

Frontier's halfway home in volleyball

Frontier Conference Notebook

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It's been an interesting first half of the Frontier Conference volleyball season. There's been surprises, there's been upsets and there's been great matches all over the league.

But as all Frontier squads reached the halfway point last weekend, things have started to shake out a little more like they were expected to.

Rocky Mountain College has been dominant from the get-go, but at the midway point, the Battlin' Bears sit tied with three-time defending champion Lewis-Clark State for first place. Both teams sport 6-1 records heading into the bye week.

Meanwhile, things get a little cloudier after the Bears and warriors. Carroll College had a chance to make it a three-way tie for first, but the Saints lost to UGF last Saturday in five games – the match was the Argos third five-setter in their last four matches. So now Carroll is a game back at 5-2. Westminster struggled out of the gates, but the Griffins settled into the season and are now at 4-3, alone in fourth place.

MSU-Northern and UGF may have been the biggest early surprises. The Argos started the season 17-1, but when the Skylights beat them in five sets three weeks ago in Havre, it was Northern which was off to a 3-0 start in league play and alone atop the Frontier standings for the first time in eight years. But the Skylights dropped four straight matches to finish the first half and are now tied with UGF at 3-4, in the middle of the pack.

Bringing up the rear is Montana Tech and UM-Western. Tech is a bit of a surprise at 0-6, but the Orediggers lost their top offensive threat in former Big Sandy star Shersteen Cline, and their attack hasn't been the same since. Western is 1-6 in league play, and the Bulldogs have already bettered their win total from a season ago.

- It's been a good year for the Frontier getting national exposure.

Four different teams have been ranked in the NAIA Top 25, and three teams are ranked at the halfway mark. RMC, which made the trip to the national tournament a year ago, is ranked 11th in the nation and the Bears have hovered near the Top 10 for most of the season. Despite a few early losses, LC State has gotten heavy respect from the voters, and this week, the warriors are ranked No. 14.

Carroll and UGF have also spent time in the Top 25 this season. The Saints are currently ranked No. 23, while the Argos received votes this week. UGF had been ranked in the Top 25 in the first poll of the season and Montana Tech received votes in the preseason poll.

- Volleyball is a team sport and individual stats don't always tell the whole story. But plenty of players are having a great year so far.



Montana State University-Northern's Hillary Isleifson makes a dig during a Frontier Conference volleyball match against Carroll College last Friday night in Havre. Isleifson is fifth in the Frontier in kills and sixth in the league in hitting percentage at the midway point in the conference season. Frontier teams have a week off from conference play this weekend.

UGF's Kelsey Van Uden is having a monster season so far. She leads the Frontier in kills with 3-4 and is seventh in the NAIA in that total. Van Uden and teammate Taylor Lucero are also 1-2 in the league in hitting percentage. RMC senior setter Kristin Barott heads up a great group of setters in the Frontier. She leads the league in total assists with 678, while Carroll libero Maureen Fruanholtz leads the league in digs with 295. Carroll middle blocker Markki Otteson leads the conference in blocks with 75 total and LC State's Lauryn Herrick leads the Frontier in service aces with 34.

Northern has some outstanding individual play as well.

Hillary Isleifson is fifth in the conference in kills with 180 and she's sixth in the league in hitting percentage. Kelsey Williams is sixth in the league in kills with 166. Senior setter Nahe Keanaaina is third in the conference in total assists with 484, while sophomore Holly Cartwright is seventh in digs with 252. Victoria Polo leads the Skylights and is eighth in the league in blocks with 43 on the season, and senior Sierra Diehl is first for the Skylights and ninth in the Frontier in aces with 21.

- If the Frontier handed out halfway awards, UGF's Van Uden would certainly be the leader in the race for player of the year. She's been a weapon offensively from day one and she stands out on a UGF team loaded with hitters. However, 2010 Frontier MVP Nicole Graybeal is now back from injury and she'll be poised to have a big second half of the season. Other candidates include RMC's Sara Brunner and Ashley Welborn, as well as Isleifson and Williams at MSU-Northern. Carroll's Elli Graff, a Weber State transfer has the inside track on newcomer of the year, along with Isleifson, while Saints' freshman Sarah Roshak could be considered the favorite to win freshman of the year.

The 2011 Frontier season resumes next week with Northern traveling to UM-Western Oct. 14 and Montana Tech Oct. 15. The Skylights have just two home matches in the second half of the season.

Editor's Note: For a look at the first half of the Frontier Conference football season, see Thursday's Havre Daily News sports page.