Skylights finally back in the Armory
MSU-Northern women take on Valley City State tonight
By George Ferguson
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After back-to-back grueling road trips, the Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team had a much-needed week of rest.

But now, the Skylights will have to get past turkey day in a hurry because they’ll be back on the floor for a Black Friday game against a tough NAIA foe. Tonight, the No. 21 Skylights (10-0) return to the Armory Gymnasium to play host to Valley City State (4-3). Tipoff is set for 6, and it’s Northern’s first home game in over a month, and its last until Frontier Conference play begins in January.

“They (Vikings) are legit,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “They are a very good team, and they’ll have played some very good teams by the time they get here. Like with every game on our schedule, we’ll have our hands full with this one. But it will be nice to be on our home floor again, and we’re definitely looking forward to it.”

While the Vikings, who are an NAIA Division II power, and play in the newly-formed Northstar Athletic Association, will be a legitimate threat to the Skylights tonight, MSU-N is even more legit.

The Skylights are unbeaten on the season, and have won five straight games against NAIA foes. Northern has also been winning on the road, which isn’t easy to do. And so far, Mouat likes where his team is at, especially considering that the Frontier Conference season is right around the corner now.

“I’m pleased with the progress we have made,” Mouat said. “Defensively, we’ve been able to play at a very high level every game, and that’s not always easy considering most of those games are on the road. And I think we’ve played well offensively too. But we have a lot of room for improvement. We have a lot of areas we can get better, and that’s what we’ll continue to do.”

Sure, Northern can improve, and if the Skylights continue to do that, it’s a scary thought for their upcoming opponents. MSU-N leads the NAIA in scoring defense, allowing a mere 45 points per game, Northern is also first in the NAIA in total assists, total scoring offense, assist-to-turnover ratio and total rebounding. MSU-N is also beating its opponents by an average of 39 points per game, out-rebounding teams by 18 rebounds per outing and is holding its opponents to just 30 percent shooting from the field.

Individually, the Skylights have been balanced and are getting a total team effort, night in and night out. Senior A’Jha Edwards averages 15 points and 11 rebounds per game, while senior point guard Taylor Cummings averages nine points and leads the nation in total assists. Sophomore Natalee Faupel adds 13 points and six rebounds per night for the Skylights, while Jacy Thompson and Megan Feldman each contribute nine points per outing.

But as good as Northern has been this season, and the Skylights have been good, they’ll get a stern test from the Vikings tonight. Valley City is an outstanding 3-point shooting team, loaded with talented guards.
Sophomore Georgia Williams (5-10) leads the team in scoring at 12 points per night, while she also shoots better than 36 percent from beyond the arc. Fellow guards Sierra Even and Steph Pedersen chip in with nine points each. The Vikings aren’t as tall and rangy as the Skylights, but their host of talented guards and their pressure defense will make Northern have to work for everything it gets on offense.

But the Skylights do the same on the defensive end of the floor, and even coming off of a layoff, Northern will expect its trademark defense to be there once again, as the Skylights look to improve to 11-0 before heading back out on the road.

Northern is set to finish non-conference play with a three-game road trip next weekend in Washington and Oregon, then a two-game trip to Florida. The Skylights won’t be back at home until they host Montana Tech in their conference opener Jan. 9.

Tonight’s game between Northern and Valley City tips off at 6 inside the Armory Gymnasium.