2014 Frontier Football Preview: It takes talent to stop the pass

There are some quality defensive backs in the Frontier Conference
By Chris Peterson
August 6, 2014

Football has changed quite a bit over the past decade. Teams are running more plays and throwing more passes than ever before. Yet, in the Frontier Conference, offensives are still centered on the ground game.

However, as the league continues to evolve, the passing game is becoming more important, which means having talent in the secondary is an essential part of building a championship caliber team.

The biggest challenge in the Frontier Conference when it comes to slowing down the passing game comes against Southern Oregon, which operates a fast-paced offense that averaged 406 passing yards per game last season, while also racking up 48 touchdowns through the air.

Rocky Mountain College was the only other school to surpass 4,000 passing yards last season, so while the passing game is becoming more relevant, there aren't high-flying pass offense on the schedule each week.

That is something that probably benefits the Montana State University-Northern Lights because last season, the Lights were among the worst in the Frontier when it came to defending the pass, allowing 271.3 passing yards per game, 8.2 yards per pass and 23 touchdown passes.

In terms of pass defense, the Lights were among the bottom three teams in every major statistic, and their struggles defending the pass definitely played a role in surrendering 29.8 point per game last season, despite having the second best run defense in the Frontier.

This season, the Lights will still be relying on the development of young talent as the secondary rebuilds. Yet, there is one returning starter that should make a big impact in 2014 and that is Hunter Chandler, a 185-pound safety out of Bozeman.

Chandler played in all 10 games for Northern last season and put up impressive numbers as he notched a team-high 79 tackles, while also leading the team in solo tackles with 51 and assists with 28.

The senior will play a vital role on the defense in 2014 and will need to help the youngsters in the secondary get up to speed. Trevor Baum also returns for the Lights after 33 tackles and six pass breakups last season, but his focus will be at the wide receiver after a position change but could see time at defensive back if needed. Baum is a two-year starter for the Lights at defensive back, while his brother, an All-Conference safety for the Lights, graduated last season.

"We're a little thin right now there," said Northern head coach Mark Samson. "We don't have a lot of experience or depth back there right now. So we have some work to do there in fall camp. We have some guys coming in that we will need to help us there right away. But we certainly have a lot of work to do there."
Here’s a look at the rest of the defensive backs in the Frontier Conference

As far as pass defense goes, no team did it better in the Frontier last season than Carroll College, which held opponents to a league-low 202.4 passing yards per game and just 16 passing touchdowns, good enough for second best in the conference.

The Saints should be just as good defending the pass in 2014 thanks in large part to the return of first-team All-Conference safety James Dogwin, who led the Frontier with seven interceptions last season. The 6-2, 190-pound safety may already be the best defensive back in the conference and that helps lead a defense that could be the class of the Frontier.

When it comes to the top cornerback in the conference, that honor right now resides in Dillon, Montana, with UM-Western corner Jesse McCloud, who had 55 tackles, four pass breakups and one interception for the Bulldogs last season. The 6-0, 190-pound senior, who earned first team All-Conference honors last season also had seven interceptions to his credit in 2012. Tim Mundaniohl will also be back for the Bulldogs after leading the team with three interceptions last season.

Rocky Mountain College is the only other team that boasts an All-Conference player returning in the secondary, as Kyle Mai, a second-team selection at safety last season, returns.

Mai was highly productive for the Bears last season, racking up 60 tackles, four interceptions and seven passes defensed. Rocky finished with the second-best pass defense in the Frontier last season, allowing just 205.3 yards per game.

Another talented cornerback that will be back in the Frontier this season is Andre Cornell of Montana Tech, who earned All-Conference honorable mention honors in 2012 but was limited to just six games last season. Yet, in those six games, Cornell starred, posting three interceptions, three tackles for loss and one sack. He leads a Montana Tech defense that was third in the league in passing yards allowed.

Southern Oregon struggled in pass defense last season but does bring back Colton Grimwood, who finished with 23 tackles, four passes defensed and two interceptions for the Raiders. The top defensive back returning for Eastern Oregon will be Ronnie Flowers, who is coming off a season that included 61 tackles and three interceptions.

Note: This is the fifth installment in the Havre Daily News’ breakdown of the upcoming Frontier Conference football season. For a look at the top linebackers in the Frontier, see Friday’s Havre Daily. And for a preview of the top wide receivers in the league, see Monday’s HDN.

Havre Daily News website