

Frontier Notebook: Frontier reaches the critical halfway point

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It's the halfway point of the 2012 Frontier Conference men's and women's basketball seasons. That means the next four weeks will be more intense than any other point in the season as teams race to a Frontier title and a postseason berth.

As for those races, the only thing clear on the men's side right now is that MSU-Northern and UM-Western are threatening to run away from the pack. The Lights and Bulldogs are tied atop the league standings at 6-1, with Northern now ranked No. 10 in the NAIA, while Western sits at No. 19.

MSU-N currently holds the tiebreaker with Western after the Lights beat the Bulldogs back on Jan. 14 in Havre. But the two teams are headed for a Feb. 10 showdown in Dillon, which could very well decide the Frontier's regular season champion.

After that, the Frontier is as wide open as it could get. Great Falls, Westminster, Carroll and Rocky Mountain College are all tied for second with 3-4 records, while Montana Tech and Lewis-Clark State bring up the rear at 2-5. With the logjam in the middle of the league, it's going to be a wild last seven games.

The women's league is also close. Westminster has the outright lead at 6-1, though the Griffins' lone loss came at LC State two weeks ago. However, the Warriors fell to second when Northern stunned them last Friday night in Havre.

RMC could be the wildcard in the women's race. The Battlin' Bears sit at 5-2 in league play and have Westminster and LC State at home in the second half of the season. Northern, Carroll and Montana Tech all sit at 3-4, and all three teams have pulled off big wins in the first half.

The head scratcher in the women's race so far is Western. The Bulldogs opened league play with a shocking 20-point win over LC State, but they've since gone 1-5. Great Falls is alone in last at 1-6, but the Argos have played a myriad of tight games in January. They might just be the team that keeps another team from winning the Frontier, or reaching the national tournament.

Halfway Awards

There is still a lot of basketball left to be played, but it's never too early to look at potential postseason awards.

Western's Brandon Brown is the clear favorite to repeat as Men's Player of the Year. Brown leads the Frontier in scoring 22 points per game and steals, at three per game, just as he did a season ago. He's also second in the conference in assists, and second in 3-point shooting. In less than three full seasons in Dillon, the dynamic Brown has eclipsed the 1,500 point plateau. If anyone is to challenge Brown for the award, it's Carroll's Andy Garland – another former POY. Garland is averaging 17 points and six rebounds per game in the final season of his historic career with the Saints.

Other players having a big year include, LC State's P.J. Bolte, a leading candidate for newcomer of the year, as well as UGF's Melvin Williams and Westminster's Jake Orchard.



Montana State University-Northern senior guard Laramie Schwenke looks to pass during a Frontier Conference women's basketball game last Friday night in Havre. Schwenke is leading the Frontier in 3-point shooting, as are the Skylights.

The MSU-Northern Lights may not have a player of the year candidate because they are so balanced and no Light is putting up gaudy numbers. But seniors Shaun Tatarka, LaVon Myers and Joe Simpson are all all-conference performers, as is Devin Jackson. Simpson should have the inside track on defensive a player of the year honors as well.

On the women's side, there's no question LCSC's Jasmine Stohr was on track to earn player of the year honors for another season. But Stohr could be sidelined the rest of the year with a knee injury. If the award was handed out today, and Stohr didn't win it, Westminster junior Nicole Yazzie or Western's Hayley Pettit would probably be the front runners. Yazzie is averaging 13 points, five assists, five rebounds and two steals per game. She's also shoots 47 percent from the 3-point-line. Pettit has had monster year, averaging a double-double, with 15 points and 12 rebounds per game.

Other POY candidates include, Northern's Laramie Schwenke, who actually puts up similar numbers to Yazzie's. Schwenke averages 14 points, six rebounds and four assists per game, while also shooting 41 percent from three. LC's Krisi Voshell, as well as Tech's Kelsey DeWit are among more Frontier players having a big season. LC's Alyssa Fierro, along with Pettit and Western and UGF's Kindra Jones joins Northern's Jordan Bruursema as potential defensive honorees, while Northern's Nikki Tresch and Westminster's Cydnee Tibbitts are probably the top candidates for newcomer of the year at the halfway mark.

The closest award could be the women's freshman of the year. LC's Brittaney Nibergall and Tech's Mandy Machinal are both putting up big numbers. Machinal is leading Tech in scoring at 16 points per game, while Nibergall averages double figures in points and leads the Frontier in steals.

Leaders

Brown is tearing up the Frontier in scoring and rebounding, but many other players are leading the way individually.

RMC's Sergio Trocha leads the Frontier in rebounding at 7 per game, while Western's Kyle Perry leads at 2 blocks per game. Trocha's teammate, Joel Barndt is second in the Frontier in rebounding. UGF's Williams leads the league in assists at nearly five per. As a team, UGF is tops in scoring at 78 points per game, the Lights are first in defense at 54 points per game, and field goal defense at 42 percent per outing. Carroll is first in 3-point shooting at 37 percent per game and the Lights are leading the Frontier in rebounding margin at 8 per game.

On the women's side, Stohr leads the league in scoring at 20 points per outing. Pettit is the top rebounder at 12 per, Nibergall leads the way at three steals per game and Voshell is the top shot blocker at 2 per outing. Tech's Tabitha Tomlinson is leading the Frontier with five assists per night. Team-wise, RMC leads in scoring at 73 points per game, Northern is tops on defense, allowing just 54 points per game, while the Skylights lead the Frontier and the NAIA in 3-point shooting at 39 percent per game. LC State leads the league in rebounding margin at almost nine boards per night.

Note: The Montana State University-Northern men's and women's basketball games Saturday night at the McLaughlin Center in Great Falls will have earlier start times. The Skylights play UGF at 5 p.m. and the Lights tip off at 7.