Lights breaking in new tailbacks this fall

At times, the Frontier Conference was widely known for its wide-open, high-flying passing offenses. At other times, it has been known for its grind-it-out running teams. Now, in the age of the spread offense, it’s a little bit of both.

But each year, the Frontier seems to have some of the best running backs in all of NAIA football, and with three 1,000-yard rushers, last season was no different. And, with so much talent returning at running back in 2013, this coming season will likely be no different either.

The Montana State University-Northern Lights are one of several teams which will have to replace an all-world running back this season. Gone is three-year starter Stephen Silva, who happens to be Northern’s all-time leading rusher with 2,856 yards. In all, Silva left MSU-N with 10 different MSU-N rushing records, as well as being named Frontier All-Conference three times, and NAIA All-American once.

Also departed is reliable utility back Justin Montelius, who was an emotional leader as well for the Lights. So when it comes to running the football, the Lights will be brand new this year.

Senior quarterback Derek Lear is Northern’s leading returning rusher, and wide receiver Orin Johnson is second on that list. The starting tailback spot is up for grabs in fall camp, but the leading candidate is junior college transfer Jai Johnson (5-8, 205). Johnson came to MSU-N last winter and excelled in spring drills, and with a strong fall camp, could be ready to really be a breakout player this season. Sophomore Zack McKinley (5-10, 197) will also be in the mix. McKinley was set to see some playing time last season, but injuries slowed the former Great Falls High standout down.

MSU-N will likely return to using a fullback this season with the arrival of Chance Nevarez (5-10, 235). The junior college transfer is a bruiser, and could be a big help to the Lights in redzone and short yardage situations.

Around the League

Stars come, and stars go in the Frontier Conference, and several teams are happy to have their stars back at running back in 2013.

Montana Tech has perhaps the most productive, and explosive back in the league this season with the return of junior Pat Hansen. Hansen burst onto the scene as a freshman, and has back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons to his credit. Hansen (5-9, 180) is a great combination of speed and power, and he racked up 1,218 yards and a league-high 17 touchdowns a year ago. And it’s scary to think the already two-time NAIA All-American has two more seasons to hound opposing defenses in the Frontier Conference.
Carroll College is another team which lost a seemingly once-in-a-lifetime rusher in Chance Demerais. In 2012, Demerais, Carroll’s all-time leading rusher, was hampered by injuries, but still gained 1,151 yards in just eight games.

But the Saints don’t have to worry about the state of their running game much. Junior Dustin Rinker (5-10, 205) is a star already, as he went for over 1,000 yards in Carroll’s magical 2011 season. Rinker gained 674 yards and 61 yards per game as a sophomore, but now, as the full-time starter for the Saints, the speedy and powerful back from Idaho will likely put up huge numbers behind Carroll’s massive offensive line.

The UM-Western Bulldogs seemed to have located their star running back in 2012 as well, and he was a just a freshman. Former Laurel standout Dylan Kramer (5-9, 185) earned the starting nod as a freshman and never let it go, gaining 777 yards and scoring six TDs in 2012. Kramer will be a feature back in the Frontier this season, but he’ll also have help from fellow sophomore Tyrell Braun who, together, will give the Bulldogs a solid ground game.

Expect a breakout year from Eastern Oregon senior Chris McGinnis-Parker (5-7, 185) as well. He is widely known as one of the faster backs in the conference, and after splitting time with Sean Hurlburt a season ago, McGinnis-Parker is poised for a big season.

Southern Oregon is yet another team dealing with the loss of a star rusher. In his only season in the Frontier, Manny Barrigan led the league in rushing, gaining 1,341 yards and scoring 13 TDs. Barrigan’s season was remarkable, considering the Red Raiders had the best passing attack in the NAIA and threw the ball over 45 times per game a season ago. Barrigan’s backup a year ago, now-sophomore Zach Marshall (5-9, 170) will likely be the opening-day starter for the Red Raiders after he gained 460 yards a year ago. But expect SOU to showcase a stable of talented young running backs as well, as they try to compliment star quarterback Austin Dodge.

Dickinson State is also replacing a starting running back, but junior Myren Moore (5-9, 17) gained 330 yards a year ago, and will probably carry a heavier work load this season. Meanwhile, Rocky Mountain College lost its top two running backs from a season ago, leaving quarterback Bryce Baker as its top returning rusher. The starting tailback job at Rocky appears to be wide open, with plenty of competition in fall camp.

*Editor’s Note: The Havre Daily News will continue its breakdown of the top returning players in the Frontier Conference with a look at the top special team’s players in Tuesday’s HDN.*