The wait is over: Skylights meet Cougars
MSU-Northern women play first NAIA tourney game in eight years today
By George Ferguson
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When you get to the college basketball postseason, there’s always a lot of hype and there’s always a dramatic buildup before a team even hits the floor for its first game.

That has certainly been the case for the Montana State University-Northern Skylights who are making their first appearance in the NAIA national tournament in eight years.

But now that’s all over. All of the excitement, the pageantry and hoopla surrounding the national tourney comes to an end this afternoon when the No. 21 Skylights (21-9) take on the No. 10 Columbia College Cougars in an NAIA first-round game at the Frankfort Convention Center in Frankfort, Ky. Tip time is 3:45 MDT.

And though the Skylights might be underdogs today against the high-scoring Cougars (26-7), who went 20-2 in the American Midwest Conference, they aren’t going to be intimidated playing in the first national tournament game.

“I don’t want to be done,” Northern junior Rachelle Bennett said. “We’re aren’t going down there just to be there and say we made it this far. We’re going down there to win.”

The Skylights have done a lot of winning this season, and they have a chance to do more today. Bennett has been a big part of Northern’s success this season, averaging nine points per game. But she’s also been one of the best defenders in the Frontier Conference this season, and that’s where Northern must be especially good today.

The Skylights bring the NAIA’s best scoring defense into today’s game, allowing just 53 points per contest. Northern is also the third-best rebounding team in the country. And the Skylights won’t just have to be good today in those areas, they’ll have to be great because Columbia is an offensive juggernaut. The Cougars average nearly 84 points per game, shoot 46 percent from the field, have made 239 3-pointers this season and are also the top rebounding team in the nation. They average nearly 45 boards per game.

“They are very, very good,” said Northern head coach Chris Mouat. “They are very worthy of their ranking coming in. They are built for speed, they play four athletic guards at all times and they have great shooters. They love to shoot the three, and their 6-0 guard is their best 3-point shooter. They have great size, their big (Janarrika Bland) is as good as we’ve seen all year, at any level. So basically, they are just a very good, very complete team. They seem to have all the pieces.”

Both Northern and Columbia do indeed have all the pieces. The matchup between the 6-4 Bland, a Nebraska transfer who averages 15 points and seven boards per game, and A’Jha Edwards, who leads the
Skylights with 13 points and 11 boards per night will be a big one. Neither the Skylights or Cougars have probably gone head-to-head with a center as good as theirs, so today’s game will be interesting in that regard.

But both teams are talented across the board. Columbia gets 14 points per game from 5-10 senior Heather English, another 11 from 5-9 sophomore Corri Hamilton while 6-0 senior Kayla Washington is a deadly 3-point shooter who averages eight points per outing. Columbia also has a deep and sizeable bench. The Cougars will sub at least four players who stand 6-0 or taller.

Northern will counter with veteran points guard Taylor Cummings and All-Conference freshman Natalee Faupel, who combine to average around 17 points per game. Add in the shooting of Kassie Barta and Kacie McKeon off the bench, and the steady inside play of juniors Megan Feldman and Taybra Teeters, and the Skylights will match up well with the Cougars.

But just because the Skylights match up well, and will play great defense today, it doesn’t guarantee Northern anything. MSU-N will have to play at a high level on both ends of the floor. The Skylights will have to not only defend, but they’ll have to score. In other words, they must play their most complete game of the season to advance, something they are very focused on doing.

“It’s going to be a heck of a challenge,” Mouat said. “Columbia is talented and very dangerous and from the first time we saw film on them, they had our full respect.

“But at the same time, our kids will be ready to play,” he continued. “They know what they have to do. We have to go out there and try and slow it down some, try as best we can to dictate tempo some because they (Cougars) play very fast. And like with every game we play, we have to win on the boards and make shots. When we do those things, we have been pretty successful this season, and we can again on Wednesday.”

“Our team is full of competitors,” Teeters said. “So it’s not enough for us to just go down there and play. We want to win this game. We have every intention of winning. And we know we can. We’re focused on going down there to do a job.”

Today’s NAIA national tournament game between the Skylights and Cougars tips off at 3:45 MDT in Frankfort, Ky. The winner will face either Oklahoma City (22-2) or Langston (20-12) in the Sweet 16 Friday at 12:30 p.m.

**Game Time**

*No. 21 Skylights (21-9) vs No. 10 Columbia Cougars (26-7)*  
Today at 3:45 p.m. In Frankfort, KY

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