

Frontier Conference Notebook: Lights were a big part of a fun Frontier season

A look back at the 2011 Frontier Conference football season

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The 2012 Frontier Conference football season is eight months away. In fact, it was just two weeks ago that it truly ended as the Carroll College Fighting Saints made it all the way to yet another NAIA national title game appearance.

And while it's too early to look ahead to what will be a much different Frontier next fall, as Dickinson State and Southern Oregon join the league and the schedule will have two divisions with some teams only playing each other one time per season, it's not too late to look back on what an exciting year it was in the league.

Summer was far from over when the Frontier got rolling and things looked promising for many teams in the league. Montana Tech, under new head coach Chuck Morrell won its season opener, while optimism was high in Dillon under new head coach Ryan Nourse. Rocky Mountain College also stomped DSU in Billings to open the season and many thought this was going to be the year of Bear.

However, Tech would win just two more times the entire season, Western picked up just two wins in Nourse's first season at the helm of his alma mata and despite being ranked for much of the year, the Bears faltered down the stretch. Rocky lost its last three games, finishing at 4-6 in the Frontier and 5-6 overall. That meant Rocky, Tech and Western brought up the rear in what was an action-packed Frontier.

The wildcard this season was MSU-Northern. The Lights started strong beating Western at home and Tech in Butte. But tough losses at home to Eastern Oregon and on the road at Western kept Northern out of playoff contention.

Still, MSU-N was by far the team on the rise this past season. In going 5-5 and finishing third in the league, the Lights led the Frontier in most offensive categories, and were in the top half of the conference on defense too. MSU-N had 13 all-conference selections, including quarterback Derek Lear, who was a first-team selection and set many MSU-N passing records. Stephen Silva broke Northern's single-season and career rushing record, while Landry See ended a brilliant four-year career as Northern's all-time leading tackler and Will Andrews was named Frontier Defensive Player of the Year.

And Northern's roster was chalked full of underclassmen, meaning the Lights will be a force once again come August.

Eastern Oregon's success this season wasn't a surprise. Chris Ware was Chris Ware and running back Kevin Sampson, joined Carroll's Chance Demarias, Silva and Tech freshman Pat Hansen in the 1,000 yard club this season. The Mounties were potent on offense and did enough on defense to have a chance to win the Frontier title right up till the end of the season.

What was surprising about EOU's season was, first, the Mounties stunned Carroll in Helena in just the second game of the season, then, when it looked like they were a sure playoff team, they were upset by Southern Oregon right in the middle of the year, then were left out of the NAIA playoff field even though Carroll demolished a less-talented Valley City State in the first round.



MSU-Northern's Kyle Johnston helped the Lights return to prominence in football this season, as well as emerged as one of the top wide receivers in the Frontier Conference.

It was clear to many EOU was one of the 16 best teams in the NAIA this season, but the SOU loss was what likely did the Mounties in.

Then there's the Saints.

Folks might have been worried when Carroll faltered at home against EOU. But the Saints didn't lose another game until their heartbreaking Dec. 17 loss to Saint Xavier in the national championship game in Rome, GA.

After their loss to EOU, the Saints' defense was back to its usual self – stingy, and Demarias racked up a season for the ages, which eventually led to the junior from Malta being named NAIA Offensive Player of the Year. The emergence of another great offensive line, freshman tailback Dustin Rinker and senior leaders like Matt Ritter, Dane Broadhead and Thomas Robison among others, helped Carroll recover from its loss to EOU and roll to a 12th straight Frontier title. From there, the Saints breezed in the first round of the playoffs, won a thriller over Azusa Pacific and breezed again in the semifinals, then came within one series of winning yet another national championship under head coach Mike Van Diest.

Yes, 2011 was one that won't be forgotten in the Frontier Conference. It was a year in which running backs ran wild, the passing games at EOU, Northern and Rocky were equally as exciting, yet the defenses in Helena, Havre and Billings were also very good. The year will be remembered as the first time in more years than anyone can remember that Bob Green wasn't smiling on the sidelines at Alumni Coliseum in Butte, that Northern returned to being a Frontier power and that Carroll stumbled in league play for only the second time in a ridiculous five years. It will be remembered for exciting finishes, for new stars like Hansen, Rinker and Northern's Kyle Johnston emerged, and it will be remembered as yet another year where the Saints took their rightful place at the top yet again.

And when the 2012 season begins this August, we can look back on the 2011 season and remember the Frontier looking a lot different. Because now that the football season is over, it really is the dawning of a new Frontier.