Tech, LC State set to challenge MSU-N women
By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team is getting set for the NAIA Game of the Week. But, the Skylights have to get through one difficult game before they get to an even bigger one.

Tonight, the No. 19 Skylights (7-3, 17-5) are home to host the Montana Tech Orediggers in a key Frontier Conference showdown. The game, which tips off at 6 inside the Armory Gymnasium is a prelude to Saturday’s massive rematch with No. 13 Lewis-Clark State, also in Havre.

Northern enters this weekend’s games fresh off a dramatic road split. Last Thursday night, MSU-N won a thriller at UGF 53-52, but fell at LC State 80-68 last Saturday night. Northern is still very much in the Frontier title hunt with six games left, and though getting a chance to play the Warriors for the second time in six days is intriguing, the Skylights won’t look any farther than Montana Tech.

Tonight is about the Orediggers, and about bouncing back from a tough loss, something MSU-N has done well this season.

“This has been a very resilient team,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “They have dealt with all the things that have been thrown at them. This league is so tough, you’re going to have some games that don’t go your way. And our kids have done a nice job of bouncing back all season long. They have done a really good job of battling back. That’s due to us having really good leadership. I really like the way this team battles.”

The Skylights are in for two more battles this weekend.

The Orediggers (4-6, 8-9) may be under .500, but they certainly have the roster of a championship caliber team. And like Northern, Tech is also a very good defensive team. The Diggers’ lead the NAIA in defensive rebounds per game at 30, and a big reason why is their star power in the paint. Senior Kelsey DeWit (6-2) is a four-year starter, averaging 10 points and five rebounds per night. And while her overall numbers might be down, she’s had huge games against the Skylights in the past. The addition of 6-0 Kabri Emerson has been big as well. She averages 10 points and leads the Diggers with seven rebounds per outing. Junior guard Mandy Machinal (5-7) leads the team with 13 points per game, but she’s certainly capable of scoring much more than that, while Victoria Turner is another outstanding shooting guard with good size.

Offensively, the Diggers have struggled at times this season, but they’ve picked up the pace in recent weeks as well. And though Northern will counter with its NAIA leading defense, Mouat expects to see a much different Tech team than the one the Skylights beat 58-42 last month in Butte.

“They’ve gone through a coaching change,” Mouat said. “They’ve really rallied around that situation. They are playing better right now, and they are playing a different style than when we played them in Butte. We’ll be prepared, but it will still be a whole new deal seeing them again.
“This will be a very tough game,” he continued. “Tech is as talented as anybody out there. They have two really good post players, and they have Mandy Machinal who is a great guard. And their cast around those three is playing well. They play really well defensively, and they are explosive offensively. We’ll have to be on our toes on both ends of the floor.”

Of course, both the Diggers and Warriors will have to be on their toes in the Armory as well. Not only is Northern leading the NAIA in scoring defense, but MSU-N is right behind Tech in rebounding defense. The Skylights are third in the NAIA in that category, and are out-rebounding opponents by an average margin of six per night.

The rebounding numbers have something to do with 6-5 center A’Jha Edwards, who seems to be getting better and better as the season goes on. Edwards averages a double-double at 12 points and 11 rebounds per outing, and her play will be crucial against the Orediggers’ big front line. Junior Taylor Cummings has picked up her scoring of late as well. Cummings averages 10 points per game, and has scored in double figures in four straight contests. Rachelle Bennett and Natalee Faupel average nine per night, while Kassie Barta and Kacie McKeon give MSU-N some big-time 3-point shooting off the bench.

And speaking of 3-point shooting, slowing down Lewis-Clark State’s 3-point shooting will be critical in Saturday’s huge rematch. Northern trailed the Warriors (9-1, 22-2) by 20 points at halftime of last Saturday’s game in Idaho, and though the Skylights fought valiantly in the second half, the deficit was too big to overcome, and Mouat says the reason why was early bombs by the Warriors.

“We let them (Warriors) get loose on us from the 3-point-line early on,” Mouat said. “And Tanis Fuller played as complete a game as we’ve seen all year. So obviously, this time around, getting off to a good start and maintaining that level of play will be key. You just can’t fall behind a team like LC by 20 points and expect to have success.

“They are a very good basketball team,” he continued. “They do pretty much everything well. They shoot it, they have a ton of athleticism, they defend, they press and they rebound. They are pretty complete.”

The Warriors are a complete team. They lead the Frontier in scoring offense, averaging 80 points per contest, but they also only allow 58 points per game. They play a vaunted full-court press that really rattles teams, and they have talent at every position. Fuller (5-10) is the catalyst, as she scored 24 points against MSU-N last Saturday. However, a healthy Brittaney Niebergall (5-3), true freshman Caelyn Orlandi (5-9) and weapons like Natahanee Spencer (5-6) and Loree Hill (6-2) make LCSC a team which is very difficult to defend.

Still, even with LCSC’s firepower, and even though they lost by 12 points last Saturday, the Skylights are excited and anxious to get another shot at the Warriors. Northern has played well all season long, and if the Skylights play to their potential for a full 40 minutes, they know they can handle the Warriors in their own gym.

“We learned a lot from the first half of that game,” Mouat said. “And I think the kids are pretty excited to have another chance at them. We have to worry about Montana Tech first, and this is a big weekend at home for us. But I think the girls are really looking forward to playing LC again. We have a tremendous amount of respect for their program, they are very, very good. But we know we can play much better than we did down there and they are looking forward to that opportunity.”

Tonight’s game between MSU-N and Tech tips off at 6 at the Armory Gymnasium. Saturday’s Game of the Week between Northern and LC State also tips at 6 p.m. The Skylights are on the road to face Western and Westminster next weekend.

No. 19 Skylights (7-3, 17-5) vs Tech (4-6, 8-9) and No. 13 LC State (9-1, 22-2) tonight and Saturday night at 6 p.m. in the Armory Gymnasium

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