Skylights aim for strong finish against DSU, RMC
By George Ferguson
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It’s been quite some time since the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team has gone this deep into the season holding on to an NAIA national ranking. And it’s been nine years since the Skylights last made the NAIA national tournament.

But playing at home in the final two games of the regular season, the No. 22 Skylights (8-6, 18-8) have a chance to end that drought and keep the national ranking they’ve held on to since January.

However, in order to do that, Northern must first end a streak of a different kind. MSU-N comes into tonight’s Frontier Conference game against Dickinson State on a three-game losing skid, a streak which included back-to-back losses on the road last weekend. The Skylights and Blue Hawks tip off at the Armory Gymnasium tonight at 6, while MSU-N wraps up the regular season with its senior night game against Rocky Mountain College Friday night at 6 p.m.

Northern has a lot to play for this weekend, and has the advantage of playing the two teams sitting at the bottom of the conference on the final weekend of the season. At stake for MSU-N is clinching a third-place finish in the Frontier and a home game in next week’s playoffs. Two wins this weekend could also put the Skylights in a position to lock up an at-large berth in the NAIA national tournament as well, so the stakes are high.

But the goal in front of Northern right now is simply to play better, especially at the start of tonight’s game. In three of MSU-N’s last four games, the Skylights have fallen behind by double digits in the first half.

That’s a trend, along with shooting the ball better than they did last weekend, that head coach Chris Mouat would like to see change this weekend. The Skylights are still No. 1 in the NAIA in scoring defense, allowing just 52 points per game, and that bodes well against two teams which can struggle offensively.

However, against both the Blue Hawks and Bears, Northern needs to be more consistent on offense. A’Jha Edwards leads the way with 12 points and 11 rebounds per game, while Taylor Cummings and Rachelle Bennett average nine apiece. Natalee Faupel chips in with eight points per game, and when senior Kassie Barta and sophomore Kacie McKeon get going from the 3-point-line, that’s when Northern really starts to click.

And MSU-N will need to be clicking on offense this weekend. The Blue Hawks (5-9, 15-12) have been a tough out for the rest of the Frontier all season long, and though the Skylights crushed them 82-43 last month in Dickinson, Mouat won’t let his team rest on that fact tonight.

“Dickinson State is a well balanced team with four players averaging double figures,” he said. “All are capable of big nights offensively. They have a definite inside-out balance with quality guards and strong
post players. They have been playing very well lately, and pose many challenges for us defensively. As a group, they are strong on the boards at both ends.”

DSU is led by TaRicka Linzey’s (5-7) 13 points per game, but the Hawks are balanced. Mariah Duran (5-5) and JaLisa Gatlin (5-11) combine to score 22 per game while Jess Bygate (6-1) averages 11 points and seven rebounds per night and is an excellent player on both ends of the floor. As a team, DSU scores 66 points per outing, while the Hawks are a good 3-point shooting team as well.

Despite being winless in conference play, and already having lost to Northern last month in Billings, Rocky (0-14, 7-16) can be dangerous too. Brittany Kumm scores 12 points per night and is one of the best 3-point shooters in the Frontier. The Bears are also big in the paint, with Mya Donovan-Perow (6-0) and Megan Halstead (6-0) proving to be a very formidable tandem.

Rocky also brings something else to Havre which makes the Bears dangerous Friday night. They come in with nothing to lose and everything to gain. RMC has lost 13 straight games and hasn’t tasted victory since mid-December, and given the fact the Bears always play well in Havre, that makes them a scary senior night opponent for a Skylight team with lofty goals.

“Rocky is very athletic and they really get up and down the floor,” Mouat said. “They shoot it very well from the 3-point-line as a team and are quick off of the dribble to the rim. They have good team quickness and get after it on the defensive end. We must be aware of shooters at all times against them, because if you leave them they can really hurt you. Brittany Kumm is as good a shooter as there is in the league and has amazing range.

“These are exciting games,” Mouat added. “And we’re glad to be playing at home. We just want to come out and make sure we play better. That’s the main goal is to improve.”

Tonight’s game between MSU-N and DSU tips off at 6 inside the Armory Gymnasium. It’s also a blackout night. Northern’s regular season finale against RMC will tip off at 6 p.m. Friday night.

No. 22 Skylights (8-6, 18-6) vs DSU (5-9, 15-12) and RMC (0-14, 7-16) tonight and Friday in the Armory Gymnasium

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM

Streaming: www.msun.edu/athletics

Twitter: Twitter/Havredaily

MSU-N Probable Starters
G Taylor Cummings, 5-5, Jr. 9 ppg
G Rachelle Bennett, 5-7, Jr. 9 ppg
G Natalee Faupel, 5-10, Fr. 8 ppg
F Megan Feldman, 6-0, Jr. 5 rpg
C A’Jha Edwards, 6-5, Jr.12 ppg