

## **Skylights finish on the road**

*George Ferguson*

Friday, November 4th, 2011

A long season has come down to just two weeks for the Montana State University-Northern volleyball team.

This weekend, the Skylights will put the wraps on what has been an exciting regular season with road trips to Carroll College tonight and Rocky Mountain College on Saturday.

But as exciting as things have been for Northern this season, the last two weeks haven't been so. Northern hasn't won a set in its last three matches, having been swept by Great Falls, Westminster and Lewis-Clark State in its last three matches.

And things don't get any easier for the Skylights (5-7, 13-11) this weekend. Tonight's match at Carroll (8-4, 15-7) pits MSU-N against the first of two nationally-ranked opponents. The Saints come into tonight's match alone in third place in the Frontier Conference and ranked 23rd in the latest NAIA Top 25 Poll. Carroll also swept Northern in Havre last month and with a roster that boasts such talent as setter Caitlin Tocci, libero Maureen Frauneholtz, and impact net players like Markii Otteson, Elli Graff and Kristin Telin, the Saints are going to be a tough team for the Skylights to contend with.

And so will Rocky on Saturday in Billings. The Bears (10-2, 22-4) are ranked eighth in the NAIA, their highest ranking in school history, and they are in that spot for good reason. Rocky has some of the top players in the conference, led by hitters Ashley Welborn and Jillian Bates. The Bears also have a top-notch setter in Kirstin Barott, who helped the Bears dole out 45 kills in a three-game sweep of Northern last month in Havre.

But as good as both the Saints and Bears are, the Skylights are in the midst of their most productive season in six years, and they will give both teams everything they've got this weekend. Northern has struggled with hitting the last three matches, but with standouts like Hillary Isleifson, Kelsey Williams and Paige Richardson, MSU-N could snap out of its hitting funk at any time. The Skylights are also starting to get better production in the middle, with Victoria Polo and Sierra Diehl leading the way. Despite their struggles last weekend at home, the Skylights did average seven blocks in matches against the Warriors and Griffins. Northern head coach Bill Huebsch has also been pleased with how his team has passed and served the ball in recent matches.

"The biggest thing with us has been consistency," Huebsch said. "We just haven't been able to maintain a high level of play for long periods of time. We've seen it stretches. We've gone out and shown that we can compete with anybody. But at other times, we have really struggled with unforced errors and costly mistakes and to me that's mental. We're a talented team and we're capable of beating anybody."

The Skylights will try and put that to the test tonight when they face the Saints at 7 in Helena. Northern plays its final regular season match Saturday at 5 p.m. against RMC in Billings. The Frontier Conference Tournament will be held next weekend in Helena.