What exactly defines success? It can be defined in so many different ways, and often times, even in a loss, a team is more than successful.

And that would certainly be the case of the Montana State University-Northern Skylights this winter. Yes, it’s true, the Skylights lost their last game of the season, but unless you win the national championship, your last game is always going to be a loss anyway.

So, last Wednesday’s loss in the first round of the NAIA national women’s tournament to Benedictine College, which went on to the reach the NAIA Fab Four by the way, really has no baring on just how successful the Skylights were this season — or have been for the last three years.

And, head coach Chris Mouat said as much after Northern’s heartbreaking overtime defeat in what would be the Skylights’ season finale.

“This doesn’t take away from the season we’ve had,” Mouat said. “This team has been tremendous all season long. They accomplished so many great things. And this loss doesn’t diminish that one bit. I’m just so proud of them for everything they’ve done this season.”

And the Skylights did a lot. They lost A’Jha Edwards and Taylor Cummings to graduation, yet they opened the season by ripping off eight straight wins, including a win over nationally ranked Wayland Baptist, and two wins over NAIA DII powerhouse Dickinson State.

During that stretch, the Skylights also achieved the highest ranking ever by a Northern women’s basketball team in the NAIA DI Coaches Poll, as they reached the No. 2 spot in December.

Then came adversity though, as the injury bug would certainly bite. MSU-N at one time or another this season, was forced to play without senior starter Rachelle Bennett, reserve guards Peyton Filius, Brandy Lambourne and Tina Doughty, reserve forward Makhayla Farmer, and they lost transfer forward Jessica Anderson to a season-ending injury.

Yet, Northern kept on playing. Every time the team’s back was against the wall, the Skylights rebounded. They rebounded from a Frontier Conference opening loss at Rocky Mountain College. They rebounded from a home loss to Carroll College, and back-to-back road losses at UGF and Carroll.

And when MSU-N did rebound, the wins were usually huge. On Feb. 6, the Skylights became the only team all season to beat Lewis-Clark State on the road. Then, Northern rebounded from a tough loss to Rocky by beating nationally ranked UGF, Carroll and LC State in an eight-day stretch inside the Armory. One more time, Northern bounced back, too, as the Skylights were dealt a devastating blow when they were beaten by Montana Tech at home on the last night of the regular season — only to bounce right back and beat RMC, a team that had beat them twice, in the opening round of the Frontier playoffs.
"This team never quit," Mouat said. "They faced adversity all season long. But they always kept moving forward. They always kept working hard, and they stayed together. They always battled and that’s one of the things I’m most proud of them for."

And in the end, the Skylights’ resiliency paid big dividends. Northern wound up having the Frontier Conference MVP in Natalee Faupel, the Defensive Player of the Year in Jacy Thompson and three All-Conference selections. They also won 23 regular season games, and most importantly, the Skylights punched their ticket to their third straight national tournament. And that’s where the success can be defined.

“We’re the only team in our league right now that’s gone to three straight national tournaments,” Mouat said. “That’s really cool. When you consider how tough this league is, with so many great teams and great players, for us to be able to do that, it says a lot about the kids in our program, not only right now, but all the kids we’ve had over the last three years.”

And it says a ton about just how successful the Skylights were this year. To lose the production of an Edwards, and the heart, toughness and leadership of Cummings, not to mention all the other great seniors Northern had a year ago, it would have been pretty easy to expect a step back for the program.

But this Skylights’ team did anything but step back. Instead, they kept going forward. New stars emerged, Mouat did a brilliant job of adjusting some of his schemes to fit this team, and in the end, the Skylights still played with the foundation of tough defense, rebounding and hustle, something that is no different than other team Mouat has ever coached.

So, no matter the final score of last Wednesday’s game in Independence, Missouri, these Skylights were already a success story. They already had every reason to hold their heads up high and be proud of all they’ve done over the last six months. They gave their fans, and all of us so much excitement and so much to be proud of.

And, at the very end of the day, this Skylight team, along with their head coach, who has done such an incredible job in his tenure at Northern, didn’t just have one successful season — no, this Skylight team did something even more. They officially stamped Northern as an NAIA national power again. The Skylights are just a Frontier power now, they’re a national power, and it’s because of the run the 2015-16 team. It was an incredible ride, and one the Skylights and their fans should be proud of, and one they shouldn't forget.