



FILE PHOTO: ANDREW RURAK

SETTING THE PACE Third-year setter Daryll Roper (1) is one of the Pandas' on-court leaders.



KIM SMITH

WITHIN REACH The Golden Bears have a National Title within their grasp—if they stop slumping.

Volley squads gunning for National gold

Top-ranked Pandas unconcerned over lack of playoff experience

ANDREW RENFREE
Sports Staff

Pandas volleyball captain Wendy Linnell barely had a moment to catch her breath last weekend. After helping the Alberta volleyballers win Canada West gold, Linnell rushed off to the Canada West track championships, also being held at the University of Manitoba, where she qualified for Nationals in the Triple Jump event.

"It was definitely extra stress having to be in Canada West finals for both volleyball and track," she said. "The schedule turned out being pretty conducive to preparing appropriately for both sports; it was just a little bit hard preparing for a full day for our volleyball match and then heading straight to a track competition."

While her focus was divided in last weekend between two varsity sports, Linnell has her sights set on volleyball this weekend as the Pandas head into the National Finals in Calgary. Their Canada West gold medal earned them a first place ranking going into the tournament, but head coach Laurie Eisler is quick to point out that the ranking doesn't mean much.

"Why is it a good thing to be ranked number one? You get to decide what practice time you want; you get to pick the uniform colour, but those are probably the only advantages," Eisler laughed. "The seedings are just a number. I don't think we're naïve enough to think that being number one means it's going to be easier for us—it's a huge challenge. Really what it means is that we won going in and it's always better to be winning going in than to try and recover from a loss."

While Eisler wasn't putting much stock in a top seed, Linnell felt it was a completion of the team's goals for the season.

"This is where we want to be. All season we've been trying to get to be number one coming into Nationals," Linnell said. "There will be pressure,

but we've dealt with pressure throughout the season and every other team's got pressure so I think we're happy being where we are."

Alberta is a young team this year, and when veterans Janna Konihowski, Tawana Wardlaw and Kristin Van Eck graduated last season, the squad was left with no fifth-year players. While the 2006/07 edition of the Pandas is more youthful than previous years, Eisler noted that Linnell and other Pandas have stepped up to fill the leadership void.

"Wendy is very much the leader of the team in every aspect, but on the court, we have leadership from Daryll Roper, Tiffany Dodds and Jocelyn Blair; I would be remiss if I singled them out because it's a real collective leadership on this team—it's different people contributing in different ways," she said.

Eisler added that she's not discouraged by the fact that other teams at Nationals may have more experienced players.

"Sometimes the fifth-year thing can come back to bite you because it's harder for them because of the urgency of it being their last chance," she said. "The first championship we won, we didn't have any fifth-year players on the team—very similar to the makeup of this team."

For a team heading into Nationals this weekend as the favourite, the Pandas volleyball squad looked quite relaxed at Monday's practice. Players joked with each other and smiles abounded as they made some last minute preparations for the most important games of the season. Staying relaxed will be a key factor as the tournament begins.

"As a coach I can only control what I can control. If I'm freaking out, I can't really expect them to be calm and collected," Eisler said.

Alberta will play eighth-ranked St Mary's today at 5pm in Calgary's Jack Simpson Gymnasium. Semifinals will go tomorrow and the gold medal game will be broadcast live on The Score at 2:30pm on Saturday.

NICK FROST
Sports Staff

After a disappointing prelude at last weekend's Canada West Championships, which saw them finish fourth, the Golden Bears volleyball team (17-1 regular season; 0-2 playoffs) will seek out a reversal of fortune on the main stage, as they go for their first CIS Championship title in two years.

However, that goal—if recent playoff history is any sort of indication—doesn't appear to be one that the Bears would be able to coast to. Combined with last year's loss to Trinity Western in the CIS Finals, last week's losses to UBC and Winnipeg gave the Alberta program three straight playoff losses—despite coming into every one of those games as the top seed of the tournament. For the players, these recent failures and the redemption they seek as a result, are part of what's driving them towards the gold this weekend at the National Championships in Hamilton.

"We've talked about [last weekend's losses], and it's not like it's one of those things that's just in the past for us," Canada West Libero of the Year Justin Wong explained. "I'm pretty confident that we've learned from it, and we're going to come back hungrier; it's definitely something that can motivate you to play well and come with that little extra fire next game."

Focusing on their recent playoff woes, the Bears have also analyzed their play and reassessed what needs to be done in order to win this post-season. Head coach Terry Danyluk pointed out that there were specific areas of play in each of last week's games that caused their downfall: Thursday night's loss against UBC saw too many net touches; Saturday night's loss to Winnipeg saw the service game break down at times. The main focus, now, is addressing those problems by getting out onto the court in both practice and

game situations.

"I think the biggest thing is that the guys are anxious to get back out and play again," Danyluk said. "After last weekend, we had a couple of really close losses, and everybody knows that we could've done some things a little bit better; we've already talked about the things we could've done better. I just think the fact that we had a chance to face some adversity is a good thing. It just makes us more ready and makes us want to perform."

The challenge has become even greater for Alberta, though, as champions from other conferences—specifically, those in Ontario and Québec—are now added to the mix. The Bears, nevertheless, are prepared for anyone that comes their way—having played all but two of the eight teams involved, the Bears are fairly aware of what each of their opponents bring to the court.

"We've beaten Trinity Western twice [counting pre-season matches], UBC twice, and Winnipeg twice, as well as McMaster and Dalhousie in exhibition play," Danyluk noted. "This group has the potential to beat every team for the National Championship, but you have to go out there and do it. It's not just a matter of knowing that you could."

"We've seen all of these teams play and we know what they're capable of," Wong added. "But, we also know what we're capable of. We have to prepare to play for the weekend, and we still have an opportunity to win a championship, and that's the most important part."

The CIS Championships start Friday at McMaster University, with Alberta meeting its first opponent, the Dalhousie Tigers (18-1), at 6pm ET. The gold medal match will be broadcast live on The Score at 3:30pm ET on Saturday. That game more than likely won't feature the Bears and Trinity Western Spartans for the third consecutive year, as the two are poised to clash in Saturday's semifinal should they win their first-round games.