There have been a couple of common themes when reflecting on each week in the Frontier Conference. One is the play and steady rise up the NAIA ranks by the Montana Tech Orediggers. And two is how many yards Southern Oregon put up through the air against its most recent victim.

But what has been lost in the wild and crazy season that has been the Frontier up to this point is Carroll College. Maybe it’s because the Saints dropped back-to-back games in early September, or maybe it’s because they just don’t dominate teams the way Frontier fans are used to seeing.

But make no mistake, Carroll is still Carroll, and the Saints have a 13th straight Frontier championship within their sights.

Carroll has quietly, maybe as quietly as the Saints ever have, put together a solid winning streak of four straight games and are now tied with Tech atop the Frontier standings. Carroll has also moved back up to No. 7 in the most recent NAIA Top 25, and perhaps most importantly, the Saints seem to be picking up momentum as they welcome in a huge rival on Saturday when the high-octane Montana State University-Northern Lights invade Nelson Stadium.

Carroll hasn’t smashed opponents like the days of old, but never-the-less, the Saints are getting the job done. They had to outlast a solid effort by UM-Western last Saturday in what was a too-close-for-comfort 21-14 win over the Bulldogs. But Carroll has been winning close ones all season, and that, as much as anything, may be why the Saints are still the team to beat in the Frontier.

Offensively, not a lot jumps out at fans when talking about the Saints. Chance Demarais is heading towards another 1,000-yard season, but Carroll is averaging just 25 points per game, which is only third-best in the Frontier. Meanwhile, junior quarterback Dakota Stonehouse, as dynamic as he is, has had his ups and downs this season. Carroll is only the seventh-best passing team in the Frontier and Stonehouse has thrown just 12 touchdowns against nine interceptions. But where the Saints win on offense is in the fourth quarter. Behind a huge offensive line, and a savvy running game, Carroll beats teams when the game is on the line. In essence, Carroll still knows how to win football games.

And defensively, well Carroll is right where it wants to be. The Saints allow just 16 points per game and are first in the Frontier in almost every defensive category. That’s Saints’ football and as long as they continue to do that, they will always thrive in the Frontier, even if it isn’t as flashy as some of the Carroll teams of the past.

What’s Different?

Since Northern resurrected football nearly 15 years ago, the Lights have never won a game on the soil in Helena. MSU-N has been close a number of times, and over the last decade, have given Carroll some of its scariest moments at home when it comes to league play.
But after 12 straight losses to the Saints, including a 31-6 setback back in August, is this the Saturday the Lights turn their fortunes against the Purple and Gold around? History isn’t in Northern’s favor, but history would also show no Northern team has been playing like the current Lights on offense going into a game at Nelson Stadium.

Junior quarterback Derek Lear is the second-leading passer in the Frontier and is third in the NAIA. He is also second in the NAIA in total offense, while junior wide receiver Brandon O’Brien is coming off another monster outing. Stephen Silva is still third in the Frontier in rushing at 98 yards per game and the Lights have budding stars in Mick Miller and Brandt Montelius, both of whom create matchup problems with height and speed. As an offense, the Lights average nearly 500 yards and 303 through the air.

And while Carroll has one of the best defenses in the country, and the Nelson Stadium home field advantage, if Northern continues to click on offense, the game will likely come down to one thing – turnovers. Turnovers have hurt Northern in past matchups with Carroll, including the one earlier this season in Havre. And Carroll is legendary for making teams pay for miscues, and the Lights are sixth in the Frontier in turnover margin at -3. Simply put, the Lights are explosive on offense and will be a test for Carroll’s outstanding defense. And, if the Lights don’t give the ball away, there’s no reason to think they won’t have a chance come Saturday afternoon. If they do, well then, it could be more of the same old story in Helena.

A true test

Even with a bye, the Montana Tech Orediggers made a big move in the NAIA Coaches Poll this week, jumping from No. 13 to No. 8. And tech essentially controls its own destiny in regards to the Frontier championship. A win over Carroll and no rematch gave the Diggers’ that opportunity.

But Tech likely has the toughest schedule of any of the three title contenders down the stretch and it starts with a trip to Eastern Oregon on Saturday. Tech lost to EOU 26-24 in the season-opening game for both teams in Butte, but since, has ripped off five straight wins. EOU meanwhile, stumbled to three straight losses before righting the ship against Rocky Mountain College last week.

And not being able to count on Carroll losing down the stretch, the Digger’s probably need to win their last four games in order to secure the Frontier’s automatic bid to the playoffs, but starting with a trip to LaGrande, Ore., won’t make that task easy. And the fact that the Diggers’ finish the season with a trip to SOU will make that task even more difficult. So there’s no doubt, with two trips to Oregon and home games against rivals Northern and Western in between, the Diggers’ are about to find out if this is truly a dream season.

Tackle Watch

Despite the onslaught the Lights faced in a 65-34 loss to SOU last Saturday in Havre, there were some bright spots, particularly at linebacker.

Northern senior James Chandless continued his great season by recording 18 tackles, which gives him 63 for the season. It’s doubtful that anyone will catch EOU’s Howard McDonald, who has 93 stops with four games left in the season, and will most likely earn NAIA Defensive Player of the Year honors, but you can’t say enough about the job Chandless has done for the Lights this season. After all, he was playing fullback for the Lights when the year started.

And when it comes to the Frontier’s leading tacklers, Chandless isn’t alone. Northern teammates David Arteaga, Josh Baum and Jordan Van Voast are currently third, fourth and sixth in the Frontier in tackles, respectively. Arteaga, a first-year starter is having a breakout season with 58 tackles, while Baum has 53 and Van Voast 52. This will be the third straight year in which Van Voast, a former Havre High standout finishes in the Top 10 in the league in total tackles.