The Montana State University-Northern Skylights love playing at home. They love playing in front of the raucous crowds that pack the Armory Gymnasium. But, ahead of this weekend’s crucial Frontier Conference home stand, it’s life on the road that’s given the Skylights an added boost of confidence.

The No. 11 Skylights (5-2, 22-3) come into tonight’s game with Rocky Mountain College, which tips off at 6 inside the Armory, and Saturday’s big bout with No. 18 Carroll College, fresh off impressive road victories at Lewis-Clark State last Thursday and Montana Tech last Saturday.

And while the Skylights have gone 14-2 away from Havre this season, playing so well on the road only makes Northern that much more excited to play at home.

“Last weekend was big,” said MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat, whose Skylights are tied for second in the Frontier and sit one game behind league-leading Westminster. “To get two wins like that on the road is huge, especially after a tough loss to UGF. So it should give us a lot of momentum going into these next two games. I know our kids are excited for these games. I know they’re excited to be playing at home again.”

Momentum is big, but so is the way the Skylights played in their visits to LCSC and Tech last weekend. After a struggle two weeks ago at UGF, Northern got back to playing dominant defense, and the Skylights got back to owning the glass. MSU-N comes into this weekend’s games, leading the Frontier in rebounding, while also leading the NAIA in assists and defensive rebounding. The Skylights also allow just 50 points per game, which is second in the NAIA to only Westminster.

Offensively, Northern is getting it done, too. MSU-N misses freshman sharp shooter Jacy Thompson, who’s currently out with an injury, but the Skylights are still finding plenty of ways to score, and sophomore Molly Kreycik has averaged close to 10 points per game since stepping into a starting role. Of course, seniors A’Jha Edwards and Taylor Cummings and sophomore Natalee Faupel also remain MSU-N’s top threats. Edwards averages 16 points and 13 rebounds per game, while Cummings is coming off an 18-point outing against Tech. Faupel averages 13 points per night, and can really explode on teams.

“We’re playing well,” Mouat said. “We like where we’re at. But we still have a ways to go. We still need to get better. That’s the focus.”

Northern also focuses on playing one game at a time, and not overlooking any opponent. And the Skylights have to do that this weekend, because while the Valentine’s Day showdown with Carroll is yet another huge matchup of Frontier and NAIA powers, the Skylights can only worry about the Battlin’ Bears tonight.
While the Skylights beat the Battlin’ Bears (2-7, 9-11) 67-53 last month in Billings, RMC has come a long way under first-year head coach Wes Keller. The Bears went winless in the Frontier last season, but it’s easy to see how much they’ve improved. They’ve played a multitude of tough, close games this season, and led by Whitney Mitchell’s 15 points per game, RMC has become a dangerous offensive team. Jayde LaFevre has also come on strong, while the Bears have a strong inside presence with Tenika Capouch (5-11), Mya Perrow-Donovan (6-0) and Bridger Rice (6-0).

"Wes (Keller) is doing a great job with them (Bears),” Mouat said. "They are playing well and they play extremely hard. They’ve been close with all of our teams in our league, and we know they’ll come in here and play well and play hard.

"Whitney Mitchell is one of the best guards in our league,” he continued. And they have really good balance offensively. But what I really like about them is how they defend. They defend really well and they rebound the ball well, and that’s kind of what we do best. So we know it’s going to be a tough game with them, for sure.”

As tough as tonight’s game will be, Saturday’s game is the yet another showdown with Frontier Conference championship, Frontier playoff seeding and NAIA national tournament implications on the line.

When Carroll (6-3, 15-7) arrives in the Armory Gymnasium, it’s always a great rivalry game, but this weekend, the Skylights and Saints are headed for their second straight showdown where they’re both nationally ranked. Northern won the first battle on Edwards putback with two seconds left month in Helena, so there’s no reason to think the rematch won’t go right down to the bitter end, too.

“The first game, we really had to manufacture points,” Mouat said. “Both teams played great defensively in that game, and points were pretty hard to come by. So offensive execution is going to be pretty critical again.”

Like Northern and Westminster, Carroll is yet another Frontier team with a dominant defense. The Saints allow 57 points per night, which is third behind MSU-N. But Carroll is also very scary offensively. Led by the senior tandem of Bailey Snelling (5-8) and Kailee Junkermeier (5-10), who averaged a combined 25 points per game, and both shoot over 40 percent from three, the Saints can score with the best of them. Add to that, the strong inside play of Cassidy Hashley (6-2), who had a strong game the first time around against the Skylights, and the leadership of point guard Katie Estey (5-6), and the Saints can be as good as anyone in the Frontier on a given night.

“They’re (Saints) just really good on both ends of the floor,” Mouat said. “Snelling and Junkermeier are as good a 1-2 punch as there is in their league. Snelling hit seven threes on us, and Junkermeier just had a game where she made nine. So they have great shooters. But they’re just as good defensively. They’re just really tough, they’re just a very complete team, and it’s going to be another really tough game.”

Thankfully, the Skylights have been in plenty of those so far this season, so they’ll be ready for the challenges that they face this weekend. And it’s a crucial weekend, as Northern must go back on the road next weekend to face up-start UM-Western and top-ranked Westminster.

“We’re just excited to be home,” Mouat said. “We love playing in our gym. These are two really good teams, and they should be very tough games. But we’re excited for both of them.”

Tonight’s game between the Skylights and Battlin’ Bears tips off at 6 in the Armory. Saturday’s NAIA showdown between Northern and Carroll also gets underway at 6 p.m.

No. 11 Skylights (5-2, 22-3) vs RMC (2-7, 9-11) Tonight at 6 p.m.; vs No. 18 Carroll College (6-3, 15-7) Saturday at 6 p.m.
at the Armory Gymnasium Havre, MT

MSU-Northern Starters
G Taylor Cummings, 5-7, Sr., 9 ppg
G Molly Kreycik, 5-8, So., 5 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, 13 rpg
Game Tracker
Streaming: http://www.msun.edu
Twitter: Twitter/Havredaily
Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM

Havre Daily News website