The Frontier Conference may have officially began back in November, but things didn’t really come into full, serious mode until last weekend.

Men’s and women’s basketball teams around the league kicked off the new year with some thrilling basketball, and when the dust settled on the first full weekend of league play, one thing was more clear than anything else. The next two months are going to be wild.

On the women’s side, there are eight teams with winning overall records through last weekend. And while Westminster, Montana State University-Northern and Lewis-Clark State have become the front-runners from the Frontier title, the nonconference season indicated the Frontier could be as deep as it’s ever been, and it’s highly unlikely that any team, including the Griffins, will go undefeated in league play this winter.

Things are just as jumbled on the men’s side. Seven of the nine times made it through last weekend with a winning overall record, and none of those teams played an easy schedule by any means. And while the women’s title could come down to a three-team race in February, the men’s picture is much more confusing. Rocky Mountain College has established itself as the early favorite, but Northern, Western, Westminster, Lewis-Clark State and Great Falls could all have something to say about the outcome of the regular season by late next month.

Youth Movement

Some of the best players in Frontier women’s basketball are now upper-classmen, but the future is certainly bright. UGF sophomore Erin Legel is scoring points at a rapid pace, leading the league in scoring, and she’s only a sophomore. Northern’s Natalee Faupel has also quickly established herself as a star in the making as well. Faupel, a true freshman from Butte High, is averaging nine points per game this season, but in conference-only games, she’s scoring close to 15 points and grabbing seven rebounds in MSU-N’s three wins.

Add in stellar performances this season by UGF’s Taylor Stratten (So.), Carroll’s Katie Estey (So.), Rocky’s Katie Fitzpatrick (So.) and LCSC’s Megan Risinger (Fr.), and the Frontier is absolutely loaded with youthful stars. There’s also RMC’s Jayde Lefevre, a true freshman from Laurel. She was averaging 15 points per game this season, before a knee injury ended her inaugural year with the Battlin’ Bears.

Swan Song

Dickinson State’s stay in the Frontier will certainly be short-lived. The Blue Hawk’s second season in the conference is their last, but they certainly seem bent on making the most out of it. DSU’s women finished last in the league a year ago, but the Blue Hawks are off to a 2-1 start in league play this season. Meanwhile, the DSU men finished eighth a year ago, but came agonizingly close to sweeping UGF and Northern last weekend. If not for Alfie Miller’s overtime buzzer-beater, the Blue Hawks would already be 2-1 in conference play and in second place in the league standings.
"If they (Blue Hawks) continue to play the way they played against us, they’re going to make a lot of noise in this league,” MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. “They are playing really well right now.”

Dickinson will leave the Frontier to join the North Star Athletic Conference next season.

**Massive Home Stand**

Any coach will tell you, the Frontier’s regular season is a marathon, not a sprint. But the Armory Gymnasium will host play to four impactful games this weekend.

The Northern women, ranked No. 18 in the nation, host UM-Western Thursday night, as well as No. 4 Westminster Saturday. Both teams have had rare success against the Skylights in the Armory, but head coach Chris Mouat’s team has a chance to really put a dent in the Frontier standings. Stopping Western will require stopping star forward Sammi Bignell. She’s played big against the Skylights the last two years, and she comes into Thursday night’s game averaging 17 points and eight rebounds per game. Meanwhile, the Skylights haven’t beaten the Griffins since 2007, though Northern has had some thrilling games in Havre with the five-time Frontier champs over the years. Westminster will bring a No. 4 ranking into Saturday night’s game but, while the Griffins appear to still be the cream of the Frontier crop, the loss of Frontier Player of the Year Nicole Yazzie and fellow All-American Cydney Tibbitts certainly makes them more beatable than in the past two seasons.

The men’s games in Havre will be no less exciting this weekend. The Northern/Western rivalry has become as intense of a rivalry as there is the Frontier over the last six seasons. The Bulldogs knocked the Lights out of the Frontier tourney a year ago, while MSU-N beat Western for the 2012 Frontier title in Havre. In fact, the Lights and Bulldogs have played five straight seasons in either the Frontier semifinals or championship game. Western comes into Havre fresh off two dramatic wins last weekend, and head coach Steve Keller’s squad brings a team which averages 80 points per game. Northern’s rivalry with Westminster has been no less dramatic, though the Lights have had the Griffins’ number of late. The Lights are 5-2 in their last seven meetings with the Griffins, and they haven’t lost to Westminster in the Armory in four seasons now. Still, the Griffins appear to be on the rise again. They, like MSU-N, aren’t tall, but they bring perhaps the deepest team in the Frontier to Havre. Westminster plays up to 12 payers a game, and has nine different players averaging between 14 and seven points per game.

One thing that should help the Lights and Skylights out this weekend is their unique home-court advantage. The spring semester started Wednesday, meaning the Armory Animals should be in full effect for both games.

"We’re really excited to be playing at home this weekend,” Mouat said. "These are two really big games, against two very good teams. And having our home crowd behind us will be big.”