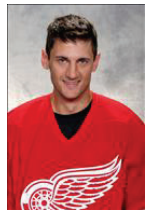


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FILE PHOTO: SHAHEED MERANI

SET US UP THE BLOCK The Pandas have been getting contributions from all areas of their game en route to a 4-0 record.

Surging volley Pandas host fading Winnipeg Wesmen

JANELLE SLOYCHUK
 Sports Writer

When the volleyball Pandas host the Winnipeg Wesmen this weekend, it will be a matchup between a pair of teams headed in opposite directions.

The seventh-ranked Wesmen began their season on an uncertain note as they split a season-opening series against UBC only to fall in straight sets against the Manitoba Bisons in a lone game this weekend.

Alternatively, fourth-ranked Alberta opened the season with a more vigorous debut, posting a 4-0 record and losing only two sets all season. The Pandas made quick work of the Brandon Bobcats and fifth-ranked Regina Cougars in weekend sets this season, thanks in large part to a pair of third-year hitters.

"On the stats for sure you look at Jocelyn Blair and Tiffany Dodds carrying a fair bit of the offensive load and

[they] are kind of problem solvers for us," Pandas coach Laurie Eisler said.

While Blair and Dodds are ranked fifth and sixth in Canada West in kills per game, it's Winnipeg's Nicola Dirks that is ranked number one in the country with an average of 6.5 points per game, including non-conference play.

"Winnipeg is always a good team," Eisler said. "They have a very strong power hitter in Dirks—definitely a player we're going to have to be ready for."

While the Wesmen attack will rely heavily on Dirks, Eisler feels that her team is able to spread the ball and offer a more balanced attack. Grant MacEwan transfer Samantha Wojtkiw is sixth in the conference in hitting percentage, and fellow middle Alexa Berton isn't far behind in eighth.

"They all have their times when they're leading the charge," Eisler said. "I'm happy with what the middles are bringing and Darryl Roper has done a

really awesome job in her first year as the starting setter for the team."

Eisler has good reason to credit the third-year setter from St Albert who has proven her worth this season through a well-balanced skill set, boasting 146 assists and 33 digs. The Pandas have also found emerging young players in Berton, a second-year, and first-year left-side Tiffany Proudfoot. Despite her youth, Proudfoot has established herself as one of Alberta's most consistent athletes.

"We're getting more consistent although we have our moments [where we aren't]. We are recovering out of them quite well," Eisler said. "We're balanced in our play: we're distributing the ball a little more evenly and I think [we're] more balanced in all aspects of the game."

The Panda's first set against the Wesmen is served up on Friday at 8pm with the second game to follow on Saturday at 6:30pm.

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