 14, Taylor Cummings 1-6 7-8 9, Kassie Barta 4-8 1-2 12, Kacie McKeon 1-4 0-0 3, Molly Kreycik 2-3 1-1 6; Taybra Teeters 0-1 0-0 0. Totals: 21 54-16-21 66.
Halftime-Northern 26-24. 3pointers: MSU-N 8-17 (Faupel 1, Bennett 2, Barta 3, McKeon 1, Kreycik 1), UM-W 2-12 (Thurman 1, Hasquet 1); Rebounds: MSU-N 44 (Edwards 21), UM-W 27 (Kacie Matthies 5, Bignell 5); Fouls: MSU-N 16, UM-W 17. Fouled out: None.