Lights return key players in the secondary
2013 Frontier Conference Football Preview
By George Ferguson
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On the football field, the secondary is the last line of defense. There’s a lot of pressure on defensive backs to perform in college football, and it’s why the great ones go on to make millions of dollars in the NFL.

At the NAIA level, great defensive backs, and speedy athletic cornerbacks are hard to come by. That’s because the best ones end up at Alabama or LSU, and then at mid-majors or FCS. But over the years, the Frontier Conference has produced some of the premier defensive backfields in the NAIA, and in recent times, the Montana State University-Northern Lights have been no exception.

In the last eight seasons, the Lights have produced great DBs like three-time NAIA All-American safety Marc Samson, cornerback Khalin Anderson and so many more. However, in the last couple of seasons, the secondary has been a difficult spot for the Lights’ defense, and as the new season approaches, they are hoping to remedy that situation.

And a big reason why the Lights’ secondary should be a strength this season is the return of three full-time starters. Northern graduated captain and free safety Matt Reyant after a strong career, but the Lights return both their starting corners, as well as their strong safety.

A year ago, Josh Baum had a breakout campaign, finishing second for Northern, and ninth in the Frontier with 76 total tackles. Baum (6-1, 210) also had five pass breakups and was named to the Frontier All-Conference Team for his efforts. Baum is joined by younger brother Trevor (6-1, 200) who played in the secondary for the Lights in all 10 games a year ago, recording 42 tackles in his inaugural season. Also back is senior corner Tanner Varner (5-10, 195). Varner will be starting in Northern’s secondary for the third straight year, and as a sophomore, he had six interceptions and was named First Team All-Conference. In his junior season, Varner recorded 55 tackles.

Yes, the Lights can finally claim they aren’t a young and inexperienced secondary anymore. And though Northern’s defense has some retooling to do on the lines and at linebacker, the MSU-N secondary could be one of the best in the Frontier by season’s end.

Around the League

When it comes to great secondaries, Carroll College has been the standard in the Frontier Conference for over a decade. As great as Carroll’s front seven has been over the years, the Saints have been equally as good in the secondary, and a lot of that credit has to go to former Havre Blue Pony star Jarrod Wirt, who coached the Saints’ secondary for years. Wirt is now gone, taking the defensive coordinator position at Bethaney College, and also gone are star Saints Brian Strobel and Tucker Vezina, both former All-Conference performers. And while Carroll will have some new faces in the secondary this season, the Saints do return perhaps the Frontier’s best corner in senior Mike Siegersma (6-0, 200). Already a two-time All-Conference standout, Siegersma had three interceptions a year ago, but he doesn’t see as much action because a lot of passing teams like to stay away from his side of the field. The Saints also return starting
safety Matt Upham (5-11, 201), and after a strong junior season, he should be another impact player for the Saints.

Overall, four of the eight All-Conference defensive backs from 2012 return, including Josh Baum and Siegersma. Perhaps the most productive of the four though, is UM-Western’s Jesse McCloud (6-1, 190). As a sophomore, McCloud racked up a league-high seven INT’s and totaled a whopping 62 tackles. McCloud will be part of a young Bulldog secondary, which includes up-and-comer Torrey Vezina (5-11, 182).

Eastern Oregon has also had great secondaries and star players in the backfield over the years, and junior safety Tristan Askew carried on that tradition a year ago. Askew (5-11, 220) totaled four picks, 44 tackles and a league-high 13 pass breakups a year ago, and he’s back to lead an otherwise young EOU secondary. On the other side of Oregon, senior cornerback Josh Leff (5-9, 190) returns to lead the Southern Oregon secondary. Leff was an anchor in SOU’s pass defense a year ago, totaling four interceptions and finishing third on his team in total tackles.

Meanwhile, a few Frontier squads will look to rebuild what was a strength a year ago.

There is no question Montana Tech housed the best secondary in the Frontier in 2012, led by corner Ketwuan Frank and safety Nate Kobold. But while junior corner Nate Thompson (5-11, 180) is back after a strong 2012 campaign, the Orediggers will have plenty of new faces behind their stout front seven this season.

Rocky Mountain College has also been a force when it comes to producing great DBs in recent years, but the Battlin’ Bears have graduated some great ones the last two seasons, including All-Conference corner Ridge Fuentes in 2012. The Bears do return the speedy Eric Buer (5-9, 180), as well as junior safety Corey Brummer (6-0, 200), two of the team’s top tacklers from a year ago, but the Bears must also find some new standouts in what has been a great secondary in recent years.

Dickinson State struggled in Frontier play a season ago, but defending the pass was a strong point for the Blue Hawks. They were among the top teams in the league in pass defense a year ago, and that was due in large part to an athletic, and senior-laden secondary. Now however, the Blue Hawks will look to young players like former Miles City standouts Robert Nalajawa and Jaylen Sokoloski, as well as Billings’ Kyle Stanton to help replace graduated stars like Mike Fisher, who led the Blue Hawks in tackles, INTs and pass breakups a year ago.

Editor’s Note: The Havre Daily News will continue its breakdown of the top returning players in the Frontier Conference by position with a look at the top linebackers in the conference in Friday’s sports page.