Skylights aim to get back on the right track
By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern women's basketball team has felt the sting of defeat just three times this entire season. Unfortunately, the Skylights have felt that sting in each of their last two games.

And the road to getting back on the winning track doesn't get any easier for the No. 11 Skylights (5-2, 20-3), who play their fifth game against a nationally ranked opponent when they visit the No. 21 Lewis-Clark State tonight in Lewiston, Idaho. MSU-N is also on the road Saturday to face Montana Tech in Butte.

Northern, which started Frontier Conference play with a perfect 5-0 record, including a 63-61 win over LC State last month in Havre, has dropped two straight games. The Skylights suffered a double-overtime setback against No. 4 Westminster two weeks ago at the Armory Gymnasium, then were throttled by now No. 20 UGF last Saturday night in Great Falls. And now, the injury-plagued Skylights, who will likely be without the services of starting guard Jacy Thompson again this weekend, will have to try and start a new winning streak with two tough road challenges.

"We've got good leadership," said MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat said. "But, we've got to look in the mirror and figure out what we're all about again. Going into these games, we have to clean some things up. We have to be better defensively, we have to much better on the boards, and we have to finish better offensively. And I think we will. These kids are a very focused group. They know what needs to be done, but we certainly have to play much better than we have the last couple of games."

"Defense and rebounding are Northern's bread and butter. But the Skylights didn't do either well last Saturday in Great Falls. However, Northern is still the No. 2 defense in the country, and the Skylights still have senior A'Jha Edwards, who averages 17 points, leads the Frontier Conference in rebounding at 13 per game, and also gets two blocks per night. Natalee Faupel and senior leader Taylor Cummings also average in double figures for the Skylights, while sophomore Molly Kreycik's role will increase tremendously if Thompson is unable to go.

And tonight's game will be a tall order for the short-handed Skylights. Lewiston is a place Northern has played well before, but has come up short more times than the Skylights have won. Not to mention, LC State will certainly be gunning for the Skylights tonight after the Warriors (4-3, 18-5) not only lost in Havre last month, but were also dismantled by Westminster 89-40 in their last game.

"LC State is a very good team coming off of a tough loss and playing at home," Mouat said. "We fully realize that we are going to take their best shot, so we've got to go in there with a solid mindset. We need to expect and handle their full-court pressure early in the game and get into a rhythm on offense. And, we need to do a much better job on the boards than we did last weekend. Defensively, we need to be sharper than ever because of the amount of weapons they have on the floor at any given time. They definitely start with Tanis Fuller and Caelyn Orlandi, who both can get over 20 points on any given night. Both are matchup
problems, but around them they have a bunch of kids who can really hurt you from the perimeter and at the rim."

Fuller is the catalyst for LCSC. She averages 17 points and six rebounds per game, while Orlandi is the Warriors top 3-point shooter. But as Mouat mentioned, the Warriors have tremendous depth, and center Mackenzie Heaslet is a load to handle in the interior.

Another team that will be gunning for Northern is Montana Tech (0-7, 8-14). The Skylights thumped the Orediggers on the opening night of league play, and Tech, which hosts No. 20 UGF tonight, hasn't been able to find the column in league play yet.

However, Mouat and the Skylights won't underestimate the Orediggers one bit. They can't afford that with Tech boasting a trio of stars in Mandy Machinal (14 ppg), Kayla DeWit (12 ppg) and Kabri Emerson (10 ppg), as well as sophomore guard Martha Dembek, who averages 10 per night and is one of the top 3-point shooters in the Frontier. Add to all of that a Tech squad hungry to start winning, playing at home, and the Skylights will be walking into a hornet's nest for the second straight night on the road.

"Montana Tech, despite their record, is one of the most talented teams in the league," Mouat said. "They have two all-conference caliber post players in DeWit and Emerson, and Mandy Machinal is as good as any guard in the league when she's playing well. Hattie Thatcher has been playing much better for them at the point spot and has really upped her scoring, and Martha Dembek has been solid all season long. This is a very, very capable team and our players know it. We need to limit their looks on the block, and we need to contest the 3-point line. They have been shooting it very well from 3 lately."

There are a lot of things the Skylights need to do well this weekend, and in both games, the challenges will be daunting. But Northern's goals are still all in front of them, and those goals include contending for the Frontier title and securing an NAIA postseason berth. And this weekend's games will go a long way in achieving those goals if the Skylights can find success.

"Both games present big challenges, and we need to respond with a great effort," Mouat said. "Defensively, and on the boards, we simply must be better. Offensively, we need to finish. Our execution has been there most of the time, but we need to finish easy baskets better than we have been."

Tonight's NAIA showdown between the Skylights and LC State tips off at 6:30 in Lewiston, Idaho. Northern's game at Montana Tech starts at 5:30 p.m. Saturday in Butte. The Skylights are back home to host Rocky Mountain College and Carroll College next weekend.

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