

Spartans hand volley Bears first loss

PAUL OWEN
Sports Editor

For the second-straight time, Trinity Western was celebrating at the expense of the Bears volleyball team.

In a game that was strangely similar to last year's National Championship Final, TWU handed the Bears their first loss of the season on Friday in straight sets, 26–24, 25–22 and 25–20. The Spartan victory marked a turnaround in the biggest rivalry in CIS volleyball, as Alberta (17–1) has traditionally dominated TWU (13–5).

"We've had a lot of struggles in this gym, and I've got a lot of bad memories in here, so it's nice to get a good one, finally," said Josh Howatson, Spartans setter-turned-middle.

"[This loss] is bad. Especially to those guys. We don't like losing to Trinity: it sucks," Alberta middle Derek Proudfoot added.

With an injury to middle Doug Van Spronsen, Howatson was moved into his spot and first-year Chaim Schalk inserted at setter for the Spartans. Despite the roster changes, TWU caused problems for Golden Bear hitters all night long, holding them to a measly .265 hitting percentage.

"Given the changes we've made, I think we played well; there were a lot of unforced errors out there tonight," Trinity Western coach Ron Pike said. "We're actually glad to be playing a team like the Bears—that's as good as they are—because it's going to force us and test us and we're going to have to do some good things with this lineup if we're going to be successful."

In addition to their problems hitting, Alberta had 18 service errors to only six for the Spartans—who had a



ANDREW RURAK

BUMP IT UP The Bears defence was solid, but they made too many mistakes serving and on offence to overcome Trinity Western. It was Alberta's first loss all year.

.306 hitting percentage and bungled six serves.

"We had so many momentum-breaking errors that we never got the chance to get on a roll. Both teams made errors, but we made a lot more, and we made them when we tried to come back and then missed a serve, missed a free ball or shanked a pass," Golden Bears head coach Terry Danyluk said.

"We just couldn't get together and

rally behind anything," Proudfoot added.

Saturday saw a sharp turnaround as the Bears won the first two sets of the rematch, but TWU won the next two before bowing out in the fifth set.

"Our guys came more ready to play tonight. It was a better response to what was thrown at us," Danyluk said.

While the win reasserted the Golden Bears as a favourite at Nationals, it

didn't remove the sting of Friday's loss. For the third-straight season, Alberta will head into the playoffs with only a single regular-season loss. Danyluk noted that having locked up a playoff bye, home court at the Canada West finals and a berth at nationals might have led to his team's poor start.

"It looked like we weren't playing with a purpose at the beginning—we just kinda came because we knew we

were in first place and we're waiting two weeks for the playoffs to start. In some sense, that's what it felt like; the types of errors we made were focus errors," he said. "Is it easy to get complacent? Maybe. Is it hard to fire up? Maybe. But one of the things that should have been in the back of people's minds is that this is the team we lost to last year, and we should have come here to set a point."



MIKE OTTO

DIVING DIG Jocelyn Blair has become one of Alberta's best players in both the offensive and defensive end, earning her high praise from the opposition.

Volley Pandas sweep TWU, finish second in CanWest

ROSS PRUSAKOWSKI
Sports Staff

Entering the final weekend of the regular season, the Pandas volleyball team knew they would once again be making an appearance in the post-season. What they didn't know was their finishing seed or where they would hit the court for the first round. However, with an impressive and mildly surprising sweep of the Trinity Western University (TWU) Spartans (15–5), the Pandas (16–4) secured second place and home court to start the playoffs.

The wins, a five-set marathon victory on Friday and a 3–1 follow-up on Saturday, save Alberta from becoming road warriors for the next three weeks, as they try to better their sixth-place finish at last year's CIS National Championship.

"In Canada West, when you're on the road—you're on the road," Alberta head coach Laurie Eisler said in reference to the long-distance travelling that occurs in the conference that encompasses half the country. "With Manitoba finishing first, there was a potential coming into this weekend that we could have gone from Vancouver to Winnipeg to Calgary

for three consecutive weekends. To overcome that [playoff schedule] would be grueling and difficult for any team."

Instead, a pair of victories means home court advantage against Simon Fraser University (SFU) for an Alberta team that seemed to fit their stride over the two games with TWU. After handing over 16 free points to the Spartans courtesy of service errors on Friday, the Pandas settled down on Saturday, committing only four.

In addition to finding the range for their serves over the series, Alberta's Daryll Roper made a handful of improbable digs to continue key rallies while both Tiffany Dodds and Jocelyn Blair frustrated the Spartans with their attacks. The impressive third-years combined for 33 of the team's 50 kills on Friday and nearly matched that performance on Saturday when they accounted for 32 of Alberta's 54 successful attacks—dominant performances that didn't go unnoticed by their opponent.

"Alberta's a strong team all around and you can't let up on them. They have some of the best outside hitters in the country; you've got to battle back and take care of your own side," TWU head coach Ryan Hofer said.

"Jocelyn Blair and Dodds are great players, but Blair is a standout. She has great strength and she passes well; she hits well, and when you put those together, you have a great combination. She's amazing."

"[Dodds and Blair] certainly carry a load in our offence, but I don't know if I would single out two people because two people can't do it alone, and the work that our middles do creates the room for the people on the outside," Eisler added. "If they don't create that space, then it's a lot harder for the team to beat a defence as good as Trinity Western."

The Pandas will get to see a much different team on Friday when they open up a best-of-three Canada West playoff series against SFU, who finished seventh in Canada West and just squeaked into the playoffs. Alberta took all but one set against SFU (6–14) in two conference games this year, so it could be a quick weekend for the offensively dominant Pandas.

"[SFU is] a very good team, but they're a different style of team and it brings different types of challenges for us," Eisler said. "But when it comes to playoff time, it's all about what we're going to do as opposed to someone on the other side of the net."