It’s a new era in Frontier Conference football. Two new teams, a new look to the schedule and new rivalries.

But will it also be the same-old-same-old this season?

That’s always the biggest question entering a new year in Frontier football. Can anybody unseat Carroll College, which has won or shared 12 straight Frontier championships.

In 2011, Eastern Oregon became just the second Frontier team to even beat Carroll in a conference game since 2006, but the Saints rebounded and won yet another outright league title. Teams like the Mountaineers and Montana State University-Northern seem to be on the verge, but until someone actually ends Carroll’s streak of conference titles, the question of can anybody else do it will still remain.

Another big story line heading into the Frontier season is the addition of Dickinson State and Southern Oregon. Both teams have been perennial NAIA stalwarts over the years, but it remains to be seen how either will stack up in the Frontier. Still, conference expansion has been big and the Blue Hawks and Red Raiders certainly make the Frontier an even stronger league, which will grow even bigger when the College of Idaho begins playing in 2014.

The league is also now split into two divisions. Carroll, Northern, RMC and DSU are in the East and play each other twice, while Tech, Western, SOU and EOU are in the West and play each other twice. Each team also has one game against the other division to round out the league's 10-game schedule.

And with expansion comes the possibility of more teams reaching the NAIA playoffs. EOU was certainly worthy last season, going 8-3 with a win over the defending national champions in Helena. But the fact remains, the Frontier hasn’t had more than one team reach the playoffs since the 2007 season. Here’s to hoping someone can end that trend this season.

Individually, the league is loaded with talented players on both sides of the ball, including returning NAIA Offensive Player of the Year Chance Demarias of Carroll. Demarias earned the honor by rushing for nearly 2,000 yards in just nine regular season games a year ago.

When it comes to offensive talent, the league is loaded with playmakers, especially at running back. Demarias, teammate Dustin Rinker, MSU-N’s Stephen Silva and Montana Tech’s Pat Hansen are all not just good, but great running backs. Then there’s Northern quarterback Derek Lear, who enters his third year as the Lights’ starter. He could easily put up the numbers to challenge for offensive player of the year in the conference this season, as could Carroll’s Dakota Stonehouse. At wide receiver, MSU-N has a host of great ones, including senior Kyle Johnston and juniors Brandon O’Brien and Orin Johnson. EOU has two exciting playmakers to watch in wide receiver Kedrick Starr and Abraham Naway.

Defensively, Frontier teams will be tested with so many potent offenses, and several are rebuilding. Northern lost a pair of great seniors in Will Andrews and Landry See, but still return a host of starters.
Carroll’s defense will always be stout and Rocky Mountain College and Eastern Oregon may be better on the defensive side of the ball than they are on offense, which is unusual for both schools.

Yes, the Frontier race is on. A new schedule, new teams and new rivalries all adds up to a race to November and the Frontier crown. So sit back, hold on to the bleachers and enjoy the ride because it’s going to be a lot of fun.

Here’s a team-by-team look at the 2012 Frontier Conference by the predicted order of finish.

**Carroll College Saints**

2011: 9-1 in Frontier, 13-2 overall. Frontier champions, NAIA national runner-up

**Head Coach:** Mike Van Diest (14th season)

The Saints are ranked second in the NAIA Preseason Poll, they are again picked to win the Frontier title and are expected to make a run at a seventh national championship. But they are also breaking in a new starting quarterback in junior Dakota Stonehouse, as well as reshuffled offensive and defensive lines. Carroll also endured a few days of turmoil this summer when Van Diest nearly retired during fall camp.

However, Carroll is always going to be Carroll, and with running backs Chance Demarias and Dustin Rinker taking the pressure off of Stonehouse, as well as all-American defenders like safety Brian Strobel, linebacker Joe Dunning and cornerback Mike Siegersma anchoring that side of the ball, the Saints, and the fact that they have the most depth perhaps in all of NAIA football are poised for big things in 2012.

If Carroll can escape a brutal two-game stretch to start the season, a trip to Northern and playing Big Sky Conference power Portland State in Portland, Ore., the following week, the Saints will once again be hard for anybody to catch.

**MSU-Northern Lights**

2011: 5-5 in Frontier, 5-5 overall, 3rd place

**Head Coach:** Mark Samson (9th season)

The Lights are picked to finish second in the Frontier by the league’s coaches and appear to be on the verge of greatness.

Northern returns a wealth of talent on an offense that was at, or near the top of the league in almost every category a year ago. Derek Lear had a monster sophomore season and is only getting better with every snap he takes, while Stephen Silva already became the school’s all-time leading rusher. Northern has a veteran and deep wide receiver group, as well as up-and-coming playmakers on defense.

Two keys to the Lights being able to unseat Carroll for the conference title will be winning close games, and enduring a rough second-half schedule. Northern plays three of its final four games on the road, and while the Lights certainly have the makings of a conference championship, and playoff-caliber team, they’ll need to win games in late October and November in order to do that this season.

**E. Oregon Mountaineers**

2011: 8-2 in Frontier, 8-3 overall. 2nd Place

**Head Coach:** Tim Camp (4th season)

It didn’t take long for the Mounties to ascend to greatness in the Frontier – and 2011 was as great as it’s ever been in LaGrande.

EOU knocked off Carroll in Helena, and rode the season to its best record since joining the league. But a loss to Southern Oregon probably kept the Mounties out of the playoffs, and now they must retool what has been one of the most explosive offenses in all of NAIA football the last four years.
EOU has to replace three-time all-American quarterback Chris Ware as well as three of its four top receivers from last year, including two-time all-American tight end Dillon Bedford. Also gone is two-time all-American running back Kevin Sampson, so the EOU offense will have a much different look in 2012.

However, the Mounties have built an outstanding defense, led by the likes of linebacker Howard McDonald, who led the Frontier in tackles last season, safety Max Hannah, a two-time all-conference performer and defensive end Michael Goings. So there’s no doubt EOU will be adept at stopping teams, and if the Mounties can pick up steam offensively as the season goes on, they’ll be right back in the hunt for the top of the Frontier mountain.

Rocky Mountain Bears
2011: 4-6 in Frontier, 5-6 overall, 4th place
: Brian Armstrong (5th season)

Like EOU, the Battlin’ Bears have undergone major changes offensively. Prior to 2011, the Bears were one of the top offenses in the country, but now it’s RMC’s defense which has taken center stage.

Coming into 2012, no one in the league may have a better secondary than the Bears, with the likes of Eric Buer, Travis Bertelsen, Thomas Ackerman and Ridge Fuentes. And the Bears are big and nasty up front too.

But what could give RMC a boost this season is the improved offense. The Bears underwent major changes in 2011 due to the graduation of a three-year all-american QB in Kasey Peters, and while Bryce Baker shined at times last fall, he should be much more comfortable and in control of the Bears’ wide-open offense this season. The big question will be the supporting cast on offense. Baker has some talented, but unproven wide receivers, and the running back job is up for grabs in Billings. If they can pull that all together, especially with such a stout offensive line, and with such a stellar defense, the Bears could be in for a great season, especially if they can win their season-opener Friday night in Miles City against Jamestown College.

S. Oregon Red Raiders
2011: 5-5 as NAIA Independent
Head Coach: Craig Howard (2nd season)

The Red Raiders have been an NAIA Independent for years and are no strangers to success at this level. And while they are the new kid on the block in the Frontier, they’re no stranger to Frontier football. SOU has played at least two Frontier teams, sometimes more on their schedule for the last decade, so they do know what to expect when league play begins for them.

In 2011, SOU was a young team and looked the part at times, but the Raiders were also explosive at times offensively. They run a pro-style offense and have an excellent QB to do it in junior Austin Dodge. Dodge will have plenty of solid receivers to work with and if SOU can find balance on offense, it will be tough to stop them in this league. Defensively, SOU was young a year ago, so expect improvement there too, though the Raider schedule didn’t always have them playing Frontier-caliber teams week-in-and-week out.

Still, with a deep recruiting base and a good offense in place, it won’t take long for SOU to become a Frontier power, if the Red Raiders already aren’t this season.

Montana Tech Orediggers
2011: 2-8 in Frontier, 3-8 overall, Tied 5th place.
Head Coach: Chuck Morell (2nd season)

The last two seasons haven’t been exactly what fans in Butte are used to in the way of Montana Tech football. In Chuck Morrell’s debut season, the Orediggers won just three times, and twice in conference play.
However, with a full year of a new system in place after legendary head coach Bob Green retired, the Diggers' could be the sleeper team of the Frontier in 2012.

Sophomore running back Pat Hansen is back after rushing for over 1,300 yards a year ago, and Tech’s offensive line is big and more veteran. Brian Schwartzkoph should also be much more comfortable at quarterback and he has some outstanding targets to throw to in Tech’s no-huddle, up-tempo offense.

Question marks do remain on defense, but with Tech now playing in the west division of the league, not playing Carroll or Northern twice, the Diggers’ could build an outstanding record and be near the top of the league standings by season’s end.

**Dickinson State Blue Hawks**

*2011*: 4-5 in DAC, 4-6 overall.

**Head Coach**: Hank Besiot (37th season)

The Blue Hawks have been one of the most consistent programs in NAIA football the last 20 years, winning title after title in the Dakota Athletic Conference under the great Hank Besiot. And even though they struggled in 2011, they are a perfect fit for the Frontier Conference.

Excitement is high in Dickinson as the Hawks come into the Frontier. They have a beautiful new stadium, they know the Frontier well and they had a young team a year ago, with some outstanding players.

Still, the transition to the Frontier won’t be easy. DSU’s triple-option attack will be tough for some Frontier defenses to adjust to, and DSU does have playmakers in running back Brennan Haughain and end Tanner Leak, as well as QB Dave Valsequez, but playing a week-to-week Frontier schedule will be daunting this season, and it’s just tough to say exactly where DSU will end up.

**UM-Western Bulldogs**

*2011*: 2-8 in Frontier, 2-9 overall, Tie 5th place

**Head Coach**: Ryan Nourse (2nd season)

It’s been tough going for Western in recent years. At times, the Bulldogs have looked on the verge of getting back to the glory days of the 1990’s, but at others, they’ve simply struggled to keep pace in the Frontier.

In Ryan Nourse’s second season at the helm, the Bulldogs are picked to finish last, but that isn’t for a lack of talent. Jeff Logan is a veteran quarterback and T.J. Leep is a great running back prospect. The Bulldogs also have one of the best offensive line’s in the league, and offense and scoring has never been a problem for Western anyway.

And if Western can be a team on the rise defensively, there’s simply no way the Bulldogs will finish last in the Frontier. Like Tech, they too don’t have to play Carroll and Northern twice and for much of the year, their road trips will be somewhat shorter. The keys for Western this season will be an improved defense, less turnovers and winning games late in the season. If the Bulldogs do those things, they’ll be closer to the top half of the league standings than the bottom.