

Skylights face big tests

MSU-N spikers host nationally-ranked Carroll tonight, Rocky on Saturday

George Ferguson - Havre Daily News sports editor

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The Montana State University-Northern women's volleyball team was on a roll, getting off to a 3-0 start in Frontier Conference play. This weekend, the Skylights will try and start another hot streak at home.

Northern went into last weekend alone in first place in the Frontier Conference standings, but after back-to-back losses road losses at Westminster and LC State, the Skylights dropped to 3-2 in league play and 11-6 overall.

Now Northern will try and regroup, but the Skylights will have to do it against the top two teams in the Frontier. Tonight, Northern hosts 23rd-ranked Carroll College at 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. MSU-N is also at home to take on No. 12 Rocky Mountain College on Saturday afternoon.

And with two nationally-ranked teams coming in this weekend, Northern head coach Bill Huebsch knows his team must put last weekend's losses, including a gut-wrenching five-setter at Westminster in the past.

"We talked this week right away about forgetting about last weekend," Huebsch said. "Putting it in the past. We know we're capable of getting back to playing the kind of volleyball we want to play. And we can't be worried about how we played last weekend because we have to really, really good teams coming in here this weekend.

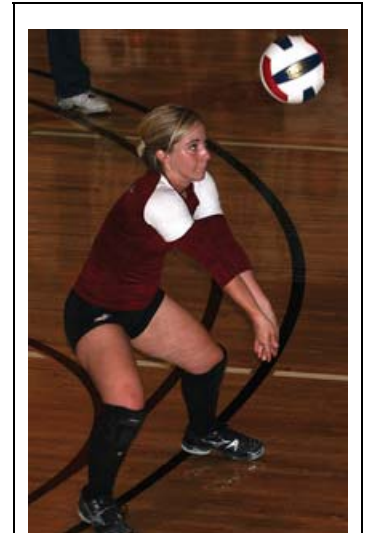
"So instead of worrying about or dwelling on what happened to us on the road last weekend," he added. "We have been focused on moving forward, and we're focused on taking advantage of playing at home. Our gym has been a tough place for teams to play and we want to continue that this weekend."

Despite the losses to Westminster and LC State, Northern is still on track for big things this season. The Skylights are in third place in the Frontier heading into this weekend's matches, but they stand just one full game behind league leaders Carroll, LC State and Rocky. So a lot can happen over the course of the next two days.

And with two tremendously talented teams coming into the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, the Skylights will want to be at their very best. Hillary Isleifson has been playing very well for Northern, especially in MSU-N's 6-2 offense. Isleifson is fifth in the conference in hitting percentage and fifth in kills with 161 on the year. Kelsey Williams is sixth in the league in kills with 148 and she's also been outstanding on the defensive end for the Skylights. Nahe Keanaaina is fourth in the league in assists with 453, while Holly Cartwright continues to be among the league leader in digs.

But against the likes of Carroll and Rocky, Northern will have to be extra sharp, especially with senior outside hitter Paige Richardson nursing an injury. The Skylights will need to utilize their size at the net and present a good block with Victoria Polo in the middle, as well as Sierra Diehl, Isleifson and Williams.

"These are two very tall, very athletic teams," Huebsch said. "We need to be very good at the net against both of them. We've been productive with our block at times this season, but that's going to be real key



MSU-Northern's Holly Cartwright and the Skylight volleyball team will play host to a pair of nationally-ranked Frontier Conference opponents this weekend. Tonight at 7, the Skylights host Carroll College, and Saturday at 2 p.m., MSU-N takes on Rocky Mountain College.

for us this weekend. And of course, against both teams, we need to win the battle of serve and serve-receive."

The Saints (4-1, 11-5) come into tonight's match as the only team to have beaten Rocky this season. So there's no doubt Carroll is an outstanding club. Carroll's star power starts with senior setter Caitlin Tocci, the Frontier's leader in assists. Tocci is a three-year starter for Carroll and is adept at making the right pass at the right time. Carroll also relies heavily on the play of senior libero Maureen Frauenholtz, who leads the league in digs. Sophomore setter Natalie Stewart is also key in Carroll's 6-2 rotation.

"(Caitlin) Tocci is really the heart of that team," Huebsch said. And with their libero and their other setter, they (Saints) really have a veteran group of smart players who just go out and get the job done. They are very consistent. They are a little younger up front, but they have a tremendous amount of size and athleticism, so defending them will be very critical. We just have to make sure we stay in rallies and limit our unforced errors."

Carroll's young hitters include former Havre Blue Pony Karla Hellegaard, as well as 6-2 Calli Prestwood and 5-11 Sara Roshak. Ellie Graff, a 6-0 middle transfer from Weber State also gives the Saints a big presence at the net.

And as talented as Carroll is, the Battlin' Bears (4-1, 16-3) might be even more loaded. Rocky has been on a tremendous roll so far this season and the Bears appear to be the team to beat in the Frontier. And while Northern got a win at home over Rocky a year ago, Huebsch said it's a combination of things that have made the Bears so dangerous this fall.

"They've (Bears) got six seniors, five who are starters on their roster," Huebsch said. "This is a team who went to the national tournament last year, they have a ton of experience, they are really well coached and they have played a great schedule in the preseason which made them even better. They have beaten a bunch of teams who are currently in the Top 25.

"Then, they are really a veteran and experienced team, they are intelligent and big in the front row and they really put heat on the ball on the outside. So they are just a really good, all-around team having a great season so far."

Like Carroll, Rocky has a great setter in senior Kristin Barott, and the Bears go through her on offense. But with a huge front line led by senior outside hitter Sara Bruener, who is second in the Frontier in kills with 212, as well as 6-2 senior Jillian Bates, who has 141 kills, the Bears are potent on the attack. Jillian Stanek, a 6-1 senior middle blocker and Ashley Welborn, a 6-2 senior outside hitter are also big players for the Bears up front.

"Rocky is going to be a huge challenge for us," Huebsch said. "They (Bears) are not just talented and athletic, but they are playing really well right now. So we're going to have to be at our very best against them and I believe we can be. I believe we've shown we can compete with every team in this league.

"We just have to get back to playing the kind of volleyball we were playing before last weekend's trip. That trip took a little bit out of us, so we have to get back to playing our style of volleyball" he continued. "It's an important weekend for us. We're only going to be in our gym for four more matches all season. So I'm hoping we have great crowds again and we can feed off that energy like we did against Great Falls. These are two really high-caliber teams coming in here and it's going to be really good, competitive volleyball. And we're excited about the chance to go out on our home court and play our best against both teams."

The Skylights and Saints will get underway tonight at 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The match between Northern and Rocky will begin at 2 p.m. Saturday in Havre. Both matches can be streamed live via the internet. This weekend's matches mark the halfway point in the Frontier season with a bye week next week for all Frontier teams.