

A new era in MSU-N volleyball begins today

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Bill Huebsch is no stranger to the game of volleyball in Havre. But today in Great Falls, Huebsch will begin a new era in not only his coaching career, but in volleyball at Montana State University- Northern. Huebsch begins his first season as the MSU-N head coach today when the Skylights play their season opener against nationally-ranked NAIA powerhouse California Baptist University at the UGF Preseason Tournament. Today's match is the first of three in three days for the Skylights. Northern also squares off against Minot State University on Friday and Hope International on Saturday. And for the Skylights, today is not only a new beginning in the coaching department, but it's a fresh start for a team which won just twice all of last season. "Not to sound cliché, but these kids have worked really hard to be ready for the season," Huebsch said. "This is a group who really has put in the time and effort to improve, and I'm really encouraged by what I've seen in practice. I don't want to jinx anything but I'm really excited to see us out on the court because things have gone so well, and we have a lot of talent on this team, and kids at key positions who can really perform at a high level." And while a team which returns almost its entire roster from a two-win season doesn't usually inspire optimism, such is not the case for the Skylights. MSU-N had by far the youngest team in the Frontier Conference the last two years, but the Skylights aren't short on talent, and now they aren't short on veterans either. And with a new system in place, and a fresh start, Huebsch is confident that his team will be one to watch out for sooner rather than later. "We have a lot of talent on this team," Huebsch said. "And it's been about putting them in the right position to compete and be successful. We're not the biggest team in the league, but with our speed, our defense, our improved ball movement and the tremendous group of hitters we have, I think we will cause some real matchup problems for a lot of people." Northern returns a solid nucleus of juniors and sophomores who all have extensive playing time under their belts at the NAIA level. Kaylee Bossert will anchor the middle for the Skylights along with the everimproving Paige Richardson and Sierra Diehl, two sophomores who Huebsch says have improved by leaps and bounds. On the outside, hardhitting Brittany Baker is back for her junior campaign, and Northern is awaiting the return of the talented Taya Tokarski, who is away playing beach volleyball for team Canada this summer. Tasha Dyrland has also steadily improved after seeing plenty of time on the outside as a true freshman, and MSU-N's depth on the outside is bolstered by Desiree Gatin, Liz Richards, Shaina Evans and Ashley Lawson. "Our offense has the potential to be very good," Huebsch said. "With players like Kaylee Bossert, Brittany Baker and Taya Tokarski, we have the chance to really put the ball away. And Paige Richardson and Sierra Diehl are going to be impact players for us this season." Moving the ball will be junior setter Jordan Merrill. Merrill is a talented setter who can also do other things for the Skylights. Newcomer Nahe Keanaaina could also see time at the setter position. In the back row, MSU-N has a pair of veterans in Jenna Frankino and Sheena McInnes, both of whom saw plenty of time on the court last season. Add in newcomer Angie Gasio and the Skylights have the making of a talented and deep team, which in time could be poised to make plenty of noise in the Frontier Conference. "We have several kids who can really hit the ball," Huebsch said. "And we have a good group of juniors who have all been playing for a long time now. I think that talent and experience, mixed together with these kids' work ethic and desire to really succeed makes us a team that can do some good things this

season. I don't want to put a number on how well we'll do, but we know we can compete with the best teams in our league. Now it's a matter of executing the things we're supposed to do, and getting better each and every day so we're playing our best volleyball come October and November." While conference play is still a month away, Huebsch obviously points to defending Frontier champion Lewis- Clark State as the team to beat. But he also sees Carroll College and Rocky Mountain College as having good teams, as well as UGF and Montana Tech. "Our league is very good," Huebsch said. "LC obviously has a great team, they won the league title last year and they are hosting the tournament this season, so they have a lot of advantages. But there are a lot of teams in this league that have talent and are just really solid teams. "But with what we've done both in preseason training and back in the spring, I am confident that we can be in the mix. I know these girls will go out and compete hard every time they step on the floor. They just have a great attitude, and I'm just really pleased with how things have gone so far, and am really looking forward to seeing this group out on the floor and seeing what we can do this season." Northern will get tested right away. The Skylights face Cal Baptist today, a team which has reached the NAIA semifinals for the last five years and is currently ranked No. 3 in the country. Minot State is a top tier NAIA Division II team and Hope International is from the same conference as Cal Baptist. The Skylights also go to a junior college tournament in Twin Falls, Idaho Aug. 28-29 and a tournament at the University of Mary Sept. 4-5 before opening Frontier Conference play at home against UGF on Sept. 11.