The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team knows what it’s like to be the hottest team in the Frontier Conference. But the Skylights got a taste of what it’s like to go up against the hottest team Thursday night in Dillon.

The UM-Western Bulldogs won their sixth straight conference game by beating the No. 19 Skylights 70-58 Thursday night. The loss was Northern’s second straight, and it dropped the Skylights into a tie for third place in the league standings with the Bulldogs. Both teams are now 8-5 in league play with three games left in the regular season.

“We just couldn’t stop them (Bulldogs) when we were on defense,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said of Thursday night’s loss. “Give them (Bulldogs) credit. They are hot right now, and they played well. It was no surprise to us that they played really well tonight. What was surprising is we didn’t play as well as we were capable of. Especially on defense. I thought we took a step back defensively tonight.”

Northern did lead throughout much of the first half, but Western went on a run late, and wound up taking 37-28 lead into halftime. The Skylights pulled even a couple of times in the second stanza, but the Bulldogs wound up shooting 50 percent for the game, and went 21-of-30 from the foul line. The Skylights also didn’t have an answer for the Bulldog’s dribble penetration. Star senior Sammi Bignell scored a game-high 20 points, while Roxy Thurman added 15 points including an 11-of-12 performance from the charity stripe. Western scored 70 point and only made three 3-pointers on the night.

“We just couldn’t stop them driving to the basket,” Mouat said. “That was a big factor. And on the other end, we didn’t shoot it well enough. We got close a couple of times, but we didn’t shoot the ball well enough to get over the hump.”

Freshman Natalee Faupel did have a big game for the Skylights, scoring 17 points and grabbing 13 rebounds. Faupel also buried three triples for the Skylights, who shot 40 percent from the floor and out-rebounded Western 37-30. Rachelle Bennett added 14 points for Northern and A’Jha Edwards scored 10.

The loss was a tough one for the Skylights, who beat Western 66-43 last month in Havre, and things won’t get any easier. Northern travels to No. 3 Westminster in what is the Skylights’ final road game of the season Saturday night in Salt Lake City.

The Griffins (13-0, 19-2) beat UGF 71-50 Thursday night in Salt Lake, and are still unbeaten in conference play. They also handled MSU-N 60-46 last month at the Armory Gymnasium.

“They (Griffins) are deep and talented,” Mouat said. “But what impresses me is how efficient they are. They don’t make mistakes. They don’t turn it over, and they make you play for every mistake you make. They are loaded offensively and can score in many different ways. And they are a machine on defense. They just really get after teams.”

The Griffins are all of the things Mouat mentioned and more. They are second only to Northern in scoring defense in the NAIA, and they average 68 points per game, and lead the NAIA in 3-point percentage. As a team, Westminster shoots 42 percent from beyond the arc, while the Griffins are in the Top 20 in the NAIA in 17 different statistical categories.
Offensively, Westminster is led by Alli Blake’s 14 points per game. She scored 29 against the Skylights last month. But Blake gets plenty of help. Tia Pappas, Amy Kromenhook and Shelby Ellsworth all average around 11 points per game.

“This is a tough road trip,” Mouat said. “We knew it would be. Now we just have to go down to Westminster and play the best we can. We have to play very well on both ends and see what happens.”

Saturday’s game between the Skylights (18-7) and the Griffins will tip off at 5:30 p.m. in Salt Lake City. MSU-N will close out the regular season with games against Dickinson State next Thursday night and Rocky Mountain College next Friday.

*Skylights are 8-5 in the Frontier and 18-7 overall; Next Up: At No. 3 Westminster Saturday*

**UM-Western 70, Skylights 58**

**MSU-N** – Kassie Barta 0-4 0-0 0, Kacie McKeon 1-11 0-0 2, Natalee Faupel 4-7 6-7 17, Rachelle Bennett 4-9 5-7 14, Taylor Cummings 2-5 1-3 6, Megan Feldman 2-2 1-4 5, Molly Kreycik 1-3 0-0 2, A’Jha Edwards 5-9 0-1 10, Taybra Teeters 1-1 0-0 2. Totals: 20-51 13-22 58.

**UM-W** – Kelsey Callaghan 1-1 4-6 7, Sammi Bignell 9-17 1-3 20, Roxy Thurman 2-6 11-12 15, Jenna Banks 3-4 4-6 10, Rosie O’Brien 1-1 0-0 3, Baylie Smith 4-5 1-1 9, Kaci Matthies 3-7 0-2 6. Totals: 23-46 21-30 70.

Halftime: Western 37-28. 3-pointers: MSU-N 5-20 (Faupel 3, Bennett 1, Cummings 1), UM-W 3-12 (Callaghan 1, Bignell 1 O’Brien 1). Rebounds: MSU-N 37 (Faupel 13), UM-W 30 (Bignell 6, Thurman 6) Fouls: MSU-N 24, UM-W 13; Fouled out: Cummings.