

Sweep: Skylights perfect at home

George Ferguson, Havre Daily News

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The Montana State University-Northern volleyball team sure made a lasting impression in its first home match of the 2011 season.

The Skylights opened the season with a four-game win over the UM-Western Bulldogs Friday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. MSU-N won the match by scores of 25-13, 25-19, 26-28 and 25-17, and in the three games they won, the Skylights were dominant and sharp.

"It was a really well-played match," Northern head coach Bill Huebsch said. "I really like our start. We were focused and we played with a lot of energy and enthusiasm. Overall, we just played really good, fundamental volleyball."

The Skylights came out roaring in their home debut. Hillary Isleifson had three early kills and leading 13-8, Victoria Polo had a kill which would send Northern an 11-1 run, leaving Western in its wake.

And that momentum carried over into the second set. The Skylights went on a 8-3 run behind three kills and a block by Kelsey Williams and Western never recovered.

Northern also played well in the third set and was in search of a sweep. But ahead 18-15, the Skylights may have let down a little. Western pushed ahead late in the set, and while MSU-N responded, the Bulldogs pulled out a thrilling 28-26 win to force a fourth game.

"We were disappointed we didn't finish them off when we were up in the third set," Huebsch said.

"Because up till that point, we were really in control both offensively and defensively. That's a situation we need to learn from, we need to learn to take advantage of big leads like that and finish teams off. But there were positives even in that because when we got behind, we battled back and still almost pulled that set off."

And the Skylights wasted little time in putting Western away in the fourth set. Northern jumped ahead 12-7 early in the fourth as Williams put two balls away. From there, Northern rolled to victory with Isleifson killing the last two Northern points to end the match.

"I thought we served really tough and we defended really well all night," Huebsch said. "That was really big, the way we defended. We didn't let them extend rallies and when they were extended, we made some great saving plays, some great hustle plays. So we did a lot of things really well tonight."

Isleifson led the way with 15 kills and 11 digs. But the Skylights had three players in double digits in kills with Paige Richardson totaling 14 and Williams 13. Richardson was on fire early on, totaling eight kills in the first set. Holly Cartwright had 21 digs while Williams added 15 digs and three aces. Nahe Keanaaina added 14 digs and 47 assists, while senior Sierra Diehl had seven kills and three of Northern's eight blocks.

"I thought we had really good team-work tonight," Cartwright said. "We played with a lot of intensity and we played together and things just really worked well for us."

Skylights sweep Diggers'

The Skylights put their abilities on display again on Saturday.

Saturday afternoon the Frontier Conference Skylights were back in to take on the conference rival Montana Tech Orediggers. And sweeping the Orediggers in three games, the Skylights earned wins by scores of 25-12, 25-22 and 25-18.

The win gave MSU-N a 2-0 start to Frontier Conference play and put the Skylights in a tie atop the Frontier standings after one week of conference action.

"Anytime you can win at home is a good thing," Huebsch said. "Tech is a good team that plays sound defense and we were able to get into a rhythm early. We were able to get into a much better rhythm tonight than we were able to last night (Friday against Western)."

The Skylights looked good to start the match, grabbing a dominating win in the first set. They came out energized and hit the ball well, including an 11-point run with five kills, with Sierra Diehl behind the service line.

But after earning a 13-point victory in the first set, the tables turned in the second set, with the Orediggers coming out much more competitive. Tech was able to control the tempo for much of the set, as they started to hit the ball much better, and even took advantage of quite a few Northern errors. The Orediggers also attacked the Skylights' zones Huebsch said. But after a called timeout, the Skylights were able to make the necessary adjustments and grab the narrow win.

Tech went up 2-0, but the scoring was back and forth the entire set. Northern trailed by as much as 5-1 early, but overtook the lead at 9-8 after a small run of its own. From there the Skylights wouldn't trail in the second set, but the Orediggers never backed down in the 25-22 Northern victory.

And the Orediggers' confidence carried over into the third set, something the Skylights were conscious of after dropping the third set to Western the night before. But after battling the Orediggers once again, this time to a 9-9 tie, the Skylights regained their composure and began to gather some separation. With Isleifson up to serve for the Skylights, she used an ace and two Oredigger hitting errors to build a 13-11 lead. And just two sideout's later, the Skylights' Karyssa Bowron used her opportunity behind the service line to help generate a six-point run to take a 19-13 lead. In the run Holly Cartwright earned a kill, and she took advantage of a handful more of Orediggers errors. After the 19-13 lead the Skylights

"We talked about being in this situation last night (Friday)," Huebsch said. "About being up two games to none on Western and giving up the lead in the third set. We were just lackadaisical in what we were doing and we just wanted to make sure we learned from that and applied it to today. We weren't going to let that happen again."

"Our confidence was what carried us through" Diehl said. "Tech caught us off guard a little bit, and we got a little complacent, but we didn't let them go on too many runs. We learned a lot from last night when we let Western catch us and we weren't able to pull through in the third set. But it's starting to not be an issue already because we are already learning to play together more. We know what we are capable of know when to put the pedal down and finish."

In the three-game sweep by the Skylights, Northern had 31 total kills, led by Diehl with nine, Polo with seven and Isleifson with six. Polo, Diehl and Isleifson all had one ace each, while Polo also led with three blocks. Isleifson led with 10 digs, and Lysie Togia had nine, Nahe Keanaaina had eight, Cartwright had seven and Polo finished with six to lead the team.

Next up for MSU-N is the rival University of Great Falls on Friday at 7 p.m. at the Armory gymnasium.

MSU-Northern def. UM-Western

25-13, 25-19, 26-28, 25-17

Northern — Kills 53 (Hillary Isleifson 15, Paige Richardson 14, Kelsey Williams 13), Aces 4 (Williams 3), Digs 83 (Holly Cartwright 21, Williams 15), Assists 51 (Nahe Keanaaina 47), Blocks 8 (Sierra Diehl 3, Victoria Polo 1).

Western — Kills 38 (Charelle Minor 7), Aces 6 (Shelby Mack 3), Digs 60 (Mack 20), Assists 31 (Paige Latimer 31), Blocks 5 (3 with one each).

MSU-Northern def. Montana Tech

25-12, 25-22, 25-18

Northern — Kills 31 (Sierra Diehl 9, Victoria Polo 7, Hillary Isleifson 6, Kelsey Williams 4, Paige Richardson 4, Karyssa Bowron 1), Aces 3 (Victoria Polo 1, Sierra Diehl 1, Hillary Isleifson 1), Digs 45 (Hillary Isleifson 10, Lynnsie Togiai 9, Nahe Keanaaina 8, Holly Cartwright 7, Victoria Polo 6, Karyssa Bowron 2, Paige Richardson 1), Blocks 5 (Victoria Polo 3).

Tech — Kills 29 (Emily Lobinz 14, Emily Matosich 4, Korey Krumm 4, Gabby Weber 3, Katie Petteys 2, Lacey Phelan 1), Aces 0, Digs 45 (Allyse Cruise 20, Kiara Ross 6, Kendra Lyons 6, Emily matosich 4, Kirstin King 4, Michelle Hardy 2, Emily Lobnitz 1), Blocks 3 (Katie Petteys 1, Lacey Phelan 1).