It's summer. It's hot out and football season still seems like it's a long way off. But not for the quarterbacks of the Frontier Conference.

No, those select few that will guide their teams through the fall, and towards a Frontier Conference championship, have been hard at work all summer long, gearing up for the season ahead.

And make no mistake, the Frontier Conference in 2014 will feature some of the very best quarterbacks in all of the NAIA. Names like Austin Dodge and Bryce Baker are at the top of the list when it comes to the elite signal callers in the Frontier. But there's plenty of good QB's to go around and that makes the upcoming season one that will likely be very exciting.

And the excitement will certainly be palpable in Havre. While the Montana State University-Northern Lights will begin their first season without four-year starting quarterback Derek Lear behind center, the Lights do have the luxury of starting a veteran QB this fall. Stepping in for Lear, who was a two-time Frontier All-Conference quarterback, and holder of almost every passing record in MSU-N history, is crafty veteran Travis Dean. Dean has been at Northern for five seasons, has seen his turn to start games over those years and has plenty of game experience entering what will be his final season with the Lights.

However, Dean has also missed a multitude of games due to knee injuries. The Arizona native came to Northern highly touted but two serious knee injuries derailed what was going to be a promising career with the Lights. Still, through it all, Dean has been an integral part of the Northern program for years. When healthy, Dean served as Lear's backup, but was also called into action on plenty of occasions. In 2013, Dean remained healthy and started several games at the end of the season. In all, he threw for over 900 yards and five touchdowns in seven games a season ago, and that experience will certainly launch him into this season, in which he is not only the starting quarterback, but also the veteran leader of an otherwise young Northern offense.

"Travis has been around a long time," Northern head coach Mark Samson said. "He's got a lot of experience. He's really come a long way the last two years, and I expect he will have a very good season."

Not only will Dean lead the Lights on the field, he'll also mentor the next generation of Northern quarterbacks. The past few years, the Lights have had a veteran tandem at QB with Dean and Lear working closely together. Now however, Northern will have Dean for this season, but then the job will be turned over to someone much younger. The heir apparent could be incoming freshman Jess Krahn (6-4, 215) out of Bush Prairie, Washington. Krahn is a true pro style QB and he put up big numbers for Hockinson High School during his career. Now, he gets a year to learn the Frontier ropes under the veteran Dean.
Here's a look at the top returning quarterbacks in the Frontier Conference for 2014

When looking at the cream of the crop in the Frontier, no one needs to look any further than Ashland, Oregon where Austin Dodge resides. The 6-2, 210-pound senior is the two-time reigning Frontier Offensive Player of the Year and a two-time NAIA All-American. In two seasons at SOU, Dodge has put up incredible numbers, throwing for over 9,000 yards and a staggering 92 touchdowns. After his 2012 season, many thought Dodge and the Raider offense might slow down with the graduation of three 1,000-yard receivers, but instead, Dodge threw for nearly 4,500 yards and 47 scores, while only tossing 12 interceptions. And that's what makes Dodge so special. SOU throws the ball an average of over 50 times per game, yet, in two full seasons, Dodge has only thrown 22 interceptions, while completing nearly 70 percent of his passes.

Then there's Rocky Mountain College's Bryce Baker. The 6-2, 215-pound senior is a two-time All-Conference performer and a total offense machine. Baker has started 31 games in his RMC career, including guiding the Bears to a 2013 playoff appearance. While he loves to throw the ball, as he's amassed 8,000 passing yards and 64 touchdowns, including 31 a season ago, Baker is also dangerous with his legs. He led the Frontier in total offense a season ago, and was near the top in the NAIA in that category. For his career, Baker 661 yards and 21 scores, and entering his fourth season as the Bears' starter, he's likely to be more dangerous than ever before.

Meanwhile, two bitter rivals will have a new starting QB in 2014. In Helena, the Carroll College Fighting Saints must replace the do-everything Dakota Stonehouse, who tortured defenses with his running and throwing abilities the past two seasons. The favorite is junior Mac Roche (6-2, 212). The former Whitefish star is much in the mold of Stonehouse, a dual-threat QB who can do both facets of the offense equally well. But Roche has been in a battle with another former Montana Class A star since spring in sophomore J.T. Linder (6-2, 195). Linder was one of the most prolific QB's in Dillon's storied history, and he turned down offers to play other positions at higher levels of college football for a chance to play QB for the Saints. And While Roche had the edge coming out of spring ball, he and Linder will engage in a battle for the starting spot as soon as fall camp convenes.

Two quarterbacks are also in a battle for Montana Tech's starting job, but one has some starting experience. Former Helena star Dawson Reardon (6-1, 190), another running QB, earned the starting spot in 2013 and was impressive in his debut. But in Tech's second game of the season, Reardon suffered a season-ending injury, and the Orediggers went with the talented Herman Tapley the rest of the season. With Tapley gone, Reardon is the likely candidate to win the job again, but he'll have to beat out talented sophomore Andrew Loudenback (6-3, 225) to get the job.

In Dillon, the UM-Western offense has a chance to be very dangerous this season, with a stable of talented running backs. But head coach B.J. Robertson is also excited about the return of junior quarterback Tyler Hulse, who started nine games a year ago, and threw for 1,400 yards and seven scores. Hulse has some experience now, and could really balance out Western's offense this season. Meanwhile, QB changes are likely coming to Eastern Oregon. Former University of Idaho standout Dominique Blackman showed flashes of being able to dominate the league last season, throwing for 1,600 yards and 11 scores in 10 games. But Blackman is no longer listed on EOU's roster, leaving the starting QB job wide open in an EOU offense which graduated a bevy of talent from last year's team.

There's also a new team in the Frontier this season, as the College of Idaho brings back its football program. The Yotes list four QB's on their roster, and whoever wins the job will be a freshman or redshirt freshman.

Note: This is the first installment in a series of breakdowns of the upcoming Frontier Conference football season. Next up will be a look at the top returning offensive linemen in the Frontier on Wednesday, followed by a preview of the best defensive linemen in the league on Friday.