Sweet Sweep
Skylights rock Orediggers, topple Warriors in Frontier openers
By George Ferguson
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In the tough landscape of Frontier Conference women’s basketball, it’s hard to find anything better than beating a league rival by 41 points. Unless you turn around the next night and win an emotional, hard-fought NAIA Game of the Week against an arch rival.

And that’s exactly what the Montana State University-Northern Skylights did on the opening weekend of Frontier play. Northern dismantled Montana Tech 78-37 Friday night in the Armory Gymnasium, then, the No. 15 Skylights out-lasted the No. 12 Lewis-Clark State Warriors 63-61 in front of a boisterous Armory crowd Saturday night.

The win over LCSC avenged last season’s heartbreaking loss in the Frontier semifinals, but more importantly, gave the Skylights a 2-0 start to league play. And it also gave them even more confidence going forward.

“Very proud of our kids,” said Northern head coach Chris Mouat. “LC is a great basketball team. They are very hard to beat, and they made clutch play after clutch play down the stretch. It was a pressure-packed, great basketball game and neither team laid down. And I’m just really proud of how our kids stayed poised down the stretch.”

And Northern needed to keep its composure in the final minutes. After out-playing the talented Warriors for much of the contest, as expected, the Warriors made one final push.

The Skylights had built an 11-point lead at 48-37 with 11:22 to play, but the Warriors were never going to fold. A quick 7-0 run, capped by a Kelli Rice 3-pointer got LCSC right back in the contest, and while an A’Jha Edwards layup kept Northern ahead 55-52 with just more than three minutes left, the Skylights, at that point, were in for a big fight.

And just seconds later, things got even more interesting as Natahnee Spencer buried a triple to tie the game at 57-57. Edwards responded with a turnaround bank shot to put the Skylights back ahead 59-57 with two minutes left, then freshman Jacy Thompson took a big charge on LCSC’s ensuing possession. Then she came up with an even bigger play as she beat the LCSC full-court press down the floor for a layup and foul. The 3-point play gave the Skylights a 63-59 lead with 1:11 to go and the MSU-N crowd was in a frenzy.

The two key plays by Thompson, a true freshman from Townsend, were critical to the outcome.
"Jacy really stepped up," Cummings said. "It was a great way for her to establish herself as a player in this conference. And experiences like tonight are going to make her even better down the road."

Leading by five, the Skylights were in good shape, but the Warriors weren’t done. Caelyn Orlandi hit two huge shots inside the final minute, and all of a sudden, the score was 63-61 with 11 seconds left. But senior Megan Feldman, who played an outstanding game in her own right, found herself at the foul line with a chance to put the contest away for good. However, she missed both free throws, giving LCSC one last shot at a tie or the win. But, in the waning seconds, Feldman and Edwards stood up defensively, and Spencer never got a clean look at the basket as time expired, sending the Skylights to a huge, early-season victory.

"LC is great,” Mouat said. “They wouldn’t go away. Tanis Fuller and Caelyn Orlandi were phenomenal down the stretch. They hit some huge shots, and we really had to weather that storm. And we did that. I thought, we executed well in key moments. We got some big baskets, and a couple of key stops down the stretch. It was just a great basketball game. It was a lot of fun.”

The Warriors were certainly great, especially Fuller, who was brilliant in the second half. But she couldn’t outdo Northern, which was great from start to finish.

Edwards and Natalee Faupel established themselves right away, and the Skylights jumped all over the Warriors, leading 6-0. Later in the half, Edwards and Faupel combined for an 8-0 run, which eventually led to a 28-22 Northern halftime edge.

MSU-N really got rolling in the first portion of the second half. They scored six quick points to start the period, and led 34-22. Thompson and Faupel would add 3-pointers later on to keep Northern’s cushion at a comfortable 10 points, and when it looked like the Warriors were about to make a run, senior Taybra Teeters dropped a big shot in from the elbow to give the Skylights a 45-35 lead. Minutes later, Faupel would bury another triple to push the lead to 48-37, before LC began its final run at Northern.

“It was a great game, and a lot of things stood out for us,” Mouat said. “Natalee hit a huge three in the second half, Taybra made a clutch shot when we needed it. Jacy taking that charge was huge. I thought Bird’s (Feldman) defense all night was phenomenal. She did a tremendous job, she really came to work tonight. And Taylor kept us composed like she always does. It was just a great all-around effort by our kids, and against a team as good as LC, that’s what you have to have.”

Faupel poured in a game-high 20 points and hit two treys, while Edwards was spectacular for the second night in a row. Despite being double-teamed for much of the game, she scored 19 points on 8-of-14 shooting while grabbing 19 rebounds. Thompson added 14 points and six assists while Northern shot a solid 48 percent from the field and out-rebounded the Warriors 31-27. LC, which squeaked out a win at Great Falls Friday night, got 16 from Fuller and 15 by Orlandi.

“I think the loss we had in Florida really helped us tonight,” Cummings said. “We were kind of in the same situation tonight, and we did a better job of keeping our composure, of doing things like making our free throws and taking care of the ball. We handled the end of the game much better tonight, and that made all the difference.”

No Contest

Northern didn’t need any late-game heroics in its Frontier Conference opener on Friday night in the Armory Gymnasium. And while Montana Tech is a team with talent and depth, the Orediggers were no match for the Skylights as they cruised to a 41-point victory.

From the out-set, it was clear A’Jha Edwards was going to be spectacular, even going up against a rival in Tech forward Kayla DeWit. Edwards scored Northern’s first six points, while Jacy Thompson buried a triple to start a 13-0 run. By the time Taylor Cummings capped the run, Northern led 21-5, and the blowout was on.

The Skylights added a 17-4 run later in the a first half in which Edwards didn't miss a single shot on her way to yet another record-breaking night. And by the time the first 20 minutes were in the books, the Skylights led 36-18.
"We got off to a great start," Mouat said. "We have a lot of respect for Montana Tech. They are a very good team. But I thought we were really focused. We executed really well on both ends of the floor, and that gave us a lot of confidence, knowing we could execute like that against a really good team. It was a really good first half."

As well as Northern played in the first half, the Skylights would get even better. Edwards never slowed down, and neither did the MSU-N defense, which held Tech to a dismal 28 percent shooting for the game. And when Edwards hit a turnaround jumper to cap yet another Northern 10-0 run, the Skylights led 58-28 with 10:19 to play. From there, everybody got into the act. Freshman Brandy Lambourne came in and scored six points, Taryn Norby hit a shot and Cydney Auzenne nailed a 3-pointer as the Skylights opened the conference season in dominant fashion.

And while it was a total team effort, Friday night belonged to Edwards. She scored 27 points on a school-record 11-of-12 shooting. She also yanked down 16 rebounds, which gives her an incredible 14 double-doubles this season. Her two-night performance in the Armory also comes on the heels of winning NAIA National Player of the Week just five days ago.

"A'Jha was spectacular," Mouat said. "And I thought our kids did a great job of getting her the ball in the right spots. And then of course, she did a great job finishing against a really good Montana Tech defense."

"But it really was a great effort by the entire team," he added. "We got great spark from our bench all night. Molly and Brandy both did a great job of running the point when they were in there, I thought we took care of the ball, we kept our turnovers low. It was just a great effort by all our kids."

On a night when MSU-N shot 55 percent from the floor, committed a season-low eight turnovers and out-rebounded the bigger Orediggers by 12 boards, the Skylights also got 10 points from Cummings and nine from Thompson. DeWit led Tech, which beat UGF Saturday night, with 15 points, but the MSU-N defense held double-digit scorers Mandy Machinal and Kabri Emerson to a combined 11 points.

"We played with a lot of confidence tonight," Edwards said. "We have a lot of trust and belief in each other. And I thought that showed tonight. That allows us to play like that. And when we play like we did tonight, it gives us the confidence to know we're a really good team."

The Skylights are indeed good, and they're off to a great start. Northern is 2-0 in league play and a sparkling 17-1 overall. But with huge road games now coming at nationally-ranked Carroll College Thursday night and Rocky Mountain College Saturday night, Mouat knows his team has a long way to go.

"We got two big ones this weekend," Mouat said. "Tonight (Saturday) was a big win for us. LC is just so hard to beat. And I'm really proud of the kids for that win, and happy for them. But there's a lot of season left. We have a lot of hard games still to play, and that's what we'll focus on now."

Northern will be back in the Armory for league games against UM-Western Jan. 23 and Westminster College Jan. 24.

Skylights 78, Montana Tech 37

TECH – Kayla DeWit – 6-22 3-5 15, Kabri Emerson 2-3 2-3 6, Hattie Thatcher 2-8 0-1 4, Martha Dembek 1-3 0-0 2, Mandy Machinal 2-8 1-1 5, Sophia Baetz 0-1 0-0 0, Calee Remsen 1-3 1-1 3, Rachel Farris 0-1 2-3 2, Shayla Mack 0-2 0-0 0. Totals: 14-51 8-13 37.

MSU-N – Megan Feldman 2-3 3-5 7, A'Jha Edwards 11-12 5-8 27, Jacy Thompson 2-7 3-4 9, Natalee Faupel 4-8 0-0 8, Taylor Cummings 4-10 2-2 10,
Brandy Lambourne 3-6 0-0 6, Taryn Norby 1-3 0-0 2, Molly Kreycik 2-2 0-0 4, Makhayla Farmer 0-0 0-0 0, Cydney Auzenne 1-2 0-0 3, Taybra Teeters 1-3 0-0 2. Totals: 31-56 8-13 78.

Halftime: Northern 36-18. 3-pointers: TECH 1-7 (Machinal 1), MSU-N 3-8 (Thompson 2, Auzenne 1); Rebounds: TECH 26 (Emerson 9), MSU-N 39 (Edwards 16); Fouls: TECH 13, MSU-N 14. Fouled out: None.

Skylights 63, Lewis-Clark State 61

**LCSC** – Megan Risinger 1-2 1-1 3, Tanis Fuller 5-12 5-6 16, McKenzie Heaslet 4-9 0-0 8, Caelyn Orlandi 6-14 2-2 15, Brooke Litalien 1-5 0-0 3, KKynndah Ulmer 0-0 1-2 1, Natahnee Spencer 3-5 2-2 10, Hannah Byerly 1-1 0-0 2, Kelli Rice 1-3 0-0 3, Laurennna Plourd 0-1 0-0 0. Totals: 22-52 11-15 61.

**MSU-N** – Megan Feldman 2-2 2-5 6, A’Jha Edwards 8-14 3-6 19, Jacy Thompson 3-6 4-7 14, Natalee Faupel 6-14 6-9 20, Taylor Cummings 1-5 0-0 2, Molly Kreycik 0-1 0-0 0, Taybra Teeters 1-1 0-0 2. Totals: 21-43 10-18 63.

Halftime: Northern 28-22. 3-pointers: LCSC 6-11 (Orlandi 1, Litalien 1, Spencer 2, Rice 1); MSU-N 3-10 (Thompson 1, Faupel 2); Rebounds: LCSC 27 (Heaslet 8), MSU-N 31 (Edwards 19); Fouls: LCSC 23, MSU-N 14. Fouled out: None.