

SPORTS

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New-look Bears start quest for three-peat

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While the jerseys, arena and the man behind their bench will all be the same as last year for the Golden Bears hockey team, little else will be the same for this year's remake—though not rebuilding—edition of the team when the puck drops on their regular season this weekend in Regina. While this will be the first regular CIS action for a third of the team, head coach Eric Thurston doesn't expect that it will take long for Alberta's rookies and new line combinations to find their comfort zones.

"We're starting to get chemistry among the guys and the two pre-season weekends served us well," Thurston said. "The chemistry between some of the guys has quickly developed and I am very impressed by the way [Tim] Krymusa and [Ian] McDonald have meshed together as well as how good the line of [Brian] Woolger, [Tyler] Metcalf and [Scott] Henkelman have been."

While three of those players made steady contributions to the Bears last season, rookies McDonald and Woolger will be expected to contribute as well if the team is to have a chance to capture their third-straight CIS title—a feat that hasn't been accomplished since the 1979/80 Alberta team hoisted the University Cup and capped their three-peat. Capturing a title this year to match that will be a tough for this relatively inexperienced team, as teams will be targeting the Bears like never before.

"At the U of A, you're the hunted and everybody's gunning for you. I've talked to our guys about how we wear the bull's eye and it's not an easy thing to wear and not everybody can



HE'S BEATING YOUR ENTIRE TEAM Richard Hamula (18) eludes a pair of Lethbridge defenders in action Saturday at Clare Drake arena.

do it," Thurston said. "It's easy [for the other teams] to hunt people because there's no pressure on [them], but we get everybody's best game, and that means we have to bring our best game.

"I don't know if it's pressure, but it's a pride. I'll be perfectly honest with you: as a coach I want to win and it's my expectation to win every year and I would be doing an injustice if I didn't have that expectation."

The Regina Cougars, who are looking to

improve upon their sixth-place finish from a year ago, will be the first team to take aim at Alberta this season. However, with the departure of Josh Garbutt—whose 55 points lead the team last season—to the Victoria Salmon Kings of the ECHL, Regina's offence won't likely provide much competition for the Bears. But, Thurston is loathe to take the Cougars lightly because of their coaching and fortitude.

"Regina is very tough in their rink; they block every shot and they sell out every shift, and if you

don't go there and bring your best game, you're coming away minus two points every night," Thurston said. "They're a very good team and they're very well coached. I think Blaine Sautner is the best coach in Canada West, maybe one of the best coaches in the country, and I really respect him and the work ethic of his teams are second-to-none."

The first face off is at 7pm in Regina on Friday, with both teams going again at the same time on Saturday.

Pucking Pandas raise banner versus visiting Cougars

ANDREW RENFREE
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Howie Draper has been through this before—four times to be exact. The routine is more or less the same each time a national championship banner is raised to the rafters of Clare Drake Arena, but no matter how many times the tenth-year coach sees this ceremony, each time is special.

"One of the things that we talk to players about when they come into our building is about the banners," Draper said. "It's special when you can come back after years gone by and look up into the rafters and see your years up there, and the accomplishments that you've had as a group. It's significant that these banners go up because they'll be there forever: as long as this arena lasts."

The Pandas hockey team is taking on the Regina Cougars this weekend and will have a ceremony Saturday in honour of their CIS national championship last year—Alberta's fifth championship in the last seven years. While some former Pandas have now moved from Edmonton or are playing on other hockey teams, several will be in attendance Saturday for a special ceremony.

"We're hoping that everything works out that they can all be there—I know that they all want to," Draper said.

The Pandas could take these first few games of the 2006/07 season to recover from their championship hangover, and reminisce about the successful seasons of years gone by, but Draper and his team are eager to start the season strong and come out of the weekend with a 2–0 record. That might be easier said than done, however, as Regina has traditionally been one of the stronger teams in the Canada West division.

Regina has been the only team in the last ten years, other than Alberta, that has won the Canada West Championship, claiming the title in 2001. Last season, the Cougars finished second behind Alberta in the division, and were the only other team to have a winning record on the season. Draper expects the Cougars to have a strong team this season as well, and they could

be vying for a Canada West title come March.

"Regina traditionally has been one of the top competitors in our conference as well as in CIS, so we're expecting them to be very quick, very skilled," Draper said. "Regina has been able to produce strong offence so that makes for an exciting matchup between the two clubs."

Regina lost four players to graduation in the off-season, two of whom were defenders and two of whom were goalies. Subsequently, the Cougars might be a bit weaker in their own end, but Draper noted that Regina has recruited some strong players, including luring a strong defensive player that Alberta had sought out in the off-season.

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HOWIE DRAPER

"If I know [Regina head coach] Sarah [Howald] and her ability to recruit, Regina will be strong this year. They've always been pretty strong with their defensive core and I would imagine that they'll be just as good if not a little bit better," he said.

Friday will mark Alberta's first regular season game after a successful pre-season that saw the Pandas post a 3–1–1 record. Draper was pleased with how his team performed early on, and felt that the younger players stepped up into the void left by the graduated players like Kristen Hagg, who was the league MVP last season.

"I pleased with our new players this year," he said. "I think that they're showing a lot of potential and they're going to give us a little more depth than we had last year."

The puck drops Friday and Saturday at 7pm at Clare Drake Arena.



FILE PHOTO:NICK WIEBE

ICE ICE BABY The Pandas will start their title defence with a celebration on Saturday night.