MSU-N athletics thriving right now
Four different Northern teams have been nationally ranked in the last year
By George Ferguson
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The fall sports season didn’t come to the type of end that either the Montana State University-Northern volleyball or football team was looking for. And both the Lights and Skylights have Rocky Mountain College to thank for that.

But, Saturday aside, it’s been quite the last three months, and then some, for Northern athletics.

When it comes to garnering national attention, dating back to last winter, all of the major sports at Northern, and even others have gotten their share. In fact, since March of 2013, the MSU-N men’s basketball team, the MSU-N wrestling team, the MSU-N football team and the volleyball team have all been nationally ranked.

Currently, the Skylight volleyball team, who didn’t receive an at-large bid to the NAIA national tournament, is ranked No. 22 in the last NAIA Coaches Poll, which was released Sunday afternoon. Yes, it was a heartbreaking end for the Skylights last Saturday night in Great Falls, but Northern still captured the regular season Frontier Conference championship, won 26 matches this season, and has been to the last two Frontier Conference championship matches, and it’s a pretty amazing run the Skylights have been on.

This fall also saw the MSU-N football team win three straight games and climb to a national ranking of No. 18 at the end of September. And while Northern didn’t stay amongst the NAIA’s best this fall, and a schedule that saw the Lights play on the road for over a month didn’t help, receiving as much respect in the polls as the Lights did this fall is still a sign of some healthy respect for head coach Mark Samson’s program.

Respect is also something the MSU-N wrestling team is getting plenty of lately. The Lights are currently ranked No. 2 in the NAIA, and are coming off a 2012-13 season which saw them claim their first trophy at the NAIA national tournament since 2004. Northern’s rise back to an elite power in wrestling has been guided by head coach Tyson Thivierge, who knows a thing or two about being amongst the NAIA’s elite. And though there’s a long way to go this season, the Lights have the firepower to compete for more than just a national ranking this season, they have a team that can compete for a national championship banner.

Of course, respect is something the Lights’ basketball team has been getting for quite some time now. Under Shawn Huse, Northern has spent multiple seasons being nationally ranked, and the 2013-14 season started no different. MSU-N is currently ranked No. 24 in the NAIA, and the Lights look poised to make yet another run at the Frontier championship and what would be a fifth trip to the national tournament in the last six years.

The MSU-N women’s basketball team hasn’t seen a national ranking in a few years now, but the Skylights should have. Two years ago, Northern lost just nine games, but was continually snubbed by NAIA raters. However, head coach Chris Mouat’s team is off to a perfect 6-0 start this season, and if the Skylights
continue to build on the momentum they’ve created so far this season, don’t be surprised to see them ranked when the first regular season coaches poll is released on Dec. 9.

Getting respect on the national stage isn’t just about polls and rankings, or wins and losses either. The MSU-Northern rodeo team has gotten in on the act, too. In both 2012 and 2013, bronc ride Robert Wagner qualified for the College National Finals Rodeo, and this past summer, Northern junior Charlie Mack joined him there. Mack is considered one of the top cowboys in the Big Sky Region, and he’ll no doubt find his way back to the CNFR in 2014.

So while Saturday didn’t quite go the way of the Lights and Skylights, it doesn’t change the fact that Northern athletics is making headway across the board. It doesn’t change the fact that Northern has truly become a Frontier Conference powerhouse in all sports.

While fall is over now, there’s an entire winter ahead, which means there’s still plenty more great things to come from the Lights and Skylights.