The Montana State University-Northern Skylights have known they were going to the NAIA national tournament for a while now. Given how high the Skylights have been ranked throughout the season, an at-large berth was a given.

But Wednesday evening, it all became official.

The NAIA released the field of 32 and the bracket for next week’s Susan G. Komen Greater Kansas City 2015 NAIA women’s national tournament Wednesday night. The Skylights (27-5), ranked No. 10 in the final NAIA Coaches Poll, are seeded third in their quarter of the bracket, and will face Lindsey Wilson of Kentucky in the opening round next Wednesday at 4:45 p.m.

Northern, which has broken all kinds of records during a remarkable 2014-15 season, is making its second straight trip to the national tournament, which has moved to Independence, Missouri this year. Last spring, Northern won a thriller over Columbia College in the first round of the tourney, before falling by three points to eventual national champion Oklahoma City in the Sweet 16.

“It’s been this team’s goal to get back there,” said MSU-N head coach Chris Mouat, who has led Northern to three national tournament appearances in his 10 seasons in Havre. “It’s been in the back of their minds all year long to get back to this level. We had a lot of other goals we had to accomplish first, to get to this point.

“So we’ve taken this season step by step, goal by goal,” he continued. “But with so many returners from last year’s team, I am positive this was the goal for this team, and I know they’re very excited to be going back to the national tournament.”

Not only is MSU-N back in the national tournament, but the Skylights will be considered a formidable foe throughout. Lindsey Wilson is ranked No. 21 in the new NAIA Top 25, and finished as the runner-up in the Mid-South Conference after going 9-5 in league play and 21-5 overall. The Blue Raiders are seeded sixth and were the eighth at-large team in the field, while Northern is seeded third and was also the No. 3 at-large team. The Skylights and Blue Raiders have never met on the hardwood, and they have no common opponents this season.

But, Mouat is certain the game will be a tough one, and Northern’s bracket, which also includes top-ranked Freed-Hardeman and a possible Sweet 16 matchup with eighth-ranked Vanguard is loaded with talented teams.
“Lindsey Wilson will be very good,” Mouat said Wednesday night. “We’re working on preparing for them right now. But it’s the national tournament, and it’s loaded with good teams. There are no easy games there.”

While the draw will be tough, Northern will be ready. In Frontier Conference play alone, the Skylights faced fellow nationally ranked teams on seven different occasions, and the depth of the conference was rewarded on Wednesday, as Carroll College, the University of Great Falls and Lewis-Clark State all received at-large bids, joining MSU-N and league champion Westminster in the field of 32. It’s the first time in the league’s history that the conference has sent five teams to the big dance.

The Skylights will depart for Independence Monday morning, and will open the tournament Wednesday against Lindsey Wilson at 4:45 p.m. M.S.T. Stay tuned to the Havre Daily News for complete coverage leading up to Wednesday’s game, as well as complete coverage throughout MSU-N’s run in Missouri.

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