Frontier Notebook: Wild Frontier football season down to its last day
Frontier Conference Notebook
By George Ferguson
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The Frontier Conference championship is settled. Carroll College kicker Connor Smith decided that when he booted a game-winning, 38-yard field goal against Rocky Mountain College Saturday afternoon at Nelson Stadium in Helena.

In a wild affair, RMC went ahead 35-34 with just :55 left in Saturday’s contest, but the Saints methodically went down the field and got close enough for Smith to win the game and send Carroll to its 13th conference title in the last 14 seasons. After a one-year absence, Smith’s field goal also ensured the Saints of an NAIA playoff berth, something Carroll missed out on when the Saints went 7-4 a year ago.

And Carroll’s dramatic win Saturday was indicative of the kind of season it’s been in the Frontier. The conference literally beat up on each other all year long. Carroll was able to overcome a stunning fourth-quarter collapse at Eastern Oregon, winning three straight games, including two straight against nationally ranked opponents in Southern Oregon and RMC.

Meanwhile, things have been even more dramatic for the Battlin’ Bears, who are still in a position to make the NAIA playoffs. Typically, three-loss teams from the Frontier don’t get at-large bids to the playoffs, but Rocky has only lost to Carroll on the field this season, by a combined total of nine points in two games. The Bears’ third loss comes by way a forfeit to Southern Oregon back on Aug. 30. And, Rocky didn’t drop dramatically in the NAIA Coaches Poll, either. The Bears enter Saturday’s season finale at Montana State University-Northern ranked No. 11, and if RMC wins in Havre, a playoff berth is well-within reach. History has shown that any team ranked among the Top 12 in the final NAIA Poll is in good shape for an at-large berth.

Meanwhile, this season has seen a lot of playoff contenders in the Frontier, but now, in late November, most have fallen by the wayside.

SOU stormed its way to a five-game winning streak midseason and had a chance to share the league title with Carroll if the Raiders could win in Helena. But a Nov. 2 loss to the Saints, coupled with last Saturday’s meltdown against rival Eastern Oregon, essentially ended any chance of SOU going to the playoffs for a second straight season.

MSU-Northern and UM-Western looked the part of a contender at one time, too. Northern reeled off three straight wins at one point, and rose to No. 18 in the NAIA Poll. However, the Lights haven’t won since a Sept. 29 victory at UM-Western, and now they play the role of spoiler in Saturday’s home finale. Western was ranked No. 15 in the NAIA when the Lights stuffed the Bulldogs in Dillon. And they went reeling from there, losing a total of four straight before finally righting the ship last week against Montana Tech.
And in the too-little-too-late department, Eastern Oregon rebounded nicely from an 0-4 start. The Mounties have won five of their last six games, including last Saturday’s 38-37 triumph at SOU. And they are the only team to hand Carroll a loss this season.

Yes, it’s been an interesting season, and it’s not over yet. From Carroll reclaiming the Frontier title, to Montana Tech sitting in seventh place in the league after being picked to win the conference for a second straight year, to Rocky playing for its playoff life on the last day of the season, and to Northern trying to get in the Bears’ way, once again, the Frontier has certainly had no shortage of drama in 2013.

The Winners Are

It will be some time before the 2013 Frontier postseason awards are released, but here’s a look at the front-runners in the major awards.

The Offensive Player of the Year will, no doubt, be SOU quarterback Austin Dodge for a second straight season. Dodge has thrown for 4,172 yards and 45 touchdowns this season, and he leads the NAIA in both passing and total offense. Other candidates include Carroll running back Dustin Rinker and Rocky QB Bryce Baker, but Dodge’s numbers are just too gaudy to ignore.

The Defensive Player of the Year award is a little more muddled, but at the top of the list is Carroll linebacker Shawn Blomquist. The junior OLB has 90 total tackles this season, while he leads the Frontier in tackles for loss. Blomquist has also scored several touchdowns, including on an interception return and a couple while playing fullback on offense. Others in the running include, Western linebacker Casey Griffith, EOU linebacker Gary Posten and RMC linebackers Josh Johnson and Travis Bertelsen.

The Coach the Year nod could go in just about any direction. Of course, Carroll’s Mike Van Diest will be a favorite after quickly turning the Saints right back into a national title contender. But Rocky’s Brian Armstrong, UM-Western’s B.J. Robertson and Northern’s Mark Samson have all done an outstanding job with their respective programs this season, too.

Senior Day

Saturday will be the home and regular season finale for the Lights, and there’s plenty to play for. Northern will say goodbye to a stellar season class including quarterback Derek Lear, wide receivers Orin Johnson and Brandt Montelius, linebackers Jordan Van Voast and David Arteaga, cornerback Josh Baum and offensive lineman Alex Cummings.

But it won’t just be a sentimental goodbye in Havre. The Lights can get to the .500 mark with a win over Rocky, something that hasn’t happened in four years. Northern also has a three-game losing streak going against the Bears, and, perhaps even more importantly, the Lights can essentially end any chance RMC has of making the NAIA playoffs with a win Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium.

So there’s plenty of motivation for the Lights heading into their senior day game.

Northern lost a heartbreaker to RMC back in October in Billings, a game in which the Lights’ offense moved the ball well on a stout Rocky defense, but struggled with three turnovers. MSU-N’s defense also played well in the 23-13 loss at Herb Klindt Field. The Lights held the Bears to just 362 total yards in the game, which is over 100 yards below RMC’s season average, while Baker was limited to one of his least productive outings of the season.

And while RMC and Northern have two of the top defenses in the Frontier, expect offensive fireworks Saturday. Rocky is fighting for its playoff life, and will likely pull out all the stops. Meanwhile, Northern will go out swinging too. The Lights have shown flashes of brilliance on offense all season long, and with playmakers like Johnson, Montelius, Dylan Woodhall, Jake Messerly and running back Zach McKinley, the Lights are more than capable of lighting up the scoreboard one more time.

Coming Home

A pair of former Hi-Line standouts will be in Blue Pony Stadium for Saturday’s finale between Northern and RMC.
Former Havre Blue Pony Casey Schaub is an H-back for the Bears, and he's seen action in eight games this season. Schaub is listed as having caught three passes for 14 yards on the season. Also, former Chester/J-I Bryant Ceynar is backup WR for RMC. Ceynar has seen action in two games this season and has one catch to his credit.