Star players abound on the defensive line
2013 Frontier Conference Football Preview
By George Ferguson
August 2, 2013

Talented linemen at the NAIA level are sometimes hard to come by, whether it’s offense or defense. But just like on the offensive line, the Frontier Conference never seems to have a shortage of outstanding defensive linemen.

Year in and year out, the Frontier produces some of the top defensive linemen in the NAIA, and in fact, the league has produced a player who’s finished in the NAIA’s Top 10 in sacks and tackles for loss in each of the last six seasons.

That trend figures to continue in 2013, as several teams return loaded defensive lines, while there are stars aplenty across the conference.

The Montana State University-Northern Lights pride themselves on having top defensive linemen, and just two years ago, Northern’s Will Andrews finished off a monster career by winning the Frontier’s Defensive MVP. And last season, the Lights got great production from Mike Carbone and Ryan Craig. But the three aforementioned players are all gone now, and the Lights are looking to rebuild their defensive front four in 2013.

Northern has plenty of young talent on the roster, but players who will be called upon this fall have little experience. Tyler Craig, a 6-1, 210-pound defensive end from Great Falls, will look to emerge as a strong pass rusher this season, while former Helena star Chase Vestre (6-2, 215) could also be looked at to step up on the line this season.

Northern also brought in a big defensive tackle to fill a key run-stopping role in the middle in junior Weston Mudge. Mudge (6-2, 280) transferred from Bakersfield Community College in California and has all the makings to be a stout defensive tackle in the Frontier Conference.

Several other younger players also had a strong 2012 spring and offseason, but no matter where the talent comes from, Northern will have a relatively new defensive line when the Lights kick off the season Aug. 29 at Dickinson State.

Around the League

The offensive and defensive lines have always been strengths at Carroll College and Montana Tech, and 2013 should be no different as both teams return a bevy of star players on the defensive front.

But perhaps the best defensive lineman in the conference resides at Rocky Mountain College in senior Jacob Scharbrough. The 6-1, 285-pound former University of Wyoming player is already a two-time First-Team All-Conference selection and can play both tackle and end. He’s at his best in the middle however, and is pure run-stopper who racks up tackles for loss. But Scharbrough also has the size and speed to get into the backfield and wreak havoc on opposing quarterbacks.
Eastern Oregon also has a star defensive end, who’s also a two-time All-Conference performer. Senior Wes Orr (6-3, 200) will be a four-year starter this season and racked up seven sacks a year ago. Orr has 26 career sacks at EOU and will look to lead a young and revamped Mountie defense this fall.

Back at Montana Tech, there will be no revamping of the defensive line as the Orediggers return a pair of stars. Junior defensive end Jacob Workman had a breakout sophomore season in which he led the Frontier with nine sacks, while also totaling 14 tackles for loss. Workman (6-0, 240) is a hybrid defensive end/tackle who can play three spots on the field. He’s adept at getting to the quarterback, but he can also play run support and pass coverage, which makes him one of the most complete linemen in the conference. Senior Mike Waldman (6-3, 215) plays on the other side of the line and his speed-rusher impact on opposing offenses garnered him 4.5 sacks and First-team All-Conference honors last season.

And while things are looking good on the defensive line at Montana Tech, it’s also business as usual at Carroll.

The Saints will have to replace three-year starter and NAIA All-American Rhakeem Harris, and the team was dealt a tough blow when up-and-coming tackle Kyle Smith was severely burned in a cooking accident earlier this year. But Carroll still has stars across the line, including two-time All-Conference tackle Dakota Amy. Amy (6-3, 265) is a pure tackle who plugs up the middle and can force his way into the backfield. And on the ends, Carroll has a pair of exciting and talented pass rushers in junior Bryan Graupmann from Great Falls and Sean Condon from Laurel. Both players saw extensive action in 2012 and combined for 11 sacks and 18 tackles for loss. And this season, they could very well be the top defensive end tandem in the Frontier.

UM-Western will have a young defense again in 2013, but the Bulldogs will look to star end Phil Selin (6-2, 234) to lead them. Selin has started for two years and came up with five sacks in 2012. Dickinson State will also be young up front, but the Blue Hawks do return Colton Hill, who totaled 4.5 sacks and seven TFL’s last season. Southern Oregon, which had a great defense to go with its high-powered offense a year ago, graduated most of its starting defensive line, but the Red Raiders do have some experience in tackle Rob Tamasallo, who earned six TFL’s a year ago.

Editor’s Notes: Most heights and weights for players listed in this story were taken from 2012 rosters or 2013 spring rosters. Over the next three weeks, the Havre Daily News will break down the top players in the Frontier Conference by position. For a look at the top wide receivers in the league, see Monday’s Havre Daily News.