This season, the Montana State University-Northern Skylights have played in six games against fellow nationally ranked NAIA opponents. And that’s just since the start of January. So playing in big-time games is nothing to Northern.

However, tonight in Salt Lake City, the Skylights (27-4) won’t just be playing another nationally ranked power, they’ll be playing in the biggest of all Frontier Conference games. Tonight at 7, the No. 10 Skylights will take on the No. 4 Westminster Griffins (24-2) in the Frontier championship game. And while Northern has seen plenty of big games this season, it’s the Skylights’ first trip to the Frontier championship game in 17 years.

“We’re very excited for this opportunity,” said MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat. “We know it’s going to be a big challenge. But I think our schedule has prepared us well for this game. We’ve played on the road a lot, against very good teams. We’ve seen a lot of different atmospheres this season. We know what we’re up against. But our kids are confident, and they believe that if they play well they have a great shot.”

What the Skylights are up against is the juggernaut known as Westminster. The Griffins have won five straight Frontier titles, and they twice beat the Skylights this season, including a double-overtime win in Havre in January, and a 59-44 victory last month in Salt Lake City.

And not only are the Griffins a veteran, seasoned team with tons of championship game experience, they are loaded with talent, and they’re the only team in the NAIA that defends better than the Skylights do statistically. Westminster allows just 48.4 points per game, which is six less than the great MSU-N defense allows. On the other end, the Griffins are supremely talented and deep. They lead the Frontier in 3-point shooting, and they get 13 points a game from star guard Tia Pappas, while fellow senior guard Amy Krommenhoek averages 13 as well, and forward Shelby Ellsworth averages 11. Westminster also has three more players who average between seven and 10 points per game.

In other words, according to Mouat, the Griffins are the total package.

“They (Griffins) are amazing defensively,” Mouat said. “So first off, we have to find ways to score on them, and we haven’t done a very good job of that against them at times. They are also very good on the boards. They are well coached, and offensively, they run their stuff as well as anybody out there. And they are deep. They have a ton of talented players. So this is going to be a huge challenge, especially on their home floor.”

A huge challenge indeed. But the Skylights, led by seniors A’Jha Edwards and Taylor Cummings, have been up to the challenge all season long. And Northern certainly won’t shrink from the challenge of trying to capture a Frontier championship tonight.
“We’re excited for the opportunity,” said sophomore Natalee Faupel. “We know Westminster is very good. They beat us twice, and we want that next shot at them, we want to give it our best and see what happens.”

Tonight’s championship game between the Griffins and Skylights will tip at 7 in Salt Lake City.