

## Skylights begin again

MSU-N spikers get a rematch with Carroll at the Frontier Volleyball Tournament

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The Montana State University-Northern volleyball season has come down to one match. One match for the Skylights to keep playing.

Northern head coach Bill Huebsch has said his team has been on a roller coaster ride this season, a season of great highs and new milestones, but also a season of tough losses and disappointments. But Friday night in Helena, the Skylights can put everything in their rearview mirror as they play in the opening round of the Frontier Conference Tournament.

Northern (5-7, 13-13) squares off against No. 23 Carroll College (10-4, 17-7) at 7 p.m. Friday in the final first-round match of the tournament. The Skylights are the No. 6 seed while the nationally-ranked Saints are the No. 3 seed. Carroll swept Northern in the season series, including a three-game sweep just last Friday in Helena. But Huebsch says his team is just fine with facing the saints again on their home floor.

"We're fine with that," Huebsch said. "Going into the last week of the season we kind of expected it (to be playing Carroll again). I feel though the scores don't show it, we match up pretty good with them. We just have to be more consistent than we have against them the two times we've faced them this season."

Northern's season has included its first .500 record in six years, as well as its best conference record in that stretch. The Skylights started the season on a three-match winning streak and were alone in first place in the Frontier standings after the first two weeks of the season. Given the tough times the program has endured over the last several years, those were big achievements according to Huebsch.

"We've made progress," Huebsch said. "We have had some really nice accomplishments this season and it shows we're going in the right direction. But we also understand we want to go beyond those accomplishments, and in order to that we have to grow into a much more consistent team night in and night out."

Consistency has been the Skylights' Achilles heel, especially as of late. MSU-N comes into its match with the Saints riding a five-match losing streak – a streak in which Northern didn't win a single set in matches at UGF, Carroll and Rocky Mountain College or in home finales against Westminster College and Lewis-Clark State.

"Hitting the ball consistently has really held us back," Huebsch said. "For whatever reason, we just haven't been able to put the ball away when we have opportunities to do so. And the more times you get out-hit, the less likely you're going to win matches, especially against the level of competition in this conference."

And in order to be successful against Carroll a third time around, the Skylights will have to hit much better than they did in their previous two meetings. But one of Carroll's strengths is defense. The Saints have the leading defensive player in the league in libero Maureen Frauenholtz (386 digs) and the top blocker in the league in middle Markki Otteson (102 blocks). The Saints also have a veteran leader in senior setter Caitlin Tocci and an athletic group of tall, offensive weapons, which include former Havre Blue Pony Karla Hellegaard.



Northern's Holly Cartwright makes a sliding dig during a Frontier Conference volleyball match earlier this season in Havre. The Skylights start the postseason on Friday in Helena.

The Skylights will counter with their great all-around player, Hillary Isleifson. She's racked up 234 kills and 149 assists, as well as 43 blocks on the season. Kelsey Williams is second on the team in kills with 202, while senior Sierra Diehl, a Helena native, has 133 kills and 47 blocks. The Skylights also need big blocking from middle Victoria Polo, while Holly Cartwright has had an outstanding season anchoring the MSU-N defense. The former Pony standout is sixth in the conference with 348 digs.

"We feel we can play with Carroll," Huebsch said. "And that's not taking anything away from them. They have a great team, they have a lot of very talented athletes and they're very well coached.

"But we know if we play to our strengths, play to our capabilities and play with consistency, we are right there with them. I really believe that," he added. "This is an opportunity for us to go down there, play relaxed and with nothing to lose. And if we do that, who knows what might happen."

The Frontier Conference tournament begins Friday with top-seeded Lewis-Clark State (13-1, 19-3) vs eighth-seeded Montana Tech (0-14, 7-20) at 12 p.m. Fourth-seeded Westminster College (8-6, 11-14) takes on fifth-seeded University of Great Falls (6-8, 21-9) at 2 p.m. and second-seeded Rocky Mountain (12-2, 24-4) battles seventh-seeded Montana-Western (2-12, 7-18) at 5 p.m. The Skylights face Carroll at 7 p.m. Saturday in Helena pits the first-round winners against each other in the morning, with the championship match set for 7 p.m.