Great Skylights' season ends
Northern women make historic run to NAIA Final Eight
By Chris Peterson
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The Montana State University-Northern Skylights went to the NAIA national tournament to prove they were among the best women’s basketball teams in the country. And even though they fell short of a national championship, they proved they can play with any team at the NAIA level.

This past Saturday in Independence, Missouri, in the quarterfinals of the NAIA tournament, the Skylights finally saw their magical season come to a close as they fell to top-seeded Freed-Hardeman, which used a 13-0 run over the final five minutes and change to do in No. 10 MSU-N 63-50.

“I thought our effort was really, really good,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat said. “I thought our foul trouble early on hurt us and then their post players gave us problems throughout the night, but our effort was great. Our kids sold their souls and played as hard as they can play. We just didn’t get it done down the stretch after we tied it up.”

The fact that the Skylights had the game tied with just minutes remaining was impressive after they trailed for most of the game. Northern did hang with the Lions early in the game and after a 3-pointer by Molly Kreycik, the score was tied at 9-9 with just over 13 minutes to play in the first half.

Yet, Northern had difficulty scoring against a stout Lions defense and that allowed Freed-Hardeman to outscore the Skylights 17-8 and take a 26-17 lead. However, in the final minutes before the half, MSU-N rallied. Kreycik nailed another trey, which helped Northern trim the halftime deficit down to 29-24.

At the start of the second half, FHU tried to run away with things but a couple baskets by A’Jha Edwards kept the Skylights in the thick of things. It was only a matter of time, though, before the Lions were able to build a 46-36 advantage.

Down by 10 points, Northern didn’t panic. The Skylights went on a 14-4 run that included five points from Jacy Thompson and five more from Natalee Faupel, including a trey and two free throws that tied the game at 50-50 with 4:36 left in the game.

“We tried doing a bunch of different things to slow them down defensively,” Mouat said. “And we finally got some stops. Then, we were able to hit a couple threes, and I think that got us going a little bit.”

But after battling all the way back to tie the game, the Skylights went cold and did not make a field goal or score a single point for the rest of the game. In the meantime, the Lions scored 13 straight to end the game and wrap up the win.

“We just weren’t able to execute down the stretch,” Mouat said. “And they were and that was the difference.”
In her last outing as a Skylight, Edwards, a two-time All-American, went out with a solid effort of 14 points and 20 rebounds. And even though it was another great showing, the Lions did a better job than most of holding Edwards in check, particularly on the offensive end.

"It was a really physical game," Mouat said. "They were very physical with us and that’s the way it was allowed to be. But I was proud of the way A’Jha battled back and played well."

Kreycik also had a solid performance with 12 points, while Faupel pitched in with 11, as did Thompson. Leading the way for the Lions was Grace Alonso de Armino, who scored 26 points and grabbed 12 rebounds in the win. Taleeah Cross also had a strong showing with 16 points.

"I am really proud of this team," Mouat said. "It seemed like every time we had adversity this year we stepped up and found a way to respond. And we came down here and played two good games and a third one that was pretty good. That just wasn’t good enough to beat a team like (Freed-Hardeman). But I am really proud of this team and thankful for everything they have all done for the program."

Friday, the Skylights had to take care of business just to get into the Final 8, and they did that knocking off Southern-New Orleans 73-54 in the NAIA Sweet 16.

And as she has been all season, Edwards was superhuman in the win. The senior center put together one of the most dominant performances in tournament history as she scored 35 points to go along with a tournament-record 28 rebounds.

"To make it to the final eight means you have done something good," Mouat said. "This is something to be very proud of. It’s a great accomplishment and a huge, huge win. It’s especially huge just because of how good (Southern-New Orleans) is. That was a very hard team to prepare for. So I’m very proud of the way we played today."

The Skylights once again did it with defense as they held a Knights team that was averaging more than 80 points per game, to just 52 points on 39 percent shooting. A big reason for that was Edwards, who not only grabbed 28 boards but also blocked two shots.

Edwards was equally good on the offensive end, where she connected on 16-of-22 shot attempts to post a career-high in points as well as rebounds. Northern also got 16 points from Thompson in the win. Megan Feldman contributed with seven points and six rebounds, while Taylor Cummings and Kreycik combined for nine assists.

"It was a monster performance by A’Jha," Mouat said. "She had to carry us a little offensively, because we had trouble getting shots off and handling the ball at times against their pressure defense. But I thought we were decent offensively for much of the game, and credit to our guards for handling their pressure as best they could and getting A’Jha the ball. But, yes, it was a special performance by her, just incredible."

Despite losing to Freed-Hardeman, Northern finished a historic season with an overall record of 29-6. The trip to the Final 8 was also the first for the Skylights since the 1999 season. MSU-N was also the last of the five teams from the Frontier Conference to be eliminated from the national tourney.

Note: Havre Daily sports editor George Ferguson contributed to this story. For more on the Skylights, see Tuesday's HDN.

Skylights 73, SUNO 54.

**SUNO** - Natalia Merkulova 1-4 0-0 2, Brandy Broome 7-12 2-2 16, Marquetta Stokes 1-9 2-4 4, Breanna Wiley 0-0 0-0 0, Shonte Dillon 2-5 2-2 6, Jessica Savannah 1-2 0-0 2, Kishaun Williams 11-26 2-5 24, Rayvin Miller 0-10 0-0 0. Totals 23-68 8-13 54

**MSU-N** - Taylor Cummings 1-4 0-0 2, Taybra Teeters 1-1 0-0 2, Cydney Auzenne 0-2 2-2 2, Ajha Edwards 16-22 3-6 35, Molly Kreycik 2-7 0-0 4, Taryn Norby 0-0 0-0 0, Megan Feldman 2-8 3-8 7, Natalee Faupel 4-9 7-8 16, Makhayla Farmer 0-0 0-0 0, Brandy Lambourne 0-0 0-0 0, Jacy Thompson 1-1 2-2 5. Totals 27-54 17-26 73

Freed-Hardeman 63, Skylights 50

MSU-N - Taylor Cummings 1-8 0-0 2, Taybra Teeters 0-2 0-0 0, Cydney Auzenne 0-1 0-0 0, Ajha Edwards 7-14 0-0 14, Molly Kreycik 3-5 4-4 12, Taryn Norby 0-0 0-0 0, Megan Feldman 2-3 0-0 4, Natalee Faupel 4-12 2-3 11, Makhayla Farmer 0-0 0-0 0, Brandy Lambourne 0-0 0-0 0, Jacy Thompson 3-8 0-0 7. Totals 20-53 6-7 50

FH - Hayley Newby 6-13 2-3 14, Grace Alonso de Armino 10-20 6-9 26, Kenley Crowell 0-1 0-0 0, Erika Zurauskaite 0-0 0-0 0, Taleeah Cross 7-13 0-0 16, Morgan Warren 0-0 0-0 0, Kim Mallory 0-0 0-0 0, Tiffany Pate 0-0 0-0 0, Brandee Busenlehner 1-4 2-2 5, Hannah Harris 0-0 0-0 0, Paige Melville 1-12 0-0 2. Totals 25-63 10-14 63


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