Getting to know the Lindsey Wilson Blue Raiders

By George Ferguson
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It's not uncommon at the NAIA national women's basketball tournament for teams from around the country to meet for the very first time. In fact, it's pretty standard.

And that's what will take place when the Montana State University-Northern Skylights take on the Lindsey Wilson Blue Raiders in the first round of the NAIA tournament Wednesday afternoon in Independence, Missouri.

Northern is making its second straight appearance in the NAIA national tourney, and it's third in the last 10 seasons. Overall, the Skylights have gone to the national tournament 12 times and have won an NAIA national championship.

Lindsey Wilson also has a strong tradition of reaching the Big Dance, but the Blue Raiders, who hail from Columbia, Kentucky, are back in the field for the first time since 2012. And even though few players on the Blue Raider squad, led by head coach John B. Wethington, who's been at Lindsey Wilson for an incredible 26 season, have much tournament experience, they come into their game with No. 10 Northern ranked 21st in the NAIA and seeded sixth.

And they come in as a dangerous opponent for the talented Skylights.

"They’re (Blue Raiders) very good, and they are coming out of the Mid-South Conference, which, along with the GSAC and our league (Frontier Conference), is as good as it gets at this level,” said Northern head coach Chris Mouat. "Their league got five teams in, just like we did, so you know they’re going to be very well prepared and battle tested. You know they’ve played in a lot of good basketball games this season."

Indeed, the Blue Raiders, who are 21-9 overall, have played in a tough league. They finished an outstanding second in the regular season, going 9-5 in league play, a league that includes a No. 1 seed in conference champion Campbellsville. The Blue Raiders were upset in the quarterfinals of their conference tournament, but have won seven games against nationally ranked opponents this season, and they were the No. 8 at-large team selected to the national tourney.

As for their roster, the Blue Raiders boast an outstanding group of athletes, and they’ll play four players who are 6-2 or taller. Those four, led by 6-2 sophomores Michelle Montgomery and Billie Hearn, will be charged with containing Northern star A’Jha Edwards, but the Blue Raiders’ offensive punch comes from a pair of outstanding guards.

Chanel Roberts, a 5-8 swingman is not only the Blue Raiders’ leading scorer at 15 points per game, but she’s one of the top players coming out of the Mid-South Conference.

“She’s hard to stop,” Mouat said. “She can do it all. She can shoot from anywhere, and she can run the floor. She’s a pure scorer, and she’ll be a big focus for us.”

Roberts is the catalyst for the Blue Raider offense, which averages an outstanding 74 points per game, and shoots 41 percent from the field and 32 percent from 3-point range. But, Roberts isn't the Blue Raiders' lone scoring threat either. Point guard Cassidy Martin (5-8) averages 11 points per game, and shoots better
than 40 percent from three, while Bre Elder (5-9) averages 10 points per game, and Kayla Richardson (5-8) adds another nine per night.

Offensively, the Blue Raiders are also an up-tempo team, and they'll push that tempo as often as possible, with even their four bigs running the fast break according to Mouat. But, Lindsey Wilson is also a tough defensive team. The Blue Raiders allow just 63 points per game, and have defended well against some of the top offensive teams in the country this season. Opponents are shooting just 38 percent from the floor and a measly 29 percent from three against them this season, and they average 37 rebounds per night, which means the Skylights will be going up against a team that does the same things that they do well.

“I really like their size and athleticism,” Mouat said. “But what really stands out to me is their aggressiveness on defense and the way they get after teams on the boards. They really go to the glass hard and they have the size to do it effectively. So there’s no doubt, they’re going to be a handful.”

But that’s always the case when it comes to the last 32 teams in NAIA women’s basketball each spring. In this tournament, everyone is good, and the Blue Raiders are no exception. They’re part of a conference that is sending No. 4 Campbellsville, No. 18 Shawnee State, No. 23 Pikeville and Cumberland of Tennessee to this week’s national tournament, and they themselves are coming in as one of the Top 20 teams in the country.

The Skylights are also from a league that is sending five nationally ranked teams to the tournament, so like Lindsey Wilson, Northern is more than battle-tested. MSU-N has played nine nationally ranked teams this season, so playing another one in the Blue Raiders is nothing new. However, Mouat said that even though the rigors of the Frontier has prepared his team well, facing a brand new opponent presents brand new challenges.

“The Frontier was extremely good again this year,” Mouat said. “And it’s prepared us for this tournament as best it can. We’ve played a lot of really quality basketball teams this season, and faced a lot of different styles. So we’ve seen a lot.

“But when you get to this point, it is kind of like starting over,” he continued. “You get a short amount of time to prepare for a team you’ve never seen before, and that’s not easy to do. And Lindsey Wilson is a very good team. They present a lot of challenges for us, and we understand, after seeing them on film, and prepping for them every day since the bracket came out, that we’re going to have our hands full. That’s just the way it is once you get to this point.”

The NAIA national tournament first-round game between the Skylights and Blue Raiders will tip off at 4:45 p.m. M.S.T. Wednesday inside the Independence Events Center. The winner will advance to the NAIA Sweet 16 to take on either second-seeded Vanguard or seventh-seeded Southern-New Orleans Friday at 1:15 p.m.

No. 10 Skylights (27-5) vs No. 21 Lindsey Wilson Blue Raiders (21-9)

Wednesday at 4:45 p.m. in Independence, Missouri

Lindsey Wilson Quick Facts

Location: Columbia, KY.
Enrollment: 2,600
Nickname: Blue Raiders
Conference: Mid-South, finished 2nd at 9-5

Key Players: Chanel Roberts, 5-8, So., 1st-Team All-Conference; Cassidy Martin, 5-8, So.; Bre Elder, 5-9, Jr., 2nd-Team All-Conference; Kayla Richardson, 5-8, So.; Michelle Montgomery, 6-2, So.; Billie Hearn, 6-2, So.; Ranika Rone, 6-3, Sr.