So Close: Skylights fall to Stars
Northern takes OKCU down to the wire in NAIA Sweet 16
By George Ferguson
March 24, 2014

All season long, the Montana State University-Northern Skylights were out to prove they could play with the big girls. And time and time again, they did just that. In the Sweet 16 of the NAIA national tournament, the Skylights nearly knocked off another giant of NAIA women’s basketball.

Almost.

Friday morning, at the Frankfort Civic Center in Frankfort, KY., the No. 21 Skylights lost a heartbreaking 58-55 game to the No. 5 Oklahoma City University Stars. The game came right down to the end, but in the end, the Skylights saw their magical season end on a crushing note.

Trailing 56-55 with :12 left in the game, Northern was in possession of the ball with a chance to knock off the high-scoring Stars and advance to the Elite 8. But freshman Natalee Faupel, who had a career day, scoring a game-high 28 points, missed a running shot with just over six seconds to play, and when OKCU secured the rebound, Northern saw a very special season come to an end in what was a dramatic game.

“I’m so proud of this team,” said MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat, who has guided the Skylights to two Sweet 16 appearances in eight seasons in Havre. “They fought their guts out, to the very end. The effort today was tremendous. We hung in there to the very end, against a great basketball team, under a lot of adversity. It didn’t go our way at the end, and our kids are very disappointed right now. But I’m very, very proud of them.”

Northern can be especially proud of its defense. For the second straight national tournament game, MSU-N held one of the highest-scoring teams in the country under 60 points. The Skylights weren’t just good Friday, they were spectacular defensively, and through their two games in Kentucky, they certainly lived up to their billing as the No. 1 defense in NAIA women’s basketball. The Stars came in averaging 89 points per game, but the Skylights held them to just 35 percent shooting, three 3-pointers and forced them into 17 turnovers.

“We were very good defensively,” Mouat said. “For all 40 minutes, we played at a very high level defensively. Oklahoma City is a high quality team. They have great players, they are so well-coached and they are very dangerous. They can hurt you in so many different ways, and at times, they did today. But overall, we did what we needed to do on the defensive end.”

The Skylights’ troubles came by way of two key stretches in the second half, and neither was a result of their incredible defensive display.

In a second half that saw Faupel score eight points and hit back-to-back threes early, the Skylights then went on an 8-0 run to seemingly take control of the game. Faupel started the run with a driving layup and
senior Kassie Barta finished it with a triple from the top of the circle. Barta’s trey lifted the Skylights to a 45-38 lead with 8:30 to go.

But as quickly as Northern raced out to the lead, the Stars took it right back. OKCU answered Barta’s three with one of their own, then two straight MSU-N turnovers led directly to OKCU points, and eventually, the Stars would finish an 8-0 run and have the lead back at 46-45 with just over six minutes left.

"That was a tough stretch for us," Mouat said. "We didn't do a very good job of handling their pressure. Turnovers were one thing that really hurt us today. We made some mistakes taking care of the ball at really key moments in the game."

What was also tough for the Skylights was having to battle the Stars down the stretch without two key players. Rachelle Bennett, who scored nine points in the first half, left with an injury early in the second, while A'Jha Edwards, who was held to just four points for the game, would foul out with 1:47 left.

But the Skylights have overcome adversity all season long and they did their best to do it again on Friday.

Faupel kept making plays and free throws to keep Northern in the hunt, and her last two foul shots of the afternoon gave the Skylights a 55-54 lead with :38 left in regulation. However, OKCU made two shots from the charity stripe 10 seconds later to go back up 56-55, then got the ball back with a chance to ice the game. But Markeisha Johnson missed the front end of the 1-and-1, giving Northern one last chance to pull a second upset in three days. However, Faupel’s attempt at a game-winner missed and OKCU put the game away with a pair of Autumn Huffman free throws.

It was a bitter end to a remarkable run for the Skylights, who finished the season with a 22-10 record and played three dramatic games to end the season, a double-overtime loss at Lewis-Clark State in the Frontier Conference semifinals, a win over third-seeded Columbia College in the first round of the national tourney last Wednesday and Friday’s heartbreaker against OKCU.

In Friday’s game, Northern played remarkable defense, but the Skylights committed 19 turnovers and shot just 32 percent from the field. MSU-N was 6-of-19 from three and went 19-of-27 from the foul line. Northern was also out-rebounded by the Stars 41-33.

“We did everything we could do,” Mouat said. “The kids played their hearts out today. We just didn’t shoot it quite well enough, we missed some key free throws, and we had some turnovers that were costly. Credit to Oklahoma City, they are a really good basketball team, and they made some big plays on us in the second half.”

Both the Skylights and Stars (24-4), who play John Brown in tonight’s semifinals, made big plays early, too. Edwards scored her four points in the first five minutes, while Bennett hit two treys in the first half, the first of which gave Northern an early 13-12 lead. Faupel also hit a couple of shots early, while OKCU did just enough to grab a 24-22 lead at the break.

In the end, Faupel was spectacular. She went 6-of-11 from the field and made three triples. The true freshman from Butte was also an unflappable 13-of-15 from the free-throw-line. Bennett added nine points before leaving with the injury, while Megan Feldman scored seven. Edwards added a game-high 15 rebounds, while OKCU got 15 points and seven rebounds from Huffman.

“Natalee played amazing today,” Mouat said. “She did not play like a freshman today. She had an incredible game.

“It’s disappointing right now because we came so close,” he continued. “We had our chances to advance today against a really good basketball team. But I’m so proud of our kids, not just for the way they played today, or even in this tournament, but for this entire season. They played their hearts out this whole season and you can’t ask for anything more than that.”

**Skylights' season ends at 22-10**

Oklahoma City 58, Skylights 55
**MSU-N** – Megan Feldman 2-4 3-8 7, A’Jha Edwards 2-10 0-0 4, Natalee Faupel 6-11 13-15 28, Rachelle Bennett 3-5 1-2 9, Taylor Cummings 0-7 2-2 2, Kassie Barta 1-3 0-0 3, Kacie McKeon 0-4 0-0 0, Molly Kreycik 0-1 0-0 0, Taybra Teeters 1-1 0-0 2. Totals: 15-46 19-27 55.

**OKCU** – Autumn Huffman 7-12 0-0 15, Ouleymatou Couliably 5-13 3-6 13, Kayla Mackenzie 0-3 2-2 2, Yvonte Neal 4-1 11 4-4 13, Markeisha Johnson 3-4 1-3 7, Cara Pugh 1-11 3-4 6, Autumn Lau 0-2 1-2 1. Totals: 20-56 15-21 58.

Halftime: Oklahoma City 24-22. 3-pointers: MSU-N 6-17 (Faupel 3, Bennett 2, Barta 1), OKCU 3-11 (Huffman 1, Neal 1, Pugh 1); Rebounds: MSU-N 33 (Edwards 15), OKCU 41 (Coulibaly 11); Fouls: MSU-N 15, OKCU 19; Fouled out: Edwards.

Montana State University-Northern's Natalee Faupel, left, drives by an Oklahoma City University defender during an NAIA national tournament game last Friday in Frankfort, KY. Faupel scored 28 points, but the Skylights fell in the Sweet 16 58-55.