Northern women loaded for another big run this winter
By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern women's basketball team has had plenty of quality seasons in the nine that Chris Mouat has been the head coach of the Skylights. But his ninth season was truly special.

The 2013-14 season was a banner one of the Skylights, who finished third in the Frontier Conference, was selected to play in the NAIA national tournament, then proceeded to reach the NAIA Sweet 16. In the land of women's NAIA basketball, it doesn't get a whole lot than that.

And yet, as the Skylights begin a brand new season on the hardwood, it might just get better. Northern returns the bulk of its lineup from last year's national tournament team, and with a year of experience like the one the Skylights got last season, there is a real possibility that they can be an even better team this winter.

"Last year, we had a great run," said Mouat, who enters his 10th season at the helm of the Northern program. "The last three or four games we played, we played some really good basketball. And it was a lot of fun to see us go on the run we did."

"But that was last year," he continued. "And we are starting over. We do have the luxury of returning some very good and seasoned players. But we also lost some big pieces to that puzzle, especially on the offensive end. So we do have holes to fill, and that's easier said than done. So certainly, as we start the season, we have some challenges in front of us."

On a team that went 22-10 and finished third in the Frontier Conference (10-6), while losing to Lewis-Clark State in a double-overtime thriller in the Frontier semifinals, before beating Columbia of Missouri 56-55 and falling to eventual national champion Oklahoma City by three points in the Sweet 16, the Skylights do return a wealth of talent and experience. But they'll also have to replace sharp-shooter Kassie Barta, and they won't have the services of all-around standout Rachelle Bennett, at least for a while. Bennett injured a knee at last year's national tournament, and her status for this season is still up in the air.

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So indeed, Northern has some shoes to fill at the guard position. But the Skylights do return senior point guard Taylor Cummings, who will start and run the Northern show for the third straight season. Cummings (5-5) averaged eight points per game a year ago, while leading the Skylights in steals and assists. While Cummings is the lone true contributor returning on the perimeter, the Skylights return a formidable front line.

That front line starts with senior A'Jha Edwards (6-5). She was the Frontier Conference Newcomer of the Year a season ago, and her impact was felt, not only at Northern, but all across the conference. Edwards dominated in the paint during conference play, and finished an All-American season averaging a double-
double, with 13 points and 11 rebounds per night. She also paced the Frontier Conference in blocks with 33, and was among the NAIA's best in rebounding, blocks and field goal percentage.

"It's not often you get a player like A'Jha," Mouat said. "She's a force for sure. She's got size, she's got great hands, she's efficient around the basket and she is a game-changer on defense. But we're really fortunate, because we return three really strong post players, because Megan (Feldman) and Taybra (Teeters) were very good for us last season, too."

Both seniors, Feldman (6-1) and Teeters (6-0) will be key for the Skylights again this season. Feldman had a breakout junior year, averaging seven points and six rebounds per night, and both she and Teeters are excellent defenders on the low block.

Northern also returns a big weapon in sophomore Natalee Faupel (5-10). She can play several different positions, and proved to be a matchup nightmare for opposing defenses a year ago. As a true freshman last winter, Faupel averaged nine point and four rebounds per game, but down the stretch, she played like a veteran, averaging nearly 15 points per game over the course of MSU-N's final 10 contests. And along with returning guards Molly Kreycik (5-6), who saw extensive playing time as a true freshman as well, and former Chinook star Taryn Norby (5-5), the Skylights have some serious young talent in the backcourt.

"We do have some seasoned returning players," Mouat said. "Even Natalee and Molly, they were big contributors for us as freshmen, so they have a lot of experience coming into this season. But again, we also have some holes to fill. We have some spots to fill on the perimeter, so that's one thing that will be big for us early in the season, seeing how those roles on this team unfold."

"But with all the players we do have back from last year's team," he continued. "We do have a good amount of experience and leadership. And that's a nice luxury to have."

Northern's not too distant future looks bright, too. MSU-N brought in a recruiting class packed with talent, including former Havre Blue Pony stars Peyton Filius and Brandy Lambourne, as well as four-time Class C Chinook All-State standout Makhayla Farmer. The class also included Class B star guard Jacy Tompson of Townsend, and three-time Class C state champion Katie Fetterer of Belt.

But while all of those players figure to play a key role in MSU-N's future, the present is here, and Mouat expects the 2014-15 team to play as well, if not better than the Skylights of the past.

MSU-N plans on once again being very tough defensively, and that's coming off a season in which the Skylights led the NAIA in scoring defense, allowing just 53 points per game a year ago. The Skylights were also ranked third in the NAIA in rebounding and rebounding margin a season ago. Northern will be stout when guarding opponents, and as mentioned, Edwards can completely take over a game on the defensive end. Meanwhile, on offense, the Skylights will look to be efficient, both in the paint and on the perimeter, much like they were a season ago when they were among the Frontier leaders in field goal percentage and free-throw percentage.

"Our team defense is our biggest strength," Mouat said. "We led the country in points per game allowed last season, and that's a team thing. It's nice to have a player like A'Jha, who can limit a team to one shot, but our overall team defense has a chance to be very good again. And it starts with Taylor (Cummings) She's our engine on defense. She sparks us defensively, and we feed off of that. Not having Rachelle out there is a big loss because she's a great lockdown defender. So that hurts, but we do feel like we have the players to get back to that same level on defense."

"Offensively, we have enough returners that that transition has gone pretty smoothly so far," he continued. "So we're going to be similar to what we were last year on that end. We've added some new wrinkles, but we are going to take advantage of our strengths and that's being an inside-out offense. We want to take advantage of our post players inside, but we also have good players on the perimeter, so I think we can be very balanced again."

While the Skylights will be extremely good this season, and are coming off one of the best seasons in the program's storied history, they certainly have battles to fight early on.

As usual, Mouat has put together another rigorous nonconference schedule, and between this weekend's season-opening games in Edmonton, and the start of conference play in January, the Skylights will play just
three home games and 13 times on the road. MSU-N will face road challenges against the likes of the University of Lethbridge, Arizona Christian and Dakota Wesleyan, and the Skylights will travel all the way to Florida to battle a pair of tough teams in Northwood University and Cornerstone University.

Northern's three home games won't be a picnic either. MSU-N takes on NAIA DII power Warner-Pacific in the Armory Gymnasium Oct. 19 and Valley City State Nov. 28. Frontier Conference play begins Jan. 9-10 with home games against Montana Tech and Lewis-Clark State, respectively.

"The road itself is going to be our biggest challenge," Mouat said. "Obviously, we play a lot of quality teams on the road, but just the amount of travel and time we're going to spend on the road in the nonconference season will really be a big test for us. We're playing a lot of quality opponents a long, long way from home.

"But that's the point," he continued. "We want to be tested. We want to be as ready as we can be for the Frontier, and this schedule will do that for us. We're going to see the gamut as far as teams and style of play is concerned. So this first few months is going to be a heck of a challenge."

There's no doubt the Skylights will be challenged, especially early on. But, there's a flip-side to that coin and that is, Northern is going to be a big challenge for anybody in the Skylights' way this season. MSU-N stormed its way into the postseason and to its first national tournament appearance in eight years last March. And with so much talent, experience and athleticism back this season, the Skylights, no matter who they play, will be a force to be reckoned with.

"I think the experience of last year was incredible," Mouat said. "We saw that we could compete on that stage (national tournament). And once you've been there, you want to go back. And I know that this team has that goal in mind. But it's not our only goal. We want to play at home in the Frontier Conference tournament. That's big. The postseason really starts there, so in order to do that, we need to finish as one of the top teams in our conference. So that's a big goal of ours.

"I think we have the potential to be a very good team," he added. "It seems a little early to be playing games, but it's here now and we're excited to get started. We're excited to get out there and play those first few games and see where we're at. I know this team wants to accomplish great things this season, and now the season's here. This is what it's all about, and we're really looking forward to it."

The Skylights, who held intra-squad scrimmages in Belt and at Havre Central Gymnasium, will open the season against Concordia of Alberta and Kings University this weekend in Edmonton, Alberta. MSU-N plays its home opener Oct. 16 against Northwest Indian College.

**MSU-N Quick Facts**

**Head Coach:** Chris Mouat (10th Season)

**2013-14:** 22-10 overall, 10-6 in Frontier (3rd). Lost in NAIA Sweet 16.

**Key Returnees:** A'Jha Edwards (6-5, Sr. 2014 1st-Team All-Conference, Frontier Newcomer of the Year, Honorable Mention All-American), Taylor Cummings (5-5, Sr.), Natalee Faupel (5-10, So. 2014 Honorable Mention All-Conference), Megan Feldman (6-1, Sr.), Taybra Teeters (6-0, Sr.).

**2014-15 Skylights Basketball Schedule**

Oct. 10 vs Concordia University At Edmonton
Oct. 11 vs The Kings University At Edmonton
Oct. 16 vs Northwest Indian College
Oct. 19 vs Warner Pacific
Oct. 24 vs Lethbridge At Lethbridge
Oct. 25 vs Mount Royal At Lethbridge

Nov. 7 vs San Diego Christian At Phoenix
Nov. 8 vs Arizona Christian At Phoenix
Nov. 14 vs Corban University At Great Falls
Nov. 15 vs Dakota Wesleyan At Great Falls
Nov. 28 vs Valley City State
Dec. 4 at Willamette University
Dec. 5 at Multnomah Bible College
Dec. 6 at Walla Walla
Dec. 30 vs Northwood University At Palm Beach, Florida
Dec. 31 vs Cornerstone University At Palm Beach, Florida

Jan. 9 vs Montana Tech
Jan. 10 vs LC State
Jan. 15 at Carroll College
Jan. 17 at Rocky Mountain
Jan. 23 vs UM-Western
Jan. 24 vs Westminster
Jan. 31 at Great Falls

Feb. 5 at LC State
Feb. 7 at Montana Tech
Feb. 13 vs Rocky Mountain
Feb. 14 vs Carroll College
Feb. 19 at UM-Western
Feb. 21 at Westminster
Feb. 28 vs Great Falls

March 3 – Frontier Playoffs

Northern senior point guard Taylor Cummings and the Skylights are coming off a season in which they won 20 games and reached the Sweet 16 at the NAIA national tournament.

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