In the world of sports, a short-term memory is a good thing. It’s always best to leave the past in the past. And that’s exactly what the Montana State University-Northern volleyball team is setting out to do this season.

In 2014, the Skylights started the season one year removed from one of the best season’s in school history, falling just short of winning a Frontier Conference championship. However, with the loss of five quality seniors from that 2013 squad, the Skylights couldn’t keep the momentum going as head coach Bill Huebsch’s team went 3-11 in the Frontier and 7-21 overall.

Now though, much has changed as Huebsch hit the recruiting trail hard and has brought a team together that is poised to be outstanding this fall. With a mix of solid returning players and exciting newcomers, Huebsch, who enters his seventh season at the helm, says that 2014 is already nothing but a distant memory.

“It’s hard to explain what didn’t work last year, other than that we lost five really good players from a very successful season the year before. But for whatever reason, things just didn’t come together for us,” Huebsch said. “But that’s in the past and it’s been particularly easy to put that behind us already because we have a very new team. But mostly, it’s been easy because this team has come together so quickly. The chemistry they have, it’s honestly like they’ve been playing together for a long time, not just two weeks. They get along, they push each other, they have great communication and they have great chemistry. Our practices have just been awesome and they come in the gym every day excited and enthusiastic. So that’s been a lot of fun.”

But while a talented MSU-N team, led by returning veterans like Erin Jensen, Jessica Wilcox and Cydney Auzenne are more than ready to put last year’s tough season behind them, there’s someone the Skylights won’t forget and she is a daily motivator for Northern to push on.

Sophomore middle hitter Taylor Woolman was severely and critically injured in last May’s horrific stabbing in Havre. Woolman, a Belgrade native was a breakout player last year for the Skylights, and was set to be a major contributor this season before the senseless attack happened this spring. And while she continues her long and tough recovery, and won’t be with her teammates this season, Huebsch said she is very much still with the team in spirit and that her toughness and courage inspire the Skylights daily.

“She’s still a huge part of our team, and she inspires these girls every day,” Huebsch said. “Taylor saw substantial time as a freshman last year and was having a great offseason and was doing great in spring ball before this senseless act happened. And she’s an inspiration to us all. Instead of doing a team retreat last week, we drove down to Belgrade and spent the day with her, and she’s getting better every day. She
is fighting and working so hard to recover and get back to where she was before, and even though she has a long way to go, the way she’s working so hard, how tough she is and her attitude towards all of this, she’s just a huge inspiration to these kids, and to me, and she’s very much still a huge part of this team.”

While Woolman won’t be able to be on the floor for the Skylights this season, her teammates will honor her in many different ways throughout the year. And, that Skylight team will be an athletic and interesting mix of returning veterans and exciting newcomers.

Jensen (5-8) is Northern’s top returning scorer. The senior middle hitter tallied 197 kills and 49 blocks a year ago, and will again provide firepower for the Skylights at the net. Wilcox (6-0), plays on the outside, and she totaled 170 kills and 39 blocks a season ago. Auzenne (5-10), now a sophomore, should also be ready to contribute more offensively this season on the outside, while MSU-N also returns libero Kylie Pasieka, who played both libero and back row a year ago as a true freshman, as well as middle hitter Mikayla Virostek (6-0). She red-shirted last season and will be asked to step up in the middle this fall.

And while that group gives Huebsch a solid core of players who have been in his 5-1 system, he’s also excited about all the new recruits that complete the Skylight roster.

At the top of that list is sophomore outside hitter Cassie Krueger (6-0), the daughter of a pair of former Northern standout basketball players. Krueger transferred to Northern after a stint at Montana State, and Huebsch said she should have an immediate impact. Four junior transfers will also see plenty of floor time this season, including setter Emily Russell (5-8), who will likely earn the starting nod. Huebsch also brought in freshman setter Samantha Martinez (5-8) and he says both players are passing the ball well in practice. Junior Jacy Vining (5-7) is also stepping into a libero role, while Rebecca Egan (5-6) is a strong defensive specialist and Korrie Stephenson (5-11) will provide more power on the outside. Freshman middle hitter Taleah Ross (5-9) rounds out a Skylight roster that boasts just two seniors.

“Some of the things this team is showing right away is that we’re stronger and more athletic right now than we were a year ago,” Huebsch said. “And we have a lot of versatility with where some of the kids can play. This group gives us a lot of options, so we’re experimenting with some different things with our lineups. And that’s really exciting.

“I really like this group,” he continued. “Erin and Jessica both have a lot of experience in our program, and Cydney Auzenne is really coming into her own now. And with all of the new players we brought in, they are all very talented and are going to have an impact on this program. Cassie Krueger is an outstanding player and she’s only going to get better. I think Emily Russell has done a really nice job so far, but as an entire group, they’re all playing really well, and that’s a great sign, because we have only been together for two weeks. So that shows we can get even better and that’s exciting to see.”

And while Huebsch is excited about the talent, athleticism and upside to his entire roster, it’s how they are as a group that has him feeling very optimistic as Northern embarks on its new season, a season that includes four non-conference tournaments, many of which will feature nationally-ranked opponents, and a new 12-match Frontier schedule, with Westminster College no longer a part of the league.

“The preseason has gone really well,” Huebsch said. “I thought we have improved every day. I thought we looked pretty good at times in our scrimmage against Medicine Hat College. There are plenty of things we can keep getting better at, but overall, I really like where we’re at right now.

“And the biggest reason why is this team’s chemistry,” he continued. “That’s this team’s biggest strength right now. These girls have come together really quickly, and if you watch us, I don’t think we look like a team that’s only been together for two weeks. They have really bonded on and off the court. They really support and push each other, and they work really hard each and every day. It’s a really fun group to coach and when you have so much chemistry, like this team has already, it’s really exciting to see, and it makes the start of a new season really exciting. I know they’re looking forward to getting out on the road and competing, and I’m looking forward to watching this team because I think they’ll just get better and better as the season goes on.”

The Skylights open their 2015 season with four matches at the Eastern Oregon Tournament Friday-Saturday in LaGrande, Oregon. Northern’s first home and conference match of the season is set for Sept. 17 against Lewis-Clark State. For more on MSU-N’s upcoming season, see Friday’s Havre Daily News.
Havre Daily News website