UM-Western makes a stunning season debut

By George Ferguson
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We’re only two weeks into the Frontier Conference football season, but already 2013 is shaping up to be as tumultuous as 2012 was.

And just like in 2012, surprise teams are emerging.

The Montana State University-Northern Lights have aspirations to be one of those teams, and Saturday’s home-opener against the Eastern Oregon Mountaineers will be telling. The Lights have played two games this season, with a win coming against 0-2 Dickinson State, as well as last Saturday’s loss to No. 12 Carroll College in Helena.

Having played probably the team struggling the most in the Frontier, as well as the team picked to win the league on its home field, it’s still a little hard to gauge exactly where the Lights fit in in the league.

But one thing is for certain, Northern knows it has to pick up the pace offensively. The Lights enter Saturday’s title with EOU (0-2) averaging just seven points per game, which is last in the Frontier.

Northern is also gaining just 269 yards of offense which is seventh in the league standings after two games. Perhaps more importantly, the Lights are really struggling once they cross their opponent’s 50. In a win over DSU, MSU-N marched into Blue Hawk territory on six different possessions, but only scored twice. And last week against Carroll, the Lights came away with just three points in five trips into Saints’ territory.

Still, the Lights return to Blue Pony Stadium with a defense playing at a high level. MSU-N is allowing just 14 points per game, and is third in the Frontier in total defense, as well as pass-and-rush defense. And with an offense that has all the weapons it needs, and back-to-back home games against winless squads, the Lights appear poised to really break out.

Meanwhile, EOU is kind of a mystery as well. The Mounties played up to open the season, losing badly at Big Sky Conference power Portland State, then lost 23-7 in their home opener to No. 7 Montana Tech. EOU’s offense returns just three starters from a year ago, and it’s shown as it averages just eight points per contest so far. For the second straight year, the Mounties also appear to have not settled on a starting quarterback, with both red-shirt freshman Zach Bartlow and sophomore T.J. Eskeielu seeing nearly equal reps in their first two games.

While EOU has struggled on both offense and defense to start the season, one thing the Mounties continue to excel at is on special teams. Return specialists Kedrick Starr and Chris McGinnis-Parker are a threat to return kicks the distance every time they touch the ball, while EOU already has the leading place kicker and punter in the Frontier.
**Bulldog Bite**

First, it was Rocky Mountain College shocking the defending Frontier champion Southern Oregon. Then it was UM-Western’s turn. Last Saturday, the Bulldogs roared back from a 34-24 deficit against the Red Raiders in Dillon, mainly behind the running of freshman tailback Sam Rutherford, who had 185 yards on the day.

The Bulldogs overtook SOU with just over a minute to go, then held off one last drive by SOU quarterback Austin Dodge. It was a statement win for UM-Western head coach B.J. Robertson, as the Bulldogs piled up 404 yards of offense and overcame some major adversity as they saw a 24-12 first-half lead disappear, only to come back from 14 down in the fourth quarter.

Meanwhile, the loss was a devastating blow for the Raiders. Dodge did throw for nearly 400 yards, but SOU’s scoring efficiency has dipped way down this season, and defensively, the Raiders are struggling.

Things don’t get any easier for SOU this week. SOU plays up, visiting Sacramento State of the Big Sky, then travels to arch rival EOU on Sept. 21.

**For Real**

It’s pretty much time to stop wondering if the Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears and quarterback Bryce Baker are for real. The Bears did exactly what they were supposed to do Saturday in their home-opener, which was dismantle Dickinson State.

In a 56-23 win over the Blue Hawks Saturday in Billings, Baker went a remarkable 22-of-25 passing for 246 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions. After three games, Baker ranks first in the NAIA in passing efficiency, total offense and total passing. Rocky’s Andre McCullough is also first in the country in receiving yards and receptions, while the RMC offense ranks first in every major passing category and is even 11th in the country in rushing.

Rocky gets a week off this week, then the first huge hurdle toward a coveted Frontier title comes when the Bears host Carroll College Sept. 21 in Billings. A season ago, Baker engineered a thrilling win over Carroll in Billings, and if he, and the vaunted RMC offense can do it again in two weeks, the Bears will be a major step closer to a conference championship and the NAIA playoffs.

**Famous Cousin**

When Eastern Oregon comes to Havre this Saturday for the Lights’ home opener, fans will see a familiar last name on the EOU roster. Starting offensive linemen Mana Victorino is a 6-0, 283-pound junior from Kent, Wash. He’s also the cousin of Boston Red Sox outfielder and Major League Baseball all-star Shane Victorino.