

## George Ferguson Column: Skylights turned a big corner Friday night

George Ferguson - Havre Daily News sports editor

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Friday night, inside the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse was volleyball at its very best. It was excitement at a fever pitch. It was sports entertainment at its highest value. It was fun, it was loud and it was thrilling.

But to the Montana State University-Northern volleyball team, Friday night's homecoming win over the 25th-ranked University of Great Falls Argos in five gut-wrenching sets, it was so much more.

The win was a trademark one for a program which had fallen on hard times, combining to sin just three match from the start of the 2007 season to the end of the 2008 season. The win was also a measuring stick for how far the Skylights have come in three years, and just how far they can go from here.

Still, it was more than that.

In my eyes, the win didn't just cement Northern as the first-place team in the Frontier Conference standings after two weeks of play, and it didn't just show that the Skylights could overcome adversity against its biggest rival – well it did do all that too, but to me it showed that Northern is fully back to relevance in the volleyball landscape. And it's been a while.

"It's a huge step for the program," senior Ashley Lawson said on Friday night. "These are matches we might have lost a year ago or two years ago. But this team is different. We lost a lot of talented players last year, but this team, collectively is just playing better together. This is a great win for us for this year and a great win for the program."

Not just a great win – a landmark win.

Lawson, who's seen the major ups and downs of the program in her time at Northern, having played for three different head coaches is now part of an MSU-N revival of volleyball and third-year Northern head coach Bill Huebsch is a big reason why.

Huebsch hasn't just done a great job of recruiting, but he's done a great job of teaching, of motivating and of getting a team to gel, to bond and that's something that's absolutely essential to success in college volleyball.

And while there' still a long way to go, and plenty of room for Northern still to grow, even he understood the importance of Friday night's triumph over the Argos.

"I think it says a lot about where we're at as a program and where this team is at right now," Huebsch said. "The kids are starting to understand and believe they can compete, play with and beat anybody. Anytime you beat a really good team like UGF, and do it in the way we had to tonight, it has to show you that you're playing well, that you're doing things right and that you're on the right track, and right now, I think we are doing those things.

"So it's certainly a big win for our program, and it's a big step in the right direction," he added. "It was a special night for our program and I'm just really proud of this team for hanging in there and finding a way to win the match."



Northern's Paige Richardson (left) goes up for a ball during Friday night's Frontier Conference volleyball match in Havre. After their win over the University of Great Falls Argos, the Skylights stand alone in first place in the Frontier.

Northern certainly did hang in there. And while Huebsch and the Skylights know there is a long journey still ahead of them, they can look at Friday night's victory over UGF and know for certain, they have all come a long, long ways already and that in itself is as big a victory as any.

Because from here on out, there's no mistaking it any more, volleyball is back to relevance at Northern once again.