Quarterback. In football, it's the marquee position, and most experts say, a team's fate almost always hinges on how its quarterback performs.

Last season in the Frontier Conference, the list of quarterbacks was as star-studded as it's been in quite some time. The league produced three NAIA All-American signal callers last year, and four of the conference's six programs started veteran QB's with two or more years of starting experience.

But as 2011 approaches, things are somewhat different in the Frontier. Defending national champion Carroll College saw former Havre High star Gary Wagner graduate, while Rocky Mountain College lost three-time NAIA All-American Kasey Peters. Montana Tech not only lost its coach in legend Bob Green, but four-year starter Matt Komac also expired his eligibility.

So to say the quarterback position in the Frontier will be different in 2011 is putting it mildly. But that doesn't mean it won't again be star-studded and productive.

Here's a look at the top returning quarterbacks in Frontier Conference, as well as newcomers who may have a big impact this fall.

The Montana State University-Northern Lights were as young as any team in the NAIA at the quarterback position a year ago. But now, the Lights already feel like they have veterans leading the way.

Last season, MSU-N started redshirt freshman Derek Lear most of the way, and in eight full games, he 58 percent of his passes for 1,806 yards and 20 touchdowns. Lear finished second in the Frontier in passing and also second in total offense after racking up 2,027 total yards of offense ion his rookie season. The Lights also had a young backup who's shown much potential in true freshman Travis Dean. He saw limited action a year ago, but came into the spring battling Lear for Northern's starting coveted job.

Lear emerged as the starter for the 2011 season after a spirited QB battle and a strong freshman season. And as a starter coming into the fall, Lear is highly regarded around the league as one of the top returning quarterbacks, especially with his ability to get out of the pocket and make exciting plays happen.

But Dean is also a talent in the making, and the Lights come into 2011 with something they haven't had in quite some time — great depth at the quarterback position.

"Derek did a great job in Spring Football," MSU-N offensive coordinator Kyle Samson said. "He's a very athletic kid who is just as much of a running threat as he is throwing the ball. He has the potential to be one of the best in the league if he continues to improve this fall camp. Has done a good job this offseason getting faster and stronger."
"Travis also had a very good spring and now will return for his sophomore season with some game experience under his belt," he added. "He has a knack for making big plays and is a very competitive kid. I feel he could be a great QB in this league as well and I know that he will continue to push Derek for our starting job and will always prepare and be ready to play just as if he was our starter. We feel very confident that we are in good hands with either Derek or Travis leading our offense. We are very fortunate to have two QB's with playing experience and they are both still young guys who have bright futures in front of them. They are both great kids and I am very confident that our QB position will be very good this fall with both of these young men,"

And MSU-N isn't the only team around the league in good shape at quarterback coming into 2011.

Eastern Oregon comes into 2011 having no quarterback controversy whatsoever. The Mounties return three-year starter and two-time NAIA All-American Chris Ware. Undoubtedly the top returning QB in the league, Ware has already led the Frontier in total offense in each of the last two seasons. In 2010, he threw for a league-best 2,656 yards and 24 touchdowns. He also led the league in total offense with 3,119 yards, and with talent around him, and years of starting experience, Ware just might be the top returning QB in all of NAIA football this fall. Despite Wagner leaving Carroll as a highly decorated NAIA All-American and a national champion, the Saints and head coach Mike Van Diest had no panic about the starting QB spot. Taking over for Wagner is senior Dane Broadhead. While Broadhead's name might not be familiar to some, he's already got a mountain of experience coming into the season. As a freshman, he helped Carroll reach the national championship game when Wagner went down to injury early in the season. And Broadhead has been shining ever since. He's started at least one game in each of his three years at Carroll, and he'll be more than ready to assume the full-time position this season.

And should anything happen to Broadhead, the Saints have the ultra-talented Dakota Stonehouse waiting in the wings. Stonehouse was a highly-recruited quarterback out of Colorado and was even on the Montana Grizzlies' radar as a senior in high school. He's a strong-armed excellent all-around athlete, and as a redshirt freshman a year ago, he played wide receiver for Carroll, and he will likely get plenty of time on the field again this year.

Things have been rough at UM-Western the last few years, but the Bulldogs return an outstanding leader at QB in 2011. Jeff Logan returns for his junior years after starting most of 2010. As a sophomore, Logan threw for 1,482 yards and 10 TD's and entering his junior season, he should be one to watch.

But as good as some of the returnees are in the Frontier, there are a couple of teams with quarterback questionmarks.

At Rocky Mountain College, the big question is who will replace Kasey Peters, a three-time NAIA All-American who threw for 10,739 and 86 TD's in three seasons for the Battlin' Bears. The top candidate is redshirt freshman Bryce Baker of Nevada. But senior Paxton Paynter pushed Baker in spring ball, while former North Star High School star Zack Halter also got reps in spring ball at RMC.

Montana Tech also has the task of replacing four-year starter Matt Komac. The Orediggers have two good ones in Billings West's Brian Schwarzkoph and Seattle's Nick Baker, but either way, the Diggers' will be young for the first time at QB in several years.

Note: The Havre Daily News will be breaking down the Frontier Conference by position over the next two weeks. Next up is the Offensive Lineman in Wednesday's HDN.