2013: Havre Daily's top local sports stories
Trophies, triumphs and dramatic games highlight a magical year on the Hi-Line
By George Ferguson
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Year-in and year-out, the Hi-Line produces many magical sports moments. Whether it's a team state championship, a great individual accomplishment, or just a heart-felt story about triumph or perseverance, there always seems to be those types of moments in our coverage area.

And 2013 was no exception to that. In Havre, both at Havre High and on the campus of Montana State University-Northern, there were many magical moments, from triumphs on the wrestling mat and hardwood to exhilarating games at Blue Pony Stadium and the Havre High gymnasium. And from Chinook to Chester, from Big Sandy to Turner, the past year in sports was another one in which local fans won’t soon forget.

Here’s a look at the Top 10 local sports from the last year.

1. Havre wrestling back on top

It was only two seasons ago, but for a wrestling program as dominant as Havre High has been under head coach Scott Filius, two seasons without a state championship might have seemed like an eternity. But, back in February, the wait came to an end. Havre scored 233.5 points to capture the 2013 Class A state championship in Billings. The title was Havre’s fifth since 2007 and the school’s 10th title under Filius. The Blue Ponies won individual state championships from then sophomore Grayson Brenna (112) and senior Grant Pattison (189), and overall, HHS placed 11 wrestlers, which helped the Ponies beat Sidney, which scored 200 points. The title also helped keep Havre’s trophy streak alive. The Blue Ponies have now finished in the top three at the state tournament for 10 straight seasons.

2. MSU-N volleyball wins regular season title

There was perhaps no team on the Hi-Line which had as dominant a regular season as the Montana State University-Northern volleyball team. The Skylights suffered a non-conference loss on Aug. 31 in Florida, then didn’t lose again until a Nov. 2 loss at Westminster College. In all, Northern reeled off a 14-match win streak, and went an astounding 15-1 in Frontier Conference play, the best winning percentage by any team in the league in the last five years. The mark secured MSU-N its first conference championship of any kind since 1992, and was one of many firsts for Northern this season.

Under head coach Bill Huebsch, who earned Frontier and AVCA Region Coach of the Year honors, the Skylights went undefeated at home this fall, including beating Rocky Mountain College in front of a sold-out Armory Gymnasium to clinch the league championship, and also won at RMC, UGF and Lewis-Clark State for the first time in nearly a decade. MSU-N achieved an NAIA national ranking of 24, the first such ranking in 20 years, and the Skylights reached the Frontier title match for the second year in a row. A loss to RMC in the championship match in Great Falls back in November ended Northern’s run, but nothing will ever replace the magical year that was in MSU-N volleyball.
3. Lights bring home a trophy

There was plenty to cheer about in wrestling last winter, and it wasn’t just at Havre High. The MSU-Northern wrestling team captured its first NAIA trophy in 10 years when the Lights finished third at the NAIA national tournament back in March in Des Moines, Iowa. Northern got a big push from All-Americans Aaron LaFarge (125) and Duell Stadel (125), as well as Mickey Cheff (157), Ethan Hinebauch (165), Max Payne (174) and Toby Cheff (184). But the most points came from then-junior Cameron Neiss, who reached the 133-pound national championship match before falling. Head coach Tyson Thivierge’s team also swept rival UGF last season, and has kept on going. The Lights finished 2013 ranked No. 2 in the NAIA and beat UGF again back in November in Great Falls.

4. MSU-N men go back to Kansas City

Making the trek to the NAIA national men’s basketball tourney is becoming old hat for the Montana State University-Northern men's basketball team and head coach Shawn Huse. The Lights went 10-6 and finished third in the Frontier last season, while going 21-10 overall. Northern earned an at-large berth into the big dance in Kansas City, the Lights third straight tourney berth and their fourth in the last five seasons. MSU-N lost its opening round game to Evangel, 64-54, but it was yet another great season. The Lights won 20 games for the seventh straight season, while senior Devin Jackson became a 1,000-point club member, and teammates Roshawn West, Corbin Pearson and Jesse Vaughan joined Jackson as Frontier All-Conference performers.

5. Abby Nicholas shines

In a volleyball season to remember, MSU-Northern senior Abby Nicholas had a year she won’t soon forget. Nicholas racked up 532 kills, 80 blocks and 326 digs on her way to being named Frontier Conference Player of the Year. Nicholas also earned AVCA Northwest Region Player of the Year and was named an NAIA Second-Team All-American as a right-side hitter. The senior from Sandy, Utah, holds six different Northern records, including kills in a season, and she finished her two-year career at MSU-N third on the all-time kills list with 911.

6. Ponies finally beat Miles City

After a thunderstorm forced a regular season Class A football game between Havre and Miles City to be called off back in September, it looked as though the Blue Ponies would have to wait at least another year to get the Miles City monkey off their backs. But the Cowboys returned to Blue Pony Stadium in November for a Class A playoff game, and promptly led 20-7 at halftime. However, HHS stormed back, scoring the only two TD’s of the final 24 minutes, one on a Kody Pribyl run and the game-winner on a Dane Warp pass to Tristan Manuel midway through the fourth quarter. Meanwhile, Havre’s defense shut out the Cowboys for the entire second half, including a huge stand in the final seconds of the game after Miles City had driven the ball deep into HHS territory.

The win not only advanced Havre to the Class A quarterfinals, where they eventually fell to powerful Columbia Falls, but was also the Ponies’ first win over the vaunted Cowboys in more than a decade.

7. Box Elder/Big Sandy Triple-OT thriller

In District 9C boys basketball last season, Box Elder and Big Sandy were clearly the cream of the crop. And things came to a head on a cold February night at the HHS gymnasium. In the 2013 9C championship game, Box Elder and Big Sandy needed three overtimes in order to settle things. The game was knotted at 67-67 at the end of regulation, and again at 75-75 after on extra frame. The two teams then played to an 82-82 standstill over the next five minutes before Box Elder finally gained an edge and won 89-85. The championship was Box Elder’s first in 22 years, giving the Bears both the regular season and tournament titles for the season.

8. Pony girls go back-to-back

With a second straight Central A regular season championship already in tow, the Havre High girls basketball team stormed through the Central A tourney in late February in Great Falls. The Blue Ponies dominated Browning 69-42 in the championship game, claiming their second straight Central A title. Havre
advanced to the Class A state tournament for the fourth time in five seasons, and the run in Great Falls capped off a dominating two-year romp in the Central A for head coach Dustin Kraske’s squad.

9. Skylights start 11-0

The Montana State University-Northern women’s basketball team is really gaining some momentum. Northern finished the 2012-13 season by reaching the Frontier semifinals, including a Frontier Conference Tournament win over Rocky Mountain College last March in Havre. Then, MSU-N captured its first 12 games of this season, and garnered an NAIA national ranking for the first time in five years. Northern did drop its last two games of non-conference play, but the Skylights enter the new year ranked No. 24 in the country and with a sparkling 11-2 record heading into league play.

10. Pioneers get to state via two challenge games

The Big Sandy boys may have felt heartache after losing to Box Elder in three overtimes in the 2013 9C championship game, but that didn’t stop the Pioneers from playing in the Class C state tournament in March. After losing to Box Elder, Big Sandy came back and narrowly beat Chinook in a 9C challenge game to reach the Northern C Divisional. The following week in Great Falls, Big Sandy again found its back up against a wall. After losing early in the Northern C, the Pioneers rallied to win four straight games, including avenging their loss to Box Elder, and beating powerful Highwood in a Northern C challenge game. At the state tourney, the Pioneers knocked off Melstone before losing 55-52 to Westby-Grenora in the semifinals. Big Sandy’s magical ride came to an end in a Saturday morning loser-out loss to Fairview, but the run capped off an incredible school year of boys sports in Big Sandy.

Honorable Mention: Chris Inman retires from Havre High swimming after a remarkable career; Marc Mariani sidelined with an injury again in 2013; Chester/J-I girls play five games at Northern C, win three times in overtime and finish third; Rocky Boy boys win District 1B regular season and tournament basketball championships; Havre bantam hockey team wins a state championship; MSU-Northern freshman running back Zach McKinley rushes for a 1,000-yard season; MSU-N volleyball, football, men’s and women’s basketball and wrestling teams all nationally ranked in the same year; Rocky Boy’s Kyle Olson makes NAIA cross country national championship meet.