

Esks' woeful season good for fans

Fret not Eskimos faithful, for there's an upside to your team's utter downfall



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Sports
Commentary

Most Canadians remember the fall of 1972 quite clearly. It was the year Canada was cemented as the greatest hockey country in the world when a team of NHL stars beat the Soviet Union in the Summit Series. For Edmontonians however, the fall of 1972 had additional significance: it marked the first of 34 consecutive years that the Edmonton Eskimos made the CFL playoffs—a record unsurpassed in any other North American professional sport.

During that span, the Esks appeared in half of the Grey Cup Championship games (17), ten of which resulted in victories. There have been many parades and celebrations during those years, but after three and a half decades of waltzing into the playoffs, the 2006 edition of the Edmonton Eskimos will be watching the post-season from their couches for the first time since Nixon was president.

It's been an agonizing season for Esks' fans, watching the team tumble from Grey Cup glory to the cellar of the CFL. As hard as it is to admit, this grotesque season may actually be a good thing for the Eskimos, their fans and the league. Don't get me wrong, I loathe hearing constant reminders from fans of other teams,

especially Calgary, that the Eskimos will be on the outside of the playoffs looking in this year. However, there are benefits from the demise of this impressive playoff streak. I was at Commonwealth Stadium on 20 July when Milt Stegall ran for a 100-yard touchdown on the last play of the game to give Winnipeg the win. Believe me, that was about as enjoyable as watching a *Jackass* film. But despite the tribulations the Eskimos have caused, this abysmal season will serve to teach some lessons to the Edmonton faithful.

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First, it's now becoming clear who's a true fan and who was simply enjoying the successes of the last 34 years. It's easy to cheer for a perennial championship contender, but it's another thing to cheer for the second-worst team in the league. If the Eskimos lose some casual fans who just stick around when times are good, it really doesn't harm the organization. The core fans are more likely to purchase merchandise, own season tickets and pass on the enjoyment of the game to family members who will become the future fans.

Second, and more importantly,

Esks' fans are becoming complacent as we watch the regular season with limited interest, knowing that the Green and Gold will make the playoffs, even if they have a mediocre season. We've now know what Roughrider fans go through every year: an up and down season that leaves them on the brink of a playoff appearance at year end. By being humbled this season, Esks' fans might begin to appreciate the game a bit more.

Compare the revelry during the Oilers' playoff run to the celebrations after the Esks won the Grey Cup last year. It had been so long since the Oilers saw post-season success that fans were ecstatic to the point of insanity—nobody really knew how to celebrate without acting like drunken idiots. On the other hand, when the Esks won the Grey Cup last year the attitude in Edmonton was a nonchalant, "Good job boys, way to win another Cup." People were happy, but not soil-their-pants happy. Maybe a few bad seasons for the Eskimos would help fans realize that athletic success is very difficult to achieve and championships should be valued.

Eskimo fans must admit that the best league is one where a new team wins each year, and teams can go from bad to worse in a couple of seasons. With the apparent end of the Eskimos playoff streak this season, it only benefits the other teams and won't kill the Esks faithful either. As the cliché goes, it'll only make us stronger—or at least it'll make us anticipate 2007 a little more in the hope that the Esks can turn down the suck.

straight Canada West title—maintaining their all-time undefeated conference record in the process—in Lethbridge this weekend. The Pandas will face the other three Canada West teams: Victoria, UBC and Lethbridge, their biggest rivals. The Pandas downed the Pronghorns 10-3 in the final last year and won silver at the CIS championships.

Bears Volleyball

Fresh off a 4-0 showing at their own Can-Am tournament, the Bears head to the University of Manitoba for their final pre-season tune-up this weekend. They'll take on the Dalhousie Tigers Thursday at 5pm and the Ryerson Rams Friday at 3:45pm. Saturday will mark the end of exhibition play with a pair of games against Manitoba at 10am and Winnipeg at 3:45pm. Reports that Manitobans don't know how to schedule an event are thus far unproven, but seriously, who schedules a game at a quarter to? They should learn from the U of A and realize that just because you schedule a game at 6pm (or 8pm) doesn't mean it has to start on time. The athletics department has been getting away with that one for years.

Pandas Volleyball

The Pandas continue their proud tradition of playing all their pre-season games on the road so we never have an actual opportunity to write a game story about them, instead relagating them to Sports Shorts every week. This weekend they'll take on Calgary, Trinity Western, Manitoba and a yet unnamed opponent in the U of C's tournament. The big news here will be next week when they start their season at home against Brandon.

Bears Hockey

Were this a past year, domination would be imminent as the Bears take on UBC

on the road. About the only thing in doubt heading into the weekend would be where the T-Birds would host the game since their arena is being torn apart to be replaced with a brand new Olympic-sized one. That said, this year's Bears aren't as dominant as they once were, as evidenced by a home loss to Calgary last weekend, and this year's version of the Thunderbirds (2-2) seems less severely bad than previous incarnations of the team. Also, the games are going at Whistler Arena. Poor UBC has to play 28 road games this year.

Fantasy Hockey

After beating up on that Igor Ulanov-loving, mouth-breathing old-man fucker, Heather Smith, I executed a trade with A&E Editor Amanda Ash in the *Gateway's* hockey pool, acquiring Dany Heatley and Alex Tanguay for Brian Gionta, Mike Sillinger and Phil Kessel. Deputy News Editor Scott "Quaking in his booties" Lilwall will be the next to feel the pain that can only be brought by my fearsome team. Yes, I'm only in fifth, but that's because of Yahoo! error, not virtual-GM error.

Shorts

Only two editors are rocking the boxer-shorts this week: Lilwall and myself. The four other guys in the office are wearing restrictive boxer-briefs. Chloé and Natalie are both wearing bi-coloured "boy-shorts," while Amanda is sporting full-bum panties and Krystina is wearing Sunday's underwear on Wednesday. Apparently she can't read. Lisa is supporting her band by wearing specially made underwear with the word box spelled backwards on the front and Pangina scrawled on the back. I never thought when I started the underwear poll it would result in someone pulling their pants down in the office. I was wrong.

SPORTS SHORTS

by Paul Owen

Pandas Basketball

After starting the pre-season 0-3, the Pandas will host Memorial University, Concordia University and the University of Victoria in the annual Pandas Hoopfest.

"This is going to be a good amount of quality basketball," Pandas rookie head coach Scott Edwards said. "It's another set of games for us to learn how to play together."

The team will be heavily relying on the six third-years who were brought in two years ago to turn Alberta around.

"[We're expecting] big things from those third-years. They need to set the tone for our young group—we have another big group of freshmen this year and they need to learn how to play Canada West basketball," he said. "It's going to come from those third years to show them."

The Pandas take on UVic Friday night and Memorial Saturday, both at 8pm. They face Concordia Sunday at 1pm in the Main Gym.

Bears Basketball

The male Alberta basketballers will head to southern Ontario for a trio of games this weekend. They'll kick it off in the House That Sheila Built, Copps Coliseum in Hamilton, against the McMaster Marauders Thursday at noon. They will follow that up against the University of Toronto Varsity Blues on Friday at 2pm and the York Lion on Sunday at 2pm.

Pandas Rugby

The Pandas will be in search of their eighth

Nurses

2b

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