



FILE PHOTOS: LEFT: PETE YEE; MIDDLE, RIGHT: WEIYANG LIU

**INSTANT CLASSIC** A lot of history resides between Trinity Western and Alberta as the two face off this weekend in a battle of two of the country's top squads; they have met twelve time in two years.

# Clash of the Volleyball Titans

Golden Bears continue to move past last year's upset at the hands of Trinity Western; Spartans trying to become that team again

ANDREW RENFREE  
Sports Staff

Heading into the final weekend of the volleyball regular season, one lesson can be gleaned from the last 20 weeks of competition: pre-season predictions rarely come true.

Faced with the prospect of losing five of his starters from last season, Bears head coach Terry Danyluk admitted that, in September, he would have never thought that his squad would be coming into the final weekend of the season with an undefeated 16-0 record—and neither did the “experts” who wrote off the Bears before the first serve of the season.

“I knew we had lots of good players coming in; the thing was they hadn't really played together as a team. It wasn't really a question of how good we were going to be in the end; it was how long it was going to take,” Danyluk said. “Coming in, Trinity and Manitoba were the teams everybody thought would be the best teams and everybody had kind of written us off as [having] a rebuilding year. Other teams were more senior, and being undefeated wasn't even something that crossed my mind, but this group of guys has really bonded together quickly for the number of new faces that we had.”

Alberta is striving to finish their season with a perfect record for the first time since 1996/97 this weekend against the Trinity Western Spartans—a team whose season reinforces the inaccuracy of pre-season

predictions. Experts figured the Spartans—with five starters returning from a National Championship squad—would cruise to top spot in the country, but the defending gold medallists have fallen from pre-season favourites to the third-ranked team in the country with an unspectacular 12-4 record heading into the final weekend of the regular season. Spartans head coach Ron Pike acknowledged that he didn't foresee Alberta's successes or the struggles his team would endure.

“I try not to have too many expectations [before the season]. You can always guess here and there, but the reality is that Terry Danyluk is a great coach and he runs a great program,” Pike said. “I wouldn't say that I expected [Alberta to be undefeated], but I am for sure not surprised by it.”

On the other hand, Pike certainly didn't expect TWU to be battling for fourth place in the division.

“There are a lot of factors that go into sports and we're dealing with some of the tougher side of it right now with respect to injuries,” he said. “It affects your rhythm and we're definitely not where we had hoped we would be, but in sports you deal with the cards you got and put your best out on the floor.”

“You can't judge [TWU] by their record at this point,” Danyluk added. “You can't count them out. I think that their 12-4 record is actually pretty good given the fact that they've had to play with a few key guys injured—that just shows that

they're a program with a strong base of mature guys.”

While each team appreciates this weekend for its playoff implications, neither team, no matter how hard they try, can forget about the history behind these matches. Over the last two years, this has become the biggest rivalry in CIS men's volleyball, perhaps even in all varsity sports. Alberta and Trinity have met in the last two national championship finals, with Alberta taking gold in '05 and Trinity exacting revenge last year, shocking the favoured Bears in straight sets. Both head coaches admitted that it's hard to shake that background and focus just on the weekend.

“There's always a history there. You definitely try to focus on what's going on at present but it can be tough,” Pike said. “To be honest, the history doesn't favour us a great deal, so we're trying to forget it.”

“Everybody knows we played them in the last two championships, and the majority of the guys who are playing for us now have been on those two teams,” Danyluk added. “I don't think that they're going to forget that it's Trinity Western and that we're sitting at 1-1 in national finals. Rivalry is going to be there and that brings respect—I think it's that respect that drives us to play tough against them.”

Though Danyluk downplays the rivalry that's developed between the two teams, the question still lingers: why did the 2005/06 Bears go 34-1 on

the season only to fold in the national finals last year? Several months of reflection have passed and Danyluk still ponders how his team that was so prepared couldn't beat the Spartans.

“We had one bad day; the fact is that the one day happened to be the game of the year,” Danyluk said. “I'm not sure why it happened. I still to this day don't know why Trinity played the best game they ever played in their lives and we played the worst game we played in our lives. How do you pinpoint that? A week prior we were playing our best volleyball, so what difference did a week make? I don't know.”

Perhaps, in the end, it will be the Bears' youth this season that will carry them into Nationals, maybe to spite the pre-season predictions that the young faces would have to rebuild the program.

“As an older team, last year's team had so many things to think about. Going into the national finals, half the guys were thinking: should I go pro? Should I go to the national team? We weren't just thinking about winning the national final and that might have been part of the reason we had the down-slide,” Danyluk said. “This year's team I would hope would be different because a lot of them are just getting their first experience of what it's like to be a Golden Bear as a starter.”

The rematch will begin Friday at 6:30pm in the Main Gym and continue the next night at 8pm. It will be the final regular season games for both teams.

## OWNAGE

While they're even in National Championship banners over the past two seasons, Alberta and TWU have been anything but equals on the court:

- Alberta is 11-1 against the Spartans since September 2004, having met four times in each of the past two regular seasons and matching up in the Canada West playoffs and the CIS National Finals in both seasons.

- The Bears have taken 33 sets in those twelve games, while the Spartans have mustered only eleven, including three in last year's gold medal match.

- Six of the eleven Alberta wins have come in straight sets. Three of them have gone the full length, to five sets, including the 2004/05 national final.

- Alberta features six players who saw action in last year's final match: Adam Kaminski, Justin Wong, Joel Schmuland, Derek Prudfoot, Thomas Jarmoc and Brock Pehar.

- Seth Schalk, Josh Howatson, Jeff Stel, Andrew Hawkes and Steve Rogalsky represent the hold-overs from the TWU team that spanked the Bears to win national gold.