Skylights brace for Showdown Saturday
MSU-N won’t overlook Western tonight, but the Griffins are coming
By George Ferguson
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Here we go again.

That’s what the Montana State University-Northern Skylights are thinking, because for the third straight week, they have a huge, nationally ranked showdown, and for the second time this season, that showdown happens inside the Armory Gymnasium.

But before the No. 10 Skylights (4-0, 19-1) take on the No. 4 Westminster Griffins (2-1, 12-2) Saturday night, they must put all their efforts into the UM-Western Bulldogs. The Bulldogs (0-3, 8-11) invade the Armory tonight at 6, looking for their first Frontier Conference win of the season.

“It’s a big weekend, with two big games at home,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “But Western is the priority right now. That’s the first one, and we won’t make the mistake of overlooking them.”

No question the Skylights won’t overlook the Bulldogs, even with one of the biggest regular season games in Skylight history looming Saturday night. The Bulldogs have played Northern too tough too many times in Havre for the Skylights to look past them. Not to mention, Northern is a veteran team on a roll right now, and the Skylights have done too much already, and have too much at stake, and they understand how big every game is, not just the game’s against national powers like Westminster.

“Western is going to be a good challenge,” Mouat said. “They are doing a lot of things really well. Coach (Lindsey) Woolley does a great job as always. He’ll have them ready to play. They do a great job of attacking you at both ends of the floor. They are a dangerous team, and we’re not overlooking them at all. We know we’ll have our hands full with them.”

While the Bulldogs do present challenges for the Skylights, as they are led by senior point guard Jenna Banks (5-3), who does a little bit of everything, as well as leading scorers Sierra Higheagle (5-10, 11 ppg) and Kaye Bignell (5-9, 9 ppg), they will certainly have their hands full with the Skylights, too.

Northern brings the No. 1 defense in the country into tonight’s game, as the Skylights allow just 46 points per contest. MSU-N is also the top rebounding team in the Frontier, as well as being tops in the country in field goal percentage defense. That spells trouble for a Western squad which averages just 60 points per game this season and is only scoring 55 points per outing in Frontier Conference play.
Northern is also a tough matchup for Western on the defensive end. Senior A’Jha Edwards (6-5) is playing at an All-American level, as she averages 17 points, 13 rebounds and two blocks per game. Her presence will also open things up for the likes of Natalee Faupel (13 ppg), Taylor Cummings (9 ppg) and freshman Jacy Thompson, who’s shooting really well right now and averaging 10 points per contest. Add in the inside play of Megan Feldman and Taybra Teeters, and the Skylights are a matchup nightmare.

However, the Skylights, who are off to one of the best starts in school history, and come into tonight’s game fresh off two impressive road wins last weekend, aren’t just a matchup problem for the Bulldogs, they’re a matchup problem for everyone in the Frontier.

And they’ll try to exploit that Saturday night when they take a shot at dethroning six-time Frontier champion Westminster. Northern hasn’t beaten the Griffins in Havre since the 2006-2007 season, though they’ve had a couple of really close calls, including when now Northern assistant coach Nicole Yazzie bombed in a game-winning 3-pointer as time expired five years ago. But the Skylights aren’t the only program in the league to have tasted the Griffins’ wrath over the years. Over the last six seasons, Westminster has been as dominant as any Frontier program, ever. And given some of the storied programs in the conference over the last 40 years, it makes Westminster’s run all the more impressive.

“They’re just really good,” Mouat said of the Griffins. “Year after year, they are just very good. And this team is no different. They are extremely solid, extremely well-coached and extremely talented.”

The Griffins are all of that and more. They have the preseason NAIA Player of the Year in senior guard Tia Pappas (5-7, 14 ppg) and a lot of weapons around her. Fellow senior Amy Krommenhoek (5-7) averages 12 points per night, while Amanda Hacking (5-11), Alli Winters (5-8) and Shelby Ellsworth (5-11) combine to give the Griffins another 27 points. Junior transfer Mika Pinner (6-1) is also the anchor in the middle for the Griffins and will be charged with defending Edwards for much of the night.

And defense is where the key to Saturday night’s clash lies. While Northern is the top defensive team in the country, Westminster is a team that shoots an efficient 44 percent from the floor and 37 percent from beyond the arc. And on the other end, the Griffins are just as stingy as the Skylights. They allow just 47 points per game, which is second in the NAIA, and their opponents shoot just 33 percent from the field against them.

“They (Griffins) are the best team in the country defensively in my opinion,” Mouat said. “I know the numbers say we are, but with the schedule they’ve played, and the team’s they’ve shut down, you just can’t argue how good defensively they are. You have to be strong with the ball or they’ll just take it right away from you. And you can’t make mistakes on either end, or they’ll make you pay. You make a mistake offensively, and it’s a turnover and they’re going the other way for a layup. You make a mistake defensively, and they’re drilling a three on you. They are just that good, that sound on both ends and that well prepared. It’s one of those nights where you have to be at your very best in order to have a chance.”

Indeed, the task of beating the Griffins is daunting. They’ve only lost twice in conference play since the end of the 2011-12 season. But Northern is a team equipped to give the Griffins all they can handle this season — the last season Westminster will be in the Frontier. The Skylights are on a roll that Northern fans haven’t seen in quite some time, and it’s going to take a herculean effort from even the mighty Griffins to stop that roll Saturday night.

“There’s no doubt this a big game,” Mouat said. “Westminster is as good as it gets at our level. But really, it’s two big games for us. The way our conference is right now, every game has a lot of pressure on it. But I’m really pleased with where we’re at right now. We’ve taken some big steps toward some of our goals the last couple of weeks, and that’s what we want to keep doing. Just take this season one step at a time, one game at a time. So it all starts with our game against Western Friday night. That’s the focus right now.

“Our kids are playing with a lot of confidence right now,” he continued. “And hopefully, we can play two more good games this weekend.”

Tonight’s game between Northern and Western tips at 6 inside the Armory Gymnasium. Saturday night’s showdown between the Skylights and Griffins will kick off at 6 p.m. in the Armory. Westminster plays at No. 22 Great Falls tonight. Northern visits the Argos next Saturday night.

No. 10 Skylights (19-1, 4-0) vs UM-Western (8-11, 0-3) Tonight at 6 p.m.;
vs No. 4 Westminster (12-2, 2-1) Saturday at 6 p.m. 
at the Armory Gymnasium, Havre, MT

MSU-Northern Starters

G Taylor Cummings, 5-7, Sr, 9 ppg
G Jacy Thompson, 5-7, Fr., 10 ppg
F Natalee Faupel, 5-10, So., 13 ppg
F Megan Feldman, 5-11, Sr., 9 ppg
C A'Jha Edwards, 6-5, Sr., 17 ppg, 12 rpg

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