George Ferguson Column: Frontier might be as good as it’s ever been

From the Fringe...
By George Ferguson
October 10, 2013

I’ve said for years now, the Frontier Conference is very good. And if you ask a lot of people who have been watching Frontier football a lot longer than I have, they’ll tell you the same thing.

And while I thought last season was one of the most intriguing seasons in the Frontier in quite some time, I might have to retract that statement come November.

Certainly, 2012 was interesting, and refreshing. It was refreshing to see teams like Montana Tech and Southern Oregon stand up to mighty Carroll College. It was refreshing to see the Frontier title decided on the last day of the regular season, when, for nearly a decade, it seemed like the Saints had the conference championship locked up before Halloween every year.

But let’s face it, last year was interesting and refreshing at the expense of Carroll more than anything. To be fair, the Saints just weren’t right for much of the season. And that’s not to take anything away from the Orediggers, Raiders, or even Rocky Mountain College, the three teams to beat Carroll a year ago. But honestly, Carroll just wasn’t Carroll in 2012.

And that’s what makes this fall so interesting. Carroll, at least to my eyes, appears to be Carroll once again. Sure, the Saints suffered a stunning loss at Eastern Oregon two weeks ago, but for all intents and purposes, they are back to contending for their usual Frontier throne.

Yet, as good as Carroll looks this season, and the Saints look pretty darn good, especially on defense, they aren’t winning the Frontier at the halfway point in the season.

No, midway through an entertaining season, it’s the Battlin’ Bears who are on top, and it’s just as much about the teams who are right behind. For the second straight year, it appears that the Frontier is going to be a dogfight right to the end, and many teams should be thanked for that.

Rocky is a force no doubt, but the Bears have a loss to Carroll and still have to play the Saints in Helena. The Saints get Southern Oregon at home, but still have to travel to Northern at the end of the month.

And the Lights and Raiders are two more teams which are helping make this season so fun. Northern is very much in the thick of the Frontier race, and after a brutal, month-long road trip ends next weekend in Ashland, Ore., the Lights get to close out the season at home. Yes, that’s three straight games in Blue Pony Stadium, and with some help in the coming weeks, the Lights could actually control their own destiny.

The Raiders have made a push too. Just as they did a season ago, when they won eight straight games to clinch a share of the Frontier title, the Raiders look to be doing it again, and that makes next Saturday’s game with the Lights one of the biggest of the season, for both teams.

And though they’ve lost two straight, and lost badly at EOU last Saturday, the UM-Western Bulldogs are still firmly in the fight too. Along with the Lights, the Bulldogs have been the feel-good story in the Frontier this season. They have a first-year head coach and a star running back few had heard of coming into the season, and they have a stellar defense. Yes, the Bulldogs and Lights are making this one heck of a Frontier race.
And that fact just goes to show how good the Frontier Conference is right now. Add in that Eastern Oregon has a win over Carroll, and a shutout of Western, and the depth in the Frontier this season is maybe at an all-time high. Not to mention that Montana Tech has inexplicably slid backwards after winning the Frontier a year ago, and yet as many as four Frontier teams have been ranked in the NAIA Top 25 at one time this season, and it’s proof positive that the Frontier is as deep as any league in the country.

Yes, Rocky’s lead, Carroll’s return to prominence, the resurgence of Northern and Western, even EOU’s recent winning streak, it’s all evidence that the Frontier is loaded right now. It’s all evidence that the conference is as competitive as its maybe ever been.

And that evidence is hinting, no screaming, that the second half of the season is going to be even more dramatic than the first.

So get out your winter coats, your scarves and your hand warmers. Get ready for the second act of the Frontier show, because it’s going to be a can’t-miss event.