Montana basketball team win three out of four past games

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MISSOULA--If there's one single reason to explain the resurgence of the Montana Grizzly basketball squad in the past two weeks, it can be expressed in one word: confidence.

The young Grizzlies, winners of three of their past four games going into their battle with Washington State Tuesday night at Pullman, appear to have finally jelled. And it took a lot of sweat and toil on the part of coach Frosty Cox to accomplish this.

The Silvertips suffered pastings at the hands of Idaho, Nebraska and Colorado early in the season. They lost five games in a row before showing signs of awakening by beating Washington State by 10 points.

Then, in a two-game series against tough Oregon, the Silvertips came into their own. They dropped a 70-69 decision on Dec. 22, but came back strong for an 82-75 upset the next night. Just to prove it wasn't a fluke, the Grizzlies swamped Montana State College by 73-50 last Saturday.

"The sophomores have decided that they can play basketball, and our four veterans have provided the leadership," Cox said this week. "It all adds up to confidence."

Happiest man in the Grizzly camp is 6-8 center Dave Shelby, who has tallied 58 points in the past three games and is fast proving that he can fill the shoes of Montana's All-Skyline center, Russ Sheriff, who graduated last spring.

Shelby has become an aggressive ballplayer, and that's the reason for his recent success. The big blond from Albany, Oregon, always possessed a fine shooting eye--but he was prone to let his opponents push him around. But now that has changed.

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Credit should go to the whole squad. Junior sparkplug Dan Balko is branding himself as one of the best backcourt performers in the Rockies, and the 5-11 speedster should improve upon his current 14.6 scoring average. Another guard, Vince Ignatowicz, has provided fine field generalship and a 10-point scoring average.

Up front, Darroll Dunham came up with a 16-point performance against MSC and it appears that the 6-3 veteran is hitting his stride after a slow start. The other front line post is manned by Terry Screnar, who has been hot and cold, but shows signs of adding consistency to his scoring repertoire.

Centers Marv Suttles and Duane Ruegsegger have both played several fine games this season, and both will improve. The same applies to forward Kay Roberts and guards Mike Allen and Paul Miller--all sophomores--who have improved considerably since the start of the season. And the 11th and 12th men--Gale Henriksen and John Lands--are capable performers who can provide good relief duty.

It's still a long haul through a tough Skyline schedule, and Cox admits that the Grizzlies still need to show improvement before branding themselves as title contenders. "Every team in the conference is improved this season, and we will have to keep pace," he said. The league opener Jan. 7--against Utah's towering Redskins, should give the scholarly coach a good idea of what his "new look" boys can do.

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