There’s no doubt the Frontier Conference is flush with great quarterbacks. That’s already been established. And there’s no question the offensive lines assigned to protect those great QBs will play a key role in how the passers do this coming season.

But protection isn’t the only key to success in the passing game. Great QBs also need great wide receivers, and the Frontier has seen plenty of them over the years.

The 2013 season will feature some exciting and speedy wide outs, and fans will be treated to some new faces, who will emerge by catching the long bombs or taking short slant routes to the endzone.

In other words, the wide receivers in the Frontier are every bit as good as the guys throwing to them.

In recent times, Montana State University-Northern Lights have possessed many of the great wide receivers in the Frontier Conference, including just last season. In fact, in both 2011 and 2012 the duo of Brandon O’Brien and Kyle Johnston were two of the best in the league. Johnston was an NAIA All-American in 2011, while O’Brien was a First-Team All-Conference selection a year ago, after he caught 46 passes for 808 yards and 11 touchdowns. O’Brien also led the Frontier with a whopping average of 18 yards per reception.

As a new season dawns, though, both O’Brien and Johnston are gone, as is the talented Mick Miller, so the Lights will be looking at a revamped WR group this fall.

However, senior quarterback Derek Lear does have a couple of familiar targets to throw to in seniors Orin Johnson (6-0, 200) and Brandt Montelius (6-2, 190). Johnson is a returning three-year starter who has done a little of everything offensively for the Lights over an already stellar career. In 2012, Johnson caught 44 passes for 544 yards and two scores, but the goal is to get him as many touches as possible, whether it’s in the passing game, the run game or with him lined up at quarterback.

Montelius also returns after seeing good minutes as a sophomore and junior. He’s a true deep threat on the outside for the Lights and will also provide veteran leadership to an otherwise new group of targets.

And new names will emerge for the Lights, including freshman Dylan Woodhall (5-9, 175). Woodhall was impressive in fall camp a year ago, and even more impressive this spring. He’s got great hands and good speed, and he has the potential to be the next great Northern receiver. MSU-N also added a standout signee last winter in UTEP transfer Lavorick Williams (6-2, 185).
And if the Lights can get the new and young talent to step up early on, Northern’s passing attack with Lear at the helm should have a chance to be every bit as potent as it has been the past several seasons.

**Around the League**

A year ago, Southern Oregon put up record-shattering numbers with its passing game. Though the Red Raiders return star QB Austin Dodge, they graduated their top five receivers from last season. Gone are NAIA All-Americans Cole McKenzie (98 catches, 1,661 yards, 18 TDs) and Patrick Donahue (103 catches, 1,484 yards, 9 TDs), both of whom are now trying to make a career playing professional football. Also departed is utility back Mike Olson, who caught nearly 1,000 yards worth of balls a season ago, and the fact is, the Red Raiders are looking at all new starters and contributors in its wide-open attack this season.

Meanwhile, several other teams return solid WR groups, including Carroll College, which saw its passing productivity drop off significantly last season. That was due in part to a new starting QB and a very young receiver group. But that group is a year older now and poised for a breakout year.

Carroll returns leading wideout Anthony Clarke (5-11, 185), who caught 30 passes for 527 yards and seven scores, while ultra-talented sophomore Dylan Simac (6-2, 190) is also back. Simac, a Helena native, played as a true freshman last season, catching 21 passes for 194 yards and six TD’s, and he comes into his sophomore campaign as one of the best all-around athletes in the Frontier. Carroll’s receiver corps is also bolstered by the return of juniors Jared Mayernik (5-11, 185) and Drew Clausen (5-11, 175), both of whom saw plenty of time on the field a year ago. So with all that young talent back and continuing to grow, don’t be surprised if the Saints have one of the best receiver groups in the league this season.

In 2012, a pair of star receivers emerged in two offenses known for having great wideouts. Rocky Mountain College’s Andre McCullough (6-1, 175) was a Second-Team All-Conference performer after he caught 53 balls for 676 yards, as was UM-Western’s Rashad Peniston (6-0, 190), who caught 55 passes for 713 yards. McCullough is just a sophomore and, along with junior Cole Cattalan (6-1, 185) and junior Ryan Toner (6-3, 195), they will help to form a strong passing attack with junior quarterback Bryce Baker in Billings this fall.

The Montana Tech Orediggers had a great passing game a year ago, especially with the their up-temp, no-huddle offense. And though Tech will miss All-Conference standout Trent Thomas, the Diggers return stars James Roberts (6-5, 212), Alec Bray (5-11, 175) and Zach Kinney (6-1, 170). Roberts was especially good last year, catching eight touchdown passes, and if the Diggers find a QB to throw it to them, the Tech wide receivers could be a force in the league.

And though Eastern Oregon is dealing with quarterback issues of its own this fall, which has carried over from last season, the Mounties have some great talent at wide receiver. Sophomore Jace Billingsly (5-8, 175) had a sensational freshman season a year ago, catching 64 passes for 634 yards and eight TDs, while senior Kedrick Starr (5-9, 172) is one of the fastest players and one of the best returners in the Frontier. Starr also had a strong 2012 season, catching 27 passes for 351 yards, while junior Luis Ortiz (6-0, 175) is also back to form a solid nucleus of receivers.

For a look at the top tight ends in the Frontier, see related story below.

Editor’s Notes: *The Havre Daily News will continue breaking down the top players in the Frontier Conference by position over the next two weeks. For a look at the top returning defensive backs in the Frontier, see Wednesday’s sports page.*