

Bears hope Brick leads to National success

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With the puck ready to drop on the 24th edition of the Bears annual pre-season hockey tournament, the Brick Invitational, one has to wonder how important an exhibition weekend is to the total picture of a Championship Season.

Bears head coach Eric Thurston thinks it's an important time to learn the systems of the team and adapt to the new officiating standards. Though Thurston's objectives for the weekend follow the standard for pre-season matchups, the Brick Invitational has been a good measuring stick for the Bears' past championship seasons.

Since 1983, the Brick Invitational has brought with it spirited competition and a dash of luck for the home side. Since the inception of the annual tourney, the Bears have won the entire event ten times, more than twice as many as the second place Huskies and Dinos, who have a mere four each. Also, in that 24-year span, the Bears have captured 13 Canada West conference titles and six University Cups, making them by far the most rewarded regional- and national-banner collecting club.

Despite the Bears impressive stats since the inception of the pre-season tournament, Alberta's players and coaches aren't willing to admit that it means anything more than a chance to work out the kinks.

"[The tournament] is about evaluating your players and adjusting to the new rules," Thurston said. "The only statistics I worry about are wins, losses,



FILE PHOTO: NICK WIEBE

TOEING THE GOAL LINE The Golden Bears return to action at Clare Drake this weekend hosting the 24th annual Brick Invitational pre-season tournament.

and my goalies' save percentage."

The Bears have also complemented a Brick Invitational title with a Canada West Conference title eight times. On top of that, the Bears have gone on to win the University Cup and the Brick in the same season—1985 and 2004—twice and took all three titles in 2004.

"I guarantee that no one else in

the room has heard these numbers," second-year goalie Aaron Sorochan said of the team's impressive record at the Brick Invitational. "We look at this as just another two exhibition games, another chance for the new players to adjust to the system. If we can come out of the weekend knowing what the referees are going to call and have our lines clicking,

that's more important than a Brick Invitational Title.

"For me [the stats are] bogus; you can take any stat in the world and if you ask that player about that record, he will say he never knew. We just take a lot of pride in winning and the banners speak for themselves."

With the Bears looking to become the first team to win three consecutive

national championships, a little luck in the pre-season couldn't hurt.

Whether the Brick Invitational tournament has turned into a pre-season good luck charm for the Golden Bears or not, it does make the weekend of exhibition puck fun to watch. The Bears will take on Saskatchewan at 7:30pm on Friday and then Lethbridge at 6pm on Saturday.

Fútbol Pandas host left coast powers

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After suffering their first loss of the season in Winnipeg on Sunday, the fourth-ranked Pandas soccer team will return home this weekend to take on the Victoria Vikes and UBC Thunderbirds. The perennial soccer powerhouses will provide the toughest test yet for the Alberta (5-1-0) squad.

"Given the fact that we're playing the number-one ranked [Victoria] and [ninth]-ranked [UBC] teams, [wins] will be giving the players themselves a sense of confidence in knowing that truly they are a force not to be reckoned with," Pandas head coach Liz Jepsen said. "You can see it, you can believe it, but sometimes it has to be actualized and I think that's what taking six points this weekend would do."

Last season the Pandas were swept in their two matchups against UBC, failing to score in either game, but they did manage to hand Victoria two of their four losses on the season. The growing pains of last season should benefit this year's squad.

"We have a lot more experience; I think a more mature team than last year. We only had one fifth-year player last year and this year we have a number

more. We also have been together as a team for a year and a bit," Jepsen said. "Although I've been in the program prior seasons as assistant coach, everybody has their own way that they direct and run things. I think that we've now moved beyond the building stages of that and that we, as a program, are looking forward together."

The T-Birds (2-2-1) have started off slowly with losses to the Vikes and Trinity Western, and managed only a tie against CIS newcomers University College of the Fraser Valley. Victoria (4-0-1), on the other hand, has started off the season right where they left it when they won the national championship on Foote Field last November.

"Both are very formidable [opponents], so I don't think we can take either of them lightly," Jepsen said.

"Victoria has been ranked number one since the beginning of the season; they've not had any losses. They're a very experienced squad. They just had a national championship under them, so I guess with all the accolades under their belt [it appears that] they will be tougher to beat.

"But again, we don't discount UBC because they're always strong. Their coach does an excellent job with them. I'm sure that both games will be good and challenging."

The Pandas are one win away from



FILE PHOTO: PETE YEE

HEY! YOU FORGOT SOMETHING The Pandas will have their toughest task yet when they take on UBC and UVic.

matching last season's total of six, and this weekend will mark just the half-way point in the season. Having spent the past three weeks beating up on the teams at the bottom of the division—Saskatchewan, Lethbridge and Regina—the west coast foes will provide the strongest litmus test for how good the Pandas really are this season.

"If we win our two games, or when

we win our two games, however you want to look at it if you're superstitious or not, I think it will send a real message out," Jepsen said. "I think that this is just the next rung of the ladder that we have to climb. We've taken a lot of points from the games that we've had to date with just the one loss; we need to continue to push for that. Getting the points this weekend will set us up very

well for the rest of the season. It will also send a message: if you can play with two of the best teams in Canada West and come out on top, then certainly your outlook down the long run is going to be a lot stronger."

The Pandas will be battling UBC on Saturday at noon. They take on the Vikes the same time the next day. Both games go at Foote Field.