Frontier Notebook: Saints can clinch with a win over Rocky

By George Ferguson
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One big game down, one to go for the Carroll College Fighting Saints and their quest to re-claim the Frontier Conference championship.

After Carroll not only didn't win a share of the league title for the first time in 12 seasons last fall, but also failed to make the NAIA playoffs for the first time in that stretch, the Saints are certainly back on track. And no game proved that more than last Saturday's monumental win over then No. 20 Southern Oregon in Helena. Carroll defeated a Raiders' club many said couldn't be stopped, 42-30 at Nelson Stadium, and the Saints did it with defense and a dominant offensive line...two things that have always served Carroll well.

SOU might have still rolled up 500 yards on the Carroll defense Saturday, but the Saints refused to let NAIA All-American Austin Dodge single-handedly beat them. Dodge did throw for a gaudy 435 yards on a talented Carroll secondary, but the Saints did something to him that other Frontier defenses haven't over the last two years, and that's force him to make mistakes. Coming into Saturday's game, Dodge had thrown 41 touchdowns against just six interceptions, but in Helena, Dodge was picked off three times, including Matt Upham's 45-yard return for a score. The only time Dodge had been picked off in a game more than once this season was in SOU's overtime loss at Big Sky power Sacramento State, so Saturday's three turnovers were uncharted territory for Dodge and the Raiders.

On the other side of the ball, Carroll executed a perfect game plan. The Saints used their massive offensive line to help keep the SOU offense at bay. Junior Dustin Rinker piled up 160 yards on the ground on a workmanlike 31 carries, while QB Dakota Stonehouse ran the ball 11 times and threw deep balls off play action. The Saints also dominated time of possession to the tune of almost an 8-minute advantage Saturday, and that was enough to build a big lead and then hold off a late Raider charge.

Now, with a win in what was billed as Carroll's biggest game in two seasons, the Saints are a victory away from claiming the league title outright. But, in just a seven-day span, the saints will once again be playing in their biggest game of the season as they host No. 7 Rocky Mountain College Saturday. It's the first matchup between NAIA Top 10 teams in the Frontier Conference in seven years, and the league title hangs in the balance.

Rocky comes in red-hot, as the Bears last loss was against Carroll back on Sept. 21 in Billings. In fact, that 23-17 loss to the Saints is the bears' only loss on the football field this season. Rocky is 6-2 in league play because the Bears had to forfeit their Aug. 31 win over SOU due to using an ineligible player in that game. But even with the forfeit, a win in Helena would give RMC a chance to share the league title, and clinch a coveted NAIA playoff berth. A loss to the Saints and Rocky would have to beat Northern in Havre on Nov. 16, no easy task, and hope for help in the polls to have any chance of reaching the postseason, so in essence, that forfeit loss to SOU could really come back to haunt the Bears at the end of the month.

Saturday's game between the No. 5 Saints and No. 7 Bears in Helena kicks off at 12 p.m.
Moving On

Last Saturday's loss to Montana Tech on a Herman Tapley hail Mary pass with no time left on the clock will surely stay in the minds of the MSU-Northern players coaches for some time. For three quarters, MSU-N dominated the game in every facet, only to watch Tech mount a huge fourth-quarter charge, and hand the Lights a crushing fourth straight defeat.

Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on how you look at it, Northern has a full week and then some to move on. The Lights have a bye this Saturday due to an early-season schedule change. This weekend was originally the weekend Northern was set to visit Dickinson State, but because Carroll stepped in and asked for a scheduling change with Northern so the Saints could play Menlo College on Aug. 31 in Cheney, Wash., the Lights went to DSU on Aug. 28, and now have their second bye of the season.

The bye could come at a good time after Northern's emotional setback last Saturday night at Blue Pony Stadium, but on the other hand, it could also be seen as difficult, as it might have better for the Lights to turn their attention right away to another game.

But because of that scheduling change back in the summer, Northern will have to wait a total of 14 days to get back on the field, and when the Lights do, they'll host Rocky Mountain College in the season finale at Blue Pony Stadium. That game, on Nov. 16, will certainly give Northern a shot at redemption as the Bears could be fighting for their playoff lives that day, and MSU-N and Rocky have developed quite the little rivalry in recent years. Northern will also be gunning for its first .500 season in four years that day, so there will be plenty to motivate the Lights in two weeks.

"It's going to be tough to forget this one," Northern senior captain Orin Johnson said following the devastating loss to Tech. "But we have another game, we have to keep on playing. We'll come back and fight against Rocky for sure."

A Day of Numbers

Last Saturday was an unforgettable day of football, not just in Havre, but all around the Frontier, and defense was certainly at a premium.

Frontier offenses put up some huge numbers Saturday, including in Havre, where Northern and Tech combined for 1,078 total yards, including 676 yards passing between Tapley and MSU-N junior Travis Dean. Interestingly, both Northern's Zach McKinley and Tech's Pat Hansen were each well over 100 yards on Saturday night as well.

Meanwhile, in Helena, Carroll and SOU combined for 1,091 total yards, with Rinker doing it on the ground and Dodge through the air. Stonehouse also accounted for 353 yards of offense, while SOU receivers Ryan Retzlaff (181 yards) and Matt Retzlaff (104 yards) combined for 15 catches and nearly 300 yards receiving.

Not to be outdone, the Bears rolled up 505 yards of offense in a dominating win over UM-Western last Saturday. Rocky QB Bryce Baker threw for 402 yards in the Bears' 47-10 win. And in LaGrande, Ore., the Eastern Oregon Mounties totaled 616 yards, including 445 on the ground in a 57-3 thrashing of Dickinson State last week. On senior day, EOU tailback Chris McGinnis-Parker racked up 219 yards on only 15 carries, scoring three times, including an 87-yard TD jaunt. Backup halfback Mahonri Bostrom also totaled 101 yards on the ground on 10 carries in what was EOU's best offensive output of the season.

Senior Stand

Northern's Nov. 16 game against RMC will be the final time in a Lights' uniform for a big group of MSU-N seniors, and it's fitting that their final game will be against Rocky. The Lights have closed the season against the Bears in two of the last three seasons, so this senior class will certainly want to go out on top.

Playing for the final time as a Light on Nov. 16 will be Josh Baum, Orin Johnson, Derek Lear, Tanner Varner, David Arteaga, Jordan Van Voast, Tyler Phillips, Logan Nathe, Zach Bangert, Alex Cummings, Rostyn Pace and Brandt Montelius. Together, those 12 seniors have played in almost every game for the Lights for the last four seasons.