

Volley Pandas focussed on Simon Fraser after bye week

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After hosting an international volleyball team from Japan and laughing it up with comedian Rick Mercer at a practice during their bye last week, the Pandas volleyball squad is getting serious to take on the Simon Fraser Clan this weekend. Alberta didn't even take a break to see their bit on Mercer's show Tuesday night.

"They'll only see it if they tape[d] it; we [were] training," head coach Laurie Eisler said chuckling.

The playoffs begin in a little more than a month, but both teams will be jockeying for position starting Friday. The Pandas (9-3) are currently fourth in Canada West and will begin a quest for first place over the next eight games. The Clan (5-9), on the other hand, currently sit in sixth place and are on the bubble for a playoff berth with Thompson Rivers and Regina right on their heels.

"SFU is in a serious playoff drive," Eisler said. "I think any team in the league could go on a real streak; there's no one really out of it yet. SFU will look at this weekend [knowing] that they have to leave here with at least one win, so it should be a good matchup."

As far as the Pandas are concerned, the playoffs began after the break.

"In the second half it's almost hard to differentiate between what is a regular season game and playoffs," Eisler said. "There isn't any wiggle-room left anymore if you set your sights high."

While Alberta is in a much better spot for a potential playoff spot, Eisler also emphasized that the Pandas have their sights set on moving up in the rankings, and stressed that the focus would be to come away with two wins and avoid a split against SFU.

"We're in the hunt still for first place," she noted. "We may need some help from other teams, but we're not



FILE PHOTO: SHAHEED MERANI
EYE OF THE TIGER Tiffany Dodds jokes with Rick Mercer, but not about spikes.

ready to let go of that goal. In order to do it, we have to win out the season starting with this weekend."

In Alberta's last conference outing they came out strong on Friday night and beat the then-top-ranked Manitoba Bisons 3-0, but things crumbled on Saturday and Alberta dropped the second game by the same score. Eisler noted that the Pandas will have to stay sharp both nights because the losing team on Friday has extra desire to make up for the loss.

"We need to play well two nights in a row, just as every other team in Canada West needs to do. This last weekend there were a bunch of splits, and that's going to hurt teams in the end because you can't afford to drop matches that are all too critical," she said, noting that teams would need to win more than one game per

weekend in the playoffs.

However, Eisler admits that keeping the momentum on Saturday night after a strong performance on Friday is easier said than done.

"To me, it's a no brainer: you respect your opponent and you prepare for Saturday the same way as Friday," she said. "[Sweeping the weekend] is certainly a challenge across all the schools and it's almost like our modern day dilemma. On some level it's nice to know other teams are sharing that challenge but I think it's a cop-out to say that it's too hard [to win on both nights]. If you feel like you've done something because you've won on Friday then you're not there yet."

The games are scheduled for 8pm tomorrow and 6:30pm Saturday in the Main Gym.

Help us Kelly-wan Kenobi; you're the Oil's only hope

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The slump-factory known as January is here, and once again our beloved Edmonton Oilers are mired below the playoff cut-off. I know some traditionalists will point out that the January slump usually starts around November and lasts well into February before the Oilers hit the frantic, "Oh shit, we'd better wake up," playoff race, but it's after New Year's that the slump is truly in its element. This month is the magical time when people are cold and miserable—and absolutely love to take out all their misery on the Oil. It's the time when fans seriously advocate trading the underachieving Oiler du jour for a bag of pucks and a couple of pylons, and when it seems like every day the papers are running stories of who needs to be fired (Simpson) and who we should trade away our future for (Pitkanen).

Now, to pull themselves back into contention the most likely slump-aid which they've never hesitated to use is an old standby—old being of course the operative word. As an organization, the Oilers are famous for mining old talent and talent-less hacks—well, maybe it's more like grave-digging than mining—and placing them into important roles. Former Oilers coach the team and make roster decisions, and players like Oates, Musil, Nedved and Ulanov finish out their careers by taking away valuable ice-time from developmental players. However, this year they need to take that one step further and pull the Oilers' current development coach out of, um, developing, and putting him back on the ice. I'm talking about the greatest player to ever play the game—Mr Kelly Buchberger.

I call Buchberger this with all due respect to Wayne Gretzky. I've seen The Great One play once in my life: it was March 4, 1996, in Edmonton versus St Louis during Gretz's ill-fated Blues experiment. I was a young and impressionable kid, and what I saw that day changed hockey for me forever. Gretzky was coasting along the offensive blue line watching a break-out develop 60-feet away behind the Oilers net. Along came Bucky with the flying elbow to the head, knocking Wayne out, and starting a line brawl. That, my friends and enemies, is why Kelly Buchberger is the greatest.

I'm not sure what message Bucky was trying to send that fateful night or if he even had one, but when you're the captain you've got to do what you've got to do to fire your team up. If it means giving an old teammate and friend—who happens to be the game's most prolific scorer—a concussion, then, in Buchberger's world, you take off your elbow pads on the bench and wait for him to turn his head. That's the kind of passion and rampant insanity that this year's team needs. There are guys who can deliver a punch, but who's willing to take one? Others are willing to block shots but none have Bucky's penchant of throwing himself face-first in front of 100 mile-per-hour slapshots in the second period of a 4-0 game.

With Bucky stuck teaching AHLers when the Oilers don't even have an AHL team, they're wasting a premier talent who's slightly unorthodox interpretation of the spirit of the game could deliver the first round on a silver platter covered in blood and teeth. While most armchair Craig Simpsons will argue that we need a puck-moving defence-man, I'd urge caution because, when it comes down to it, when flashy meets gritty, one goes home with the paycheque and the other goes home with the Cup, and probably a broken nose or phalange. And there's nobody grittier than Kelly fucking Buchberger.

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