

## **A statement win: Skylights spike nationally-ranked Argos**

*George Ferguson - Havre Daily News sports editor*

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Getting over the hump. It's a term Montana State University-Northern volleyball coach Bill Huebsch has been using for quite a while now when talking about the growth of his Skylight program.

On Friday night at the MSU-northern Fieldhouse, the Skylights got over a big hump as it relates to their growth as a team and a program. In dramatic fashion Friday night, the Skylights took down 25th-ranked Great Falls in five thrilling game, and in front of a raucous homecoming crowd to boot.

"Anytime you can beat a team like UGF in five sets, it's a huge win for the program," Huebsch said. "These are the types of matches we would get into in the past and we couldn't quite finish them, but tonight we were able to win one and it's a big step in the right direction.

"I'm really proud of these kids for not just what they accomplished tonight, but for how well they played against a really good opponent."

And the Skylights accomplished plenty. Not only did Northern upset the 17-1 Argos, but the Skylights overcame adversity and in the process, grabbed sole possession of first place in the Frontier Conference standings for the first time in nearly a decade. With the win by scores of 25-23, 25-21, 17-25, 16-25 and 15-11, MSU-N improved to 3-0 in league play and 13-4 overall. The Skylights are the only unbeaten team left in the Frontier after Rocky Mountain College fell to Carroll College on Friday night in Helena.

"We need wins like this," Huebsch said. "We may or may not go on and win this conference, but no matter what, wins like this are really important for your body of work at the end of the season. And also, I just think a win like this really gives us the confidence to continue on the rest of the season. This was a really important win for our program."

It was also a great match.

The Skylights got rolling right away with great swings by Hillary Isleifson and Kelsey Williams. Sierra Diehl and Victoria Polo also came up big with their blocking in the back-and-forth first set and Samantha Hutcheson finished the first game off with a thunderous kill down the right side.

Northern continued its good play in the second set. The Skylights went on an early 7-1 run which gave them a 11-6 lead. UGF battled but the Skylights were in control and back-to-back blocks by Isleifson and Polo gave MSU-N a commanding 2-0 lead.

"I really liked the way we started the match," Huebsch said. "We played really good volleyball all the way around, and our energy and intensity was really good. The kids came out very focused and while UGF was playing well too, I thought we were really in control of things in those first two games.

"But give UGF a ton of credit," Huebsch added. "They are a very good team and they really took it to us in those next two sets. I don't think we played poorly at all, they just took it to another level. It was just a great volleyball match."

Indeed. The Argos never went away. They went on a late 7-0 run in the third set to force a fourth, then they went on runs of 5-0 and 5-1 in the fourth set to force a deciding fifth set.



*MSU-Northern's Kelsey Williams (middle) spikes a ball between two UGF blockers during Northern's dramatic, five-set homecoming win Friday night in Havre.*

But the Skylights responded in ways they haven't in years past. Northern never took its eye off the prize as Diehl opened the fifth set with a rocket kill down the middle. From there, the teams traded leads seven times before senior Ashley Lawson had her second of two huge kills in the final set. Lawson's second kill gave Northern the lead for good at 10-8 and an ace by Williams finished the Argos off.

"You just have to stay focused and be ready to go in and play hard when you get your chances," Lawson said. "You have to be ready to go in and hit the ball hard and that's what I tried to do tonight.

"That was a big contribution by Ashley Lawson," Huebsch added. "She really came in off the bench and gave our team a spark tonight. I'm very proud of her."

While UGF's Kelsey VanUden ended the night with a 25-kill effort, the entire Northern team helped out in the thrilling victory.

As a team, the Skylights hit 0.24 and a stellar 0.33 in the fifth set. Isleifson finished with 12 kills, nine digs and two blocks, as well as 21 assists. Williams had seven kills and an ace and Diehl added seven kills and a block. Polo added a pair of blocks for the Skylights, while Paige Richardson had eight kills, Holly Cartwright had 16 digs and Nahe Keanaaina had 22 assists.

"It was a great volleyball match," Huebsch said. "It really was well-played volleyball by both teams. I'm really proud of our kids for not getting down while UGF made their run. The kids showed a ton of heart and determination tonight and they played great in that fifth set.

"This was a special win for us," he added. "And it was great to have that crowd support tonight. I thought the crowd's energy really pushed us and gave us added energy. Now we want to use this win to build confidence and help us go out on the road and try to keep this good play we've got going. But it was a great night for sure."

The Skylights will travel to Salt Lake City to face Westminster College on Thursday night and Lewiston, Idaho to play Lewis-Clark State on Saturday afternoon.

### **MSU-N spikes UGF on homecoming**

#### **MSU-Northern def. UGF**

25-23, 25-21, 17-25, 16-25, 15-11

**UGF** — Kills 73 (Kelsey VanUden 25, Tosha Nunes 14, Taylor Lucero 14), Assists 69 (Averi Pasma 32, Kila Adams 30), Aces 4 (Kyah Piva 3), Digs 86 (Piva 26), Blocks 5 (Lucero 1).

**MSU-N** — Kills 50 (Hillary Isleifson 12, Paige Richardson 8), Assists (Isleifson 21, Nahe Keanaaina 22), Aces 2 (Williams 1, Isleifson 1), Digs 72 (Holly Cartwright 16, Williams 13, Lynnsie Togia 12), Blocks 6 (Victoria Polo 2, Sierra Diehl 1, Isleifson 2).