

Skylights make their home debut

George Ferguson, Havre Daily News

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Three weeks on the road is a long time. But after 12 nonconference road matches to start the season, the Montana State University-Northern volleyball team is hoping all that traveling has paid off.

Tonight at 7, the Skylights will open the Frontier Conference season with a home match against the UM-Western Bulldogs at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. MSU-N will host Montana Tech at 2 p.m. on Saturday.

Northern is off to a strong start this season, winning eight of its first 12 matches. And despite losing a host of key seniors from last season, the Skylights appear to be right on track. MSU-N is already just three wins shy of its win total from all of last season.

But the Frontier Conference is as tough as it gets in NAIA volleyball, so now MSU-N's second season begins.

"These are must-have matches in my opinion," third-year Northern head coach Bill Huebsch said. "We had a really good preseason and we finished it strong last weekend in South Dakota. But we have a lot of room for improvement and we need to see some of that this weekend. These matches are also important because we need to protect our home court. We need to win at home."

Tonight's match will pit the two teams which have finished seventh and eighth in the Frontier the last three seasons, respectively. But while Northern is on the rise, especially with the early-season play of newcomers Kelsey Williams and Hillary Isleifson, as well as setter Nahe Keanaaina and Holly Cartwright in the back row, the Bulldogs are still trying to find their way.

Western (5-6) has won just two conference matches since the 2006 season, and the Bulldogs haven't won a single match in conference play since 2008. But Huebsch said the Bulldogs look vastly improved this season, and they are not to be overlooked.

"In watching them (Bulldogs), they do look like they are playing a lot better this season," Huebsch said. "They have an new coach and a new approach. And it looks like they are playing a little faster than last year. It looks like they've sped things up a bit. So they are kind of an unknown to us right now. But I'm sure they'll come in here ready to play and excited to play, so we have to match that right away."

Players to watch for the Bulldogs include middle blockers Susie Rehse (5-11) and Charelle Minor (6-2). The Bulldogs are also getting good production from freshman setter Paige Latimer.

Meanwhile, the Orediggers are also a bit of enigma to the Skylights. Tech (7-5) is under the direction of veteran head coach Marilyn Tobin as well as assistant coach Shaela Evenson, a former Havre High great. So Huebsch knows what to expect from the Diggers' in philosophy, but with the injury to former Big Sandy star hitter Shersteen Cline, the Orediggers have had to make some changes to their rotations. Libero Alysse Cruise is a catalyst for the Diggers' while freshman hitter Alex Courtney is off to a strong start this season.

"Shersteen is a really good player, a really powerful player," Huebsch said. "So not having her certainly hurts them. But Marilyn does such a good job of making adjustments and having her team prepared to play every match and they have looked really strong at times this season.



MSU-Northern's Sierra Diehl (right) and the rest of the Skylights will make their 2011 home and Frontier Conference debut tonight when they host UM-Western at 7 at the Armory Gym.

"Tech is always such a scrappy defensive team, and they play a very ball-control style and just try to wear you down. So we have to make sure we get in our system, put the ball in the right places and not extend rallies with them. We really have to execute on offense against them."

Execution is just one key to what Huebsch wants to see in the home-opens this weekend. While he's happy with how the Skylights have played offensively, as Isleifson had 40 kills and just four errors last weekend, and Williams, Sierra Diehl and Victoria Polo have also played well at the net, he says the Skylights can be even better.

"First, we have to have a big presence at the net," Huebsch said. "We have to have a strong block, and our defense behind them have to play really well. At times this preseason, we've done a good job of that, but there's room to get even better in my opinion."

"We also have to win the battle of serve and serve-serve," he added. "We have to serve tough and aggressive but error free. And we have to defend really, really well."

And if the first three weeks of the season are any indication, the Skylights appear ready to keep getting better. They appear ready to keep climbing the Frontier Conference ladder, and the first steps will be taken tonight and Saturday.

"It was a good offseason, and a really good preseason," Huebsch said "I'm really happy with how it's gone so far. The kids wanted to be challenged and we got that, and I think we're very prepared for everything we'll see in conference play."

"The kids are excited to play at home," he added. "We're going to be very excited and fired up for these two matches."

Tonight's match between the Skylights and Bulldogs will get underway at 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. Saturday's match between Northern and Tech starts at 2 p.m. Fans can follow tonight's match on twitter at twitter.com/havredailynews.