The Heartbeat of Northern
Taylor Cummings is already an all-time great Skylight point guard. But with her devotion to academics, campus and community service, her impact at MSU-Northern is even more profound

By George Ferguson
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Every fall, across America, 18-year-olds step foot on college campuses for the first time. Most of them have no idea what's in store for them, and most of them have no idea what life will be like five years later. And while that may have also been the case for Montana State University-Northern star basketball player Taylor Cummings when she arrived at Northern from Belt five years ago, the difference was, she knew exactly where she wanted to be five years down the road. She knew what she wanted out of her collegiate experience and she's spent every single day since trying to achieve it.

But even Cummings, who's as driven and goal-oriented as they come, may not have been able to predict just how special, how challenging and how successful both her academic and her basketball career at Northern would become.

The MSU-N senior point guard will leave the Skylight program after this season, having earned degrees in both Design Drafting Technology and Civil Engineering. She'll be a two-time NAIA Academic All-American when all is said and done, and she'll go down as the leader of the Skylights on the floor during one of the most successful two-year runs the program has had in a long, long time.

And that's just for starters.

Cummings, who's been actively involved in the MSU-Northern and Havre community since she arrived, has set an example few student-athletes can – putting academics, family and community service at the same priority level or even high than basketball, while at the same time becoming one of the best at what she does on the court. That's what sets Cummings apart, and that's what makes her a once-in-a-generation type of student-athlete.

"I've always had goals when it came to school," Cummings said. "And when I came to college, I just knew that you can't play basketball forever. At some point, that's going to end. School is about your future. So school has always been my first priority. Because when basketball is over, what I'll be left with is what I've achieved in school."

Cummings definitely puts the student in student-athlete, but make no mistake, she's a born basketball player at heart. A standout at Class C Belt, Cummings came to Northern and red-shirted five years ago. From there, her game has blossomed as much as her academic career, and she's taken the same approach to both over the years. And now, as she's about to leave Northern following the conclusion of what has been a spectacular season for she and the Skylights, she can look back on both and see just how far she's come.

"Playing sports in college, you definitely have to make sacrifices in order to be successful in the class room," Cummings said. "You have to give up some things you love to do, and you have to say no to some things you want to do. So I basically chose school and basketball. The other big part is, you get behind a lot..."
during the season, because you're on the road a lot. That can be very challenging. There have been some final's weeks during my career that have been absolute hell, and there have been a lot of sleepless nights over the years. But I've survived it all, it's all been worth it, and I know I'm better for it."

Cummings is also better on the basketball court. A three-year starter for the Skylights, with a career average of nine points, five assists and two steals per game, Cummings will now forever be etched into the list of the top MSU-N point guards of all time. She'll also go down as one of the greatest defenders the program has ever had, and that's saying something considering how great MSU-N teams have been defensively under head coach Chris Mouat.

"Taylor's is an amazing story," Mouat said. "She is truly a self-made college basketball player. She has worked, from day one, to be the very best she can be. Nothing was handed to her in any way, she went out and worked as hard or harder than any player I've ever had to get where she is at today. She has learned every step of the way and become one of the best point guards and leaders I've had the chance to coach."

Cummings has indeed worked hard. She knew right away, coming from Belt, that the jump to Frontier Conference basketball wouldn't be easy. But, just like with school, she had a plan, she had a goal, and she's followed that plan every day of her college career. And each year with the Skylights, she's grown, becoming a better all-around player, and now, as a senior, she's simply one of the best point guards in the NAIA.

"Taylor really showed me that great things were in store when she took over the point guard spot for our opening three games and helped us win them all," Mouat said. "She really didn't miss a beat, and she showed absolutely no fear. Now, she's a three-year starter and such a vital part of our program. Defensively, Taylor is truly special. She does things on a nightly basis that are very hard to do. She defends 94-feet, and she does it without getting herself into foul trouble very often. We ask a ton of her and she has delivered so many times. Her motor never seems to stop. She definitely sets the tone for our defense, and has helped us be one of the top defensive teams in the nation for three years straight.

"What gets lost in the shuffle sometimes is her ability on the offensive end. She has improved a ton at the rim, mid-range jumper, and from the 3-point line," he continued. "She is one of those kids that is in the gym nearly every day, despite an incredibly busy class schedule.

"It's crazy," Cummings said. "I wish I could play against the freshman me and see how far I've really come, because it's hard to wrap my head around where I was and where I'm at now. I've just really always tried to take basketball one day at a time. I've just spent every day of the last four years trying to get better. That's all I've ever wanted to do, is make sure I did what it took to get better every day.

"Obviously, defense has been a big part of my game, for a long time," she continued. "I've always been about heart and hustle. I love it and it's always been important to me to be a good defender. But from day one, coach Mouat was always on me to improve as an offensive player. So that's been a huge focus for me, and it's probably where my game has seen the most improvement. As a point guard, I've always known I have to be a leader. To get to where we want to go, you have to be a leader and part of that was me stepping up my game offensively."

Neither hard work, nor leadership are nothing new to Cummings. She's been a floor general for the Skylights for the last three years, and has helped lead them to places the program hasn't been in quite some time, including a trip to the NAIA national tournament in 2014, a likely return trip this season, as well as a whopping 47 wins to date over the last two years. Yes, Cummings has been truly special night in and night out for the Skylights. She's been truly special in a leadership role, in the locker room, the weight room, and of course, the class room. She sets the model for how to be a successful student-athlete. But her character and her integrity, her work ethic and her dedication go well beyond the class room and the basketball court.

Cummings is well known and well respected on campus and around Havre, as well is in her home town of Belt where she's organized a number of community-service oriented programs. In her time at Northern, she's volunteered at local schools, reading to children, organized community service projects with senior centers in town, the soup kitchen, she's organized a food drive on campus, and next month, she'll be working on a project with the Boys and Girls Club. All the while, steadfastly pursuing a high level of excellence in school and on the court.
"Giving back has always been important to me," Cummings, who will attend graduate school at Montana State University in Bozeman next year, said. "I have always got more gratification from giving to others and giving back then I have from some of my other achievements. It's just always been really important to me, and especially, trying to give to the next generation of kids. And Havre really has become my home away from home. I feel very comfortable here and the community has supported me so much, and everyone at Northern has been so supportive of me. So it's been really important to me to give back to the campus and the community as much as I can. I don't know, I just really enjoy being involved."

And with her leadership role on the Skylights' basketball team, she's giving back to the program too. Cummings could have had her basketball career come to an end last spring having already obtained one degree. But not only did she return to the Skylights for her final season in order to finish a second degree, but also because of how dedicated she was to the program, to her teammates and to people like Mouat, who have been there with her all the way on this incredible journey. And, because she returned, young point guards like Molly Kreycik and Brandy Lambourne got one more year to learn from one of the best to ever suit up for the Skylights, and the Skylights had their unquestioned leader for one more winter of glory.

"Replacing someone like Taylor, both the player and the person, is going to be very difficult," Mouat said. "She has become a fixture at MSU-Northern. She is active on campus as a Student Ambassador and is a top-notch student. Last year, she earned an MSU-Northern Student Excellence Award, which is one of the highest honors a student can receive. She's also helped us win a lot of games in her career.

"Taylor could have graduated and moved on last year," he continued. "She is a very goal-oriented person and had some very big goals for herself and our team this year. The one thing I know is that she'll keep working toward all of her goals until her last game as a Skylight is played. I feel very blessed to have been able to coach her.

"I wasn't ready to enter the career world yet," Cummings said. "So I was pretty much 100 percent decided on coming back and playing this season. I knew this season was going to be special. This team is special. I knew we had a chance to do great things this year together."

With Cummings at the controls, and on the floor for a whopping 34 minutes per game, this season has been special. The Skylights will finish in second place in the Frontier standings, they are currently ranked No. 10 in the NAIA, they are a legitimate threat to win the Frontier's postseason championship, and they'll be at the national tournament next month. It's no coincidence that all of that has happened with Cummings as their point guard and leader.

But then again, nothing Cummings has done in her life, and her time at Northern is a coincidence. It's all been a part of a lifelong goal, a plan and a dream. Because of how driven, how intelligent and how hard-working Cummings is, her dreams are all coming true. Her goals are now a reality. She is indeed that special breed of student-athlete, the kind that simply doesn't come around often.
And whatever she's gone through, whatever it took to get to where she is now, she knows, it was all worth it in the end.

"This experience here, I wouldn't trade a minute of it for anything in the world," Cummings said. "The school, the program, all of my teammates, Coach Mouat, everyone I know here, and everyone who has been so supportive of me, it's going to be so hard to move on because it's been such a huge, special part of my life the last five years. When it's over, it's really going to be difficult to let it go. But it's all been amazing, and I feel so lucky that I've been able to do everything I've done and be a part of all this."

No Taylor, we're the lucky ones. The Skylights, Northern, Havre,
Belt, wherever you've been and all that you've done, all the lives you've touched, the impacts you've made, we're definitely the lucky ones.