Skylights are on to the Sweet 16
Northern knocks off Columbia in final seconds to advance at NAIA national tournament
By George Ferguson
March 20, 2014

It may have been eight years since the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team last played in an NAIA national tournament game. But the Skylights haven’t lost their first-round touch.

The No. 21 Skylights pulled off an impressive upset over the No. 3-seeded Columbia College Cougars (Mo.) 56-55 in the first round of the 2014 national tournament Wednesday afternoon in Frankfort, Ky. The win boosts the Skylights record to 22-9, while the loss ended the Cougars season at 26-8. It also put Northern into the Sweet 16 for the second time in head coach Chris Mouat’s career. MSU-N also reached the second round of the big dance back in 2006.

The Cougars’ offense scored an average of 83 points per game this season, but against the Skylights’ top-rated defense, the Cougars wouldn’t even come close to that mark. And that was an important showing by the Skylights defense, as the MSU-N offense struggled throughout the game as well.

Northern shot 33 percent from the field, going 20-for-60, and just 28 percent from 3-point range, knocking down 8-of-28 from behind the arc. But those numbers were good enough to get the job done as the Skylights forced the Cougars into a less impressive outing. The Cougars were 20-of-63 from the field for less than 32 percent, and just 1-of-11 from behind the arc for just nine percent. And the likes of 6-4 Janairrika Bland, who was thought to be a real test for the Skylights, was held to just 12 points on a 6-of-17 from the field. Bland also went 0-for-3 from behind the 3-point line and grabbed just three rebounds.

After keeping the game close, and even trading runs and the lead with the Cougars, the Skylights put themselves in good position for a win near the end of regulation.

Columbia held a 26-23 lead at the break. But the Skylights opened the second half with a 10-2 run to take a 33-28 lead with 16 minutes left to play. Taylor Cummings’ only trey of the game capped off the run, but Bland also earned a quick foul, followed by a technical foul that put her on the bench until the six-minute mark in the same stretch. That was key for the Skylight offense that would at least get a break from the 6-4 presence inside. Unfortunately, A’Jha Edwards was also in and out of the lineup after getting her fourth foul near the 13-minute mark, but guards like sophomore Kacie McKeon helped carry the load.

MSU-N battled through foul trouble in the game with three players finishing the game with four fouls. Taybra Teeters, Edwards, and an active Megan Feldman all finished with four after playing key minutes. Edwards finished with a double-double, scoring 17 points and grabbing 12 rebounds. Feldman was an x-factor for the Skylights and finished with six points and eight rebounds. Feldman had four points and seven rebounds in the first half.

"I think they (Teeters, Edwards and Feldman) played smarter through the second half,” Mouat said. “They gave up some easy baskets that we didn’t want to, but had to, and they are all important to what we do
every game. But with the foul trouble, we had five guards on the floor at one point, and we were just trying
to do what we could to play bigger than we were. We just needed to give our post players enough time so
that we could eventually roll the dice and let them finish out the game. We dodged a lot of bullets tonight.

“Kacie was phenomenal,” Mouat added. “She was hurt early in the season, right before our first conference
game, but she is finally healed up and really did a nice job. But we got a lot of help from our bench tonight
for sure.”

McKeon drained two 3-pointers in the first half to keep the Skylights in contention, but her two treys in the
second half were even more important. Columbia retook the lead at 37-35 and eventually led 40-35. But
Northern went on an 8-3 run that saw a McKeon trey narrow the gap to 45-43 with 6:55 to play. The
Cougars kept trying to escape the Skylights, but another McKeon triple near the 5:30 mark kept the
Skylights within two, trailing 50-48.

From there MSU-N finished the final five minutes by outscoring Columbia 8-5.

And in a game that sent the Skylights to the line just 12 times, one free throw proved to be the difference
in the game. Cummings and Edwards combined for seven consecutive points to tie the game at 55-55 with
1:50 left on the clock. The Cougars missed a trey, followed by two missed shots by the Skylights on the
other end. The Cougars missed a field goal attempt on their ensuing possession as well, and after an
offensive board, a Cougar turnover turned into a foul sending Northern’s Rachelle Bennett, the Skylights’
top free-throw shooter on the season, to the line. With 14 seconds on the clock Bennett hit 1-of-2 from the
charity stripe, and after the Cougars missed a buzzer-beater heave, the Skylights came away with a first-
round win.

“We sent our best free-throw shooter to the line and she went 1-for-2,” Mout said. “She hasn’t done that
very much this season, but she has won some games for us.

The Skylights also led for a good portion of the first half. Corri Hamilton hit a free throw for Columbia to tie
the game at 12-12, with 8:33 left in the first half. Edwards hit a 3 that gave MSU-N a short lived lead ant
15-12, but Petrolina Chilaka gave the Cougars their first lead with 6:29 to play, 16-15 as part of an 8-0
run. Columbia led the rest of the way through the remainder of the first half.

McKeon wound up finishing with 14 points for the Skylights, hitting 4-of-7 from 3-point range. Cummings
also finished with seven and Bennett finished with six. The Skylights also slowed their offensive efforts
down with 18 turnovers after averaging just 13 a game going into the tournament.

The defense also held Columbia below most of its averages. Columbia entered the tournament shooting
over 46 percent from the field, 32 percent from 3-point range, and 73 percent from the line, but didn’t hit
any of those marks.

“I think our kids learned a lot about the national tournament today,” Mouat said. “The physicality, and how
hard you have to play. This is different than our conference schedule, and I am sure it’s different than
anybody’s conference schedule that is here. Once you get to this level the refs really let you play and
players make play. Fortunately for us, we were one point ahead at the end, and this team is one of the
hardest working teams I have had, and they pride themselves in that. We can weather the storm when we
are missing threes and even bunnies, and stick around to the end, and that is what happened tonight.”

The Skylights will face No. 5 Oklahoma City (28-4) Friday at 10:30 a.m. MDT in the Sweet 16.

Moving On

Skylights 56, Columbia 55

**MSU-N** – Megan Feldman 3-5, 0-0 8, A’Jha Edwards 6-14 3-4 12, Natalee Faupel 0-8 0-0 0, Rachelle
Bennett 1-5 4-6 6, Taylor Cummings 3-5 0-0 7, Kassie Barta 1-7 0-0 3, Kacie McKeon 5-12 0-0 14, Molly
Kreycik 0-0 1-2 1, Taybra Teeters 1-4 0-0 2. Totals: 20-60 8-12 56.
Columbia – Janairrika Bland 6-17 0-2 12, Aqua Corpening 0-3 2-2 2, Heather English 4-11 1-2 9, Tierney Seifert 0-1 1-2 1, Ashley Fisher 3-11 2-2 9, Petrolina Chilaka 3-6 1-2 7, Corri Hamilton 3-7 4-6 10, Kayla Washington 0-5 3-4 3, Laurel Wichmann 1-2 0-0 2. Totals: 20-63 14-22 55.

Halftime: Columbia 26-23; 3-pointers: MSU-N 8-28 (McKeon 4, Edwards 2), Columbia 1-11 (Fisher); Rebounds: MSU-N 42 (Edwards 12), Columbia 48 (English 9); Fouls: MSU-N 20, Columbia 17; Fouled Out: None.