Aiming High: Skylights down Argos

Skylights are 27-4 overall; Next Up: at Westminster tonight in the Frontier championship game

By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern Skylights, for all intents and purposes, have had a spot in the NAIA national tournament locked up for a while now. But these Skylights aren't a team that rests on its laurels. No, they want to win a Frontier Conference championship.

And they weren’t about to let that dream be derailed by their biggest rival.

Friday night, in front of a boisterous Armory Gymnasium crowd, the No. 10 Skylights took down the No. 24 University of Great Falls Argos 73-59 in the Frontier Conference semifinals. Behind a monstrous 32-point, 16-rebound effort from senior A’Jha Edwards, Northern (27-4) advanced to tonight’s Frontier championship game against the Westminster Griffins in Salt Lake City (see related story). It’s the first time since 1998 that the Northern women have earned the right to compete for the Frontier postseason crown. And head coach Chris Mouat said, the journey started when Northern lost in double-overtime in the 2014 semifinals at Lewis-Clark State last year.

“Last year, losing in that great game at LC State, I think they (Skylights) remembered that tonight, and they were motivated by that,” Mouat said. “They wanted to play for a championship this season, and in order to do that, we had to beat a very good UGF team tonight. So I’m very proud this team, and very excited for them. I know the kids are really excited to have come this far.

“It’s so exciting,” said Northern sophomore Natalee Faupel. “We were ready for this game tonight. And we’re ready for the opportunity to go down and play the No. 1 team in the conference in the championship game. This is so exciting. It’s amazing.”

Northern, which throttled the Argos in the regular season finale last Saturday night, got a stern test in Friday night’s rubber match in the series. But in the end, MSU-N’s defense, which held the Argos to under 40 percent shooting, Edwards, and a balanced and efficient offense were more than enough to get the Skylights to within one win of a coveted Frontier championship.

“We really had to focus on our defense, and boxing out and rebounding,” Faupel said. “They (Argos) are so explosive on offense, every one of them can score. So defense and rebounding was the focus, and we did both of those really well tonight.”

“Defensively, we were where we wanted to be at the half,” Mouat added. “We were only up by four, but I thought we were defending really well. We knew UGF would play well. They are just so explosive, and they kept coming at us. But we defended really hard for 40 minutes, and we won on the boards, and those two things were key for us.”
The Argos did keep pushing the Skylights, even with Edwards having one of her best games ever. She scored eight points early and Faupel banged in a triple to give MSU-N a quick 11-5 lead. But the Argos would go on a 12-3 run and take the lead with 6:40 before halftime, and MSU-N was in a dogfight. However, six unanswered points, including a pretty reverse layup by Molly Kreycik, and a coast-to-coast drive from Taylor Cummings, pushed the Skylights to a 32-28 lead at intermission.

Then, at the start of the second, MSU-N seemed to take full control of the game, and when Edwards scored with 13:38 to go, the Skylights led by 11. From there however, the Argos fought back. Darah Huertas-Vining and Stephanie McDonagh hit 3-pointers to spark a 9-2 run, and Northern’s lead was just two with 8:11 to go.

“They (Argos) are just so explosive offensively,” Mouat said. “You can’t even blink on defense or they will go off, and they did that for a time tonight. They can just flat-out shoot it, and they hit some big, big shots on us. They are just a very, very good basketball team.”

But so are the Skylights, and when things got close, Northern responded. Megan Feldman beat the shot clock with a floating shot, and that capped a 10-3 MSU-N run, which put the Skylights back in front 61-51 with 5:07 to go. Huertas-Vining hit a three on UGF’s next possession to cut the lead to seven, but that’s as close as the Argos would get the rest of the way as Northern got key defensive stops, including a block by Edwards and a steal by Feldman, while the Skylights made 9-of-11 free throws in the final four minutes to put the pesky Argos away for good.

Edwards led four Skylights in double-digits by going 13-of-19 from the field and 6-of-8 from the charity stripe. She also blocked two shots, while Faupel scored 13 points and dished out five assists. Feldman, who made crucial plays in her final home game, scored 12 points, grabbed six rebounds and had two blocks, while Cummings finished her remarkable Armory Gymnasium career with 10 points, three assists and two steals.

“A’Jha was special tonight,” Mouat said. “She had one of those career games. But I thought our kids did such a great job of taking care of the ball and getting it to her. We were very unselfish tonight. And the rest of the kids were getting her the ball and they trust her when they get it to her like that. So we were very efficient, especially in the second half, and we played great team basketball. But yes, A’Jha was huge for us tonight.”

Northern’s defense was once again huge, too. The Argos did have four in double figures, but leading scorers Erin Legel and Lindsey Abramson were held in check, while Huertas-Vining scored 15 and hit three trey’s. UGF (22-9) will now hope for an at-large berth to the national tournament.

Meanwhile, the Skylights aren’t worried about making it to the national tourney, instead, thanks to Friday’s win over the Argos, they’re gearing up to play Westminster for all the marbles tonight. And while Mouat knows the game will be a huge challenge, he says his team should already be very proud of how far it has come since that heartbreaking loss to LC State a year ago.

“I’m just really proud of these kids,” Mouat said. “They did everything they had to do to get in this position. What they did in the regular season got us to where we were tonight. We were in a great position, getting second and getting the bye. Getting to play this game at home, in front of our amazing fans, who have just been awesome all year long. That was huge. This was a big one tonight. It was a special win, and a very special night.”
Skylights 73, UGF 59

**UGF** – Stephanie McDonagh 1-4 2-2 4, Darah Huertas-Vining 6-12 0-0 15, Kendalyn Brainard 4-7 2-2 10, Lindsey Abramson 4-11 2-2 10, Erin Legel 5-14 3-5 15, Mackenzie Owens 2-4 0-0 5, Nneka Nnadi 0-4 0-0 0. Totals: 22-56 9-11 59.

**MSU-N** – Megan Feldman 5-9 2-2 12, A'Jha Edwards 13-19 6-8 32, Natalee Faupel 3-6 6-7 13, Taylor Cummings 4-8 2-2 10, Molly Kreycik 1-5 0-0 2, Jacy Thompson 0-1 0-0 0, Taryn Norby 0-0 0-0 0, Makhayla Farmer 0-0 0-0 0, Cydney Auzenne 0-0 0-0 0, Taybra Teeters 2-3 0-0 0. Totals: 28-51 15-19 73.

Halftime: Northern 32-28. 3-pointers: UGF 6-19 (Huertas-Vining 3, Legel 2, Owens 1), MSU-N 2-8 (Faupel 1, Cummings 1); Rebounds: UGF 20 (Abramson 10), MSU-N 28 (Edwards 16); Fouls: UGF 15, MSU-N 7; Fouled out: None.

*Havre Daily News website*