Millard North High School
THE HOOFBEAT
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STADIUM SHOWDOWN

Millard volleyball teams open the season with historic matches at Buell Stadium

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Photograph by Sebastian Cacho-Aviles

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THURSDAY NIGHT SPIKES

Varsity Volleyball plays first-ever Nebraska high school game on football field at Buell Stadium

LYDIA HARLOW
Sports Editor

The switch from fluorescent gym lights to bright, open sky and stadium lights is jarring. And when you add the challenges that come with playing outdoors-- the wind, sun, and heat-- the volleyball team faced unpredictable conditions for their first major game of the 2025 season.

On August 21, instead of their usual games on gym floors, varsity volleyball played on a portable court placed on the football field at Buell. The team played two sets against both Millard West and Millard South in this historic match-up.

"Playing at Buell in such a big arena, it was a surreal moment," senior Hannah Ehrenberg said. "The last time that an outdoor volleyball match took place like that in Nebraska was when the Huskers played on their football field, and so that was really cool to kind of carry that on."

The Battle at Buell, inspired by UNL's 'Volleyball Day in Nebraska' game in Memorial Stadium, and planned in collaboration with the coaches from the other two schools, attracted a larger, more enthusiastic crowd than ever before.

"The crowd was much louder and more involved in the game [at Buell]. They were cheering on specific players, and just looking into the crowd and seeing how the stands were absolutely packed was really an insane moment for me, just seeing how many people were watching us and cheering us on," Ehrenberg said.

Spirited Start:
Sophomore Ava Whitmarsh goes through the line, giving high fives to each teammate before the game. "[The community] is really supportive. Everybody is like one big family," Whitmarsh said.
Photograph by Lydia Harlow

Volleyball games at MN typically draw a crowd of 100 people, often with only a small student section. At Buell, however, thousands more showed up, creating a dramatic shift in environment for the athletes.

The overwhelming support for the volleyball team shattered their expectations, and they hope that support will continue as the season progresses.

"I never imagined there were going to be 4,000 people there," varsity volleyball coach Lindsey Grant said. "You never know, it's female athletics, and sometimes here at home games we have just parents, and sometimes we have a student section. You just never really know how people are going to adopt it, but I thought the Millard community really embraced it and helped send it to the next level."

Logistics for setting up such an unusual event were complicated, especially with obtaining and setting up a portable court; however, with help from groups, especially the football teams from each school, the event was able to run smoothly.

"We put the entire court together, laid out the mats underneath it, and then put each individual panel together, and helped set up the net... It felt really good to support the [volleyball] team, because they always come to our football games. They support us, so it felt good to support them," junior Austin Ruhter said.

Although coordinating this multifaceted event was difficult, the contributions from the schools, club teams, and local sponsors from around the city made the day possible.

"The club community really embraced this event. There were multiple clubs that were there and helped sponsor it. I think the volleyball community as a whole is pretty tight-knit in Nebraska, and anything volleyball-related is well promoted throughout the state," Grant said.

As the sport of volleyball has been rapidly growing in popularity in Nebraska, the community has been coming together and providing support for one another within their own schools and throughout the city.

"[Our community] is like a family. We have our three rules: integrity, hard work, and family. We trust each other. We do team bonding, and every day we work hard at practice, giving 110% effort. We hold each other accountable and are just a close group," junior Tresor Porter said.

They had to lean on each other a lot throughout the Battle at Buell, especially when facing outdoor elements, such as the wind and sun, that they don't usually deal with in a typical game.

Setting The Bar:
Freshman Andie Blomenkamp sets the ball during the first set against Millard South. They won in a close game, starting the night off strong.
Photograph by Lucas Day

"We had to adjust a lot because the sun was in our eyes, so we couldn't see the ball, and since the court was on turf, it didn't have that easy, more jumpable quality, and so we weren't able to jump as high, especially at first," Ehrenberg said.

They couldn't always see the ball, and so had to communicate excessively, warning each other of their blind spots.

"We would talk about who had what, but also the trust that we have in each other played a big role. We knew who would take what ball, and relied on them," sophomore Ava Whitmarsh said.

The team quickly adapted, working together and relying on one another, growing their trust and camaraderie.

"We all kind of got adjusted and got used to it... It was hard, but I think it made us better as players to be able to adapt to out-of-system situations during the game," Ehrenberg said.

The team is already looking ahead to future seasons, but given its logistical difficulty, it remains to be seen if this will be a recurring event.

"We're looking into seeing if we want to do it on a regular basis or how we want to continue to grow it. We'll see. Obviously, it's very early. We've had some conversations, and this will probably not be an annual thing, but we'll see what may or may not happen," Grant said.

Even if it doesn't become an annual tradition, the Battle at Buell shows the type of revamping and ingenuity that Grant is implementing in the volleyball program.

"We were making Nebraska high school history. We were the first high school team to play a game like that on a court at Buell. I think it's awesome to have been a part of that, and I hope to have that legacy continued through the program that Grant is building," Ehrenberg said.

Drawing a crowd of 4,000 is no small feat, and the Battle at Buell event marks an unforgettable start to what the team hopes will be a memorable season.

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A journey from player to coach

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Reviewing popular pizza spots

LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

New backstroke starting devices make their debut in the MN pool

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Photograph by Lucas Day

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GETTING A GRIP

Newly approved backstroke ledges become a game-changer for MN Swim Team

SARAH ROBEY
Co-Front Page Editor

It is the beginning of your race. The cool water engulfs you as you jump into the pool, your swim cap and goggles tight against your head. You grip onto the handlebars and carefully place your feet onto the wall as you wait for the sound of the buzzer. Beep! You explode backwards, but your feet lose their grip on the slippery wall. You struggle to regain the lost distance, costing you several places at the finish.

This situation is common for backstroke swimmers and can often make or break a race. Now, there is a way to combat this challenge directly.

This year, the National Federation of High School Sports (NFHS) and Nebraska School Activities Association (NSAA) approved the use of backstroke ledges for the 2025-26 school year. MN is one of the first high schools to adopt these and will begin using them at the start of the season.

Prior to this development, these ledges have been used since 2013 at the international level, including the Olympics, World Championships, and USA Swimming National Championships.

A backstroke ledge, also known as a backstroke device, is a small ledge with a grippy texture that the backstroker puts their feet on to push off of. There are two main types: the auto-retractable ledges and the manual ledges.

For the auto-retractable devices, the pressure exerted by the swimmers causes the device to be lifted out of the water by itself after the swimmer starts. For a manual device, a person has to pull it out of the water once the swimmer begins and reset it manually.

"It is a ledge to place your feet to be able to have a better directional force for the way that we want them to be racing," head swim coach Andrew Cunningham said.

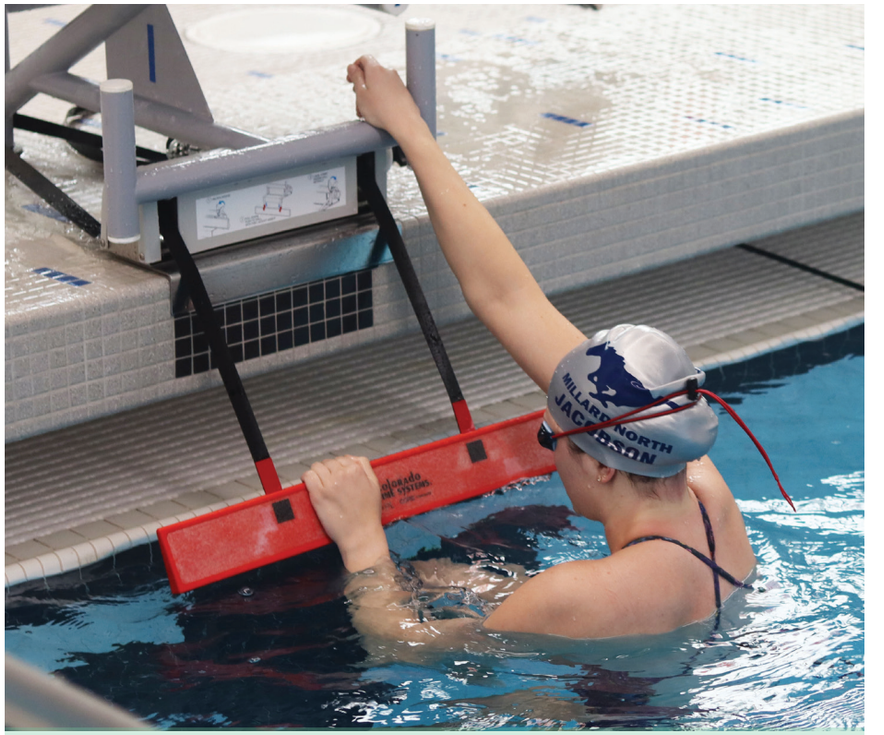
While these devices have been used for many years at higher levels of swimming, there have been safety concerns about adopting them at the high school level.

"When it comes to starts, the biggest concern is the head, neck, and back injuries because of a collision with the bottom of the pool. Adding in something that athletes can more or less jump off of, they had to figure out what guidelines can safely implement it, because at the international level and collegiate level, those facilities are different from what we have at a lot of high schools across the country," Cunningham said.

The backstroke is the only swimming stroke where swimmers start in the water instead of diving in. Before these new devices, swimmers had to place their feet on a wall or touch pad, which did not have enough texture to grip onto for their start, creating challenges with slipping.

"It's really hard to get a great quality start when touch pads aren't equal, facilities aren't equal, or it's just the painted wall," Cunningham said.

Now with the introduction of these devices, swimmers will be able to start off their races with a better, more consistent push and reduce the risk of slipping.



Smooth Start
Senior backstroke swimmer Morgan Jacobson sets up the backstroke ledge, submerging it in the water to provide a grip for her feet. After taking off, the ledges automatically retract up, easing the set-up for the swimmers.
Photograph by Lydia Harlow

> "It really sets the tone for your race. It is really important to have a good start, because if you mess up your start, it is awful."
>
> MORGAN JACOBSON
> SENIOR

"It really sets the tone for your race. It is really important to have a good start, because if you mess up your start, it is awful," backstroke swimmer senior Morgan Jacobson said.

With other things running through a swimmer's thoughts at the start of the meet, the easier start can relieve some of that pre-race stress.

"It is eliminating that fear in the back of your mind. You're thinking about it like 'Oh gosh, I better not slip,' so it helps eliminate that overthinking of your start," Jacobson said.

In addition to MN, Westside High School is the only other school who will be getting these devices. While these devices will be used for practices and several meets, they will not be at the NSAA State Swimming & Diving Championships due to the inadequate pool depth at the Bob Devaney Sports Center Natarium, where it is held. In order to cover the high costs of these devices, the swim team held a fundraiser.

"We reached out to the booster club, and they were very generous in giving us money to purchase the ledges. In addition, we did a fundraiser that helped raise some money as well to purchase the ledges," Activities Director Keith Maly said.

MN has a six-lane pool and therefore decided to buy eight of the auto-retractable ledges, which allow for two extras in case of malfunctions or damage.

"Number-wise, we run a meet equivalent to our conference-level meet and the state-level meet, so having that technical equipment is really necessary," Cunningham said.

This meet, called the Millard North Invite, will be hosted in January. Last year, over 500 swimmers and 18 teams participated in this meet.

"It's really exciting that we will be able to use them for our MN Invite, which we get really excited for. It's a really good opportunity to get better times and get better backstroke starts," Jacobson said.

With the season just beginning, the swim team looks ahead to an exciting season ahead with these new additions, making them feel confident and ready.

A FACILITY FOR THE BIG LEAGUES

How the up-and-coming GreenState Millard Activities Center will impact athletics

GRACE EVERT
Co-Front Page Editor

Out of every classroom, lecture hall, and hallway, there is no space in the MN building busier than the gym. At times, it might be easier to get a parking spot at 7:55 than to catch an open slot in the weight room schedule.

Overcrowded sports facilities are a growing worry in the Millard community. In partnership with the Millard Public Schools Foundation and other generous donors, the GreenState Millard Activities Center is set to debut in the fall of 2026.

This state-of-the-art center will feature basketball and volleyball courts, an innovation lab, an esports lounge, multi-purpose classrooms, a sports performance gym, an indoor turf field, and a cross-country trail on its 40-acre site located off 204th and Q Street.

"Construction is now in progress, marking a major step forward in Millard's commitment to community transformation — made possible entirely through private funding and generous donor support without the use of tax dollars," Millard Public Schools (MPS) Foundation Chief Operations Officer Marilyn Chollett said.

Chollett oversees sponsorships, donor partnerships, and marketing for the activity center. She worked with GreenState Credit Union to give the activity center its full name, GreenState Millard Activities Center, which was announced in a naming rights partnership on August 25, 2025.

"GreenState Credit Union is very excited to be part of this project. Community giveback is core to our mission, so supporting the Activity Center is a perfect fit," GreenState CEO Vic Israni said.

Although work on-site has just begun, plans for the activity center have been developing for many months. MN Activities Director Keith Maly, along with activities directors from high schools and middle schools across the district, was brought in on the project in the summer of 2024.

"We knew that it was a need for our community because at the high school level and middle school level, our facilities are constantly being used. We wanted to try to relieve some of that pressure of use from outside communities by giving organizations a space to practice and compete," Maly said.

The first challenge was finding a space large enough to house such a robust facility. In addition to room for multiple volleyball/basketball courts, parking was also a concern. For every inch of indoor space, there needed to be as much, if not more, space for parking. Lastly, it was important that the activity center was centralized within the district.

Renovation Rendering:
This photo shows a rendering of the completed GreenState Millard Activities Center. They plan on opening this space to the public fall of 2026.

"We were also looking for a facility that was centrally located for all the high schools and all the middle schools. We didn't want it somewhere way north for one school and then in the backyard of another," Maly said.

The first site considered was the JCPenney building in Oakview Mall. The central location was perfect, but the building lacked the square footage needed for multiple athletic spaces. Knowing it would be near impossible to find a pre-existing building to fit their vision, it was decided that the GreenState Millard Activity Center would be built next to Horizon High School.

"The good thing about using the area where Horizon is that there are around 45 to 50 acres that we're going to develop. And on the weekends and evenings, we add additional parking to the facility because Horizon is not open," Maly said.

As the activity center is still being constructed, the MN athletic department is considering how MN athletes will utilize the facility. A highlight of the abundant space is that everything will be in one place, eliminating the need to drive across town for different facilities.

"To make it more convenient for families, we started trying to put all aspects of sports programs together. We (MN) may be able to start weight training and conditioning at the activity center because the facility will employ a company that is going to strictly run the strength conditioning program," Maly said.

Regardless of how MN athletes will engage with the facility, the MPS Foundation hopes an activity center with so much to offer will attract people from across the district.

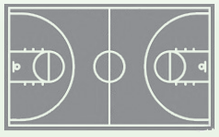
"I think one of the things the activity center will allow is an opportunity to have more programs in the future than we have had in the present or in the past. Because of the fact that we were limited by the space that we could give to people, there were a lot of things that we would have to turn down," Maly said.

In addition to the numerous traditional courts and fields, the GreenState Millard Activity Center also includes a lounge for an up-and-coming sport, Esports.

"This facility will provide amazing opportunities for our youth programs and high school students. I love basketball, so that is exciting, but I am very excited for the esports lab. Esports has really progressed over the years, and I look forward to seeing our students and community benefit from this awesome space," Chollett said.

The development of the activity center will occur in phases. While not every aspect will be ready for the public by 2026, the facility will be ready to welcome community from across the district. So if you don't find yourself at a Green State Millard Activity Center event, be sure to go take a look at this amazing space.

Inside the Center


6 full-size basketball courts

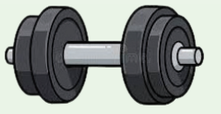
Innovation Lab for robotics and STEM

Sand and indoor volleyball courts

State-of-the-arts Esports Lounge

Multi-purpose classrooms

Indoor synthetic turf area


Sports performing training gym