Next: Skylights pull away from Saints

Strong second half lifts Northern women to exciting Frontier playoff victory

By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team won 10 games in the Frontier Conference regular season. And in nine of those, the Skylights held their opponent under 50 points. Needless to say, the Skylights can play some defense.

In the Frontier Conference playoffs, it was the same old story. The No. 21 Skylights held Carroll College to just 37 percent shooting and an abysmal 2-for-18 performance from the 3-point-line in a 58-47 quarterfinal win Monday night at the Armory Gymnasium. The victory over the Fighting Saints, in a game which was postponed Saturday night due to poor travel conditions, pushed MSU-N (21-8) into the Frontier semifinals for the third straight season, as well as gave the Skylights even more solid footing in the race for an at-large berth to the NAIA national tournament.

“It feels really good. Playing in a playoff game at home was big,” said Northern junior center A’Jha Edwards, who was unstoppable in the post Monday night. “We played a really good game and this win gives us a lot of confidence going into the game against LC (Lewis-Clark State).”

The Warriors are the Skylights’ next opponent, but first, MSU-N had to deal with a feisty Carroll team. But that Carroll team also had to deal with Edwards, and the Skylights, who were superb down the stretch.

Edwards was assertive in the post early in the second half, but Carroll was never going to go away. And a Jordan Bagley bucket tied things up at 39-39 with 7:21 left, and at that point, it was anybody’s game to win. However, Edwards made back-to-back layins, and Rachelle Bennett nailed a clutch shot from the top of the key to give MSU-N a six-point cushion again. Carroll cut the lead back to two on scores from Alison Sullivan and Bagley, but MSU-N took firm control from there.

Freshman Natalee Faupel hit a key shot with 3:39 to play, and Edwards followed with two more. Then, Megan Feldman capped an 8-0 Northern run with two free throws, and all of a sudden, the Skylight’s lead was 10 points with 1:59 to go, and the Saints never threatened again.

“We finished tonight,” MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said. “We did a really good job of making shots and free throws down the stretch. A’Jha was huge for us finishing around the basket. Rachelle Bennett stepped up and made a big shot when we really needed it. The bottom line was we executed at the end of the game. We finished, and that’s something I’m really proud of these kids for.

“I also thought we were really good defensively, and our guards deserve a lot of credit for that,” he continued. “Carroll has one of the best groups of guards in the league, and our guards chased them for a full 40 minutes and made it very tough for them to get good looks. That’s what we wanted to do, not let their perimeter players hurt us. Carroll is a very explosive team, and we could not afford to let their shooters get going on us. And I think we executed that game plan pretty well tonight.”
Indeed, the Carroll tandem of Bailey Snelling and Kalee Junkermeier came in averaging a combined 23 points per game, but they totaled just one point against the vaunted Skylight defense. Once again, Northern was big on the boards, out-rebounding the Saints 31-25, and Carroll went a horrid 11 percent from the 3-point line. Bagley paced the Saints with 17 points, while Baylee Watson had 15.

Meanwhile, MSU-N only made three triples Monday night, but they were crucial in giving Northern a five-point halftime lead.

Edwards got off to a stellar start, but so did the Saints, who kept tying the game up early on. But Kassie Barta’s second trey of the first half gave the Skylights an 18-14 lead, while Kacie McKeon drilled a corner three with 5:46 left in the half, sparking a 7-0 MSU-N run. Edwards capped the run with back-to-back hoops and Northern went into the half leading 25-20.

“Kassie and Kacie’s threes were big time,” Mouat said. “They gave us a lift and, at that point, we needed it. This could have been a much different game without those threes.

“Really, all of our kids gave us a lift at one point tonight,” he continued. “Taylor Cummings played a great game at both ends, Megan Feldman made some big plays, and Taybra Teeters got us a big bucket in the first half when we needed it. And as a team, we just played so well defensively, and we knew we had to because Carroll is very, very good.”

The Skylights played well offensively, too. Edwards finished with 22 points and nine boards, while going 11-of-17 from the floor. Cummings chipped in with 10 points and Bennett added seven. Northern shot 52 percent for the game against a tough Carroll defense, and the Skylights played a clean game, committing just 11 turnovers and just nine fouls on the night.

“We just wanted to be aggressive on offense,” Edwards said. “I tried as best I could to get good position in the low post, and if the shot wasn’t there, we had good kickouts to our guards. We played really good as a team tonight.”

And with a great team win in tow, the Skylights will go back on the road, visiting No. 2 seed LC State Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho. It will be a huge challenge for the Skylights, who were swept by LC during the regular season. But in what was likely their final home game of the year, Northern played a game that should give the team plenty of confidence going forward.

“This is a nice win for us,” Mouat said. “The crowd was great tonight. I thought we played pretty well, and the result is, we get to keep playing. It will be a big challenge for us at LC, but I think the kids will go in with a really good mindset, and the way we played tonight has a lot to do with that.”

**Skylights are 21-8 overall; Next Up: At LC State Saturday**

**Skylights 58, Carroll College 47**

**CC** – Baylee Watson 6-12 2-2 15, Jordan bagley 8-12 1-2 17, Kalee Junkermeier 0-3 0-0 0, Bailey Snelling 0-12 1-2 1, Katie Estey 1-7 0-0 3, Jordan Pfau 1-3 3-4 5, Alison Sullivan 1-1 0-0 2, Jordan Johnston 2-3 0-0 4. Totals: 19-53 7-10 47.

**MSU-N** – Megan Feldman 2-7 2-3 6, A’Jha Edwards 11-17 0-2 22, Natalee Faupel 1-4 0-0 2, Rachelle Bennett 2-3 3-4 7, Taylor Cummiings 3-5 4-4 10, Kassie Barta 2-4 0-0 6, Kacie McKeon 1-3 0-0

**MSU-Northern’s A’Jha Edwards, middle, tries to shoot between Carroll College defenders during Monday night’s playoff game at the Armory Gymnasium.**
3, Molly Kreycik 0-0 0-0 0, Taybra Teeters 1-1 0-0 2. Totals: 23-44 9-13 58.

Halftime: Northern 25-20. 3-pointers: CC 2-18 (Watson 1, Estey 1), MSU-N 3-8 (Barta 2, McKeon 1); Rebounds: CC 25 (Watson 5, Junkermeier 5), MSU-N 31 (Edwards 9); Fouls: CC 13, MSU-N 9. Fouled out: None.