There’s no question there was a seismic shift in the Frontier Conference standings over the weekend, and the fault line ran right through Nelson Stadium in Helena.

After Southern Oregon beat Carroll in the season-opening game last month in Ashland, Oregon, some might have given up on the Fighting Saints repeating as conference champions. But, Carroll rallied and won four games in a row heading into last Saturday’s showdown against then No. 4 SOU. And behind 200 rushing yards from senior tailback Dustin Rinker, the Saints did what few have done over the last few years, beat the Raiders in a shootout. Carroll prevailed 42-40, and once again wrestled control of the Frontier, at least for the moment.

Now ranked No. 3 in the NAIA, Carroll holds all tiebreakers over SOU and would win the league’s automatic bid to the NAIA playoffs if both the Saints (5-1) and Raiders (5-1) win out and share the Frontier championship, which is likely.

Carroll’s road to winning its last four games won’t be easy by any stretch. But the Saints do play this Saturday at Montana Tech, which has lost six straight, then road trip to Havre to play the Montana State University-Northern Lights. After that, Carroll finishes with back-to-back home games, playing Rocky Mountain College Nov. 8 and College of Idaho Nov. 15. While RMC figures to be Carroll’s toughest remaining test on paper, the Saints trounced the Bears last month in Billings, so likely, Carroll’s road to the league title, which started with a rare loss, will hinge on how the Saints play in Havre next week against the Lights.

Like Carroll, SOU has four games left, with two at home and two away. The Raiders visit C of I this weekend, then host RMC Nov. 1 in what should be their toughest remaining game. SOU visits Tech Nov. 8 and hosts Eastern Oregon to finish the season Nov. 15.

Rocky, which lost back-to-back home games to Carroll and EOU, has rebounded nicely, and the Battlin’ Bears are still in the league title race, as well as the playoff hunt. And in a way, the Bears control their own destiny. They are just one game out of first place in the Frontier, and play both Carroll and SOU down the stretch. A win in each of those games could give the Bears a share of the Frontier crown, but it’s going to be tough because both of those games are away from Billings.

Still, back on Sept. 27, when EOU shocked the Bears in Billings, the rest of the league may have given RMC up for dead. But the Bears have rebounded nicely, and are now playing like the team everyone thought would have a chance to win the Frontier championship.

So, while the big game in Helena last week sent shockwaves through the entire conference, things are nowhere near over.
Hungry for More

Something had to give when the Lights and Orediggers met at Blue Pony Stadium last Saturday. And it was Tech that gave. When Matt Berg missed a chip-shot field goal with less than a minute left, the Lights had snapped a four-game losing streak, and sent Tech to its sixth straight loss.

The 37-34 win over the Orediggers was Northern’s first win of the conference season, and it was well-deserved. MSU-N had played well, and racked up huge offensive numbers in losses at UM-Western and College of Idaho, as well as at home to SOU and RMC.

Now, with a win under their belt, Northern wants more, and the Lights will have to do it in a stadium they haven’t triumphed in since 2007. Saturday, Northern will play at Eastern Oregon. MSU-N last won in Community Stadium in 2007, but the Lights did trump the Mounties last fall in Havre.

EOU has stumbled as of late. After winning three straight games, the Mounties rose to No. 15 in the NAIA. But they have suffered back-to-back losses since, including last Saturday’s 34-28 setback at UM-Western.

Meanwhile, the Lights are hoping to start a winning streak, and while last Saturday’s win against Tech was pure joy for the Lights, interim head coach Jake Eldridge says he’s challenged his team to play much, much better.

“We went right back to work on Monday,” Eldridge said. “We have told the kids, we don’t want to be a one-hit wonder. They earned that win and deserved that win, but it’s only one, and I don’t feel like we played our best football game in that game. At times, we didn’t play very well at all. We made too many mistakes and several of those mistakes could have cost us that game.

“So our focus this week has been on being consistent,” he continued. “Eastern Oregon is a very solid football team, so we need to be consistently better than we were last week. We need to be much better, and not be satisfied with the win against Tech. Now, the challenge is to go out and get another one. To go out and get a big road win against a very good football team.”

Lighting the Way

In order for Northern to beat EOU this week, Zach McKinley will need to be a big part of the equation, as he has been all season.

McKinley leads the Frontier in rushing at 132 yards per game, as well as rushing yards with 922. He’s closing in on Stephen Silva’s single-season record of 1,105 yards in 2011, and for his career, McKinley has already rushed for 2,022 yards, which is just 700 shy of Silva’s career mark.

Last season, McKinley came up five yards short of Silva’s record, rushing for exactly 1,100 yards. He’s also already scored 25 rushing touchdowns in his career, which is already first on Northern’s all-time list. McKinley’s second TD against Tech tied the Northern all-time record, and his third, late in the first half last Saturday, broke Donny Saisbury’s career mark of 24 rushing TDs, which he set from 2004-2007.

NAIA Leaders

McKinley’s numbers rank him eighth in the NAIA in rushing. Brandon Wegher of Morningside leads the nation at a whopping 191 yards per game. Rinker, who averages 126 yards per outing, ranks just behind McKinley at No. 10 in the NAIA.

Northern senior Trevor Baum is ranked second in the NAIA with his 63 receptions, while his 137 yards per game ranks him third nationally, just behind Carroll’s Anthony Clarke, who is averaging 137.5 yards per game. Southern Oregon’s Dylan Young ranks 10th and RMC’s Andre McCullouch ranks 12th nationally in receiving yards per game, while McCullouch is third, Clarke fourth and Young seventh in receptions.

Frontier quarterbacks are also among the nation’s leaders. SOU’s Austin Dodge is tops in the NAIA in passing, averaging 347 yards per outing. Northern’s Travis Dean is fourth at 293 yards per game, while RMC’s Bryce Baker is seventh and Carroll’s Mac Roche is eighth in the NAIA in passing.
Dodge ranks second in the NAIA in total offense, with Dean seventh. Roche, who’s having an impressive first season as the Saints’ starter, is ninth in total offense, while Baker is 13th, EOU’s Zach Bartlow is 15th and C of I’s Teejay Gordon is 19th.

In next week’s Frontier Conference notebook, we’ll take a look at the top defensive players in the NAIA from the Frontier Conference.