Friday will be special for MSU-N seniors
Memorable Northern seniors ready for home finale
By George Ferguson
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The last home stand of any season is big for the Montana State University-Northern men’s and women’s basketball teams. That’s because the Lights and Skylights are always in the thick of the Frontier Conference races heading down the home stretch.

But the final home game of the regular season is also more than just a basketball game. It’s also senior night, and this Friday night will be an emotional one for many MSU-N seniors.

Both Northern teams have put themselves in a position to host Frontier playoff games, but Friday’s games against Rocky Mountain College will be the last official home games for the MSU-N seniors, and all will be honored before the games.

The Skylights are young by grade, and will only have one senior taking center stage Friday night. But she’s had a profound impact on the MSU-N program. Kassie Barta, a native of Fairfield, came to the Skylights from Miles Community College and has been an impact player for the Skylights ever since.

In her junior season, she averaged four points per game coming off the bench for MSU-N, but was one of Northern’s best 3-point shooters during the 2012-13 season. In her final campaign, Barta’s production has climbed even more. She’s averaging eight points per night for the nationally ranked Skylights, and she scored a career-high 23 against NW Indian College in late December. Barta has also hit 44 3-pointers this season, including six in a game twice. She’s shooting 34 percent from beyond the arc, and in conference play, has really given Northern a spark in big games.

“Kassie has made a big impact on our program. She has always been a very good shooter and leads us in 3-point field goals made,” MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said. “Kassie has worked hard to increase her strength as well, and it’s paid dividends on the defensive end of the floor. She is a student of the game and very smart. She has been a good leader on and off of the court, and a very good student in a very challenging degree area. She’s been a model student-athlete in our program and has an incredibly bright future.”

While the Skylights will say goodbye to Barta Friday night, the Lights have a host of great seniors to honor before their huge showdown with RMC.

Roshawn West, Alfie Miller, Mike LaValley, Allan Brown and Will Perry have all been instrumental in helping MSU-N continue to be one of the premier programs in the Frontier Conference.

LaValley has been at Northern for five years and has been part of two different Frontier championship teams and three NAIA national tournament appearances. Coming to MSU-N from Missoula, LaValley has been a key role player on several different Lights’ teams, and in his senior season, his production has really increased. He plays both point guard and shooting guard, and has been always been an emotional leader for the Lights as well.
West and Miller, who hail from Seattle, Perry, from Bremerton, Wash., and Brown, from Sacramento, Calif., all came in together, and were part of a recruiting class which had to follow a departing senior class which had won back-to-back Frontier championships. It was a tough act to follow, yet, last year the Lights once again won 20 games and returned to the national tournament.

West, in less than two full seasons at MSU-N has averaged 10 points and two assists per game for the Lights. He has made 82 3-pointers at MSU-N and scored a career-high 27 points in a game last season, and also has a career-best of eight 3-pointers made in one game. Miller’s career average at Northern is 12 points per game, but he’s led the Lights in scoring all season long and is averaging 15 points per outing right now. He has quickly become one of the most prolific 3-point shooters in school history, having made 172 treys entering the final weekend of the regular season.

Perry, who missed a portion of his senior season with a knee injury, has been invaluable to the Lights. Playing power forward at just 6-4, he has been one of Northern’s best defenders and rebounders the last two seasons. Perry is asked to defend much bigger players night in and night out, and he does so effectively. He’s also been an excellent scorer on the low block, and is a true floor general for the Lights. For his career, he’s averaged six points and five rebounds for the Lights, but the intangibles he’s brought to the program are so much more than just stats.

Brown is much the same. A two-year starter at point guard, Brown has been a true floor leader for Northern. He’s averaged just four points per game for his career, to go along with two assists per night, but he is also one of MSU-N’s best lockdown defenders and he is a timely 3-point shooter. Almost quietly, Brown has knocked in 113 three’s for his career, including 71 this season. But again, it’s the intangibles which makes Brown such a crucial part of the Northern puzzle.

Together, over the last two seasons, the senior class of LaValley, Miller, Brown, Perry and West have also won a remarkable 45 games against just 16 defeats. They went to the NAIA national tourney last spring and have the Lights headed in that direction again.

“I cannot say enough good things about the seniors,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “They have been great leaders and teammates. And this weekend, we need to show our appreciation to them by playing and coaching as focused as ever, on their behalf.”

The Northern seniors will be honored before the start of each game against Rocky Mountain College Friday night at the Armory Gymnasium. MSU-N is also home to face Dickinson State Thursday night.