George Ferguson Column: The last month has been a whirlwind of hoops

From the Fringe...

By George Ferguson

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And just like that, there were none. Yes, the NCAA tournament is still going and the NBA Finals are still months away, but when time ran out on the Montana State University-Northern Skylights last Friday in Frankfort, Ky., the local basketball season ended too.

The end to the Skylights’ NAIA Sweet 16 game against the Oklahoma City University Stars was a heartbreaker, but in essence, the way the Skylights played for two games at the national tournament summed up an amazing finish to the local basketball season.

The finish and excitement really began over a month ago at the District 9C tournament in Havre. There, at the Havre High gymnasium, the Box Elder boys and Chinook girls started a chain reaction of basketball excitement we haven’t seen on the Hi-Line in quite some time.

I know, I say every year of basketball on the Hi-Line is great, but this one was truly remarkable.

Following Box Elder and Chinook’s wins at the 9C tournament, things really ramped up.

The next week in Belgrade, the Havre High girls cruised to a third straight Central A tournament title, while the Blue Pony boys beat Browning in a Central A semifinal game to punch their ticket to the Class A state tourney. That snowy, cold Saturday night marked the first time in over a decade that both Havre High teams played for the Central A title in the same season, and it was the beginning of a truly special couple of week’s to come.

Meanwhile, on the same week, in Great Falls, the Box Elder Bears announced to the rest of the Class C that they were coming. Box Elder won the Northern C Divisional championship with three wins in three days of 20 points or more. You just don’t do that at the Northern C, one of the toughest basketball tournaments in all of Montana, but the Bears did.

One week later, the Bears were in Butte, and nothing had changed. Box Elder captured its first state championship since 1990, again, winning three tournament games by more than 10 points. With Class C being the biggest classification of basketball in Montana, it’s considered the hardest state championship to win. But Box Elder made it look so easy. The Bears, under head coach Jeremy MacDonald, were as talented as any Class C team I’ve seen in a long, long time, and the rest of the state was powerless to stop them.

The same weekend that produced Box Elder’s state title was also a historic one of for the Havre Blue Ponies. The Ponies’ win over Stevensville in the Class A state boys tournament was a big stepping stone for the program. Havre hadn’t been to a state tourney in eight seasons, and 20 years after the historic 1994 boys state title, Pony pride was alive and well at the state tourney.
And with great postseason runs by the Rocky Boy boys and girls, both of which played in Northern B consolation games, the high school hoops season on the Hi-Line could have ended right there and been a truly great one.

But the Havre High girls took it one step further. The Blue Ponies’ remarkable run to their first Class A state championship in 17 years capped off a season of high school basketball that no one on the Hi-Line should ever forget. Seeing Havre hoist the state championship trophy was the absolute perfect culmination to a thrilling year of high school basketball in our area.

Yes, in the high school ranks, the Hi-Line was the king of basketball this winter.

But just like winter doesn’t want to end, the basketball glory didn’t end with Havre’s state championship two weeks ago in Great Falls.

Instead, the Montana State University-Northern men’s and women’s basketball teams gave us one more week of thrills. In the end, both the Lights and Skylights fell short at their respective national tournaments, but nevertheless, Northern fans were left with a sense of pride that can’t be matched. To have both the men’s and women’s teams playing in the national tournament, in the same week, and playing intense, high-level basketball, it just doesn’t get any better than that.

I’ll admit, I seem to brag about how good basketball is on the Hi-Line each and every year, and I’m usually never wrong. But when the first ball was thrown in the air back in February at the 9C tournament, even I didn’t know just how good the next month was going to be. In the end, even I was surprised.

I was surprised because the end to the 2013-14 basketball season wasn’t just good, it was great. It wasn’t just special, it was historic. It wasn’t just fun, it was a thrill-ride of a lifetime.

And though I want winter to go away as badly as anyone in the continental United States, the euphoria of the basketball season we just witnessed is going to stay with me for a long, long time.