The Frontier Conference championship and the league’s automatic bid came down to the final day of the season. And in the end, it was Carroll College registering its 12th straight conference championship under head coach Mike Van Diest.

Carroll’s run has been remarkable and now the Saints will take to the NAIA playoffs where they are just four wins away from defending their 2010 NAIA title.

But the Frontier was remarkable in a lot of ways this season.

Eastern Oregon had its best year in the league, going 8-2 in conference play, scoring a rare win over Carroll and sweeping both Northern and Rocky. The Mounties were left out of the playoffs, but you’d be hard-pressed to say they weren’t one of the top 16 teams in the country this season.

Then there’s Carroll’s Chance Demarias. The junior running back from Malta played in less than 10 full games, including completely missing Saturday’s Saints’ win over MSU-Northern, yet he still rushed for an NAIA best 1,422 yards and a 142-yard per game average. Demarias also rushed for 14 touchdowns and has vaulted himself into contention for NAIA Offensive Player of the Year.

The Frontier’s story lines don’t end there. The Lights had their best season in three years, finishing 5-5 and in third place in the league. Northern swept Rocky and Montana Tech and no team faced more games where its opponent was ranked in the Top 25 this season. The Lights played six game against nationally-ranked teams and they were ranked in two of them.

MSU-N led the conference in total offense and passing this season and was fifth nationally in total offense and 13th in the nation in passing. The Lights’ defense was also one of the top-rated teams in the Frontier the second half of the year.

Other great stories this season include Montana Tech freshman Pat Hansen, who rushed for 1,383 yards and 12 touchdowns. His 125 yards per game was good for second in the Frontier and third nationally. Carroll’s Matt Ritter also had a huge season, leading the Frontier in both major receiving categories, while EOU’s Chris Ware was once again dominant. Ware threw for 2,655 yards and an amazing 29 touchdowns against just seven interceptions. Ware will leave EOU as one of the most productive quarterbacks in the Frontier Conference in the last decade.

While QB’s are always good in the Frontier, 2011 was certainly the year of the running back. Hansen’s 260 yards in Tech’s season-finale win over UM-Western last Saturday vaulted him past Northern’s Stephen Silva for second in the Frontier in rushing. It was still a monster year for Silva however. He finished with 1,105 yards, a Northern single-season record, as well as five touchdowns and an average of 110 yards per game which is also the best in Northern history. Silva was sixth in the NAIA in rushing and was seventh in the country and tops in the Frontier in all-purpose yards at 155 per game.
EOU running back Kevin Sampson had another outstanding season, totaling 99 yards per game, rushing for 1,086 yards and 10 TD’s. And Carroll freshman Dustin Rinker, who electrified the Saints’ fans last Saturday in Havre, finished the year with 908 yards, five TD’s and a 90.8 YPG average as Demarias’ backup. Western’s Charlie Dotson also quietly put together a great year, rushing for 717 yards and eight TD’s.

• The Lights had several other great individual performances this season. Sophomore Derek Lear led the Frontier in passing with 2,521 yards, a Northern single season record, as well as 19 touchdowns, which is also a school record for one season. Lear also led the Frontier in total offense and was fifth nationally with his 2,959 total yards, which included 304 on the ground. Lear’s 65 percent completion percentage was also among NAIA leaders this season.

MSU-N wide receivers Kyle Johnston, Orin Johnson and Brandon O’Brien were also great, as were defenders Landry See and Will Andrews. Johnston led the Frontier in yards per catch at 19 per grab, was second in receiving yards per game and seventh in catches. O’Brien was fifth in both catches and yards per game and Johnson was fourth in receptions and sixth in yards per game. See finished second to EOU’s Howard McDonald in total tackles. McDonald averaged 9.8 per game while See, who recorded 98 tackles, averaged 9.6. Andrews led the Frontier with a career-high seven sacks and was second in tackles for loss with 12.5. Northern sophomore Jordan Van Voast finished seventh in the Frontier with 7.4 tackles per game.

Team-wise, the Frontier had three of the top 11 offenses in the nation. Northern was fifth, Carroll finished 10th and EOU was 11th. Carroll finished as the No. 5 rushing team in the country.

• Tech’s Hansen earned the last Frontier Offensive Player of the Week honors after totaling 341 yards of offense against Western. EOU’s Marc-Avery Airhart earned the Defensive Player of the Week and Carroll’s Sean Blomquist had a blocked punt against the Lights which earned him Special Team’s Player of the Week.

• The Frontier Conference regular season coming to an end last Saturday with Carroll beating Northern, EOU besting Rocky and Tech taking down Western didn’t just signal the end of the regular season, it signaled the end of an era.

Next fall, the Frontier will have two new teams and a new schedule when the Dickinson State Blue Hawks and Southern Oregon Red Raiders join the conference. As it stands, Carroll, Northern, Rocky Mountain College and Dickinson will be in one division and Tech, Western, EOU and SOU will be in another. Division opponents will play each other twice and cross-divisional games will occur just once for each team, with home-and-aways scheduled to alternate each year.

The Blue Hawks beat South Dakota Mines 17-0 on Nov. 5 to finish 4-6 on the season in the soon to be defunct Dakota Athletic Conference, while the Red Raiders beat Menlo College 25-19 on Saturday to finish 5-5 in their last year as an NAIA Independent. Against Frontier teams this season, the two new members were a combined 1-3. DSU lost to both Rocky and Carroll, while SOU beat EOU and lost to Montana Tech.