A journey that isn’t over yet
Skylights head to Kentucky having already had a big season
By George Ferguson
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Every college basketball season is a journey. But the journey doesn’t always end the way a team envisions it when the season starts.

But the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team is finishing up one of the best journeys a Skylight team has taken in quite some time.

And while the journey is nowhere near over, as the Skylights get set to face Columbia College in the first round of the NAIA women’s national basketball tournament Wednesday afternoon in Frankfort, Ky., it is never to early to reflect on where they’ve already been.

And just where the Skylights have been is already special, it’s already successful, and it’s already one of the more historic women’s basketball seasons in recent MSU-N history. Northern went 21-9 during the regular season and 10-6 in the Frontier Conference. The Skylights finished third in the league standings and reached the Frontier semifinals before falling in a double-overtime thriller at Lewis-Clark State. MSU-N also got off a to a stellar 13-0 start to the season, and right then, head coach Chris Mouat, who also guided the 2006 MSU-N team to the national tourney, knew his team was on to something.

“At the start of the year, everyone has that goal, of making it to the postseason, or even winning a championship,” Mouat said. “But at that point, it’s just a goal. You actually have to go on and see it through and make it happen. And these kids have done that this year. It’s been really impressive to watch them win big games and do the things they’ve done. They’ve stayed focused. We haven’t gotten too high or too low. This team has just continued to work hard from day one on, continued to get better and continued to bond.

“And I think that’s where it started for us,” he continued. “For whatever reason, this team just came together on and off the court so quickly. And that gave us a chance to get off to a good start early in the year and we did that. We won a big game against Eastern Oregon, who is a great team that went to the final eight a year ago. That one and the win against Nebraska-Kearney were big ones for us and showed us we were on to something.”

Northern did gel quickly, which wasn’t easy to do considering the Skylights had just one senior in Kassie Barta, as well as returning starters Taylor Cummings and Rachelle Bennett. Also back was sophomore Kacie McKeon, but Mouat added newcomers in A’Jha Edwards, Taybra Teeters, Megan Feldman, Natalee Faupel and Molly Kreycik, along with redshirts Taryn Norby and Jordan Powers.

“I think that was big,” Feldman said. “We came together and became good friends really quickly. We developed really good chemistry. Even with so many of us being new, we just bonded really fast.”
“I think we would all be friends and hang out even if we weren’t a basketball team,” added Barta.

“Everyone was just really accepting of each other,” Teeters continued. “That’s made a big difference. We became a team on the floor, but friends and really a family off it.”

And that kind of chemistry has paid dividends during a season which has included a 13-0 start, eight straight weeks of being ranked in the NAIA Coaches Poll, rising to as high as No. 17, and rousing conference wins over Carroll College twice (including the Frontier playoffs), as well as high-performance wins at Dickinson State and Rocky, and again against both teams to finish the regular season at home. At one point, Northern was tied for the conference lead in January, and the Skylights stayed inside the top three in the league standings from start to finish.

It’s been a season of highs and exciting wins, and even some tough losses too. But one thing’s for sure, even before the Skylights face the Cougars Wednesday, it’s already been a season of great memories.

“Our first conference game against Carroll, going into that game, we still weren’t really sure what to expect. We were playing well but conference games are different,” Faupel, who earned All-Conference honors in her freshman season, said. “But we played so well in that game. We dominated them. The crowd was excited. We knew after that game we had a chance to do great things this season.”

It might have taken until that Nov. 30 game against Carroll for the players to know they were on to something, but ironically, it was a game that never counted where Mouat knew his team was going to be special.

“My favorite memory from this season so far is looking up at the scoreboard, in a packed gym of brown and gold fans in Sheridan (Wyo.) and we were only down by two points to a really good, NCAA Division I University of Wyoming team. We were playing a very good basketball team pretty much dead even at that point, and I let myself smile. I thought: ‘this is so much fun.’ That game, how we played in a such a great college basketball road environment that night, that told me a lot about where this team might be headed.”

And after 30 games, as well as that game against Wyoming and exhibition games against the Montana Lady Griz and MSU-Billings, Northern is headed to its first national tournament in a long time. And that’s a journey Mouat and all the Skylights are excited to take. Northern is also excited about the fact that, already, it has proven many people wrong. After all, the league’s coaches picked the Skylights to finish sixth in the Frontier this season, and instead, they’re one of just 32 teams in all of the NAIA still playing basketball this week.

“I’m very excited,” McKeon said. “This is proof of just how hard we’ve worked. We came together this year, as a pretty new team. We have great chemistry and everybody has worked towards one common goal.”

“It’s an honor to be going,” Barta added. “But it’s also not a fluke. We earned this. Nobody picked us to get here, but we had a great season and we proved a lot of people wrong. Everybody at the national tournament is going to be good, but we know now, we’re good too.”

“It’s surreal,” senior Taylor Cummings continued. “I can’t even describe the feeling really. We’ve worked so hard for this. My freshman year we had a team that got close, but no matter what we did that season, it just wasn’t enough to get in for whatever reason. So I’m so excited to be going now. The door opened for us and we took advantage of it and now we’re in and we’re going. And that’s so exciting and I’m just so proud of this team.”

Northern’s Kassie Barta is the lone senior on the Skylights. And her career will end with her getting a chance to play in the NAIA national tournament.
And Mouat is proud of his team, too. He has experienced the national tournament before, and he’s anxious for his Skylights to get that same opportunity. And it’s an opportunity he says his team will not take for granted. Brian Kelvis, Dickinson State, 6:59.

“This team has really matured,” Mouat said. “This season has been a long one, a grind. There have been some huge challenges. But the kids have met all of those challenges. They’ve weathered the storm and I feel like we ended up right where we wanted to be, playing our best basketball at the end of the season.

“Sure, we had some hiccups along the way,” he continued. “But because of the maturity and togetherness of this team, they always bounced back from those hiccups and would start to play well again, and at the right times. And because of that, we kept ourselves in a position to make the tournament pretty much all the way through conference play. I’m very proud of the kids for that, and for just giving this season everything they’ve had. This is a very special group, and I’m so happy they have the opportunity to go down to Kentucky and continue their season.”

Northern’s season will continue Wednesday when the Skylights play Columbia in the first round of the NAIA national tournament at 3:45 MDT.