It's game time in Missouri
Skylights battle Blue Raiders in NAIA opening round today
By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern Skylights have been here before. Well, sort of.

Granted, the Skylights were in the same position a year ago that they are today — playing a first-round game in the NAIA national tournament. But other than that, everything has changed in a year.

Today, when the No. 10 Skylights (27-5) face the No. 21 Lindsey Wilson Blue Raiders (21-9), Northern isn’t the underdog. The Skylights aren’t a young team on the rise any longer. And, they’re playing a team they’ve never faced before in a brand new venue.

And all that takes place this afternoon when the Skylights and Blue Raiders meet in the first round of the NAIA national tournament inside the Independence Events Center in Independence, Missouri.

“When you get to this point, it is kind of like starting over,” said Northern head coach Chris Mouat. “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.”

The Skylights may have their hands full with the Blue Raiders, but the same can be said in reverse. Yes, Lindsey Wilson played in a conference just as tough as the Frontier Conference, and like Northern having to play a No. 1 seed in Westminster three times, the Blue Raiders twice went up against a No. 1 seed in Campbellsville this season. So the two teams do have some things in common.

However, there’s little doubt that Lindsey Wilson head coach John B. Wethington is just as concerned with the Skylights as Mouat is with his Blue Raiders. Northern comes into today’s game having advanced to the NAIA Sweet 16 a year ago with virtually the same team, but a year older. The Skylights are No. 2 in the country in scoring defense, allowing just 50 points per game, and they are No. 2 in the country in total rebounding.

The Blue Raiders will also certainly be concerned with MSU-N senior A’Jha Edwards. They didn’t face a player as tall as Edwards all season long, and they definitely didn’t face a center who averages 17 points, 13 rebounds and 1.7 blocks per game. And though the Blue Raiders play four forwards at 6-2 or taller, stopping Edwards won’t be easy. If she is double-teamed, the Skylights can look outside to senior Taylor Cummings, sophomore Natalee Faupel and freshman Jacy Thompson to knock down big shots. That trio averages a combined 33 points per game, while senior forward Megan Feldman chips in with another nine points and five rebounds per night.

But as scary as Northern probably looks to the Blue Raiders, Mouat has plenty of his own concerns. And most of them will come on the defensive end, where his team has shined all season long, but is up against
a powerful team that averages nearly 80 points per game and likes to run up and down the floor as much as possible.

“Transition defense is going to be a huge key for us,” Mouat said. “They love to push it, and they have four bigs who can get out and run the floor really well. So that’s going to be big for us, getting back in our transition defense. And as always, rebounding is key, too. They really go to the glass, they are really aggressive on the boards. So, like in all our games this season, defense and rebounding are going to be big for us.”

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 Edwards, but the Blue Raiders’ offensive punch comes from a pair of outstanding guards. Sophomore Chanel Roberts (5-8) averages 15 points per game, and is the catalyst for LWU’s high-powered offensive attack. But she gets help, too, as 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.

“They (Blue Raiders) can score in a hurry,” Mouat said. “So again, we’ll have our hands full defensively. I really like their size and athleticism. But what really stands out to me is their aggressiveness on defense and the way they get after teams on the boards. They are a very aggressive basketball team on both ends of the floor, they’re very well-coached and they have a lot of talent.”

But that’s the case with every team at the national tournament, and in today’s game, it’s no exception. And that’s where experience may come into play. The Skylights will play seven players who played in the national tournament a year ago, while the Blue Raiders are making their first trip to the national tourney in four seasons.

“Definitely rebounding and playing good team defense,” said Northern sophomore Molly Kreycik when asked how to beat LWU. “We also preach one shot per possession so we really need to make sure we focus on that.”

“We’re a lot more confident now,” Edwards added about the experience the Skylights have. “We’ve been there and we know what to expect. Of course it’s not going to be easy, but we also know we can compete there.”

Indeed. The Skylights have shown they can compete on the NAIA’s biggest stage, and they want to show the country they’re ready to do it again. And they do come into today’s game brimming with confidence. However, when all is said and done, the only thing that matters is playing well for 40 minutes. That’s really the only way to beat the Blue Raiders, and it’s the only way to keep moving forward in what has already been an incredible season for the Skylights.

“They (Skylights) feel good about what they’ve accomplished so far,” Mouat said. “And what I really like is, they’re still hungry. They’re focused and excited for this tournament, because they still have goals out there they want to achieve.

“But the bottom line is, this game is all that we’re worried about, and, we’re actually trying to bounce back from a loss in our last game,” he continued. “This is a very good basketball team we’re up against. They have very good players and they are very well coached. So we’re going to have to be at our very best for 40 minutes.”

Today’s game between the Skylights and Blue Raiders will tip at 4:45 M.S.T. in Independence, Missouri. The winner will advance to the Sweet 16 to face either second-seeded Vanguard or seventh-seeded Southern-New Orleans Frida.

No. 10 Skylights (27-5) vs No. 21 Lindsey Wilson Blue Raiders (21-9) Today at 4:45 p.m. in Independence, Missouri

Viewing: http://www.naia.org
Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM
Twitter: Twitter/HavreDaily
Notes: The NAIA held its Champions of Character banquet and postseason awards on Tuesday night in Independence. Northern senior A'Jha Edwards was named a WBCA All-Region and All-American for the season, and MSU-N sophomore Taryn Norby was given a Champions of Character Award.