Montana State University-Northern Skylights played one of their most complete and dominant games of the season – at exactly the time they needed too most – in the first round of the NAIA national tournament.

But if the No. 10 Skylights want to keep their season alive, they're going to have to do it all over again – and according to head coach Chris Mouat, maybe play even better than they did in their 60-42 win over Lindsey Wilson on Wednesday night.

Northern is set to take on seventh-seeded Southern-New Orleans (22-4) in the NAIA Sweet 16 on Friday at 1:15 p.m. M.S.T. in Independence, Missouri, and while the Skylights are coming off of a tremendous win in the first round, Mouat said that against the Knights, his team has to go back to the drawing board.

"This is going to be a tough one to prepare for," Mouat said. "It's as much of a contrast between what they do and what we do as I've ever had in my 10 years of coaching. They absolutely blew out a really good Vanguard team and they play a style we've not yet had to face before. So this is going to be a very difficult challenge for us, especially with such a short time to prepare for it."

The Knights, a relative unknown out of the Gulf Coast Athletic Conference, did indeed blow out Vanguard on Wednesday night. The Lions are a perennial NAIA power, but the Knights blew by them 84-56 in a game that was never close.

And after such a powerful offensive display, it's the Skylights' turn to see if they can slow down what appears to be one of the highest-scoring teams in the tournament.

"They're very talented," Mouat said on Thursday night. "They will run, and run some more. They can shoot the three, push the tempo and attack the rim. They are as athletic as any team here. So, two big keys for us will be transition defense and attacking them on the offensive end. We have to do those things, and make sure we don't turn the ball over, because when you do against them, they make layup after layup and they win. It's pretty simple."

Of course, Northern does have the luxury of being close to the best defensive team in the field. The Skylights entered the national tournament allowing just 50 points per game, and they held Lindsey Wilson to just 42, and the Blue Raiders came in averaging 77 per night.

Still, with athletic scorers like Marquetta Stokes, Rayvin Miller and Shonte Dillon, the Knights have already proven they're tough to stop, and the top-rated Skylight defense, led by senior point guard Taylor Cummings, is going to have a challenge on its hands if it wants to advance to the Final Eight for the first time in over two decades.

"They have some dynamite scorers," Mouat said. "They have guards who shoot the three and attack the rim, so they can pretty much do it all offensively. We're going to have to be at our very best defensively, and we're going to have to be efficient offensively if we're going to be successful against them."

Of course, the Knights in turn have to guard the Skylights too. And that means guarding A'Jha Edwards, who poured in 25 points in MSU-N's opening win over Lindsey Wilson. And if the Knights choose to try and take away Edwards, the Skylights will look to knock down open shots that Cummings, Natalee Faupel and Jacy Thompson get from the outside.
And even though the Knights present a huge, and new challenge for Northern, the Skylights are doing what they set out to do all along, and that's play their best basketball in March. And there's no way Northern, which came within three points of reaching the Final Eight a year ago, is going to let down now.

"We'll be as prepared as we can be," Mouat said. "And we are playing with a lot of confidence. This is a difficult matchup for us, and a big challenge for our team. But we have a plan, and we'll go out on Friday and try to execute that plan as best we can and we'll see what happens."

Friday's Sweet 16 game between the Skylights and Southern-New Orleans Knights will tip off at 1:15 p.m. M.S.T. The winner will advance to the Final Eight to face either No. 1 Freed-Hardeman or Benedictine on Saturday at 1 p.m.