When it comes to big-play wide receivers, teams at the NAIA level search high and low to find one. Some teams even have two if they’re lucky, but home run threats are generally hard to come by.

However, year after year, the Frontier Conference houses some of the best wide receiver talent in NAIA football and the upcoming 2012 season will be no different. What is different is the fact that some of the best talents in the league are on teams which haven’t possessed those type of star receiving groups in recent years, while some of the teams that normally do are looking at rebuilding the wideout position.

A team with unquestionably the deepest receiver group is the Montana State University-Northern Lights. MSU-N returns its top seven receivers from a 2011 squad which was second in the Frontier and among the nation’s leaders in the passing game.

Leading perhaps the deepest Northern receiver group in school history is 5-8, 170-pound senior Kyle Johnston, who was a First-Team All-Conference performer a year ago after he caught 44 passes for 793 yards and 11 touchdowns. Johnston, a speedster in the slot, and a true deep threat, is already an NAIA Preseason All-American and after a huge campaign in 2011, he only figures to bust out even bigger this season.

And Johnston isn’t alone. Northern returns juniors Orin Johnson, Brandon O’Brien and Mick Miller to the fray as well. Johnson caught 51 passes last season and was a tough cover in the redzone, and he is also MSU-N’s most experienced receiver and one of its most versatile athletes. While Johnson was sixth in the league in receiving a year ago, O’Brien was fifth. Finally healthy, the powerful and speedy O’Brien caught 39 catches for 434 yards last season and with his uncanny size, speed and strength, he’s a true matchup nightmare for opposing defenses. At 6-4 Miller is even tougher to defend. And as a sophomore, he had several big games for the Lights and MSU-N will continue to utilize him in the passing game, which also takes advantage of its running backs. Last season, Stephen Silva caught 20 passes out of the backfield, while Justin Montelius was another threat after escaping the pocket.

"We return every one of our receivers from last fall and that is very exciting," Northern offensive coordinator Kyle Samson said. "I know that this group collectively is the best we have ever had at Northern by far and should be one of the best in the nation this year. They are all different in what they bring to the table but the thing that they are all very similar in is they are great competitors and all have very good speed. They are very unselfish and although I know they all want the ball which is great - more than that they want to win."

"I think the best compliment I can give to them is that they take pride everyday in trying to be the best one out on the field. They push each other every day and compete to be the best, which as a coach is awesome to see," he added. "All five of them...OJ, KJ, Brandon, Mickey and Brandt all have great experience I really expect them to have a great year individually and as a group. They are a great group of kids and I am very proud to have them on our team."

While Northern is flourishing at the wide receiver position, several teams are looking to reload after finding plenty of success recently.
Carroll College lost one of the most productive wideouts in school history in senior Matt Ritter, who led the Frontier in every receiving category a year ago. The Saints will have an extremely young group at wideout, but watch for players like sophomore Anthony Clarke (5-11, 185) and Drew Clausen (5-11, 175) and freshman Andy Ritter (5-11, 182) this season.

Rocky Mountain College and Eastern Oregon have also been spoiled when it comes to receivers. But both teams suffered heavy losses to graduation last spring. EOU, which was one of the top offensive teams in the country lost four of its top six receivers, while RMC lost three-time All-American A.J. Tolbert and a host of others from its wide-open passing attack.

The Bears still have a solid talent in Jake St. John (6-1, 200) and the Mountaineers will rely heavily on the speedy Kedrick Starr (5-9, 172) as well as running back Abraham Naway, who actually was an all-conference performer at wide receiver a year ago. All three of the aforementioned players have what it takes to be some of the best in the league, but as whole groups, Rocky and EOU are heading into the fall certainly searching for new faces to emerge.

Montana Tech and UM-Western have some exciting players lined up outside as well, and while neither team may have the depth, players like Tech’s Trent Thomas and Western’s Casey Lamping are both quality wideouts. Thomas (5-8, 175) caught 58 passes for 784 yards last season and is a preseason all-American. Lamping suffered injuries a year ago, but he should be the big-play threat the Bulldogs have come to rely on over the years.

The Orediggers also have a standout in senior Craig Halko (6-0, 190). He caught 24 passes for 370 yards a year ago and finished in the top ten in the league in receiving yards per game.

The two new members of the Frontier go about the passing game in different ways but both teams have a receiver Frontier fans should keep their eyes on.

Southern Oregon likes to throw the ball out of a “Pro-Style” offense and one of the top targets is senior Patrick Donahue (5-11, 185). As a junior, Donahue caught 54 passes for 616 yards and a team-high seven touchdowns, and he will give Frontier defenders plenty of trouble in 2012.

Dickinson State, by contrast, doesn't throw the ball a whole bunch, so wide receivers are asked to block a lot in the Blue Hawk’s option attack. But Columbus, MT native Tanner Leak has become a threat in the passing game for DSU. Leak (5-11, 175) enters his senior year having led the Blue Hawks in receiving each of the last two seasons, and he’s also a threat to take the ball out of the backfield as well on end arounds.