The Frontier Conference football season is fast approaching. And while every team in the league has their uncertainties this time of year, one thing about the Frontier is very true — the running backs throughout the league are good.

Even with three premier rushers graduating last spring, in Carroll College’s Dustin Rinker, Montana Tech’s Pat Hansen and Southern Oregon’s Melvin Mason, the Frontier is still loaded with quality ball carriers, and some teams, like the Montana State University-Northern Lights have more than one.

Northern returns the leading rusher in the Frontier from a year ago in junior Zach McKinley. As a sophomore, McKinley shattered several of Northern’s single-season rushing records, and he led the Frontier in the regular season with 1,425 yards and a 130-yard per game average. McKinley, who will break Northern’s all-time rushing record sometime this season, also scored 14 touchdowns and averaged 5.9 yards per carry on his way to First-Team All-Conference honors.

And MSU-N first-year head coach Aaron Christensen didn’t just inherit perhaps the top running back in all of the NAIA in McKinley, he takes over a program that is very deep at the tailback position.

The Lights are deep because of junior Mario Gobatto (5-8, 175). He’s a bruising runner who sheds tackles, and he could be a full-time starter for most teams in the NAIA. A year ago, Gobatto rushed for 335 yards and three scores, and he’ll figure even more prominently into MSU-N’s stellar ground game this season.

But the Lights aren’t the only team in the league with a 1-2 punch at running back.

UM-Western head coach B.J. Robertson has that luxury, too. The Bulldogs are led by senior tailback Sam Rutherford (6-1, 215). The star back rushed for 1,061 yards and 11 scores a season ago, and in two seasons in Dillon, he’s run for well over 2,000 yards, all the while missing several games with injuries. Rutherford was also All-Conference last season, and his workload is helped by teammate Dylan Kramer (5-9, 190). Kramer rushed for 400 yards last season, and he gives the Bulldogs a powerful ground attack, one that will be very difficult to slow down in 2015.

Montana Tech had the same thing in 2014, with two star running backs. But with Hansen, the Orediggers all-time leading rusher now gone after starting for four straight years, junior Nolan Sarecini (5-9, 175) will get to step into the starting role, and get the bulk of Tech’s carries. As a sophomore, Sarecini had several big games, even with Hansen’s third 1,000-yard season in four years. Sarecini rushed for 438 yards and a score, and he’s certainly got all the tools to step up and be the next great tailback in Butte.

On its way to a national championship last season, Southern Oregon also had a two-headed monster in the backfield. As pass-happy as the Raiders were, Mason and Sean Tow combined for nearly 2,000 yards
rushing in 2014. Mason is gone, but Tow (5-6, 160) is back for his junior season. He rushed for 754 yards and seven touchdowns last season and will be the feature back in the Raiders’ offensive attack this season.

Meanwhile, Eastern Oregon’s Jace Billingsley (5-9, 185) has already earned All-Conference honors at wide receiver twice in his career. But Billingsley also carried the ball for 870 yards and 10 touchdowns last season, and he enter his senior year as the Mounties’ featured tailback. And because of Billingsley’s speed and versatility, he could easily be the most dangerous offensive player in the Frontier this fall.

And while so many teams in the league have a star running back, don’t expect Carroll College not to. Rinker became the Saints all-time leading rusher after running for 1,675 yards last season, and while the Saints have a tailback battle going on in fall camp, there’s no doubt a star will eventually emerge because they always do in Helena.

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