

## Frontier Conference football preview Frontier football will be a weekly grind

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For two teams, the Frontier Conference football season is already a week old.

For the rest, the race for the Frontier championship and a berth in the 2010 NAIA playoffs starts Saturday.

The Frontier is off to an interesting start with the Montana State University-Northern Lights beating the UM-Western Bulldogs 20-3 last Saturday in Dillon. If prognostications are important to anyone, the Lights were picked to finish last in the league this season, while the Bulldogs garnered a fourth-place pick from the league's coaches.

But the Frontier is full of surprises and this season should be no different.

One thing which is different however, is the league is full of outstanding quarterbacks, and high-octane offenses. Two NAIA All-American QBs in Eastern Oregon's Chris Ware and Rocky Mountain College's Kasey Peters are back this season, along with veteran signal callers Gary Wagner of Carroll College and Matt Komac of Montana Tech.

And while offense will be the name of the game, defense could be the key to claiming a Frontier championship this fall. And it could also be a key to any team being able to snap Carroll's current winning streak. The Saints haven't lost a conference game since the Lights beat them back in 2006 in Havre.

And while Northern is off to a great start to its 2010 season, the Lights are one of four teams which will try and knock the Saints off from their annual Frontier thrown.

MSU-N has a bye this week, but here's a brief look at the rest of the Frontier Conference in its predicted order of finish for 2010.

### Carroll College

The No. 3 Saints have won 10 straight Frontier championships and are heavily favored to capture an 11th title this season under longtime head coach Mike Van Diest. For years now, Carroll has been the standard by which all NAIA football programs are measured and that doesn't seem likely to change anytime soon.

Carroll has lost just one conference game in the last four years, and the Saints have, at times, rarely been tested.

The Saints enter the 2010 season with something to prove. They lost a heartbreaking playoff game to Lindenwood last winter, and now, entering his sixth year, former Havre Blue Pony star and Class A great Gary Wagner will try and take Carroll back to the NAIA title. Wagner has been a model of consistency as the starter, finishing third in the NAIA in pass efficiency last year. With an All-American tight end in Bubba Bartlett and a stable of great running backs behind Wagner, the Saints should be a potent offense this season.



*The Montana State University-Northern defense (left) squares off with the UM-Western offense during a Frontier Conference football game last Saturday in Dillon. The Lights beat the Bulldogs to open Frontier play, while the rest of the league gets going this weekend.*

On defense, Carroll suffered key losses on the line, but return a stable of great linebackers and defensive backs. Carroll has had a top-five defensive unit for the last eight years, and with so many good offenses in the Frontier, their road to a league title could hinge on the Saints' defense coming around this season.

### Eastern Oregon

Still a relative newcomer to the Frontier, No. 24 Eastern Oregon finally broke out in 2009. The Mountaineers went 7-3 and tied for second in the league with Montana Tech. Only a season-opening loss to Southern Oregon kept the Mounties from earning their first playoff berth.

Now, with quarterback Chris Ware and running back Kevin Sampson back for another season, EOU doesn't just have its sights set on a playoff berth, but on a Frontier title.

EOU's achilles heel the last two seasons hasn't been talent — instead its been its ability to win on the road. Defense has also been a struggle at times, so if the Mounties can win road games and keep games like their epic 200-point game with Rocky Mountain College last season from happening this year, they could be in for their best season in school history.

### Montana Tech

Like EOU, a nonconference, season-opening loss kept the Orediggers from reaching the NAIA playoffs.

After two difficult seasons, Tech and longtime head coach Bob Green got back into the Frontier mix last season by going 7-3.

This season, Tech could be in for even bigger and better things with the return of the league's top running back in junior Skylar Knuchel as well as senior quarterback Matt Komac. Knuchel led the Frontier in rushing last season, and Komac has started since midway through his freshman campaign. Add to that mix an outstanding offensive line and a big defensive line and the Orediggers have plenty of talent on both sides of the ball.

Tech's two question marks entering the season will be having to replace three linebackers in the middle of an otherwise stout defense, as well as its ability to limit turnovers. Komac and the Orediggers have struggled in that department the last three seasons, and if they can find a way to take care of the football, and keep their running game going for a full season, than a playoff berth is certainly within reason in Butte.

### UM-Western

Despite its 0-1 start to the season, the UM-Western Bulldogs have high hopes for 2010.

Last season, the Bulldogs made strides by going 4-6, and if not for two plays that didn't go their way, they could have upset the Saints, not once, but twice.

There is no doubt Western is an offensive machine with its spread passing attack. But the Bulldogs also have a strong running threat in junior Charlie Dodson, who had a breakout 2009 season. Transfer and former Dillon high school star Zach McRae has also replaced the often injured Michah Mamyia as the starter at Western and receiver Kahei Sevilla might just be the best-kept secret in the Frontier.

However, on defense, the Bulldogs graduated eight starters from a year ago and are starting newcomers and freshmen. The defensive side of the ball may hold Western back this season, as well as its schedule. After losing to Northern last Saturday, the Bulldogs go on the road to play Big Sky Conference member Idaho State on Saturday.

Still, under third-year coach Rich Ferris, the Bulldogs are hoping things are headed back towards Western's football prowess of the early 1990's.

### Rocky Mountain College

Opening with two wins in their first three games last season, the Rocky Mountain College Bears were being looked at as the surprise team of 2009. Then came a string of losses which put RMC right back in the Frontier cellar.

Still, the ground work had been laid for what the Bears are hoping to be a great 2010 season.

Rocky led the nation in total offense and passing offense a year ago behind Kasey Peters and receiver Levi Sutton. Both players are back this season, although Peters has to sit out the first three games.

Rocky's offense also got a boost with Montana State transfer Mark Desin, who is playing QB while Peters sits. The Bears are likely to have a great offense in 2010, but it may take some time with Peters out. Rocky lost a heartbreaking season-opener at Dickinson State, and the Bears have always struggled on the road, so a playoff berth may still be a stretch this season.

Still, with an offense so dangerous, and an improving defense, the Bears won't be a pushover in any game they play this year.