2014 Frontier Football Preview: Frontier title is indeed up for grabs
Carroll is favored again, but a lot can happen this fall
By George Ferguson
August 28, 2014

There’s just no getting around it. It’s sure to be a fun, exciting season of Frontier Conference football. But isn’t every year that way?

Still, there’s no shortage of story lines heading into a new season of Frontier football, which already began with UM-Western demolishing Montana Tech last Saturday night in Dillon.

At the top of that list is the Montana State University-Northern Lights, and how they’ll respond to the untimely and frustrating departure of 11-year head coach Mark Samson. With all the controversy the Lights were embroiled in early in fall camp, and the undeniable amount of talent the Lights have, it stands to reason that all eyes will be on Havre, and the Lights this fall.

Another story line, as is with every season of Frontier football, will be the watch to see if someone can dethrone Carroll College. It happened in 2012, the only year Mike Van Diest didn’t lead the Saints to at least a share of the league title in his illustrious career. But Carroll bounced right back and dominated the conference last fall, reaching the NAIA semifinals in the process. And, in spite of questions at quarterback and the offensive line, the Saints were chosen to win the league yet again.

If any team has a real chance to beat Carroll for the league title this season, it will most likely be between Rocky Mountain College and Southern Oregon. Yes, it looks as though Northern and UM-Western will be much-improved this fall, while Tech might struggle, it certainly seems as though the Battlin’ Bears and Raiders have the best chance at knocking Carroll off. Rocky will play the Saints twice, while Carroll also has to play SOU twice, so those road trips to Billings and Ashland, Oregon, could be the difference between the Saints holding the Frontier crown or not at season’s end.

And lastly, there is an excitement in the air about College of Idaho playing their first season of Frontier football. But actually, it’s C of I’s first season of college football in nearly four decades. The dormant program was revived two years ago, and now the Yotes will jump right into the fire, competing in the Frontier, one of the premier conferences in the NAIA. The Yotes will be an unknown quantity for every Frontier squad this season, but it’s obvious that they will likely not take long to compete. C of I had over 1,000 fans show up to Simplot Stadium for their first-ever spring game back in April, while even more fans watched their final fall scrimmage last week in Caldwell.

With the departure of Dickinson State, which won just three conference games in two seasons in the Frontier, the Yotes will be a refreshing addition to the Frontier Conference, and that’s just one of a number of reasons why the 2014 season will be one for the history books.
“It’s going to be an interesting season for sure,” Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge said. “There’s a lot of good football teams, and a lot of very good coaches in this league. There’s a lot of talent in this league, on both sides of the ball. The Frontier is always very tough, and I think this season will be no different.”

Here’s a quick look at every team in the Frontier Conference in their predicted order of finish for 2014

**Carroll College**  
**Fighting Saints**  
**Location:** Helena, MT  
**Head Coach:** Mike Van Diest (16th Season)  
**Stadium:** Nelson Stadium  
**2013:** 12-2 overall, 9-1 in Frontier (1st), Reached NAIA Semifinals  
**2014 Outlook:** Carroll is good. Carroll is always good, and 2014 will be no different. Yet, the Saints do come into the new season with a big unknown. For the first time in ages, a quarterback battle was waged at Carroll, first in the spring, then in fall camp, and it appears junior Mac Roache, a former Whitefish star, will be the guy to replace the departed Dakota Stonehouse under center. Roache will be tested by a slew of top-notch defenses, but he also has players like star running back Dustin Rinker, and a bevy of talented wide receivers, led by Anthony Clarke, to take the pressure off of him. Another outstanding Carroll defense, led by linebacker, and reigning Frontier MVP Sean Blomquist, should also help Roache out in his first season at the helm. Safety James Dowgin will also have a huge impact on what should be an unforgiving CC defense. But, for the Saints to successfully defend their 2013 league title, they’ll have to negotiate a schedule which includes two games against RMC, two games against Southern Oregon, and road trips to Eastern Oregon, Montana Tech and MSU-Northern. If the Saints can win those tough road games, it’s likely they won’t be caught in the Frontier standings and Mike Van Diest will have his 15th Frontier title.

**Rocky Mountain College**  
**Battlin’ Bears**  
**Location:** Billings, MT  
**Head Coach:** Brian Armstrong (7th Season)  
**Stadium:** Rocky Bowl  
**2013:** 8-4 overall, 7-3 in Frontier (T2nd), Lost in first round of NAIA playoffs  
**2014 Outlook:** For the last five years, the Battlin’ Bears have been considered a team on the rise. But that label is gone. After a third straight winning season, and an NAIA playoff berth in 2013, the Bears have officially risen to be a true Frontier Conference power. Now RMC sets its sights higher. The Bears, led by star quarterback Bryce Baker and All-American wide receiver Andre McCullough, have a legitimate chance to win the league title this season and make a deep playoff run. Of course, that hinges on two things, being good on defense, and being able to beat Carroll College, at least once. RMC did lose some great playmakers on the defensive side of the ball, but they return a pair of All-Conference safeties in Kyle Mai and Corey Brummer. A new-look offensive line will also need to gel quickly, but all-in-all, RMC is a force to be reckoned with this season, and it could truly be the year of the Bear.

**Southern Oregon**  
**Raiders**  
**Location:** Ashland, Ore.  
**Head Coach:** Craig Howard (5th season)  
**Stadium:** Raider Stadium  
**2013:** 7-4 overall, 7-3 in Frontier (T2nd)  
**2014 Outlook:** If RMC doesn’t dethrone Carroll, Southern Oregon has the next best chance. The Raiders won a share of the league crown two years ago, and return 10 starters on an offense that has been the best in the NAIA the last two seasons. Austin Dodge is back for his senior year at QB. Already a two-time NAIA All-American, Dodge has thrown for 102 touchdowns and just 18 interceptions in his two years at SOU, while leading the Raiders to some staggering offensive numbers. Receivers Ryan and Matt Retzlaff also return, while Dylan Young was also a 1,000-yard receiver last season. SOU also has one of the biggest offensive lines in the league, so there’s no reason to think the Raiders won’t shatter their own offensive records this fall. Defense and a difficult schedule will be the key to SOU’s success. If the Raiders’ young defense blossoms, they’ll be tough to beat considering they’ll average at least 40 points per game. And if SOU can win enough on the road, an NAIA playoff berth, and a shot at the league title is a real possibility.

**Eastern Oregon**  
**Mountaineers**
La Grande, Ore.

**Head Coach:** Tim Camp (7th season)

**Stadium:** Community Stadium

**2013:** 6-5 overall, 6-4 in Frontier (4th)

**2014 Outlook:** The Mounties couldn’t have gotten off to a worse start last fall, losing three straight and four of their first five. But a five-game winning streak ensued and EOU vaulted itself into the top half of the conference standings. This fall, EOU is already 1-0 after beating Menlo on Aug. 23, and looks to be potent on offense. Zach Bartlow is back at starting quarterback this season, while Jace Billingsley is one of the top receivers in the Frontier. EOU’s spread offense will feature tailback A.J. Prom, who steps in for the graduated Chris McGinnis-Parker, who rushed for 1,300 yards last year. EOU also has a top-notch defense with seven returning starters, and the Mounties are extremely tough to beat at home. So last year, both good and bad, EOU was the surprise team of the Frontier, and this season, head coach Tim Camp’s squad will be even stronger.

Montana Tech

**Location:** Butte, MT

**Head Coach:** Chuck Morrell (3rd season)

**Stadium:** Alumni Coliseum

**2013:** 3-7 overall, 3-7 in Frontier (7th)

**2014 Outlook:** The Orediggers want to forget all about a 3-7 2013 campaign. And they certainly have the talent to do it. But a lopsided season-opening loss to UM-Western on Aug. 23 wasn’t exactly what third-year head coach Chuck Morrell had in mind. Still, Tech has the roster capable of making a solid run in the Frontier this fall. Senior tailback Pat Hansen has rushed for nearly 4,000 yards in his Tech career, and he’ll be the focal point of the offense yet again. Tech is starting junior college transfer Andrew Loudenback at QB. He beat out sophomore Dawson Reardon for the starting job, and the Diggers do have a go-to wideout in Alec Bray. However, Tech’s season hinges on the play of Morrell’s defense. The Diggers lost star linebacker Ryan Jones, but Mike Touzinksy and David Meis are back in the middle. Andre Cornell is one of the top cover corners in the league, so if Tech can put points on the board, and slow down the opposition, the Diggers should get back to playing the kind of football fans in Butte are accustomed to seeing.

Montana State-Northern

**Location:** Havre, MT

**Head Coach:** Jake Eldridge (interim)

**Stadium:** Blue Pony Stadium

**2013:** 4-6 overall, 4-6 in Frontier (T5th)

**2014 Outlook:** The Lights went through an extraordinary amount of turmoil as they lost head coach Mark Samson a week into fall camp. But, dedicating their season to their embattled coach, MSU-N will forge ahead. Not one player left the program in spite of the controversy the last two weeks, while veteran defensive coordinator Jake Eldridge has stepped up to run the team. MSU-N will go as far as it wants this season, with a slew of talented playmakers on offense and defense. Eliminating a league-worst 23 turnovers from 2013 will be the key to how far the Lights will go this fall, and where they’ll land. Northern must also take advantage of playing Carroll just once this season, and a schedule which includes a non-conference home game against former Frontier rival Dickinson State. One thing is certain, Northern will play inspired, passionate football all season long, and with so many weapons on offense, the Lights will also be very fun to watch.

UM-Western

**Location:** Dillon, MT

**Head Coach:** B.J. Robertson (2nd Year)

**Stadium:** Beaverhead County Stadium

**2013:** 4-6 overall, 4-6 in Frontier (T5th)

**2014 Outlook:** After a hot start in 2013, the Bulldogs slid to losses in five of their last six games. They certainly don’t want a repeat of that this fall, and after crushing Montana Tech Aug. 23 in Dillon, things look good so far. With the return of a healthy Sam Rutherford, who rushed for nearly 900 yards in his first four games of 2013, at tailback, Western has a legitimate threat to go with a more experienced Tyler Hulse at quarterback. However, the Bulldogs will be an even bigger force on the defensive side of the ball. Jesse McCloud is one of the top defensive back in the Frontier, while Phil Selin led the conference in sacks last season. In the middle, linebackers A.J. Wilson and Joe Coker help solidify a UM-W defense that could be
one of the best in the league this season. Western also has a favorable schedule, so it stands to reason, the Bulldogs just might be the upstart team in the Frontier this season.

**College of Idaho**  
**Yotes**  
**Location:** Caldwell, Idaho  
**Head Coach:** Mike Moreski (1st Season)  
**Stadium:** Simplot Stadium  
**2013:** 2014 is first year of football  
**2014 Outlook:** It’s hard to say what the Yotes’ outlook is. After all, College of Idaho hasn’t seen football for a long, long time. However, excitement is at a fever pitch, and the Yotes’ first home game, slated for Sept. 13 against UM-Western, probably can’t come soon enough. But joining the Frontier isn’t easy and it’s reasonable to think that success will be hard to come by early on. Still, Caldwell, Idaho, gives C of I a wide net to recruit from, so it’s likely that the program will rise fast and furious. As for 2014, the Yotes will be young. Quarterbacks Teejay Gordon and Jake Hennessey could both see reps this season, while Kyle Merritt will be a running back to watch. On defense, Grant Darrington and Dylan Coon could stand out.

*Havre Daily News website*