Eight years ago, Chris Mouat took over as the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball coach. In that first season at the helm, the Skylights went to the NAIA national tournament and advanced to the Sweet 16.

It was an exciting time for Northern basketball, especially for a program which has a lot of national tournament and even national championship tradition.

But since that time, Mouat and the Skylights haven’t been back to the big dance … that is, until now.

Over the last seven seasons, MSU-N has had some very good teams, teams which probably should have been selected for the national tournament. But the 2013-14 Skylights are the team which finally got MSU-N back on the national tournament stage.

Wednesday afternoon, the Skylights, ranked No. 21 in the final NAIA Coaches Poll, were selected as the No. 9 at-large team for the 2014 NAIA national tournament, which runs March 19-25 in Frankfort, KY.

“We’re really excited,” Mouat said. “We’ve had a good idea for a few weeks now that if we took care of business, we would get in. And I feel like we did that by beating Carroll in the first round of the playoffs and by playing well last Saturday against LC (State). We certainly didn’t hurt ourselves at the end of the season.

“Still, it’s been a kind of nerve-racking last couple of days waiting to find out and make it official,” he continued. “But now that we know, we are very excited. The kids are really excited.”

Northern also found out its first-round opponent for the tourney y Wednesday night. The Skylights (21-9) will face off against Columbia of Missouri (26-7) in the first round. Columbia is the runner-up out of the American Midwest Conference and an automatic qualifier.

But, at least for now, the first-round opponent matters little. Mouat and MSU-N will start to worry about Columbia over the next couple of days. Instead, y Wednesday, the focus was on being excited at the opportunity to play in the postseason, something the Skylights truly earned this season.

MSU-N won an outstanding 21 games and went 10-6 in Frontier Conference play. Northern won nine league games and its playoff game against Carroll by holding those opponents under 50 points, and the Skylights will take the No. 1-scoring defense to Kentucky next week.

Yes, it’s already been a remarkable season for the Skylights, and Mouat noted that everyone involved with the program is excited for his team.
“It’s been a long time since we’ve gotten to this point in the season. We’ve had a couple of teams over the years who really got close or we felt were deserving of getting in and for whatever different reasons, it just didn’t happen,” Mouat said. “And that’s who I’ve been hearing from a lot today, a lot of former players and different people who have been in our program. They are all really excited for us and really happy for this team.

“Northern women’s basketball has a great and proud tradition, and that tradition goes back a long ways,” he continued. “And the history of this program and all of that tradition isn’t lost on these kids. They understand it and from day one have wanted to represent that great tradition as best they possibly can, and now they have the opportunity to do that at the national tournament.”

Northern does indeed have a proud and storied tradition of women’s basketball excellence, and now the 2013-14 Skylights get to add their names to that list of great Northern teams.

MSU-N and Columbia will square off at 3:45 p.m. next Wednesday in the opening round of the national tournament. The winner will play either Oklahoma City or Langston, Okla., in the Sweet 16.

“The kids are really excited,” Mouat said. “They are not only excited about earning a trip to the national tournament, but they are excited to go down there and keep playing. This is a really special group, and they’ve put together a special season. And getting this far is a great and special accomplishment for this team.”

Note: For more on the Skylights, including the 2013-14 Frontier All-Conference teams, see Friday’s Havre Daily News.

Skylights (21-9) VS Columbia (Mo,) (26-7)  
March 19 at 3:45 p.m. in Frankfort, KY.

Follow the Skylights with the HDN

From today through Wednesday's game at the national tournament, fans can follow Northern's journey to Kentucky with the Havre Daily News.