

Eastern Oregon pushing forward

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It may be surprising to some, but if you watched the Eastern Oregon Mountaineers over the last year, what they're doing now isn't shocking. The Mounties are off to a 3-0 start in Frontier Conference play, and if not for a come-from-behind victory by Southern Oregon on Aug. 29, they'd be unbeaten heading into only their second home game of the year, Saturday against MSU-Northern. EOU made its first appearance in the NAIA Top 25 since 2005 this week as it jumped to No. 23 after back-to-back huge road wins at UM-Western and last Saturday at Montana Tech. Winning on the road has been, and will be critical to EOU's success, as it's something the Mounties haven't done much of since they joined the Frontier four years ago. But even more vital is the play of sophomore quarterback Chris Ware, and a veteran defense. Ware is first or second in almost every statistical quarterback category in the Frontier, and as a team, the Mounties are first in the league in scoring and second in total offense. Ware has already thrown for 1,259 yards and 15 touchdowns against just three INTs, Ware has also benefited from transfer running back Kevin Sampson, who has rushed for 265 yards in four games. EOU also returned eight starters on defense this season, an area the Mounties have struggled with in the past. EOU runs the complicated Eagle-Flex defense, and with veteran players, the scheme is starting to pay off. The next three weeks will do a lot either for, or against the Mounties hopes of making a playoff push. At 3-0 in the league standings, they host Northern, which has only one win in its last three tries in LaGrande. Then EOU goes back on the road for games at Carroll College and at arch rival Rocky Mountain College. Quarterbacks continue to make headlines all over the Frontier. Two weeks ago it was MSU-N senior quarterback Jeff Van Nest who scored big in the Light's win over RMC. Then last Saturday, Western sophomore Michah Mamiya turned the tables on the Lights, engineering three big scoring plays and throwing for 349 yards in Western's first win of the season. The Bulldog's offense lived by the big play against Havre as Mamiya's shortest TD throw was 14 yards. He also threw TD passes of 72 and 44 yards in UM-W's win in Havre. Western was reeling coming into its game in Havre, but with a win in tow, the bulldogs garnered one vote in this week's NAIA poll. Still, things don't get any brighter for Western as the Bulldogs visit Nelson Stadium in Helena on Saturday. Meanwhile, Carroll still sits at No. 2 in the NAIA rankings, just behind defending national champion Sioux Falls, which is also unbeaten on the year. The Saints are off to their ninth straight 3-0 start in league play, a statistic that doesn't bode well for the rest of the Frontier. Carroll has now been ranked in the Top 5 in the last 55 straight polls dating back to November of 2004. Carroll has no quarterback problems this season as former Havre High star Gary Wagner has been the most efficient signal caller in the Frontier through four games. Wagner is leading the league in QB rating and has thrown for 955 yards and 11 touchdowns against two picks. He hasn't thrown a pick since the second game of the season, and has a completion percentage of .681. Wagner and the Saints avoided getting into a shootout with RMC last Saturday in Billings, but the Bears proved points can be put up on Carroll's vaunted defense. Still, behind Wagner's stellar numbers, Carroll went up 35-7 and wound up beating the Bears 42-21. "I was proud of our guys," Wagner, told the Billings Gazette. "They battled through the heat and played a pretty good ballgame." The loss to Carroll was Rocky's 18th straight to the Saints. The Bears started the year by upsetting then No. 15 Dickinson State University, but have lost three straight since. Montana Tech is also in a precarious position. While the Tech offense has shown vast improvements this season with quarterback Matt Komac off to a hot start, the Orediggers are 1-3 after four games for the second straight year. Tech's offense

sputtered in the red zone in a 32-20 loss to EOU last Saturday in Butte, but Komac and receiver J.T. McIntyre are still putting up gaudy numbers. Tech's problem last week was finishing drives and stopping the run, something the Orediggers will look to remedy when they visit Billings and RMC this weekend, as both teams will try to avoid the Frontier cellar. While EOU moved into the Top 25 this week, MSU-N dropped out. The Lights dropped all the way from No. 16 to not rated after their home loss to Western last Saturday. Northern still garnered the second-most votes of any team not ranked in the Top 25, but it's the first time the Lights haven't been ranked in the Top 25 since the Week 6 poll of the 2008 season. Northern is also in a place its not used to being in turnover margin. The Lights, over the last four years, have been one of the league's best in that category, but have committed 10 turnovers combined in their two losses in 2009. Heading into Saturday's game in LaGrande, Ore., the Lights are -5 in turnover margin, which is fifth in the Frontier Conference. Northern and EOU will kick off this Saturday at 2 p.m. M.S.T.