Depth and parity in the Frontier Conference, those things have been there for a long, long time. The league has long stood as one of the toughest and most competitive conferences in all of NAIA football.

But this is getting kind of ridiculous.

Two weeks ago, even with a 41-9 loss at the hands of Big Sky Conference and FCS national power Eastern Washington, it looked like the UM-Western Bulldogs were going to be the team no one wanted to play this season. And while they still might be, the new kid on the block is now the team every Frontier school should be scared of.

Last Saturday, playing their first home football game in 37 years, and their first Frontier Conference game ever, in front of nearly 5,000 fans, the College of Idaho Yotes made perhaps the biggest splash in conference history, winning their inaugural game.

The Yotes beat Western 38-35 at Simplot Stadium in Caldwell, Idaho, not only giving them their first-ever Frontier conference win, but also their second win in as many games. And just one game into their stay in the Frontier, the Yotes are in first place in the Frontier standings.

That's a remarkable feat considering C of I didn't have football for nearly four decades. It's even more remarkable that the Yotes only revived their program a little less than three years ago. And instead of playing as club sport, or playing a season of exhibition games, the Yotes just practiced, recruited and practiced some more, and then jumped head first into the Frontier, which was already the best football conference in the NAIA.

Last month, in my Frontier Conference Football Preview, I agreed with the Frontier coaches, who picked the Yotes to finish last this season. I admitted that I thought it wouldn't take C of I long to be a competitive, if not dominant football program in the NAIA, but I said it wouldn't be this season.

Well, after two games, the Yotes have two more wins than I, or anybody thought they would, and it looks like they may make a lot of us eat our words. In an already brutal Frontier Conference, the Yotes are already howling and it looks like they're here to stay.

**Electric City running**

Speaking of tough, the Montana State University-Northern Lights suffered a tough setback at the hands of the nationally ranked Rocky Mountain College Battlin' Bears last Saturday in Havre. The 32-18 loss to the Bears means an 0-2 start to conference for the Lights. And things don't get any easier as Northern goes back on the road to face the Bulldogs this Saturday in Dillon.
But, as tough as life on the road is, the Lights have an ace in the hole in running back Zach McKinley. The former Great Falls standout has already rushed for more than 400 yards and five touchdowns this season, and he leads the Frontier at 141 yards per game, while averaging nearly six yards per carry.

After a stellar freshman campaign, and three games into his sophomore season, McKinley has laid to rest any doubt about whether he is one of the top running backs in the NAIA or not.

And while he's ready to wreak havoc on the UM-Western defense this Saturday, the Lights' defense will have to be equally as ready to stop another Great Falls running back. Western's Sam Rutherford is also a sophomore from Great Falls, and like McKinley, he's been tearing up the turf in the Frontier since last fall. Rutherford, who rushed for over 1,000 yards last season, despite missing five games due to injury, has rushed for 300 and three TDs so far in 2014. He's a big, powerful back that seems to get stronger the more he gets hit, and he's going to be a focal point for an MSU-N defensive line, and defense that's No. 1 in the Frontier against the run.

So either way you slice it, a former Great Falls prep running back is going to have a big impact on Saturday's game at Vigilante Field in Dillon. And whichever Electric City star has the better day will likely decide the winner between the Lights and Bulldogs.

A Bear of a matchup

With teams like Southern Oregon, Eastern Oregon, Western, Northern, Montana Tech all looking much-improved this fall, and C of I appearing to be nothing like what anyone thought, there's just no way to predict who will win the Frontier title right now.

There's just too many good teams, too many big games still to play, and a lot of season left. However, there's no doubt in anyone's mind that this Saturday's showdown between No. 5 RMC and No. 7 Carroll College will have a lasting effect on what transpires this season in the Frontier.

The NAIA Game of the Week will take place in Billings Saturday afternoon, and there's so much at stake for both teams. And while the Saints (1-1) certainly can't win their 16th Frontier championship in the last 17 years Saturday, they can lose it. With a loss at RMC, something that has happened to Carroll only once in the last decade against the Bears, it would be very difficult for the Saints to repeat as league champions. It wouldn't be impossible, but it would mean Carroll already has two conference losses, and still has to play RMC again, as well as Southern Oregon, which beat the Saints two weeks ago, one more time. So as good as Carroll is, a 1-2 start to Frontier play wouldn't bold well for the Saints' Frontier title hopes.

On the other side of the coin, the Bears can't clinch the league championship if they win their home opener Saturday, but a victory over Carroll would sure go a long way toward helping their cause. Rocky is 3-0 already, 2-0 in the Frontier, and the Bears haven't even played a home game yet. And unlike the Saints, RMC only has to face SOU once this season. So a win Saturday against Carroll would certainly give the Bears an extra poker chip in what is sure to be a wild couple of months.

The Bears and Saints also have a pretty good history of tight games recently. A year ago, RMC lost to the Saints 24-17 in Billings, and lost in the last seconds in Helena, 37-35, yet the Bears still made the NAIA playoffs. And back in 2012, RMC lost at Carroll 19-6, but a month later, stunned the Saints 31-28 in Helena.

So the last four games between the two bitter rivals have been very close, but no game between the Bears and Saints has had as much importance, or has featured two teams ranked this high during the rivalry, as Saturday's showdown at Herb Klindt Field. And whatever the outcome, the shockwaves from Saturday's showdown in Billings will be felt all across the Frontier.

Havre Daily News website