The Montana State University-Northern Lights are already down to just four games remaining in 2013. Yet, it’s only the halfway point in the Frontier Conference season.

The Lights (4-2) however, have been going hard since their season-opening win at Dickinson State back on Aug. 29, and have finally reached the first of two bye weeks. Northern, like much of the Frontier, has this week off, before returning to the road to square off with red-hot Southern Oregon Oct. 19. MSU-N then closes out the regular season with three home games and a second bye week as well.

And at the halfway point, the Lights are sitting in the middle of a tight Frontier title race. Last Saturday’s loss at Rocky Mountain College was hurtful, but MSU-N can still achieve all its goals because this year’s Frontier championship will once again likely come down to the final day of the season.

At the midway point in the season, Rocky, despite all its success so far, holds a slim half game lead on Carroll College. The Saints had a bye last week and are tied with RMC in the loss column. Carroll also has a win over RMC already in hand. The two meet again Nov. 9 in Helena. And if the Bears are going to try and close out the Frontier title, it’s going to be a difficult road, as not only do they travel to Helena, but they finish the season the following week at Northern.

The Saints may have the easiest remaining schedule. Carroll gets Rocky at home, which could give the Saints the tiebreaker with a win. They also play Dickinson State twice in the next month. Still, there are challenges. Carroll gets a rematch with Southern Oregon in Helena Nov. 2, but the Saints’ biggest test will be a trip to Havre to face the Lights on Oct. 26. That game could have lasting implications on what happens to both the Lights and Saints this season.

While Northern is entrenched in the Frontier race, Southern Oregon and UM-Western have joined the fight too. But the two teams are trending in different directions. In 2012, SOU ripped off eight straight wins to claim a share of the league title, and after starting 0-3 this fall, the Raiders have won three straight to get to 3-2 in league play and just a game out of the lead. Western started 3-0, and though the Bulldogs are also just a game out of the lead, they have lost two straight, and by considerable margins.

One thing’s for sure, it’s going to be a fight to the finish line over the next month and a half, and with five teams still capable of winning the league championship, the fight for the Frontier title is going to be more like a back alley brawl.

Awards Watch

Since the Frontier has reached the midway point in the season, it’s time to take a look at the league’s top performers so far.
When it comes to Offensive Player of the Year honors, there’s a handful of stars who have made a case so far. And leading the way is the reigning Frontier Player of the Year, SOU junior quarterback Austin Dodge. Though his team got off to a rough start, Dodge is putting up crazy numbers yet again. He’s passed for 2,740 already, thrown 29 touchdowns and just four interceptions. Dodge again leads the NAIA in passing and total offense, and his stats are even more impressive considering he lost his top four receivers from 2012.

Rocky Mountain quarterback Bryce Baker and Northern’s Derek Lear are also in the conversation, as is Western running back Sam Rutherford, Carroll running back Dustin Rinker and Northern running back Zach McKinley. Baker has over 1,700 yards and 13 touchdowns, with just four INT’s, and his passer efficiency has been great. Despite missing a game to a knee injury, Lear has thrown for 1,083 yards and 10 TD’s. Rutherford leads the Frontier in rushing at 148 yards per game, while he’s scored 10 TD’s. McKinley has also burst onto the season, averaging 106 yards per game and he’s scored six times, while Rinker piles up 122 yards per game. Rutherford and McKinley are certainly also locked in a battle for Newcomer of the Year.

On the defensive side of the ball, the bid for Player of the Year will likely come down to the linebacker position. Western’s Casey Griffith is having a standout season, as is a pair of Rocky linebackers in Travis Bertelsen and Josh Johnson. As expected, Carroll linebacker Sean Blomquist is also playing at a high level, and so is Northern senior Jordan Van Voast. Western defensive end Phil Selin is also off to a great start, leading the Frontier in both sacks, with five, and tackles for loss with eight.

As far as Coach of the Year honors go, a case could be made for all of the coaches who’s teams currently sit in the top half of the league standings. Certainly, Mark Samson and Western’s B.J. Robertson are up there considering the Lights were picked to finish fifth and the Bulldogs seventh back in August. But if Rocky goes on and takes the league title away from the rest of the Frontier, it would be tough to argue against what Brian Armstrong has done with the program.

In a Hole

Speaking of the halfway point, last week’s Southern Oregon/Montana Tech game was a showcase of teams headed in the opposite direction. The Raiders and Orediggers shared the 2012 Frontier championship, but Montana Tech has little chance to repeat.

Picked to win the league title by the league’s coaches, Tech has stumbled to four straight losses, including a 59-32 drubbing at the hands of the Raiders. Tech was certainly the hot team in 2012, but quarterback issues have hampered Tech’s ability to sustain last year’s magic. Inexplicably, the Orediggers aren’t getting the production on the ground either.

In his first two seasons, Tech running back Pat Hansen averaged over 100 yards per game and rushed for a total of 2,601 yards. In 2013, Hansen has been held to just 88 yards per game, and he has just two 100-yard games to his credit this season. With a struggling offense, Tech’s stout defense has been backed into a corner, and so far, things have not gone as planned in Butte.

Running Wild

While Hansen and Montana Tech’s ground game might be down this season, Frontier running backs as whole are not. In fact, the top four backs in the Frontier are all among the Top 15 rushers in the NAIA.

Rutherford is third in the nation in rushing, while McKinley is 10th and Rinker is 12th. After two straight great games, Eastern Oregon’s Chris McGinnis-Parker is now 14th in the nation in rushing at just over 100 yards per contest.

In all, there are seven rushers in the Frontier averaging 80 yards or more per game.