Frontier Preview: In the trenches
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If there is a position that Frontier Conference-wide will have question marks this season, it may be along the defensive line.

Last year, teams were packed with star-studded, all-american defensive linemen at both end and tackle. But graduation purged many of those great players like Carroll College’s Mason Siddick, Rocky Mountain College’s Phil Urlacher, Montana Tech’s Paul Klaboe and the two-time reigning Frontier Conference sack leader, Eastern Oregon’s Seath Kimball.

So coming into the fall of 2011, there will certainly be some fresh faces and new talents emerging on the defensive lines throughout the Frontier. But as always, the league prides itself on being a hard-nosed, defensive-minded league, so there will no doubt be some great players to watch in the trenches this season.

Here’s a look at the top returning defensive lineman in the Frontier for 2011, and some names you may not have heard of yet.

At one of the defensive end positions, the Montana State University-Northern Lights have little to worry about this season. The Lights return NAIA All-American and two-time Frontier First-Team All-Conference end Will Andrews for his senior season. Much was made of Andrews’ triumphant return from almost a two-year battle with leg and foot injuries, and in 2011, he didn’t disappoint.

Andrews racked up 69 tackles, five sacks, 13 tackles for loss and one interception on his way to an outstanding junior campaign. Now he returns for his last year with the Lights, and he comes into the season as not only a preseason all-american candidate, but with the labeled as the best defensive player in the Frontier Conference, and one of the best in the NAIA.

But Andrews will be part of a new-look front for the Lights this season. Northern has solid returning players in the middle of the front, but gone from last year’s team is Travis Hjort. Like Andrews, Hjort returned to the Lights after injuries seemed to end his football career four years ago. But he came back last season to register 10 sacks, fourth best in all of NAIA football. Also gone is former Havre Blue Pony Jared Weigel. A former all-american at defensive end, Weigel returned last season as well and provided the spark on the other side of Andrews, just as the duo did three seasons ago. But a broken arm and other various injuries slowed Weigel as last season wore on, and at season’s end, he too decided to end his playing career.

But Northern has always been tough up front, and the Lights will look to some newcomers for help on the line this fall.

Departures from last season didn’t just hit the Lights hard either.

For the first time in years, defending national champion Carroll comes in with an unproven defensive line. The Saints lost the bulk of their starters from last year including all-americans Siddick and Travis Schmidt. The Saints do return senior Colten Shirley, who can line up at Carroll’s rush end position when the Saints present a four-man front or rush a linebacker. But the meat of Carroll’s defensive front will feature fresh
faces. One’s to watch in Helena this fall are redshirt freshman Bryan Graupmann (6-3, 220) at end and senior Spencer Savage (6-2, 275) at tackle.

Montana Tech also boasts a strong front four almost every season, but injuries and graduation hurt the Orediggers coming into this season. Still, Tech has a couple of players to keep an eye on in tackle Marcus Johnson (6-0, 273) and end Matt Matosich (6-1, 220). Like Tech and Carroll, Rocky lost some beef on the line as well, especially Urlacher, who was a machine at defensive end. But the Bears return perhaps the best nose guard in the Frontier in senior Pau Palu, a 6-1, 295-pound giant who has not only size and strength, but speed and footwork as well.

Aside from Andrews, only UM-Western returns an all-conference defensive lineman from last season. The Bulldogs will rely heavily on tackle Penisoni Tuafua (6-0, 275) to have another quality season like the one he turned in a year ago.

But while every team was hit hard on the line, Eastern Oregon lost perhaps its best all-around player in Kimball. He dominated the Frontier the last two seasons, totaling 28 sacks in 22 games from the start of his junior year to the end of his senior season. He was also the nation’s leader in tackles for loss last season. EOU does have some up-and-comers to watch however, including returnees Michael Goings (5-10, 200) and Nathan Rudder (5-11, 233) at end. And senior Jordan Spence (6-4, 248) will look to contribute one the end as well.