A year ago, Montana Tech was the surprise of the Frontier Conference. The Orediggers after all, shared the league title and went to the NAIA playoffs after a 3-8 season in 2011, and after being picked to finish sixth in the conference last fall.

Fast forward one year, and there’s plenty of new surprises, with none being bigger than the UM-Western Bulldogs.

Three games into the B.J. Robertson era in Dillon, the Bulldogs are 3-0, tied with Carroll College for first place in the Frontier standings, and are ranked No. 15 in the NAIA. That’s pretty remarkable considering Western has had just three .500 or better seasons in the last two decades, and even more remarkable given the fact the Bulldogs have a first-year head coach, a first-year starting quarterback and a red-shirt freshman running back who is leading the Frontier in rushing, and who took the starting job away from an already talented sophomore tailback.

The Skylights are home this week, hosting Western on Thursday night and Westminster on Saturday afternoon.

It’s also remarkable that Western’s most recent victory, which catapulted the Bulldogs to their highest national ranking in nearly 20 years, was on the road, at their biggest rival. Last Saturday, Western pulled off a dramatic 28-22 win over rival Montana Tech, in Butte, on Bob Green Field.

To say everything Western has done up to this point is a huge surprise would be an understatement.

Now, the Montana State University-Northern Lights get the chance to be the first team to try and bring Western back down a bit as the Lights travel to Dillon on Saturday.

Like Western, Northern has gotten off to a great start this season, going 3-1 through its first four games, and Saturday’s bout will be a meeting of two explosive offense, and two defenses playing better than anyone gave them credit for in the preseason.

In fact, while Western and Northern are third and fourth, respectively in total offense this season, defense could be the biggest key to Saturday’s game. The Lights are second in the Frontier and the Bulldogs fourth in total defense, and they rank second and third, respectively in rushing defense, which is what both offenses want to do Saturday.

And a bigger key is, who can stay hot. It will be more difficult for the Lights on the road, but Western hasn’t gone up against an offense like Northern’s yet either. And that’s one of the many reasons Saturday’s game in Dillon is so intriguing.

At the start of 2013, no one had this game marked down as a huge game as it pertains to the Frontier title. But it is now.
"It is interesting, and a little surprising," Northern head coach Mark Samson said. "I don't think, back in the summer, outside of Havre and Dillon, too many people pointed to this game as a big game in the conference. For the teams, every game is big, but now, with what Western has done so far, this game probably became a little bigger for both teams."

**New Ground Stars**

Defense will play a key role in Saturday’s game in Dillon, but don’t expect the two feature running backs in the contest to slow down. UM-Western’s Sam Rutherford and Northern’s Zach McKinley are the top two rushers in the Frontier Conference, and Rutherford leads the NAIA in rushing. They also have something else in common, they’re from the same area.

The 6-1, 215-pound Rutherford, who transferred from the University of Mary to Western, is a product of Centerville High School near Great Falls. He leads the NAIA, averaging 201 yards per game on 76 carries. He’s already rushed for 603 yards, including a whopping 228 yards two weeks ago against Dickinson State. He’s scored three touchdowns in each of his three games this season, and last Saturday, he shredded Tech for 190 yards and three scores.

Meanwhile, Northern’s Zach McKinley, is right behind Rutherford in the rushing column. McKinley, a former CMR standout in Great Falls, has rushed for 494 yards and four TD’s this season. And behind Northern’s stellar offensive line, McKinley comes into Saturday’s game on fire. In Northern’s back-to-back home wins, McKinley rushed for four scores and a total of 340 yards.

Needless to say, Saturday’s game might be in Dillon, and the two defenses would like to have a say in the outcome, but when it comes to the star watch, former Great Falls area running backs will be front and center.

**Air Raid is Back**

Southern Oregon got off to a horrendous start after sharing the 2012 Frontier championship. But a loss at Sacramento State might have been all the Raiders needed to find their groove.

In a 63-57 overtime loss to the Hornets two weeks ago, SOU put up some obscene offensive numbers in nearly knocking off an NCAA FCS opponent. And last week at rival Eastern Oregon, the Raiders announced their offense was indeed back on track.

Reminiscent of 2012, when SOU averaged nearly 60 points a game, the Raiders throttled the Mounties 73-20 in Community Stadium. Austin Dodge, the reigning Frontier Player of the Year, threw for over 380 yards and seven touchdowns, while the Raiders rolled up close to 700 yards of offense.

For all the talk about SOU’s offense not being as good as it was a season ago, in their last two games, they have piled up nearly 1,200 yards of offense and Dodge, despite breaking in an all new receiving corps, has thrown 13 TD passes.

**Purple D**

Last week was billed as the NAIA Game of the Week when Carroll College tripped to Billings for a nationally-ranked showdown with up-start Rocky Mountain College. And the game lived up to the hype, though Carroll escaped with a 24-17 win. And now the Fighting Saints have grabbed a hold of the Frontier title chase.

One reason Carroll is off to a such a great start, after a rare down year in 2012, is to no one’s surprise, defense. The Saints seem to be back to playing the type of defense that’s won Mike Van Diest six national championships.

Carroll is allowing a mere eight points per game, and is first in the Frontier in scoring, total defense, rushing defense and turnover margin. That’s the formula that helped Carroll dominant the league since Van Diest arrived, and it’s working in 2013.
Carroll has faced two of the league’s top offenses, Northern and Rocky, and allowed the Lights and Bears a combined 20 points. Couple that with allowing a season-opening seven points to Menlo, and seven points to Montana Tech, and this is one of the best defensive starts Carroll has ever had.