The linebacker position has always been one where stars are born in the Frontier Conference, and especially at Montana State University-Northern over the last decade.

And with each passing season, great linebackers depart the league, only to be replaced by new and talented stars.

The 2013 Frontier Conference season will be no different, and though many great linebackers graduated the league a season ago, if you’re a betting man, bet that the leading tackler in the Frontier this season will be one of the names listed in this article.

For the second straight season, the Lights graduated one of the best linebackers in the league. In 2012, it was converted fullback James Chandless, who, in his only season playing the position, racked up 100 total tackles. The year before, it was Northern’s all-time leading tackler, Landry See, who graduated and left some big shoes to fill.

But the cupboard isn’t bare in the middle of the MSU-N defense.

Senior, and former Havre Blue Pony, Jordan Van Voast (6-1, 201) returns to start his fourth season for the Lights. And though Van Voast has played alongside some of the best linebackers in recent MSU-N history, he’s made a name for himself, totaling more than 70 tackles in each of the last two seasons. Van Voast was an All-Conference performer as a sophomore, and totaled 83 tackles and two interceptions as a junior.

The Lights, and defensive coordinator Jake Eldridge, will also look to junior Kami Kanehailua (6-1, 225) to help bolster the middle of the MSU-N defense this season. Kanehailua played some last season and has been a standout on special teams over his career. But after a strong spring, he appears ready to have a breakout season and help the Lights’ otherwise inexperienced front seven.

**Around the League**

Rocky Mountain College has become a power at linebacker in recent years, and the trend should continue this season. The Battlin’ Bears return three starters, including a pair of All-Conference performers in seniors Travis Bertelsen (5-10, 205) and Josh Johnson (6-3, 260). Bertelsen has been a rock for the Bears, as he totaled 81 tackles and five INT’s a season ago, while Johnson burst onto the scene by racking up 79 tackles and four sacks a year ago. Senior Jacob Barit (6-2, 240) is also back, and the trio should be one of the most formidable linebacker groups in the league.

Montana Tech was one of several teams to lose a great linebacker to graduation, but the Orediggers won’t be hurting in that department, either. Tech should be great defensively this season, and a big reason why is the return of junior Mike Touzinsky (6-2, 215). As a sophomore, he racked up 92 tackles on his way to All-
Conference honors. Senior Niall Padden (6-2, 200) is also back in Butte this season after a productive 2012 campaign.

Over the years, Carroll College has had no shortage of All-American linebackers, and though the Saints saw star Joe Dunning graduate, they do return First-Team All-Conference standout Sean Blomquist (5-11, 226). As a junior, Blomquist totaled 87 tackles playing alongside Dunning, and this year, he'll help break in the likes of sophomores Shayne Durbin (6-2, 232) and Zeke Kosolosky (6-1, 215). Both former Class A stars saw playing time a year ago, and appear ready to make the jump to full-time performers.

UM-Western returns a duo of good ones as well in seniors Casey Griffith (5-8, 206), who has led the Bulldogs in tackles the past two seasons, and Will Fields (5-8, 196), who despite being undersized, has been a wrecking ball starter for the last two seasons.

Perhaps no two teams in the Frontier were hit harder at linebacker by graduation than Eastern and Southern Oregon. The Mountaineers lost First-team All-American and Frontier Defensive Player of the Year Howard McDonald, after he recorded a remarkable 162 tackles as well as scored three touchdowns on offense. The Mounties do return Ryan Watson (6-1, 205), but replacing McDonald’s productivity will be an almost impossible task. Meanwhile, SOU lost First-Team All-Conference standout Kalii Robinson and two other starters at linebacker from last season, so the Red Raiders will likely be a little green in the middle.

Dickinson State, which will have a young defense this season, will lean on Kyle Watson (6-1, 205), a senior who recorded 68 tackles a season ago, which was second on the Blue Hawk’s defense.

Editor’s Note: The Havre Daily News will continue breaking down the top players at each position in the Frontier Conference next week. For a look at the top running backs in the Frontier, see Monday’s Havre Daily News, and the top special team’s players will appear in Tuesday’s Havre Daily News.