It’s no secret that the Frontier Conference is loaded with star running backs this coming season. But it’s also no secret that there’s plenty of star quarterbacks in the league as well.

And those quarterbacks have plenty of weapons to throw, too. In fact, the Frontier has some of the most productive wide receivers in all of NAIA football returning from last season, and they are once again ready to wreak havoc on opposing defenses.

At Montana State University-Northern, the Lights, and head coach Mark Samson have been blessed with some gifted wide receivers over the years. And that list includes four-year starter Orin Johnson, who was one of the most efficient and reliable wideouts the Lights have had in recent memory. But Johnson graduated last spring, and in all MSU-N returns just one starter from a year ago. Northern also saw Brandt Montelius depart last spring, while the talented Dylan Woodhall decided to give up playing football after last season.

So, at the start of the season, MSU-N will be breaking in plenty of new talent out wide, but the Lights do have one of the most explosive young receivers in the Frontier back for his sophomore season. Missoula product Jake Messerly had a strong freshman campaign, one in which he totaled 12 catches for 335 yards. The 6-1, 185-pound Messerly is a big-play receiver, as he averaged a whopping 25 yards per catch a year ago, and now he’s ready to lead a new-look Lights’ receiving corps, which also includes another player who can be explosive on the outside.

Senior Trevor Baum (6-1, 190) is making the move to wide receiver this fall, after starting the last two seasons for the Lights at cornerback. Baum is arguably one of the most gifted athletes in the Frontier Conference, and he will certainly have the ability to turn some heads on offense. Baum could still play some at defensive back, while he also handles the punting duties for the Lights. And with he and Messerly on the outside, Northern’s passing game shouldn’t skip a beat this season.

Here’s a look at the top returning wide receivers in the Frontier Conference

It’s unusual, but the Frontier returns all three First-Team All-Conference receivers from a year ago.

And at the head of the pack is Rocky Mountain College junior Andre McCullough (6-1, 195). Already a two-time All-Conference standout, and a 2013 NAIA All-American, McCullough is rewriting the RMC and Frontier record books as he goes along. In 2013, he hauled in 78 balls for 1,385 yards and 13 touchdowns. He’s a multi-faceted receiver, who makes plays with the deep ball, but is also a threat to take a short route the distance, and it’s been a while since the Frontier has seen a receiver of his consistency and talent level. Cole Cattelan and Ryan Toner also return for the Bears, who have one of the best passing attacks in the league.

Speaking of passing attacks, no one does it better than Southern Oregon. Of course, star quarterback Austin Dodge is a big reason why, but the wide receivers at SOU are every bit as good. Ryan Retzlaff (6-0,
190), had a monster season a year ago, catching 85 passes for 1,191 yards and 12 TDs, on his way to First-Team All-Conference and NAIA All-American honors. But the Raiders have so many receivers, it’s scary. Matt Retzlaff (6-0, 190), is also back for his sophomore season. A year ago, he earned All-Conference honors after catching 60 balls and scoring a league-best 15 receiving touchdowns. And then there’s Dylan Young (6-3, 195). All he did was catch 70 passes for over 1,000 yards and 11 scores last season. So with that trio back, there’s no question the Raiders have the best receiver group, perhaps in all of NAIA football.

Carroll College loves to run the football. The Saints will be breaking in a brand new starting quarterback this season, but their wide receivers are also as talented as they come. Senior Anthony Clarke (5-11, 190) returns after an All-Conference campaign a year ago, while junior Dylan Simac (6-2, 210) is one of the premier athletes in the conference. Clarke, who is a top all-purpose player, caught 59 passes for 920 yards and nine scores a season ago. Add in the return of Jared Mayernik (5-11, 185), and talented sophomore Kyle Griffith (6-0, 180), who shined last year as a true freshman, and the Saints have perhaps the deepest group of receivers in the league.

Eastern Oregon returns a good one in sophomore Jace Billingsley (5-9, 185). A speedy slot receiver, Billingsley had 69 catches for 860 yards and 11 scores as a freshman, and he’s poised to be EOU’s biggest weapon after earning First-Team All-Conference honors last year. At Montana Tech, junior Alex Bray (5-11, 175) is one to watch, as is UM-Western’s Connor Lamping (6-0, 180).

*Note: This is the seventh installment in the Havre Daily News’ breakdown of the top returning players in the Frontier Conference. For a look at the top tight ends in the league, see Tuesday’s HDN, and for a preview of the top special team’s players, see Thursday’s HDN.*

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