For whatever reason, Saturday nights mean huge, NAIA and Frontier Conference showdowns for the Montana State University-Northern Skylights. It’s just the way the schedule works, and with how deep the Frontier is this season it seems as if the Skylights are playing in one of those Saturday night classics every weekend.

This past Saturday night inside the Armory Gymnasium was no different as the No. 11 Skylights took on the No. 18 Carroll College Fighting Saints in a crucial Frontier matchup. In a game that was expected to go down to the wire, just as it did when Northern beat the Saints in the final seconds last month in Helena, Saturday night’s rematch lived up to its billing as Northern prevailed 56-52 in another defensive slug fest.

And while MSU-N’s vaunted defense played a pivotal role in its latest defeat of the rival Saints, MSU-N’s experience, leadership and toughness also played a big part as the Skylights rallied from a 49-45 deficit with five minutes left.

“This is a calm team in general,” said Northern senior Megan Feldman, who forced three jump balls in the final 10 minutes and scored 12 big points. “We don’t need to panic in those situations because we know we will stick together. We know we have each other’s back. It’s nice to know we can rely on each other in tough times, and that’s we did tonight.”

“This team has been in a lot of tough games this season,” added head coach Chris Mouat. “And not once this year has there been any panic. And we went through some tough times tonight. Carroll forced those tough times on us, with big shots and very good defense. But the leadership and poise we have on this team really showed tonight. They didn’t panic, and eventually, they started getting stops and then, in turn, were able to execute on the other end down the stretch.”

Usually, no team would panic because of a four-point deficit, but with baskets and points so hard to come by for both the Skylights and Saints Saturday night, anything bigger than a four-point lead might have done the trick.

But Northern never let it get that far. The Skylights led 27-23 at the break, and things got even better as MSU-N outscored the Saints 9-2 in the first six minutes of the second stanza and led 36-25. From there, however, Carroll started to chip away, and when Katie Estey knocked in a 3-pointer at the 9:40 mark, Northern’s lead was down to one at 39-38. Carroll would eventually rattle off an 11-2 run, led by two straight buckets from Cassidy Hashley, before Natalee Faupel stopped the bleeding with a trey to tie things up at 44-44.

By then though, the Saints had seemed to seize the momentum, and though MSU-N had fought hard with big points from A’Jha Edwards and Feldman, when Bailey Snelling dropped a three with 2:35 left the Saints were in front 52-50. But Northern showed its true grit, and that’s the last time Carroll would lead.
Edwards answered Snelling’s three on the other end with a layup to knot the game at 52-52, then the Skylights got a stop and Faupel scored on a hard drive to the cup to put the Skylights back in front 54-52 with :55 left. Then, MSU-N again buckled down on defense and forced a Snelling miss, while Molly Kreycik iced the win with two free throws on the other end. The final nail came when Feldman forced her third jump ball of the second half, and Carroll simply ran out of possessions.

“Megan was huge tonight, she made huge plays all night,” Mouat said. “She defended, she got big rebounds and those tie-ups were all big. Credit her for really bringing it tonight, like she always does.

“Credit Carroll,” he continued. “Tonight was a grind with two really good defensive teams making it very tough to score. And neither was going to go away. We had two double-digit leads tonight, and they came back from both of them. It was a great basketball game, and I’m so proud of our kids for staying composed and finding a way to beat a very good team tonight.”

Carroll also erased a double-digit lead in the first half, because Northern was rolling early on. Sparked by two early blocks and two buckets by Edwards, and seven straight points from Faupel, the Skylights charged out to a 16-4 lead in front of a deafening Northern crowd. But Carroll buckled down on defense and eventually got back into single digits. And the half finished on a flurry as Taylor Cummings and Estey traded three’s to end a defensive first half, in what turned out to be a defensive struggle where neither team broke 50 percent from the field.

“We hang our hat on defense, and I thought our defense, and our rebounding tonight was the difference,” Mouat said. “Same with Carroll. That’s what they do so well too. But I just thought, when times got tough, we really defended well and got the stops we needed. And I thought Taylor and Natalee did a great job on what I think are two All-American guards in Bailey Snelling and Kailee Junkermeier. They are two great players, so credit to Taylor and Natalee for chasing and chasing tonight, and making things a little more difficult for those two.”

Indeed. Snelling and Junkermeier combine to score 25 points per game, but the Skylights limited the dynamic senior duo to just 16 points and a total of six makes. Northern also got the rebounding edge 29-23 against a physical Carroll squad, while Faupel scored 18 points, including two big three’s and Edwards racked up another double-double, with 13 points and 16 rebounds to go along with her two blocks. Feldman added eight rebounds to her big night.

And it was a big night for the Skylights, who won their fourth conference game of the year against a nationally ranked opponent and improved to 9-2 in league play and 24-3 overall. Saturday night’s thrilling win also gave Northern a double-sweep of sorts as the Skylights took care of both Lewis-Clark State and the Saints in four meetings this season.

“Our focus is on one game at a time,” Feldman said. “But we also know this puts us in a good position going into these last three games. We know this was an important game for us.”

Caving the Bears

With so many Frontier Conference game against fellow nationally-ranked opponents, the MSU-North Star Skylights have been really good about staying focused, and not overlooking teams they know they should beat.

And that was the case on Friday night, in Northern’s 69-48 Armory Gymnasium win over the Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears.

As usual, the MSU-N defense brought its trademark toughness to the floor against the Bears, and while it took more than a half for Northern’s offense to put the much-improved Bears away, it was still another emphatic conference win for the Skylights.

“I thought Rocky came in and played really well, they defended us really well, especially early,” said Northern head coach Chris Mouat. “But I also thought we defended them extremely well in both halves. I thought our effort defensively was outstanding tonight, and eventually, we were able to open it up in the second half.”
The Skylights, who earned a season sweep of RMC with Friday’s win, had a hard time shaking the pesky Bears early on, despite a huge night and a fast start from Natalee Faupel, who scored six points in the first two minutes of the contest.

RMC stayed close, as sophomore Jayde LeFevre made clutch shots in the first 20 minutes, and Northern had to play extended minutes without star center A’Jha Edwards, who had to have a cut on her forehead attended to. But, with Edwards back in the lineup, the Skylights turned an 18-17 lead with six minutes left in the half to a 30-21 lead at intermission as Edwards scored six quick points in the final five minutes, sparking a 12-2 Northern finish to the half.

“It was nice that we pushed the lead to nine right before half,” Mouat said. “Rocky was playing well, and we had trouble getting score for a while there. But it was nice to get that cushion, and then Natalee just took it over for a while in the second half. Our kids did a great job of finding her, and she finished.”

Faupel was the catalyst. On her way to a game-high 25 points, she nailed three 3-pointers in the first 10 minutes of the second half, helping the Skylights bust the game wide open. A three by Taylor Cummings sparked a 10-0 run, and in the final two minutes, sophomore Taryn Norby put the finishing touches on the blowout with two trey’s of her own.

Faupel ended up going 11-of-16 from the field, while Edwards was her usual self. She scored 13 points, but grabbed a whopping 19 rebounds, now giving her 19 double-doubles for the season. Megan Feldman was also part of MSU-N’s strong second half, and she finished with 10 points, while Cummings added eight points and six assists. Her tenacious defense also helped force RMC into 22 turnovers, while the Skylights out-rebounded the Bears 33-23.

“Again, I thought our defense was really good tonight,” Mouat said. “Taylor was special again tonight on defense. We held a great scorer in Whitney Mitchell to one basket, and we forced a really good Rocky team into a bunch of turnovers. I think that speaks volumes about the way Taylor played tonight.

“I also thought we again got a nice effort form our bench,” he added. “This was just a solid won for us against a really well-coached Rocky team that we knew would come in here and give us everything they had tonight.”

After sweeping Rocky and Carroll, Northern will now get ready to embark on its final road trip of the regular season. Thursday night, the Skylights will be in Dillon to face the UM-Western Bulldogs, before traveling to Salt Lake City for a highly-anticipated rematch with the No. 4 Westminster Griffins on Saturday.

Skylights are 9-2 in the Frontier, 23-3 overall; Next Up: at Western Thursday

Skylights 69, Rocky Mountain 48

RMC – Mya Perrow-Donovan 3-5 2-2 8, Tenika Capouch 1-2 0-0 2, Jayde LeFevre 7-14 1-1 18, Peyton Spencer 2-5 0-0 4, Whitney Mitchell 1-7 0-0 3, Kara Gerke 0-4 2-2 2, Bridger Rice 2-7 1-2 5, Sam Harper 1-5 0-0 2, Marissa Morais 1-1 0-0 2. Totals: 18-50 8-12 48.

MSU-N – Megan Feldman 5-7 0-2 10, A’Jha Edwards 6-15 2-4 13, Natalee Faupel 11-16 0-0 25, Taylor Cummings 3-9 2-2 8, Molly Kreycik 2-6 3-3 7, Brandy Lambourne 0-1 0-0 0, Taryn Norby 2-4 0-0 6, Makhayla Farmer 0-1 0-0 0, Cydney Auzenne 0-0 0-0 0, Taybra Teeters 0-3 0-0 0. Totals: 29-62 6-9 69.

Halftime: Northern 30-21. 3-pointers: RMC 4-12 (LeFevre 3, Mitchell 1), MSU-N 5-14 (Faupel 3, Norby 2); Rebounds: RMC 23 (Mitchell 5), MSU-N 33 (Edwards 19); Fouls: RMC 10, MSU-N 14; Fouled out: None.

Montana State University-Northern’s A’Jha Edwards, left, goes around a Rocky Mountain College defender during Friday night’s game at the Armory Gymnasium. Edwards had another big weekend as the Skylights beat the Bears and Carroll College.
Skylights 56, Carroll 52

**CC** – Cassidy Hashley 7-16 2-3 16, Baylee Watson 1-4 2-6 4, Katie Estey 3-5 0-0 8, Kailee Junkermeier 2-7 0-0 4, Bailey Snelling 4-14 2-2 12, Mikala Osborne 1-1 0-0 3, Allison Sullivan 1-1 0-0 2, Jordan Johnston 1-2 1-2 3. Totals: 20-51 7-13 52.

**MSU-N** – Megan Feldman 4-7 4-5 12, Natalee Faupel 6-10 4-5 18, Taylor Cummings 2-9 2-2 7, Molly Kreycik 0-3 2-2 2, A’Jha Edwards 4-8 5-7 13, Taryn Norby 0-0 2-2 2, Taybra Teeters 1-2 0-0 2. Totals: 17-39 19-23 56.

Halftime: Northern 27-23. 3-pointers: CC 5-12 (Estey 2, Snelling 2, Osborne 1), MSU-N 3-7 (Faupel 2, Cummings 1); Rebounds: 23 (Hashley 6), MSU-N 27 (Edwards 15); Fouls: CC 18, MSU-N 12; Fouled out: Edwards.

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