Sinking the Argos: MSU-N women out-shoot high-scoring UGF at home

By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern Skylights play defense, and they play it well. But these girls can score, too.

Northern knew it was going to have to put points in the board against the high-scoring Great Falls Argos Friday night at the Armory Gymnasium, no matter how well the No. 17 Skylights played defense.

And that's exactly what MSU-N did. In front of a big crowd at the Armory, MSU-N rode a 23-point, 15-rebound double-double from A’Jha Edwards as well as 66 percent shooting in the second half to a 71-61 Frontier Conference victory over the Argos in Havre.

It was MSU-N’s sixth straight win over UGF, and it also kept the Skylights (6-2, 16-4) right in the thick of the Frontier Conference race.

“We knew this game would be different than some of our other league games,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “UGF is so explosive, they have so much firepower, and they don’t go away offensively. So we knew we had to score points tonight and keep on scoring and, fortunately, we were able to do that. We had a lot of different kids step up and play well offensively, and we were able to hold off a really talented and explosive UGF team. We just have so much respect for them (Argos). They are very, very good, so we feel very fortunate to win tonight.”

Edwards had a huge night in her matchup with UGF center Lindsey Abramson, who came in averaging 18 points and a league-high 12 rebounds per game. But it wasn’t just on the offensive end where Northern was special Friday night. The Argos might have scored 61 points on a Northern team only allowing 49 points per game, but the Skylights’ defense did a number on Abramson, who was in foul trouble all night and only scored six points, as well as the Frontier’s leading scorer, UGF’s Erin Legel, who was held to just 14 points and one assist.

“It was a big focus for us, not to let them (Legel and Abramson) win it for them,” said Northern junior Taylor Cummings, who was one of four Skylights in double figures. “Lindsey got into foul trouble and that helped, but I thought we did a really good job on defense. We knew it was going to be a challenge; they are both really good players. But I thought we played great team defense, and that was definitely a goal of ours coming in.”

And with Abramson and Legel held mostly in check, the Skylights turned their attention to lighting up the Armory scoreboard.
MSU-N ripped off a 10-2 run behind easy buckets in the paint by Edwards and two layups from Cummings. But UGF’s biggest push came midway through the first half when the Argos went on a 17-4 run and led 19-17 with 7:52 left in the half.

But, as was the case all night, the Skylights had answers offensively. Freshman Natalee Faupel hit a 3-pointer from the left corner, while Edwards scored six more in the paint, and MSU-N closed the half on a 15-5 run which put the Skylights ahead 33-27 at intermission.

Northern heated up even more in the final 20 minutes. Rachelle Bennett scored all of her points in the second half, including six straight to put MSU-N up 41-33 with 15 minutes left. And Northern was able to stretch that lead when Edwards was fouled on a made putback and UGF’s Mary Wilmore was whistled for a technical foul. The sequence turned into five more points for MSU-N and a 14-point lead with 12:05 left.

The offensive fireworks continued, as UGF’s Taylor Statten and Darah Huertas-Vining tried to keep things close with a string of threes. But Northern had too much Edwards, too much Bennett, too much Cummings and too much of its own firepower to let UGF come back, and when Bennett tipped in a missed layup with 4:12 left, the Skylights were back in front by 13 points, and UGF’s chances at a rally were thwarted.

In all, MSU-N shot a sizzling 56 percent from the field and 50 percent from three. MSU-N also out-rebounded UGF 35-28 and only turned the ball over eight times, in what was one of the Skylight’s most complete games of the season.

Cummings scored 19 points to add to Edwards’ 23. The 6-5 transfer from Arizona, meanwhile, went 11-of-17 from the floor and pulled down six offensive rebounds to go with one block. Bennett scored all 13 of her points in the second half, while Faupel had another big game, scoring 15 points and grabbing seven rebounds.

“A’Jha was huge inside,” Cummings said, “and that opens things up on the outside for us. All of our guards were really aggressive tonight, and I think we played off each other really well. We played great as a team tonight."

“A lot of different kids stepped up in different ways, on both ends of the floor,” Mouat added. “We had kids make big shots, get big rebounds, and make big plays on defense. I thought we were also very unselfish again tonight too. We had great ball movement and we did a great job of finding the right person.

“We did play very well offensively,” he continued. “And we had to because UGF is an explosive offensive team, and we knew they were never going to go away.”

The Argos, who will turn around and host the Skylights Thursday night in Great Falls, got 16 points from freshman Nneka Nnadi, while Statten added 15 and Huertas-Vining scored 14.

And while Northern knows how tough the return trip to Great Falls will be, the Skylights were thrilled to win another game at home in what’s shaping up to be an excellent season, and an exciting stretch run.

“Really happy we won,” Mouat said. “We beat a really good team tonight. We had great balance and great effort tonight, but we know things will again be very challenging against them (Argos) next week.”

“It was big to win this one at home,” Cummings added. “We know they’re going to be really tough next Thursday, but this win shows it won’t be easy to beat us when we play them again. So this win was huge for us.”

The Northern/UGF rematch is set for Thursday night in Great Falls. The Skylights also travel to nationally ranked Lewis-Clark State Saturday night.

**Skylights are 6-2 in Frontier, 16-4 overall; Next Up: at UGF Thursday**

**Skylights 71, Great Falls 61**
UGF - Mary Wilmore 2-4 0-0 4, Lindsey Abramson 2-7 2-2 6, Erin Legel 6-12 0-1 14, Taylor Statton 5-11 2-2 15, Darah Huertas-Vining 4-8 3-4 14, Mackenzie Owens 0-4 2-2 2, Nneka Nnadi 6-9 4-5 16. Totals: 25-55 13-16 71.

MSU-N - Megan Feldman 2-4 1-1 5, A'Jha Edwards 11-17 1-3 23, Natalee Faupel 4-7 6-6 15, Rachelle Bennett 5-7 2-4 13, Taylor Cummings 3-4 13-14 19, Kassie Barta 0-2 1-2 1, Kacie McKeon 0-2 0-0 0, Molly Kreycik 0-1 1-4 1, Taybra Teeters 1-2 2-4 4. Totals: 26-46 27-38 81.

Halftime--Northern 33-27. 3-pointers -- UGF 8-19 (Wilmore 0-1, Abramson 0-1, Legel 2-4, Statton 3-3, Huertas-Vining 3-7, Owens 0-1, Nnadi 0-2), MSU-N 2-4 (Faupel 1-1, Bennett 1-1, Barta 0-1, McKeon 0-1). Fouled out -- Wilmore, Statton, Nnadi. Rebounds -- UGF 21 (Nnadi 6), MSU-N 35 (Edwards 15). Assists -- UGF 5 (Statton 2), MSU-N 9 (Bennett 4). Total fouls -- UGF 28, MSU-N 17.

Montana State University-Northern’s A’Jha Edwards, left, looks for a shoot against UGF’s Mary Wilmore during Friday night’s Frontier women’s game at the Armory Gymnasium. Edwards scored 23 points and grabbed 15 rebounds for the victorious Skylights.