Frontier Notebook: Plenty still at stake in the Frontier
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The Carroll College Fighting Saints and head coach Mike Van Diest will be able to hang a Frontier Conference banner for the 12th straight season. The only question is, will it be yet another outright title, or, will this year be different?

For the first time in more years than most people can remember, the Frontier title isn’t Carroll’s alone heading into the final week of the season, and that shows how strong the Frontier Conference has been this year.

On the last day of the regular season, the No. 2 Saints need to beat Montana State University-Northern in order to claim the league title outright and fully secure the Frontier’s automatic bid to the playoffs. Carroll can also lay claim to the league title outright no matter what happens this Saturday in Havre if No. 21 Eastern Oregon loses at Rocky Mountain College. The Mounties can become the first team in the Van Diest era to at least share the league title if they defeat the Battlin’ Bears Saturday in Billings, and the Lights knock off the Saints in Havre.

And it’s fitting that one of the most exciting Frontier seasons in recent memory comes down to those two games, because both matchups have become heated rivalries. Rocky and EOU have played some barn burners the last four years, and the Bears handed EOU its first loss of the season last month in LaGrande, Ore. Meanwhile, Northern is just one of two Frontier schools to beat Carroll in the last eight seasons and that 2006 win in Havre certainly took that rivalry to a whole new level.

• Speaking of the Lights and Saints, Saturday’s regular season finale will certainly pit some of the best statistical teams and individual players against each other. Northern is No. 1 in the Frontier and No. 5 nationally in total offense (453 ypg) and the balanced Lights rank second in the Frontier in both rushing and passing. Carroll’s defense is rated first in every category in the Frontier. The Saints yield just 16 points per game, they give up a measly 90 on the ground and just over 230 through the air. Carroll’s defense ranks ninth nationally in both scoring and rushing defense. Northern ranks second in the Frontier in both total defense and against the run.

And the contrasts and similarities don’t end there. Carroll junior Chance Demarias has led the nation in rushing all season long and he comes to Havre averaging 142 yards per game and has scored 14 touchdowns. But Northern’s Stephen Silva has come on strong and he went over 1,000 yards last week in MSU-N’s 24-0 win over Rocky. Silva ranks fourth nationally in rushing. Northern’s Derek Lear leads the Frontier in passing and total offense and he’s climbing the NAIA ranks as well. Lear accounts for 292 total yards of offense and 248 through the air. That ranks him fifth and eighth in the NAIA, respectively.

Both the Saints and Lights have proven to be stout against the run and pass this season thanks to great individual defensive efforts. Carroll’s Mike Siegersma leads the conference and is fourth in the nation with six interceptions, while Landry See is first in the Frontier with 90 total tackles and an average of 10 per game, and Will Andrews is first in the league with seven sacks. See is 10th nationally in total tackles. Carroll’s Rahkeem Harris and Noah McWilliams have combined for 10.5 sacks this season, while Dakota Amy and Spencer Savage are among the Frontier leaders in tackles for loss.

Stats however only tell part of the story and Saturday’s game between the Lights and Saints has plenty at stake. A win for Carroll wouldn’t just lock up the Frontier title outright, it would also secure at worst, the No. 2 overall seed in the upcoming playoffs, meaning Carroll would get to play at Nelson Stadium until the national title game. A win for Northern would give the Lights their first winning season in three years and...
would also give the Lights a third-place finish in the Frontier – Northern has finished third or better in the Frontier four times under head coach Mark Samson.

- As far as the playoffs go, if EOU beats Rocky this Saturday, the Mounties will be on pins and needles on Sunday waiting for the pairing to be released. EOU would finish with an 8-3 record and 8-2 in the Frontier Conference. No Frontier school has ever made the playoffs at 8-3, but EOU certainly could make a case with a win over Carroll, one win over Rocky and a sweep of Northern this season. All of those teams have been nationally-ranked at one point or another this season. However, if the Mounties beat the Bears and aren’t selected, they can look no further than a 46-34 loss at Southern Oregon on Oct. 8. The Red Raiders, who will join the Frontier next season, sit at 4-5 heading into their final game of the season this weekend against Menlo College.

The last time the Frontier had two teams in the playoffs was 2006 when Northern made its only playoff appearance. The Lights lost to Carroll in the first round, less than a month after their historic win over the Saints in Havre.

- With this week marking the end of the regular season, all-conference honors and postseason awards will be out soon. As far as the major postseason awards go, the smart money is on Demarias for Offensive MVP. He leads the nation in rushing and has been unstoppable all season long. But Lear, EOU’s Chris Ware and Silva have all made interesting cases for the award this season as well. However, Demarias is putting himself in position to be considered for not just the Frontier award, but the NAIA National Player of the Year as well.

On defense, the award could come down to either See or Andrews. Both players have been dominant defensive players for a long, long time and both have been stellar this season. But EOU linebacker Marc-Avery Airhart is having a big season too, as is Carroll’s Robison and Harris.

- Speaking of See and Andrews, Saturday’s game between the Lights and Saints is Senior Day at Northern. The young Lights list just 10 seniors, but the offensive line takes a big hit with graduation. Zeb Olson, Jorge Magana, Matt Cervenka and Joe Pittman will all play their last games for Northern this weekend, as will LB A.J. Pasalo, LB Ryan Halko defensive tackle Nick Weller and WR Tyson Lucier.