

Dynastic Pandas make emotional return

Christy Hansen née Torgerson returned with the Canadian Masters to face Alberta almost a decade after she dominated the CIS

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Sports Staff

During the warm-up, before the opening serve smacked off a taped palm, Christy Hansen looked up at the walls of the Main Gym and reminisced about the glory days. Many white and red banners adorn the walls; each one a reminder of successful teams that brought home championships.

There's a lot of commemorative cloth hanging there, and Hansen played on several of those much-lauded teams. In the late '90s she was known as Christy Torgerson, but, while her name changed through marriage, she still has that same passion for volleyball. On Friday night, Hansen led the Canadian Masters women's team, a national volleyball club comprised of former CIS stars, in an exhibition match against the Pandas. It's been six years since Hansen played CIS volleyball in the Main Gym.

"You come into [the Main Gym] and it's kind of like coming home,"

Hansen said. "I remember the relationships and the friendships most, and how close we were to everyone. Second would be the wins and the process along the way."

"It didn't really matter how our season went, it all came down to national championships, and for those six years it was magic."

Laurie Eisler

The Pandas won consecutive championships from 1995–2000 and Hansen, a teacher who has two children, played on four of those squads. For all her success on the court, it was still a struggle for Hansen to put her

finger on one thing that led Alberta to volleyball supremacy those years.

"It was a combination of good people and amazing coaches, but other than that a lot of heart. Now, after being away for so long, we realize, 'Wow, what we did was really special,'" she said. "To be honest I don't really know [what led to our success]. All you can say is the right combination of everyone coming together."

"Special," as Hansen puts it, is definitely an understatement. In addition to the six consecutive CIS championships, the Pandas also garnered four Canada West titles. They were the Montréal Canadiens of the hardwood: virtually unbeatable for a long stretch. In fact, it was such a strong team that, in 2002, the '95-'00 Pandas were inducted into the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame. During the Panda reign, current head coach Laurie Eisler was still at the helm and had mixed emotions seeing former players Friday night.

"It really annoys me when they do

things that beat us that we don't have a solution for," Eisler joked after the game. "You get a little bit of that mixed feeling though. I love watching them play and it's so awesome to be in the gym with them, but we really want to beat them. Part of it is that they've set the ball really high and if you're a Panda volleyball player, you've got a legacy and a reputation to strive towards all the time, no matter what the year is."

Five members of Team Canada Masters Friday night had played at least one season on the Pandas dynasty in the late '90s. The familiar faces across the net gave Eisler a chance to look back on those championship seasons.

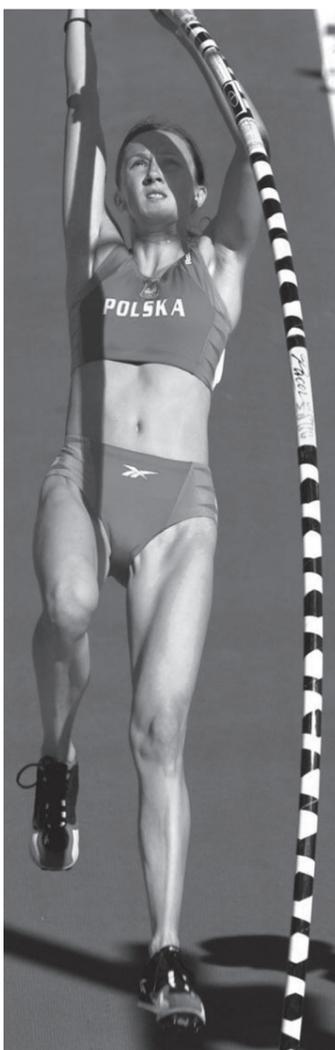
"It didn't really matter how our season went, it all came down to national championships, and for those six years it was magic," Eisler said. "We had our fair share of adversity, but once athletes know how to win, that takes a really big part of the equation out."

Today, it's the Canadian Masters team that benefits from Alberta's

past dominance. Hansen, MVP of the 2000 CIS championship, is just the tip of the iceberg; Shandra Doran racked up four CIS championships with the Pandas; Jenny Benkie was a two-time player of the year, and outstanding female athlete for 1999/2000. All of their names can be found throughout the Panda record books and all over the Pandas of the Year trophy.

Despite their qualifications, the Masters fell 3–1 to the Pandas Friday night. Pandas' left-side Jocelyn Blair earned an all-star of the game nod with her impressive kills throughout the night. To Blair, athletes like Hansen and the other players on the Masters team are role models.

"It can be intimidating at first to play against them because they're experienced and they know the game so well," Blair admitted. "The things I learnt from them are attitude and composure on the court—the way they deal with adversity, the way they lead their teammates."



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