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Skylights make one last stand at home

MSU-Northern spikers bid farewell to seniors against Westminster and LC State

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It's getting to be crunch time for the Montana State University-Northern volleyball team. But this weekend's home matches aren't just about winning and seeding for the upcoming Frontier Conference tournament, it's also about saying goodbye.

Northern begins its final home stand of the season with a huge match against Westminster College tonight at 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The Skylights will play their final home match of the season Saturday at 2 p.m. against Lewis-Clark State.

And Saturday is Senior Day at MSU-N. Northern seniors Paige Richardson, Ashley Lawson, Nahe Keanaaina, Sierra Diehl and Tasha Dyrland (who's currently injured) will also take to the floor for the final time in Havre. And it will be an emotional one according to Northern head coach Bill Huebsch.

"These seniors have meant an awful lot to our program," Huebsch said.

"They were here when things may not have been so good, and they have been instrumental in helping bring excitement back to our program.

"Each year they have helped us reach new milestones," he continued. "That's a tribute to them, to their perseverance and to them staying here and begin dedicated to this program. When their careers are over, they are going to be missed greatly, but their contributions to our program will last a long time."

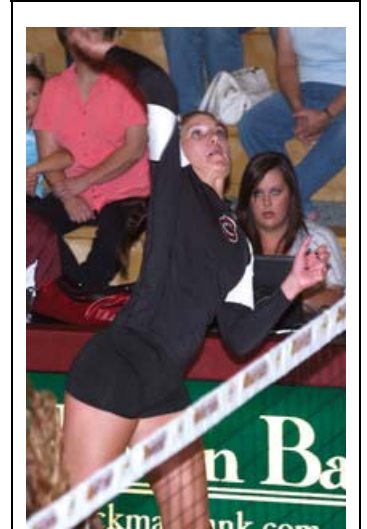
And the Skylights (5-5, 13-9) would like nothing more than to give the seniors a great home sendoff. But it won't be easy.

Tonight's match with Westminster (6-5, 9-13) is critical. The Skylights are a half game behind the Griffins for fourth in the Frontier standings, and the Griffins already have a dramatic five-set win over Northern last month in Salt Lake City. Northern's goal of finishing in the top half of the league standings could very well come down to tonight's result.

"Looking back on that match in Salt Lake, it felt like we had a commanding lead early on," Huebsch said. "Then we played three really close sets and then it got away from us. What comes out of that is the realization that it's time for us to have consistency, in all phases of the game. Against UGF last week, we served and passed well, but we hit terrible. And when you do that, you just give an advantage to your opponent. Westminster is a team that you can't let hang around. They have good players and if you let them hang around, you can get into some tough situations. So we have take advantage of our opportunities, we have to score when we have chances and we have to play consistent in all phases."

The Griffins are led by sophomore middle blocker Katie Vance, who had 17 kills against the Skylights last month. Vance also leads the Griffins in blocks with 51 on the season. Ashley Marchant leads the Griffins in kills with 211, while 6-2 outside hitter Kenzie Mitchell is another force the Skylight defense will have to contend with.

Northern counters with Hillary Isleifson's team-high 208 kills. She also 35 blocks this season. Kelsey Williams has 188 kills on the season, while Diehl has 43 blocks. Richardson is also healthy again, and is



MSU-Northern's Ashley Lawson smashes a ball during a Frontier Conference volleyball match earlier this month in Havre. The Skylight seniors will play their final home matches of their career tonight and Saturday.

starting to produce on the outside after being injured for three weeks. Defense will again be critical for the Skylights this weekend, and sophomore Holly Cartwright is among the league leaders in digs with 297.

"We have to control the middles, in both matches this weekend," Huebsch said. "Serving well and passing are constants, but we need to be better at imposing our will at the net, especially against these two teams. And we have to end our unforced errors. We just have to be a more consistent volleyball team this weekend."

Consistency will be huge in Saturday matchup with ninth-ranked LC State. The Warriors (10-1) swept the Skylights last month in Lewiston, Idaho, but Northern had chances to extend the match in the third set. That showed Huebsch his team can play with the national powerhouse.

"They (Warriors) are a totally different type of team," Huebsch said.

"They're ninth in the nation for a reason and if you don't do what you're supposed to do, what you're capable of doing, then they will jump all over you.

"But we had some really good chances in that third set against them at their place," he added. "I think that gives these kids confidence we can play with them. But again, it will come down to limiting unforced errors, playing with a higher volleyball IQ and our ability to keep rallies going and put balls away when we have the opportunities. We will certainly have to play at a high level to have success against them."

The Warriors have tons of talent, no more than middle blocker Nicole Graybeal (6-2). The defending Frontier Player of the Year was injured for much of the season, but has come on strong as of late. But as good as Graybeal is, 5-11 outside hitter Lauryn Herrick leads the Frontier in hitting and has 195 kills on the season. Kelli Tikker (5-9) has 224 kills coming into this weekend, while Brianne Brown (5-9) has 152. Tikker also leads the team in digs.

"These are very important matches," Huebsch said. "We have a chance to really put ourselves in a good position this weekend, and of course, we always want to win on our home floor.

"For us, it's time to quit this rollercoaster of volleyball we've been on," he added. "We know we're capable of playing at a high level every night. Now it's time to go out and do that."

Tonight's match between the Skylights and Griffins will get underway at 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. Saturday's Senior Day match between MSU-N and LC State begins at 2 p.m.