It's Time: Skylights begin league play
By George Ferguson
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A sparkling record with just one blemish and a balanced team with a tenacious defense. That best describes the Montana State University-Northern Skylights and what they’ve accomplished in the non-conference season.

Now however, the Frontier Conference season is upon the Skylights (15-1), and things are going to get really interesting.

The No. 15 Skylights begin league play tonight when the Montana Tech Orediggers (8-7) invade the Armory Gymnasium at 6. The home stand continues Saturday when the Skylights host No. 12 Lewis-Clark State (14-2).

And while Northern head coach Chris Mouat is proud of all that his team has done so far, he knows the Frontier is a different beast all together, and he understand that his team must take it up a notch if it wants to hold serve at home this weekend, let alone contend for a Frontier championship.

“These are two big ones right away at home,” Mouat said. “To get these two at home would be really big because the Frontier Conference is legit and every game is going to be very difficult. We’re playing two very good teams at home and both teams have our full respect. But our kids are very excited for the challenge.”

And both challenges will be big. The Orediggers may not have a national ranking, or a near-perfect non-conference record, but they are certainly one of the most talented teams in the league from top to bottom.

Tech boasts a strong inside presence with 6-2 Kayla DeWit and 6-0 Kabri Emerson. Together, the duo is one of the best post tandems in the league. Then there’s senior guard Mandy Machinal, who has been Tech’s leading scorer two straight years and is a three-time All-Conference performer. That trio is one of the most explosive trios in the Frontier, and they have proved to be a force so far under new head coach, and former Chester star Carly VanDyke. Tech, which averages 71 points per game, is deep, too. Sophomore Martha Dembek averages an additional 10 points per night, while point guard Hattie Thatcher is coming on strong.

“What jumps out to me about Tech right away is, they have only lost one game to an NAIA team,” Mouat said. “The rest of their losses have come against NCAA opponents. So they’ve played an extremely tough schedule. And they also have a ton of experience. They are a veteran team and Carly (VanDyke) is doing an amazing job with them.

“They have size,” he continued. “Emerson and DeWit might be the best 1-2 punch in the league down low. Mandy Machinal is a great player and they have a great supporting cast. They are balanced, they score fast and they are a great on the boards. So we’ll have our hands full for sure.”

Right now, Tech is the only thing on Northern’s mind, but eventually, the Skylights will turn their attention to LC State. Saturday night’s game is being billed as the NAIA Game of the Week, and for good reason as
the game pits two of the Top 15 teams in the country against each other. There’s also a budding rivalry between the two teams. In a wild series a year ago, the Skylights lost three times to the Warriors, including a double-overtime heartbreaker in Lewiston, Idaho, in the Frontier semifinals.

“We had some great battles with them (Warriors) last year,” Mouat said. “Losing that game in double-overtime, I think our kids still remember that well. So I think they’re excited about the challenge of playing them again.

“They’re a very good basketball team,” he continued. “Tanis Fuller is as good as it gets in this league. And Brian (Orr) did such a great job of bringing in a talented freshman class last year, and those kids are now stepping up and making them as good as ever. They are always tough on the boards and defend so well. Those two things are what LC always does well, and you have to be ready to counter that if you are going to have any success against them.”

Fuller is the catalyst. The 5-10 senior averages 17 points and seven rebounds per game, and she can score from anywhere. But she’s certainly got plenty of help. Sophomore Caelyn Orlandi (5-9) was the Frontier Freshman of the Year a year ago, while 6-1 center Mckenzie Heaslet is scoring 11 points and grabbing six rebounds a night for an LCSC squad which averages 40 rebounds and 78 points a game, while only allowing 58 points to their opponents.

But if anyone is equipped to stand up to the Warriors, and the rest of the Frontier, it’s certainly the Skylights. Led by 6-5 senior A’Jha Edwards, who averages 16 points and a league-best 12 rebounds, the Skylights enter league play averaging 75 points per game while only allowing 46. Northern is tops in all of NAIA in assists, assists per game, total rebounding, rebounding margin and, of course, scoring defense.

And while, offensively, sophomore Natalee Faupel adds 12 points per game and Taylor Cummings, Jacy Thompson and Megan Feldman all chip in with nine points per night, that top-rated defense is what’s going to be key, not only this weekend in the Armory, but all season long.

“Defense is our calling card,” Mouat said. “And we’ll need to bring that defense right from the start this weekend. These are two explosive teams, and both teams are talented and can hurt you in a lot of different ways. So we need to be ready to go right from the start Friday night.

“But again, the kids are excited for these challenges,” he continued. “And they’re looking forward to playing at home. It’s been a long time since we’ve played on our home floor, and I know they’re really looking forward to it.”

Tonight’s game between the Skylights and Orediggers tips off at 6 inside the Armory Gymnasium. Saturday night’s NAIA Game of the Week between Northern and LC State will also tip off at 6 p.m. The Skylights are on the road next Thursday at Carroll College and Saturday at Rocky Mountain College.

No. 15 Skylights (15-1) vs Montana Tech (8-7)

Tonight at 6 p.m.; vs No. 12 LC State (14-2) Saturday at 6 p.m. at the Armory Gymnasium Havre, MT

MSU-Northern Starters
G Taylor Cummings, 5-7, Sr, 10 ppg
G Jacy Thomspn, 5-7, Fr., 9 ppg
F Natalee Faupel, 5-10, So., 13 ppg
F Megan Feldman, 5-11, Sr., 9 ppg
C A'Jha Edwards, 6-5, Sr., 16 ppg, 12 rpg

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