2015 Frontier Preview: Talent resides in Frontier trenches

2015 Frontier Conference Football Preview: Defensive Line

By George Ferguson
July 31, 2015

There’s certainly a changing of the guard when it comes to the quarterback position in the Frontier Conference. But there’s also one going on when it comes to the guys who are charged with chasing the signal callers around.

With all four of the defensive linemen that received First-Team Frontier All-Conference honors a year ago graduated, new stars in the trenches will emerge this season.

However, at Montana State University-Northern, the best defensive end in the league is back, and he has a teammate on the inside who will help make the Lights very formidable up front this fall.

Junior Tyler Craig (6’2, 230) has been a sack machine for the Lights the last two seasons. In 2014, he led the Frontier Conference with 10 sacks while also racking up 51 tackles and 12.5 tackles for loss. Craig should have been a First-Team All-Conference performer a year ago, but he was voted to the Second Team.

And while he will likely receive plenty of double teams from opposing offenses this season, Craig will no doubt be looked upon as one of the top defensive players in the Frontier.

When Craig is double-teamed, it will open things up for fellow junior Patrick Barnett (6’3, 265). The Billings West standout had a breakout season for the Lights a year ago, totaling 41 tackles, 5.5 sacks and 7.5 tackles for loss. Barnett is an excellent run stopper in the middle, but he, too, can get to the quarterback, and he and Craig will form one of the strongest defensive line tandems in the Frontier.

Usually, Carroll College is always one of, if not the best, when it comes to defensive fronts, and the Saints were just that a year ago. Together, the trio of Sean Condon, Dakota Amy and Bryan Graupmann helped Carroll once again lead the league in rushing yards allowed. Condon and Amy were First-Team All-Conference selections, but the trio is gone, leaving Carroll in rebuilding mode up front. There’s no doubt the Saints will find replacements for the beef they lost up front, and new stars will eventually emerge.

But with Carroll reloading on the line, Eastern Oregon may take over as having the strongest defensive front. The Mounties were very good against the run a year ago, and they figure to be daunting again. Led by All-Conference performer Kyle Lanoue (6’1, 270) and converted linebacker Dalton Morgan (6’2, 230), the Mounties will wreak havoc in opposing backfields this season. Lanoue totaled 55 tackles, 11 tackles for loss and four sacks a season ago, while Morgan added 11.5 TFLs.

Defending national champion Southern Oregon had a stout run defense a year ago, and the Raiders will look to senior defensive tackle Joe Lealofi (6’2, 250) to anchor the defense again. Lealofi was an All-Conference standout a season ago after racking up 53 tackles and 2.5 sacks.
Replacing key players on the defensive line is something every team in the league has to deal with, but nowhere is that issue more prevalent than at UM-Western. The Bulldogs lost four-year starter and two-time NAIA All-American Phil Selin to graduation. The defensive end racked up over 30 sacks in his time at Western. The Bulldogs have a strong DT returning in sophomore Tyrell Penner (6-3, 270), but there’s no doubt, Selin will be missed on the line.

Another top returning DT is College of Idaho’s Josh Price (6-3, 240). As a sophomore, Price totaled 58 stops and nine tackles for loss. Montana Tech has a good tackle as well in senior Luke Benz (6-2, 240).

A stout defensive tackle also anchors what should be a formidable front at Rocky Mountain College. Junior Brendan Johnson (6-1, 285) could be one of the best tackles in the league this season. A year ago, Johnson had 7.5 TFLs and two sacks for the Battlin’ Bears. RMC will also look to rush end Austin Chamberlain (6-3, 225) for more production this season. As a sophomore, Chamberlain had 10.5 TFLs and two sacks.

Editor’s Note: This is the fourth installment in the Havre Daily News’ series on the top returning players in the Frontier Conference. For a look at the top wide receivers and tight ends in the Frontier, see Monday’s HDN.

Havre Daily News website