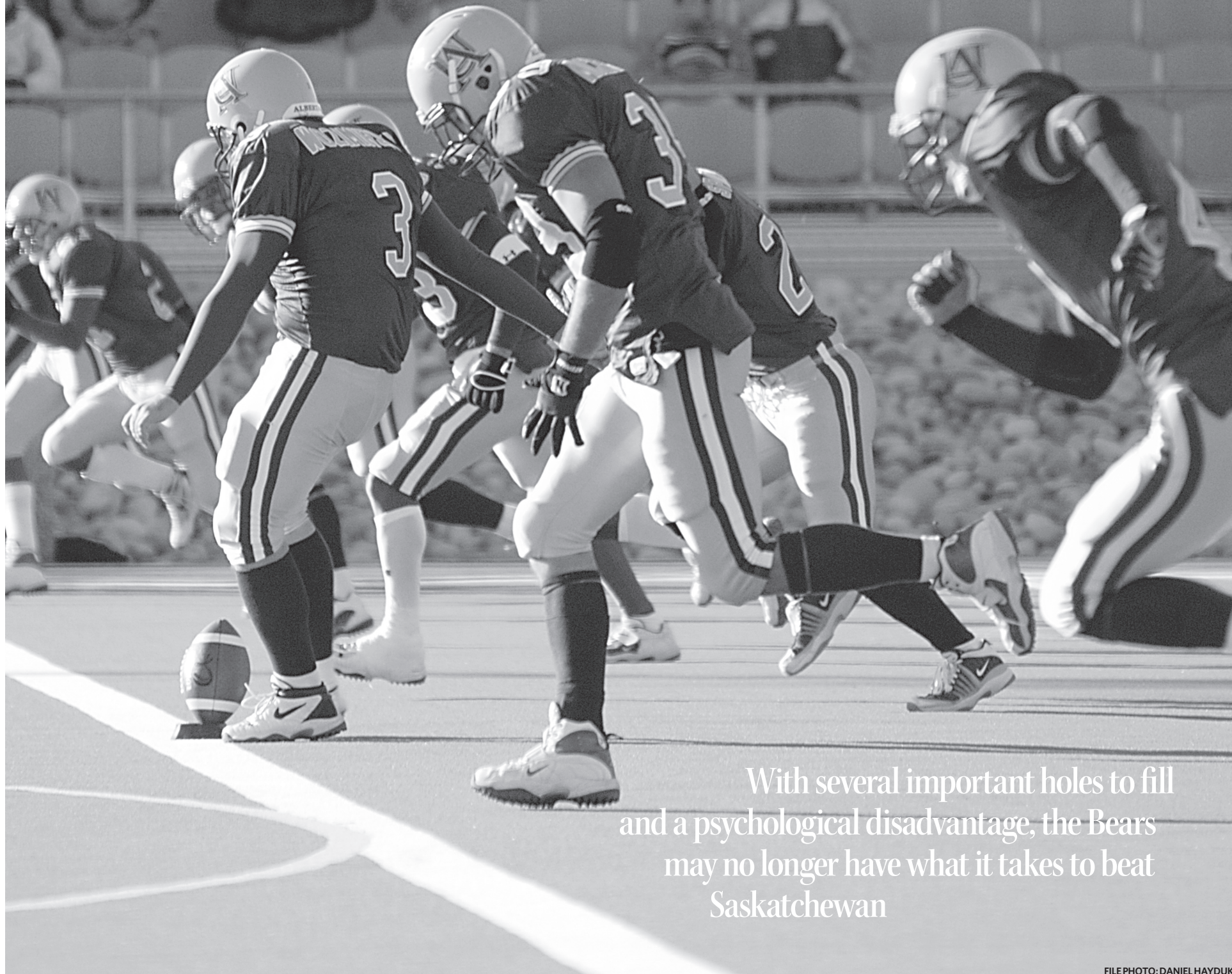


# Bears kick off against arch-rival Huskies



With several important holes to fill and a psychological disadvantage, the Bears may no longer have what it takes to beat Saskatchewan

FILEPHOTO: DANIEL HAYDUK

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For the first time since 2003, the Bears football club could very well lose their opening game of the regular season. On Saturday, Alberta takes on their prairie rivals from Saskatchewan in the opening game of the CIS football season. This rivalry may even trump the battle of Alberta that's so often the focus of media buzz when teams from Edmonton and Calgary come head-to-head.

It only takes revisiting the past two Hardy Cups, Canada West's Championship game, to get a sense of the history between these prairie rivals. In 2004, the Bears lost a close battle by a final score of 21–20 and were forced to lumber back home empty-handed after a promising regular season. 2005 ended up being a movie that the Bears had seen the year before, losing again at the paws of the Huskies 30–17. In fact, counting two last year, the Bears' last three losses have come at the hands of the Huskies.

It's been a long winter of hibernation for the Bears in the off-season;

a time to lick their wounds from the previous two seasons and regroup for 2006. But their first challenge out of the gate ought to wake them abruptly from their summer slumber, as they, once again, face their rivals from the land of Corner Gas and Tommy Douglas. Both teams should be fired up for a highly competitive game, as is usually the case, but most signs point to an Alberta loss this weekend.

The first obstacle for the Green and Gold is the "Saskatchewan Curse." This isn't documented in any medical journals or even football playbooks, but it has started to develop over the last couple of seasons with the difficulty Alberta has had beating Saskatchewan on the gridiron.

Each year, a team starts with a fresh slate, but when playoffs come around those thoughts of previous losses creep into the helmets and players begin to doubt whether they can win over this team. Because of the Bears' inability to overcome Saskatchewan in the last two Hardy Cups and the regular season last year, the curse is bound to be a factor on Saturday.

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Despite beating Alberta to claim top team in the west these last two years, Saskatchewan went on to be defeated each year in the Vanier Cup game by an eastern opponent. It was Laval in '04 with in a low-scoring 7–1 loss, then a 24–23 loss to Laurier the following year. Saskatchewan has come so close to being the top team

in Canadian university football that they're likely hungrier than the Bears. The Huskies will have their eyes set on a Vanier Cup from the opening kickoff of the season.

Not that the Bears won't be focused on a championship, but typically teams that come second place for a while just have that mental toughness that's required to win a championship. Look at the Trinity Western Spartans in men's volleyball last year. Trinity lost to Alberta in the gold medal game in '05. However, they showed a steely reserve in the gold medal game in '06 and shocked Alberta in straight sets. The hungrier team is the better team, all else being equal, so Saskatchewan has an edge in that department.

The one aspect of Saturday's game that's tough to predict, though, is how the teams will match-up after losing key players. Both the Huskies and Bears are left with large holes in their lineup at skill positions after last season. There will be two new quarterbacks, as Saskatchewan's Steve Bilan and Alberta's Darryl Salmon, who ranked fifth and eighth respec-

tively in the league last year, both graduated.

In addition, the Huskies are now without David Stevens, who was ranked second in league rushing and the Bears are minus Jarred Winkel—who is with the Eskos—and David Bissett, who combined to put the Bears third in the conference in regular season rushing yards.

With young and, in many cases, unproven players filling those spots, it's tough to predict which club has the edge in physical ability on the field, but it's also tough not to wonder if maybe the current incarnation of this Alberta team has passed its window of opportunity.

Saskatchewan's close-but-no-cigar seasons of the past two years and their defeat of the Bears to advance through the playoffs gives them a huge mental edge. And, with the game going Saturday at 1pm in Saskatoon, it's difficult to see the Bears doing anything but falling to their biggest rivals. Alberta could very well shock everyone, but more than likely they'll lose again. I just don't see anything else happening.