

Pandas hope for a quick start hosting Lethbridge and Calgary

Alberta wants to avoid “dropping points” by eliminating ties early in the year

PAUL OWEN
Sports Editor

When they opened last season with three straight ties, the Pandas soccer team tied their own noose on a 6-5-5 season that saw them miss the playoffs by two points. This year, the Pandas are determined to get off to a quicker start as they host the Lethbridge Pronghorns and Calgary Dinos this weekend.

“When we look at the start of the season the last two years, one of our problems is that we drop points in the beginning. Taking six points from this weekend will set us up that much better for the playoffs. Right off the bat we really need to be focused and understand how much every game counts,” Pandas head coach Liz Jepsen said. “We can’t continue to drop points by tying games we should win. We can’t settle for that complacency.”

“We have a sense of urgency,” striker Alix Strap added. “The season is so short, and we need to win a lot more games: no more ties.”

The Pandas avoided the tie while downing Lethbridge 3-1 and Calgary 1-0 in a pre-season tournament thanks in large part to Strap and fellow strikers Claire Thomas and Amy Ciezki. The Pandas scored

twelve goals in four games in the weekend tournament in Lethbridge.

“The nice thing about the 4-3-3 is that you can attack well with it, but it adapts to handle what you’re opponents’ attack is like,” Jepsen explained. “So I think that going at them with an attacking system is the way to go. The best thing about our system is that it lets us make the game unpredictable. We need to make sure that we have a lot of diversity.

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LIZ JEPSEN
PANDAS HEAD COACH

“Amy Ciezki ran through people in the flanks, and we scored a ton of goals in the same way, but team skill will be more prepared for that and

we need to develop different ways of scoring.”

The Pandas’ offensive abilities will help against Calgary, who recently graduated their all-star keeper, but may run into a roadblock with the Pronghorns’ back line.

“I’m sure that [the Pronghorns] will be well organized. They have a very strong keeper; I think that will be our biggest challenge: getting through their system and then actually being able to capitalize on our opportunities,” said Jepsen.

While their offence has remained as potent as ever, the Pandas have also shown renewed focus on the defensive side of the ball, recording three shutouts.

“We’re all more comfortable playing with each other, so we have more confidence and know each other’s tendencies,” sweeper Natalie Swain said.

The Pandas rebounded from their disappointing showing to make the most of their automatic bye into nationals by placing fifth, and the resilient result is still fresh in the Pandas’ minds as they prepare for the new season.

“We know we could have done a lot better last season, so this year we’re looking to play off nationals and get back there again,” Strap said.



FILE PHOTO: LEANNE FONG

HEAD AND SHOULDERS ABOVE Striker Amy Ciezki scored ten goals last year.

Field hockey team prepares to defend national title

PAUL OWEN
Sports Editor

For the Pandas field hockey team, last year’s national championship doubled as a statement to the field hockey world that they were ready to be a perennial powerhouse. Thanks to a very talented recruiting class and a positive ripple effect on the field hockey community, they just might be ready to back it up.

“We have a really good crop of rookies, and we’re excited about their talent,” said head coach Carla Somerville, last year’s CIS coach of the year. “I think we’re a more talented team, but that in our approach to the game, we’re a little bit inexperienced. We’re not playing at home, which is always a bit of a negative, but we’ve overcome the biggest challenge: we know how to win. Before we always stumbled with the challenge of winning, so we should be confident to start the year.”

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CARLA SOMERVILLE
PANDAS HEAD COACH

The inexperience is due to the graduation of a pair of all-stars—Diana Hughes and AJ Johnson—who Somerville described as very demanding and intense players. Despite these losses, the Pandas still have goaltender Sarah Houlihan; last year’s playoff hero, she’s now entering her fifth year and will be heavily relied on if the Pandas have any hope of repeating.



KRYSTINA SULATYCKI

THOSE DON’T LOOK LIKE LEGAL CURVES The Pandas should field another strong team after spending the summer trying to grow field hockey in Edmonton.

“As big of a challenge as winning a national championship was, it’s going to be harder to defend it,” Somerville said. “We’re always going to have rebuilding years and challenges, but we’re at a point now where we think we can establish ourselves as one of the best programs in the country, year in and year out.”

While the Pandas championship has

been good for the sport in Edmonton, it’s also been good for midfielder Erin Mason, who scored the Pandas’ lone goal in the CIS final. Mason gained notice at the national finals and was picked up by the national team.

Over the summer, the Pandas refused to rest on their laurels, instead donning the Green and Gold, along with a shiny, new, national cham-

pionship ring, and promoting field hockey in the Edmonton area. Field hockey was almost axed as a CIS sport in the spring of 2005, and Somerville sees their championship as a way to help ensure that field hockey remains in CIS.

“It just shows that any program can put together a good run and become a good program. But, anytime another

team or more teams win, it gives more credence to your sport,” she said. “We’re trying to grow the sport. We have a couple of Edmonton players coming out of the junior leagues who look like will be coming into the University program. They’re excited about making the team and entering the program, and it just generates from level to level.”