

## Spike: Skylights close with a sweep

(Created: Monday, November 9, 2009 12:21 PM MST)

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If creating momentum for the upcoming Frontier Conference volleyball tournament was the mission of the Montana State University-Northern Skylights this weekend — Mission accomplished. In their last regular season home matches of the years, the Skylights went 2-0, dispatching winless UM-Western on Friday night, then beating Montana Tech in a five-game thriller on Saturday afternoon at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. "This is what we were hoping for coming into this weekend," MSU-N head coach Bill Huebsch said. "I don't know if we were thinking sweep, but we wanted to make sure we were playing well heading into the tournament. And after this weekend, I think we did that. I'm just really happy and proud of our kids for the way they played these last two days. I think it shows that when we play the way we know we're capable of, we can compete with anybody. And I'm just really happy for these girls right now." Saturday was a big turning point for the Skylights in their five-game win over Montana tech. MSU-N had lost four five-game matches prior to Saturday, and although the Skylights outplayed Tech more much of the match, it looked as though the Orediggers might escape Havre with a win. Instead, Northern regrouped after losing a 2-1 lead and falling behind early in the fifth game, and found a way to beat Tech by scores of 14-25, 25-17, 25-17, 23-25 and 15-9. After losing the first set to the Orediggers despite a torrid serving start by Brittany Baker, the Skylights got on a roll, putting Tech away in sets two and three by identical 25-17 scores. Baker, Tasha Dyrland and Paige Richardson sparked the MSU-N offense with their hitting, and the Skylights never trailed in either game. They were well ahead in game four and looking to put Tech away for good. But up 17-14, the Skylights allowed Tech to come back behind the timely hitting of Janet Friesz and Shersteen Cline. Eventually, the Orediggers erased a 21- 20 Northern lead and prevailed, forcing a decisive fifth game. And the Orediggers seemed to have momentum on their side as they took a 6-3 lead early in the fifth game behind another kill from the former Big Sandy star, Cline. But MSU-N wasn't to be denied and the Skylights quickly went on a 5-0 run, erasing the lead and eventually held six match points at 14- 8. Tech erased one, but fittingly, Baker, who started the match strong, ended it with an emphatic kill, sending a raucous Northern crowd into a frenzy. "We were so due to win one of those matches," Huebsch said. "We've had chances in other matches that have gone five, and we just couldn't get over the hump. We could have put them (Orediggers) away in the fourth game, and the fact that we didn't could have hurt us. But the girls really responded and stepped up in the fifth. I'm just really happy for them that they were finally able to get over that hump and win one of these types of matches, especially against a really good team like Tech. I'm just really proud of the girls, and it was a total team effort today." Northern and Tech each racked up 55 kills on Saturday. Baker, Cline and Katie Daly each had 17 to lead all hitters. Baker also had four aces and five digs, while Dyrland and Sierra Diehl added 10 kills apiece for MSU-N. Taya Tokarski, who was moved to libero this weekend, had a huge impact on the Skylights defensively, totaling 22 digs against the potent Tech attack. "I thought Brittany Baker, Paige Richardson, even Kaylee (Bossert), (Tasha) Dyrland and Sierra Diehl, all really stepped up for our offense this weekend and played fantastic volleyball," Huebsch said. "Jordan Merrill did a great job setting for us too. But the impact that Taya Tokarski had for us as a libero was every bit as an important as anything we did hitting-wise. She played so well. But this was also an all-around team effort. We couldn't get a weekend sweep like this, something this program hasn't done in a really long time, without everybody stepping up and playing well, and I'm really proud of our whole team." And the fine play wasn't just reserved for Saturday. On Friday night, MSU-N ran all over last-place Western, beating the Bulldogs by scores of 25-15, 25-18 and 25-15. MSU-N never trailed in the match against the Bulldogs, and Richardson caught fire for the Skylights, racking up a match-high 19 kills. Bossert and Dyrland added nine kills, and Tokarski came up big with another 17 digs. The sweep of Tech and Western pushed MSU-N to finish with a 4-10 league record and 8-13 overall. Northern finished in seventh place in the league standings and will open tournament play Friday against the No. 2 seed. Carroll College, UGF and Lewis-Clark State finished in the three-way tie for first place in the conference. The Frontier Conference tournament begins Friday morning and runs through Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho.