Westminster runs away from MSU-N women
Griffins pull away from Skylights in a showdown of NAIA powers

By George Ferguson
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Once again, the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team played defense at a tremendously high level. But, for the first time in Frontier Conference play, it was to no avail.

The No. 4 Westminster Griffins made just enough shots, and played a great defensive game themselves, in handing the No. 18 Skylights their first conference loss of the season. The Griffins upended the Skylights 60-46 Saturday night at the Armory Gymnasium, dropping Northern to 4-1 in league play and 14-3 overall. Westminster improved to 5-0 in the Frontier and 11-4 overall.

And while the final score may have indicated that Westminster pulled away from the Skylights, it actually happened at the end of the first half, and not late in the contest. In the final 20 minutes, MSU-N’s vaunted defense held the Griffins to just eight field goals and two 3-pointers, but it was a 12-2 run to end the first half which helped the Griffins put the Skylights in a hole they couldn’t climb out of.

“We killed ourselves at the end of the first half,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “We did not play well in that stretch right there, and they gained all the momentum. Them (Griffins) having an 11-point lead is like other teams being up 20 because they play such great defense, and because they are so talented.

“I was really proud of our kids for the way they fought in the second half,” he continued. “I thought, defensively, we were still very good. But that run at the end of the first half was too much to give up against a team like Westminster.”

Northern, which hasn’t beaten the Griffins since 2007, did play with them step for step for much of the first half, and most of the second. The Griffins jumped out to a 10-2 lead, but threes from Kassie Barta and Kacie McKeon off the bench, as well as buckets by Megan Feldman, got the Skylights right back in the contest.

And a 3-point play by Molly Kreycik, as well as putback by Feldman got the Skylights to within four points at 23-19 with just 4:18 left until halftime. From there, however, the Griffins took command. Alli Blake scored nine of her game-high 29 points in the final four minutes of the half, and the Griffins closed on a 12-2 run to lead 30-19 at the break.

To start the second half, the Skylights got back-to-back scores from A’Jha Edwards and Natalee Faupel to cut the gap to seven, and MSU-N stayed within that range on and off throughout the period. But Westminster’s defense was outstanding and Blake seemed unstoppable, while the Skylights just couldn’t overcome the halftime deficit.
“They (Griffins) played great,” Mouat said. “Alli Blake had a huge game. She’s a mismatch for a lot of teams and she was for us tonight. Westminster is the type of team that takes advantage of every mistake you make, and tonight, unfortunately, we were our own worst enemy. We made too many mistakes, we had too many turnovers and they made us pay all night long.

“I thought we battled defensively,” Mouat added. “But in the end, we made too many mistakes and didn’t make enough shots.”

Coming into the contest, the Griffins were the No. 1 3-point shooting team in the NAIA, but the Skylights held them to just five makes on the night. Northern also held its own on the boards, but Blake was too much to handle. She went 8-of-14 from the floor and made 13-of-15 free throws.

The Skylights got another double-double from Edwards, who scored 12 points and grabbed 12 rebounds. Faupel added 10 points and Feldman scored eight and pulled down six rebounds. But, in all, MSU-N shot just 25 percent from beyond the arc, while the Griffins forced the Skylights into an uncharacteristic 18 turnovers.

The loss Saturday night to the five-time defending Frontier champions didn’t hurt Northern in the conference standings all that much, as the Skylights are alone in second place and are one of just three teams above .500 in league play. However, Northern must quickly rebound as it has two tough road games coming up this weekend.

“I told the kids, I was really proud of our effort,” Mouat said. “Our effort was great tonight. But effort alone doesn’t beat teams like Westminster. We needed to make more shots and make less mistakes and we didn’t do that. So now, we’ll learn from this game and move on.”

The Skylights visit Montana Tech Friday night in Butte and Carroll College Saturday night in Helena.

**Skylights are 4-1 in Frontier, 14-3 overall; Next Up at Montana Tech Friday**

**Westminster 60, Skylights 46**

WM - Shelby Ellsworth 1-4 0-0 3, Kelsi Wells 1-7 0-0 3, Alli Blake 8-14 13-15 29, Tia Pappas 1-5 5-6 7, Alli Winters 3-5 0-1 9, Katie Walker 1-1 0-0 3, Amy Krommenhoek 2-3 0-0 4, Amanda Hacking 1-1 0-0 2. Totals: 18-41 19-26 60.

MSU-N - Megan Feldman 4-6 0-0 8, A’Jha Edwards 6-9 0-1 12, Natalee Faupel 2-5 5-7 10, Taylor Cummings 1-6 2-2 4, Kassie Barta 2-7 0-0 6, Kacie McKeon 1-1 0-0 3, Molly Kreycik 1-2 1-1 3, Taybra Teeters 0-1 0-0 0, Rachelle Bennett 0-5 0-0 0. Totals: 17-42 8-11 46.

Halftime: Westminster 30-19. 3-pointers: MSU-N 4-16 (Faupel 1, Barta 2, McKeon 1), WM 5-16 (Ellsworth 1, Walker 1, Blake 3); Rebounds: MSU-N 25 (Edwards 12), WM 28 (Blake 9); Fouls: MSU-N 18, WM 18; Fouled out: Ellsworth.