This coming weekend will mark the halfway point in the Frontier Conference football season. And for the Montana State University-Northern Lights, it got here fast.

Northern started with an Aug. 28 road win at Dickinson State, and since that 14-0 shutout of the Blue Hawks, so much has happened to the Lights, it’s hard to even fathom.

When the Lights embarked on the 2013 campaign back in August, few gave them a chance to contend for the Frontier Conference championship. But five weeks into the season, the Lights aren’t just contending for the Frontier title, they’re leading the race.

How did Northern go from being picked to finish fifth in Frontier back in August to leading the Frontier standings the first week of October? One word really comes to mind and that’s balance.

First and foremost, the Lights have exploded on offense during their current three-game winning streak, which included a 33-21 win at then No. 15 UM-Western last Saturday in Dillon. And that offensive explosion has been based on balance. Everyone knew coming into the season the Lights would have a potent passing attack, but to be competitive week-in-and-week-out, the Lights couldn’t afford to be one-dimensional.

And thanks to a vastly-underrated running game, which is led by red-shirt freshman Zach McKinley and junior transfer Jai Johnson, the Lights are anything but one-dimensional. In fact, the Lights are so balanced it’s scary. Northern is third in the Frontier in total offense through five games, but of the 450 yards Northern averages per game, the balance between run and pass is almost dead on. MSU-N averages 237 yards per game through the air and another 213 on the ground. That is making opposing defenses finding it very hard to stop the Lights’ attack.

Northern is also balanced as a team. The MSU-N defense has risen to the occasion this season, holding opponents to a Frontier-best 280 yards per game. The up-start MSU-N defense is first in the Frontier in total defense, first against the run, including last week’s stellar performance in holding Western running back Sam Rutherford to under 50 yards, and they’re second in the conference against the pass.

That’s balance. And being balanced, plus talent, leadership and a team with something to prove in 2013, adds up to a phenomenal start. Now, with five games and two bye weeks left in the season, the Lights will try and finish what has become an amazing season.

Shocker in Oregon
Last season, the Carroll College Fighting Saints lost games in the Frontier to several teams who turned out to just be better. Those losses weren’t fluky or all that shocking. In essence, it was just a down year for the Saints. 

But heading into Saturday’s game at Eastern Oregon, Carroll appeared to have everything back to normal in Helena. The Saints were unbeaten and had risen to a No. 3 ranking in the NAIA. All seemed back to normal in Helena.

So it was certainly shocking to see the Saints lose 35-31 to then winless EOU last Saturday in LaGrande, Ore., but what was even more stunning is the way the Saints lost. Carroll didn’t just blow a 31-14 lead, the Saints blew it in the fourth quarter, as EOU scored three times in the final 15 minutes. And the Saints blew it by allowing a running back to beat them.

Carroll’s defense went into last Saturday’s game allowing just eight points per contest, and the Saints were holding opposing running backs to a measly 91 yards on the ground. But EOU’s Chris McGinnis-Parker racked up 187 yards against the Saints, and he scored three times in the fourth quarter to lift the Mounties to only their second win over the Saints since joining the Frontier, and their first-ever victory over Carroll at home.

For his efforts, McGinnis-Parker earned NAIA Offensive Player of the Week honors.

The Yotes are Coming

If you haven’t heard of the College of Idaho Coyotes, that’s because they haven’t played college football in nearly 36 years. But in 2014, they’ll be the new kid on the block in the Frontier Conference.

And while the team has been practicing this season, during what they’re calling the zero-year, C of I held a historic on-campus practice, in front of fans on Saturday in Caldwell, Idaho.

During homecoming weekend at C of I, the Yotes practiced on their future home field for the first time, and throngs of fans came out to see the new program in action. Currently, the Yotes have 63 players on their roster, with that number expected to increase by next spring.

"We were excited, the players were excited," head coach Mike Moroski said in a press release. "It was great to see the fans come out and support us."

The Yotes are expected to be a part of the tentative new Western Division of the Frontier Conference next season, so the Lights will only be facing them one time. As of now, the 2014 Frontier schedule has Northern traveling to Caldwell, so the Yotes won’t make their first appearance in Havre until 2015.

New Game of the Week

Every week, every team in the Frontier has a huge game. That’s the nature of college football. But Northern is facing its second straight week of being part of the “Game of the Week” in the Frontier.

Last week, it was the showdown with Western, while this Saturday, the Lights invade Herb Klindt Field for a matchup with the No. 16 Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears.

Rocky got off to a hot start, going 4-0 before losing at home to Carroll two weeks ago. The Bears’ offense was scorching hot going into that pivotal game with the Saints, but they seem to be cooling down now. Rocky mustered just 17 points against the Saints, and the Bears scored just 13 in last week’s 13-7 win over Montana Tech.

Over RMC’s first four games, it averaged nearly 40 points per, but now the Bears have fallen back to 31 per outing. Quarterback Bryce Baker has also cooled off, though he and wide receiver Andre McCullough are still a dangerous combination, and they showed that when they beat Northern on a frigid November night last year in Billings.

But while RMC’s offense has sputtered in recent weeks, the Bears’ defense hasn’t. Rocky equals Northern’s output of allowing just 21 points per game, while the Bears are stout against both the run and the pass, currently ranking fourth in both categories. Bears’ linebackers Josh Johnson and Travis Bertelsen are both
in the Top 10 in the Frontier in tackles, while RMC is also second in the league in turnover margin. This season, the RMC defense has eight takeaways, including six interceptions.

And not only are two good teams facing off in Billings, there’s a lot at stake, including sole possession of the Frontier lead, and the inside track to an NAIA playoff berth. So yet again, Northern is facing a daunting, nationally-ranked showdown on the road.