Three weekends is all that separates Frontier Conference basketball teams and the postseason. In other words, it’s crunch time in the Frontier.

As with every week so far, the Frontier men’s standings saw plenty of upheaval, yet, there is still no clear front runner for the regular season title.

Two weeks ago, there was a five-way tie for first place, and those five teams are still either tied, or separated by just one game. The standings have seen some change thanks to three-game winning streaks by the Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears and Montana State University-Northern Lights. RMC and MSU-N are tied atop the league standings at 7-3, but their lead is by no means safe. UM-Western, UGF and Westminster all sit at 6-4, while Lewis-Clark State is still hanging in the fight at 5-5. Even Montana Tech isn’t out of the picture at 4-6.

And expect more chaos after this weekend’s games are done. Rocky’s game at Western Friday night is probably the game of the week as both teams are nationally ranked, and the contest will have lasting implications on the regular season title. Northern meanwhile, has a chance to gain some ground with home games against Tech and LCSC. UGF and Westminster are also both home for doubleheaders this weekend, so don’t look for much more separation in the league standings come Monday.

The women’s side hasn’t changed much either, with the exception of Carroll and Western making a push upward. Westminster is still unbeaten in league play, with LCSC just one game back. Northern is one game behind LCSC after last Saturday’s loss to the Warriors in Lewiston, Idaho, but in what should be the women’s game of the week, the No. 19 Skylights get another crack at the No. 13 Warriors Saturday night in Havre.

Montana Tech, which also travels to Northern and UGF is still in the hunt as well, while the Bulldogs are red-hot, having won three straight.

Stingy Northern

It’s already been a very exciting season for fans of both the MSU-Northern Lights and Skylights. Both teams are sitting in the upper half of the Frontier standings, both have a legitimate chance to win Frontier championships, and both teams have a chance to go to the NAIA national tournament. Both teams have also spent most of the season ranked in the NAIA Coaches Poll at the same time, as is the case right now as the Skylights are ranked No. 19 and the Lights No. 23.

But heading into this weekend’s home stand with Montana Tech and LC State, there’s one more comminuity between the Lights and Skylights that’s truly amazing. Both teams are the No. 1-ranked defense in the NAIA.

The Skylights allow a measly 52 points per game, which is easily the best average in the Frontier and is No. 1 in all of NAIA women’s basketball. Meanwhile, the Lights are in the exact same position. The Northern men are allowing just 61 points per outing, which is tops in scoring defense in all of the NAIA as well.

So, if defense wins championships, both Northern teams are certainly on the right track right now.

Nice Recovery
The Montana Tech women’s basketball team’s world was turned upside down a few weeks ago when the A.D. at Tech was fired and the women’s head coach and top assistant quit in protest of the firing. But Tech, which is a very talented basketball team, has bounced back nicely.

The Orediggers are 4-6 in league play and very much in the hunt for a Frontier playoff berth. And though they’re still under .500 in conference play, Lindsie Wilson, who took over the head coaching reins when DeAnn Craft quit, has done an outstanding job of keeping the ship pointed in the right direction.

“They (Diggers) have rallied around the coaching change,” Northern head coach Chris Mouat, whose Skylight team beat Tech 58-42 last month in Butte, one night before the coaching debacle happened, said. “They’re playing better. Lindsie has done a really good with the situation, and I think they’ve turned a negative into a positive. They’re also running some different stuff now, so they’ll be a much different team than the one we saw when we played them in Butte.”

The Diggers are also a loaded squad. Junior guard Mandy Machinal and senior center Kelsey DeWit are known quantities and are returning All-Conference standouts. But the addition of 6-0 junior Kabri Emerson has made a huge different for Tech. Emerson averages 10 points and seven rebounds per night, and alongside DeWit, gives Tech one of the most powerful front lines in the Frontier.

**Friend and Foe**

When the Montana Tech men come to Havre Friday night, it won’t just be another difficult Frontier Conference game for the Lights. It’s also yet another matchup where MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse takes on his alma mater. Huse led the Orediggers to back-to-back Frontier titles in his time in Butte, and was also the 1995 Frontier Conference MVP. Huse’s older brother Brad, who is the head coach at Montana State, was also a star on the hardwood for the Orediggers.

Still, each time Huse faces the Diggers now, he’s only concerned with trying to lead his team to an important conference win, and Friday night’s game should be another battle. The Lights edged the Orediggers 83-82 in double-overtime last month in Butte, and the second meeting could be just as close.

Tech has really improved offensively under first-year head coach Patrick O’Herron. The Diggers are averaging 77 points per game which is third-best in the Frontier. They also have four players scoring in double figures, while they rank in the Top 40 in the NAIA in eight different offensive categories.

**Scoring Watch**

With three weeks left in the Frontier season, the race for the men’s and women’s scoring titles is heating up.

On the women’s side, UGF’s Erin Legel and Lindsey Abramson lead the way. Legel averages 18 points per game, while Abramson scores 17 per night. UM-Western’s Sammi Bignell (15 ppg), LCSC’s Tanis Fuller (15 ppg) and Westminster’s Alli Blake (14 ppg) round out the top five.

UGF’s Marcel Towns leads the Frontier men in scoring at 21 points per game, while LCSC’s E.J. Farris is right behind him at 20 points per outing. Rocky’s Tyree Anderson and Joel Barndt both average 18 points per game, as does Tech’s Adam Greger. Westminster’s Tallon Robertson scores 17 points per night, while Dickinson State’s Tevin Russell averages 16.