

Skylights suffer a tough finish at home

George Ferguson

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What turned out to be a difficult final two home matches for the Montana State University-Northern volleyball team got off to a rough start.

On Friday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, the Skylights were swept in three games by the Westminster Griffins. The loss also meant Northern suffered a season sweep at the hands of the Griffins.

But as lopsided as the final result looked, the Skylights had their chances to make things different. The first set was a side-out affair with 13 ties and seven lead changes. Northern senior Paige Richardson was playing well offensively as the Skylights kept pace. But Westminster used a 4-0 run to pull ahead 21-18 and that was just enough of a cushion to earn a 1-0 lead.

The second set was different, but equally as close. Both teams made big runs with Westminster jumping out to an early 7-3 lead. But with back-to-back kills from Richardson and big blocks from Hillary Isleifson and Victoria Polo, the Skylights ran off a 10-1 run and led 16-10. All looked good with a six-point lead, but the Griffins never flinched. They went on a 9-1 run of their own, and once ahead 23-20, they finished the set off and had a commanding 2-0 advantage.

"Tonight was just very disappointing," Northern head coach Bill Huebsch said. "It was disappointing to see the things we worked so hard on in practice not get put out on the floor. It was disappointing to see us give away a 16-10 lead in that second set. When you're up six on a team, you should win those games, but unfortunately, we relaxed, took plays off and the result was what you saw."

Things only got more bleak in the third for Northern as Westminster imposed its will. The Griffins went on a 10-0 run to lead 14-5 early on and the Skylights never found an answer in the sweep.

Westminster out-hit the Skylights 45-27 with Richardson totaling eight of Northern's kills. Isleifson added five kills, 14 assists, two aces and two blocks, while Sierra Diehl had four kills and a pair of solo blocks. Holly Cartwright led Northern defensively with 11 digs.

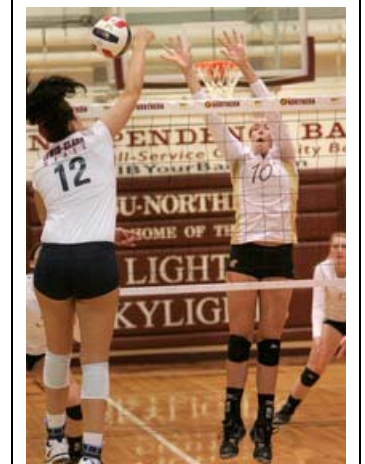
"Not much went right for us tonight," Huebsch said. "We just got out-hit, defensively we did not play well at all. We didn't control the pace at the net and we made a lot of unforced errors. I thought our serve-receive was really good. We passed pretty well overall.

"But we cannot continue to get out-hit like we have been lately and expect to win," he added. "We have to be able to put the ball away."

After a tough loss at the Armory gymnasium on Friday, the Montana State University-Northern Skylights' volleyball team was hoping to bounce back for their match on Saturday. But facing another tough opponent, the Skylights didn't get the results they were looking for, especially on senior night.



Montana State University-Northern's Hillary Isleifson tips a ball during a Frontier Conference volleyball match Friday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The Skylights were swept by Westminster and Lewis-Clark State in their final home matches.



Northern's Sierra Diehl (right) tries to block a Lewis-Clark State hitter during a Frontier Conference volleyball match Saturday afternoon in Havre. The Skylights lost to the Warriors on Senior Day. Northern fell to 5-7 in the Frontier Conference and will finish the regular season this weekend with road matches at Carroll and RMC.

Saturday the Skylights hosted the Lewis-Clark State College Warriors, the No. 9 ranked team in the NAIA. But despite showing many signs of good play, the Skylights were defeated in three games in Frontier Conference play. The Warriors defeated the Skylights by scores of 25-17, 25-13 and 25-22. Northern fell to 5-7 in conference play and 13-11 overall, while the Warriors improved to 12-1 in conference play and 18-3 overall.

"They are ranked No. 9 for a reason," Skylight's head coach Bill Huebsch said. "They are skilled at every position and you can't make mistakes against them. And the mistakes we did make, they capitalized on. I thought we played much harder than we did last night (Friday), especially in the third set, I thought we put ourselves in a good position to battle back. But you can't make the amount of errors we made today and not hit the ball effectively and expect to beat a team like that."

In the third set the Skylights did play better. After tying game one 11-11, the Skylights were outscored 14-6 in the final stretch. And in game two, the Skylights were trailing just 11-9 before being outscored 14-4 in the final stretch. Both game's one and two slipped away with many costly errors, which led to the Warriors outhitting and outscoring the Skylights. MSU-N totaled 12 kills in the first two sets, while the Warriors racked up 29.

The third set had a much different feel to it.

While the Skylights still had a couple of errors throughout, they played much better. They were connecting on the pass and their hitting was much tougher with 15 total kills. And they even battled back from a 17-11 deficit to take the lead at 20-19. MSU-N's Victoria Polo helped the Skylights go on a 5-1 run from behind the service line, while the run also saw Samantha Hutcheson giving the team a boost with two kills and a tip for points.

"When we were able to get into our offense and take good swings I think we were pretty effective," Huebsch said. "And we got better at that and it showed in our hitting percentage, in the first set we hit zero, in the second set we hit negative and in the third set we hit almost 200. That was why the game was closer, we were putting the ball away."

But unfortunately the athleticism of the Warriors pulled them through. After taking the 20-19 lead the Skylights were outscored 6-2 in the final set to send seniors Paige Richardson, Ashley Lawson, Nahe Keanaaina, Siera Diehl and Tasha Dyrland off on a high note, but without a win on their home court.

"They aren't satisfied with how they went out," Huebsch said. "But at least they were able to feed off of the emotion of senior night. They didn't want to go out on a losing note on their home floor, but at least they went down giving their best effort in that third set."

The Skylights totaled 27 kills, seven aces, 43 digs and two blocks in the match. Hillary Isleifson led the team with eight kills, 14 digs, one block and also grabbed one ace. Samantha Hutcheson finished with five kills, while Diehl and Richardson both added four each. Hutcheson also led the team with two aces, while Diehl had one block. Holly Cartwright also had nine digs, while Keanaaina had six.

The Skylights wrap up the regular season with road matches at Carroll College on Friday night and Rocky Mountain College on Saturday afternoon.

MSU-N swept at the hands of Griffins, Warriors

Westminster def. MSU-Northern 25-22, 25-22, 25-13

WC — Kills 45 (Alexis Aalona 14, Ashley Marchant 13), Assists 44 (Emily Atkinson 39), Aces 8 (Marchant 3), Digs 51 (Kyndall Kordakis), Blocks 6 (Kenzie Mitchell 3).

MSU-N — Kills 27 (Paige Richardson 8), Assists 26 (Hillary Isleifson 14), Aces 5 (Isleifson 2), Digs 44 (Holly Cartwright 10, Kelsey Williams 11), Blocks 7 (Sierra Diehl 2, Isleifson 2).

Lewis-Clark State def. MSU-Northern
25-17, 25-13, 25-22

MSU-N — Kills 27 (Hillary Isleifson 8, Samantha Hutcheson 5, Sierra Diehl 4, Paige Richardson 4, Ashley Lawson 2), Aces 7 (Samantha Hutcheson 2, Hillary Isleifson 1, Sophie Malenfant 1, Ashley Lawson 1, Shayla Bly 1), Digs 43 (Hillary Isleifson 14, Holly Cartwright 9, Nahe Keanaaina 6, Shayla Bly 5), Blocks 2 (Hillary isleifson 1, Sierra Diehl 1).

LC — Kills 43 (Lauryn Herrick 13, Kelli Ticker 10, Brianne Brown 8), Aces 2 (Lauryn Herrick 1, Brianne Brown 1), Digs 48 (Kelli Ticker 13, Lauryn Herrick 9, Nevena Dragovic 6, Brianne Brown 5, Chelsea Shears 4, Kaylee Rector 4), Blocks 7 (Chelsea Strong 2, Liz Clark 2).