Crazy Armory Nights: Skylights fall in epic thriller
Griffins prevail in double overtime one night after Skylights crush UM-Western
By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern Skylights have already had an epic 20-win season. They've already taken down nationally ranked Lewis-Clark State and Carroll College in the first two weeks of Frontier Conference play.

But the game the Skylights were involved in Saturday night inside the Armory Gymnasium went well beyond epic - it was a Frontier women's game for the ages. Unfortunately for the No. 10 Skylights, they ended up on the wrong side of one of the greatest women's games ever played in the Armory as the No. 4 Westminster Griffins simply outlasted the Skylights 67-62 in double overtime.

"Very proud of them," Northern head coach Chris Mouat said of his Skylights. "They didn't go away. Westminster is a great, great basketball team. They have all the pieces. They were so good defensively tonight. And they made really big, clutch shots time and time again.

"But I'm proud of our kids for not going away," he added. "For much of the game, they kept finding ways to hang in there. We'll look back on this game and see that we needed to make more of our free throws and that we couldn't afford to miss the bunnies we did. And we'll learn from it and go forward."

In front of a huge crowd Saturday night, the Skylights, the No. 1 defensive team in the NAIA, and the Griffins, the No. 2 team in the country in scoring defense, waged a classic defensive battle. And with the game hanging in the balance, it was Northern's trademark defense which made things as dramatic as they were.

In a second half that saw the Skylights fall behind after leading 21-20 at the break, Megan Feldman scored two layups on two straight trips down the floor to get Northern back within striking distance at 48-44. Feldman answered back-to-back 3-pointers by Shelby Ellsworth and Amy Krommenhoek - and it wouldn't be the last time Feldman would play the hero either. However, with :35 left, the Skylights were still in trouble, down 50-44.

And that's when things got crazy, and loud.

Natalee Faupel made a floating shot with :20 left to cut the Griffin lead to four points, then Molly Kreycik made a diving steal off an inbound pass and she gave it to Faupel for two more. That made the score 50-48 with :14 left. After a time out, the Skylights set up full court pressure again, planning to foul if they didn't get another steal. This time though, the Griffins couldn't even get the ball in and were whistled for a five-second violation, which brought the Armory to a deafening roar. The excitement was short-lived though as A'Jha Edwards would miss a point-blank look at a game-tying bucket and the Skylights had to foul Amanda Hacking on the rebound.
But Northern still didn't fold. Hacking missed the front end of the one-and-one, and Jacy Thompson raced up the floor to get a look at a game-winning 3-pointer. She was cut off however, but Feldman was left alone under the basket and she scored the game-tying layup, sending the game into overtime at 50-50.

"It was a heads up play by our kids to get the ball up the floor as quickly as they did," Mouat said. "Our full-court pressure, the kids executed it really well. We did a lot of really good things down the stretch in this game. A lot of things we can look at and be very proud of."

As they did so many times Saturday night, the Griffins answered MSU-N's charge. They opened the first OT with an Alli Winters trey, and when she buried another one with 2:51 to play, they led 57-53. But, the Skylights, who only made two 3-pointers all night, fought back again. Taylor Cummings knocked in a bomb to make it 57-56, and from there, the period came down to free throws. But with :22 left, Northern had the ball tied at 58-58 and were again looking for the win. But the Westminster defense stood tall and Northern never got a quality look at a game-winner, and a second overtime was needed to decide things.

And that's where the Skylights ran out of gas and momentum. Tia Pappas hit an early trey in the second OT, and the Griffins went on a 7-0 run. Thompson did nail a jumper to cut the lead down to 65-62 with :38 left, but that's as close as the Skylights would get in what ended up being a wild affair.

"We had some chances," Mouat said. "But we didn't shoot free throws well enough tonight. That was a big factor for us. We have to get that cleaned up. But you also have to credit Westminster. They made so many tough, big shots, shots I thought we defended pretty well. They are just really good, and they showed tonight why they are where they are right now."

Both teams had chances, but it was the Griffins who made the timely shots, especially from the 3-point line. But in the first half, the game was the classic defensive battle that everyone expected to see.

MSU-N managed just one field goal in the first four minutes, but the Skylight defense was equally as stifling. Then, MSU-N went on an 8-0 run, capped by an Edwards turnaround to lead 8-2 early on. Winters ended the run with her first trey of the night, and from there, buckets were really hard to come by. But two straight layups by Feldman and a jumper by Faupel gave the Skylights some daylight near the end of the first half. Northern led 21-13 with 2:46 until intermission, but the three again came into play as Krommenhoek ended the half with a long triple to pull the Griffins back to within one point.

"I thought we played really good defensively for much of the game," Mouat said. "I was a little disappointed in how the first half ended. We had worked so hard to get a little bit of a lead, and then we kind of went to sleep defensively right there at the end. You just can't do that against a team as good as Westminster. But, for the most part, I thought our defensive effort was outstanding."

The Griffins did make the Skylights pay for letting them back in late in the first half. Winters drilled another triple at the 17:17 mark of the second half, and all of sudden, the Griffins were ahead 39-30. And with how they were defending the Skylights, it was going to be tough to come back. But Edwards gave it all she had down the stretch. She wound up playing 48 minutes, with the flu, and was again remarkable. Others stepped up as well. Faupel hit big shots before fouling out just before the end of regulation, while Cummings made clutch free throws to keep the Skylights’ comeback hopes alive. Taybra Teeters nailed an important shot when the Skylights again trailed by nine with 8:16 left, and Feldman's plays late in the half set up the dramatic finish.

Edwards finished with a team-high 19 points and 16 rebounds, her 15th double-double of the season. Cummings added 12 points, four assists and two steals, while Feldman had 10 points and six boards and Faupel scored 10 as well. The Skylights shot 43 percent from the floor, which is above what Westminster normally allows. But they missed six free throws and were forced into 19 turnovers, and they also got out-rebounded by the Griffins, 37-34.

Northern's stout defense did force 19 Westminster turnovers on the other end. But the Skylights just didn't have an answer for the Griffins' timely shooting. The Griffins went 9-of-19 from three, including four by Winters, who scored a game-high 21 points. Pappas added 15 points and 13 rebounds, while Ellsworth scored 13 in what was a huge weekend for the Griffins, who swept Northern and UGF in two hard-fought games.
And while Westminster left their last-ever trip to the Armory feeling great - the Griffins will move to NCAA DII next season - the Skylights were left with their first loss of the Frontier season, but still in first place in the league standings. And though the game will certainly sting, Mouat said there's no time to dwell.

"We'll look at the film, and we'll see the mistakes we made, the things we didn't do well enough," he said. "We'll also see that we did a lot of different things really well. There is a lot we can take away from this game. But we have to move on. We have a very tough game at Great Falls this weekend, and all we can do is move on and get ready for that."

**Dawgs are no match**

While the weekend ended in disappointment, the Skylights took care of business the way they were supposed to Friday night in the Armory Gymnasium.

Northern ran right over the UM-Western Bulldogs in a 62-37 victory. And if there was any thoughts of the Skylights looking past the Bulldogs, with the Griffins coming Saturday, they put those thoughts to rest in a dominant second-half display.

Leading just 29-21 at halftime, Northern crushed the Bulldogs' hopes of an upset in the last 20 minutes. Jacy Thompson and Taylor Cummings combined for a 12-0 run, a run they combined to hit three 3-pointers in, and the Skylights were ahead 48-27 with 8:46 to play. From there, Western never got close again, as Northern's defense was simply too much for the Bulldogs to handle. The Skylights forced 11 turnovers in the second half and held the Bulldogs to just 21 percent shooting, and just 32 percent for the entire game.

"We worked all week on Western, preparing for them," said MSU-N sophomore Natalee Faupel, who scored 15 points in the first half. "We knew we absolutely could not overlook them. They're a good team. We knew they would give us everything. So our focus was on stopping them.

"At halftime, we said we need to play our game, and play better," she continued. "And we did. We were confident in the second half. We passed the ball better and that opened things up for us. We were just more confident in the second half."

"We just weren't as crisp as we would have liked in the first half," MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat added. "And Western had a lot to do with that. They played really well. They kind of took it to us. But I thought we got some shots to fall early in the second half, and we finished much better. We just played harder in the second half. We did a much better job defensively, and rebounding, too. And we had some kids step up and make some big shots when we needed them."

The first half was a bit of a struggle. Western was winless in league play, and the Bulldogs played with a sense of urgency. But Faupel was too much for the Western defense to handle. She sparked a 7-0 run with a triple and she buried two more before the first 20 minutes were in the books.

Still, Western didn't go away. Baylie Smith knocked in a three to cut the Skylight lead to 21-18, but scores by Taylor Cummings, Thompson and Faupel down the stretch helped Northern build an eight-point cushion at the break, and the Skylights came out and rolled over the Bulldogs from there.

Western did hold a flu-ridden A'Jha Edwards to just three points, but she still grabbed 14 rebounds. On the other hand, the Bulldogs could do nothing to stop Faupel, who was 7-for-8 from the field and 4-for-4 from the three as she scored a game-high 18 points. Thompson added two bombs and scored 14, while Cummings chipped in with 12 points and six assists. Northern shot better than 50 percent from the floor, made seven triples and held a Frontier Conference opponent to a meager 37 points. So while the start wasn't great, it was still an utterly impressive performance.

"It was important to come out and get this one," Mouat said. "And I was pleased with the way we played in the second half. Natalee played great, Jacy Thompson hit some big shots, and Taylor's defense was again just incredible. We got some nice lift from our bench tonight too. The second half was what we expect to see from this team. So I was pleased with the way they responded coming out of halftime."

Now, the Skylights (5-1, 20-2) will get a chance to really respond. Northern will have to shrug off Saturday night's loss to the Griffins and get ready for a big rivalry game at UGF this Saturday. The Argos lost to the...
Griffins Friday night by just four points, then took care of Western on Saturday. So it's likely they'll still be in the NAIA Top 25 when the Skylights come calling.

Northern's game at UGF is set for 5:30 p.m. this Saturday at the McLaughlin Center in Great Falls.

**Skylights 62, UM-Western 37**

**UM-W** – Melody McCloud 3-4 1-1 8, Jenna Banks 1-3 0-0 2, Sierra Higheagle 3-10 0-0 6, Kaye Bignell 3-5 0-0 6, Kaci Matthis 2-5 2-2 7, Kelsey Callaghan 0-3 0-0 0, McCall Hasquet 0-3 0-0 0, Taylor Kanthack 1-1 0-0 2, Callie Kanthack 0-2 0-0 0, Baylie Smith 10-5 0-0 3, Breyenne Mosey 03 3-4 3. Totals: 14-44 6-9 37.

**MSU-N** – Megan Feldman 2-4 0-0 4, A'Jha Edwards 1-8 1-4 3, Jacy Thompson 6-12 0-0 14, Natalee Faupel 7-8 0-0 18, Taylor Cummings 4-7 3-5 12, Brandy Lambourne 0-1 2-2 2, Taryn Norby 0-0 0-0 0, Molly Kreycik 1-2 1-2 3, Makhayla Farmer 0-0 0-0 0, Cydney Auzenne 0-1 2-2 2, Taybra Teeters 2-4 0-0 4. Totals: 23-46 9-22 62.

Halftime: Northern 29-21. 3-pointers: UM-W 3-11 (McCloud 1, Matthis 1, Smith 1), MSU-N 7-14 (Thompson 2, Faupel 4, Cummings 1); Rebounds: UM-W 28 (Higheagle 5), MSU-N 34 (Edwards 16); Fouls: UM-W 20, MSU-N 12; Fouled out: None.

**Westminster 67, Skylights 62 2OT**

**WC** – Shelby Ellsworth 6-11 0-0 13, Amy Krommenhoek 3-9 3-3 10, Tia Pappas 5-12 3-6 15, Amanda Hacking 1-4 0-1 2, Alli Winters 7-11 3-4 21, Jessica Sorensen 1-3 0-0 2, Rashel Blazzard 0-1 0-0 0, Mika Pinner 2-7 0-2 4. Totals: 25-58 8-15 67.

**MSU-N** – Megan Feldman 5-6 0-0 10, A'Jha Edwards 7-19 5-11 19, Jacy Thompson 2-11 0-0 4, Natalee Faupel 5-8 0-0 10, Taylor Cummings 4-11 3-3 12, Molly Kreycik 1-1 2-2 5, Taybra Teeters 1-1 0-0 2. Totals: 25-57 10-16 62.

Halftime: Northern 21-20; OT1: 8-8, OT2: Westminster 9-4. 3-pointers: WC 9-19 (Ellsworth 1, Krommenhoek 2, Pappas 2, Winters 4), MSU-N 2-10 (Cummings 1, Kreycik 1); Rebounds: WC 37 (Pappas 11), MSU-N 34 (Edwards 16); Fouls: WC 18, MSU-N 17; Fouled out: Ellsworth, Hacking, Faupel.

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MSU-Northern's Taylor Cummings drives past Westminster's Alli Winters during Saturday night's epic game between the Skylights and Griffins.