Cougars will give Skylights a dose of offense
By George Ferguson
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It’s been eight long years since a Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team played at the NAIA national tournament. But the wait is now over as the 2013-14 Skylights are in the big dance next week in Frankfort, Ky.

However, the Columbia Cougars, ranked No. 10 in all of NAIA basketball, won’t exactly be a nice welcoming party for the Skylights when the two nationally-ranked powers square off on Wednesday afternoon.

Columbia College, a small school in Columbia Mo., and the runner-up in the American Midwest Conference after going 20-2 in the regular season and losing a heartbreaker to Freed-Hardeman in the championship game, will present challenges to the Skylights they haven’t seen this season.

“Columbia is impressive,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat, who led the Skylights to a win at the 2006 national tournament said. “They have good size across the board and they play very physical. But they also have a bunch of kids who can really shoot it too.”

Indeed. The Cougars do shoot it and shoot it well. They average 84 points per game and shoot a solid 46 percent from the field. While they do have good size and are one of the top rebounding teams in the NAIA, what Columbia really loves to do is shoot the 3-pointer. The Cougars make 34 percent of their threes and that’s saying something because they’ve attempted a whopping 698 of them this season.

Individually, the Cougars are also impressive on paper. Head coach Mike Davis, in his 12th season at the helm, doesn’t have a deep roster, but everyone plays and everyone contributes. The Cougars are led by Janairikka Bland, a 6-4 center who scores 15 points and grabs seven rebounds per outing. Bland will be a fun matchup for Northern center A’Jah Edwards, and it might just be a matchup of two of the best bigs in the tournament.

But Bland, a transfer from Nebraska-Omaha, gets plenty of help. Heather English (5-10) adds 14 points per game and Corri Hamilton (5-9) scores 11. Another guard, Petrolina Chikata, scores eight points per game. While the Cougars shoot a lot of threes and run the floor well, they still rely on their size on both ends of the floor. Kayla Washington (6-0), Laurel Wichmann (6-1), Ashley Fisher (6-0) and Brittany Yost (6-1) will all play and present matchup issues for the smaller Skylights at times.

But as good as the Cougars are offensively, they will also test the MSU-N offense. Columbia allows 64 points per game, which isn’t like MSU-N’s 53 points per game defense, but it’s still pretty good, so Northern will have to be very good on the offensive end right out of the gates.

“They have a bunch of kids that can shoot the three and they shoot a lot of them,” Mouat said. “And they average 84 points a game, so it’s clear they can really score.”
Columbia also has national tourney experience, having been to Frankfort just last year. Overall, the Cougars are making their 11th trip to the national tournament, where they are 3-10 lifetime.

But, as good an experienced as Columbia is, it’s doubtful the Cougars have faced a defense as good as Northern, and with Edwards playing at a very high level right now, Wednesday’s matchup is one of the most intriguing ones in the entire opening round of the tournament. Northern comes into Wednesday’s game allowing just 54 points per game, which tops all of NAIA women’s basketball right now.

The No. 21 Skylights (21-9) and No. 10 Cougars (26-7) will tip off at 3:45 p.m. MST Wednesday in Frankfort, KY. The winner will meet either Oklahoma City, the No. 2 seed in the bracket, or Langston, Okla., in the Sweet 16 Friday at 12:30 p.m.

**Meet the Cougars**

**Columbia College**

Head Coach: Mike Davis (12th Season)

Record: 26-7, 20-2 in the AMC, lost to Freed-Hardeman 80-71 in AMC championship game.

Location: Columbia, Mo.

Founded: 1901

Enrollment: 2,580

**Star Watch:** Janairikka Bland is a 6-4 So., who averages 15 points and 7 rebounds per game. Heather English is a 5-10 Sr., who averages 14 points per game.