



# Nationals-hosting Bears open season against provincial rivals

A more experienced Golden Bears hopes to open the season on the right foot, as they host Lethbridge and Calgary this weekend

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The Bears soccer team has a lot to look forward to this season. As hosts of the CIS National Championships, they have an automatic spot in the playoffs, and, with the return of many fifth-year players, last season's inexperienced team has evolved into one that's capable of winning the tournament. And, they'll take their first steps towards that this weekend, with games against the Lethbridge Pronghorns and Calgary Dinos.

"Both [Lethbridge and Calgary] are improving programs—they're always competitive. It's going to be a case of: can we get our act together and play with some conviction—particularly in an attacking sense—and get the results against two tough teams," said Bears head coach Len Vickery, whose team was bolstered with the return of Mike Kennedy and Junior Castrillon, both of whom were on the Bears team that won nationals in 2003. Castrillon scored the winning goal.

"Tryouts went very well. We spent a lot of time this year recruiting, and we're particularly pleased that a number of players who were lost to injury or took a year off because they had graduated are now returning," Vickery said. "It's encouraging

we've got these experienced players returning, but just as encouraging is the development of a good group of third- and fourth-year players."

The Bears finished 6-4-2 in the 2005 season, but started very slowly, a development Vickery attributed to a lack of experience. The Bears only had one fifth-year player last season, and he went down to injury early in the year. But they rebounded well, defeating UBC and Trinity Western towards the end of the season—the gold and bronze medalists at nationals, respectively—and finishing third in the Canada West conference.

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BEARS HEAD COACH**

A change of policy has made it so the team that holds first place at the end of the season will host the Canada West playoffs, which has the Bears looking forward in hopes of hosting two straight weeks of playoffs. Vickery admitted that there were many players

at tryouts who talked of playing for a national championship this season.

"I think the highlight of the season will probably be coming in my first year and playing at the actual national championships," said first-year Bear Harman Braich, a member of the youth national squad. "Hopefully I can be a big presence in the back and step up to the level of play on the team."

Despite the home-field advantage, the Bears will still need to get past TWU and UBC, the two teams that finished ahead of them the previous season.

"[Having the Nationals on Bears' turf] is definitely an advantage; it's still going to be a difficult tournament being that there's going to be an extra west-coast team involved because we get the bye," Kennedy said.

Along with reigning CW MVP Mark Korthius, both Kennedy and Castrillon will be counted on to provide a leading role on the pitch.

"[I hope to] provide some leadership; try to help out as much as I can with the younger guys.—hopefully motivate the older guys also. It's mostly a team goal I have for this season," Castrillon said.

The Bears hit the field against Lethbridge at 4:15pm on Friday and return to it to take on Calgary at 2:15pm on Sunday. Both games go at Foote Field.



TOP: NEAL WILDING, BOTTOM: WEIYANG LIU