

THE COUNTRY'S BEST



UBC Thunderbirds
Seed: First
National ranking: First
2006/07 record: 21-2

Playoffs: 6-0, CW gold
Nationals trip: Ninth
Medals: Five gold, one silver

The defending CIS champions and Canada West-winning UBC Thunderbirds are on the verge of becoming a college sports dynasty. UBC is looking to capture its third CIS championship in four years as the team prepares to head to St John's, and must be considered the odds-on-favourite to win it all when they get there.

Led by Canada West first-team all-stars Kelsey Blair and Erica McGuinness, the T-Birds dominated the competition out West this season, losing only to Saskatchewan and Simon Fraser, who they beat on four other occasions.

Boris Kolby, the Ubyssy



York Lions
Seed: Third
National ranking: Fifth
2006/07 record: 20-2

Playoffs: 3-0, OUA gold
Nationals trip: Fourth
Medals: One silver

The York Lions captured their first-ever OUA championship with a win over McMaster in the final. Co-captains Kim Gibbs and Brenan Rurak routinely score game-high points while Laura MacCallum is a force behind the three-point line.

While some teams have players who steal the show, the Lions share the glory. Where one player is lacking, another picks up the slack. The team is definitely unpredictable, but it's what makes them dangerous.

Precious Yutangco, Excalibur



McMaster Marauders
Seed: Fourth
National ranking: Second
2006/07 record: 21-1

Playoffs: 2-1, OUA silver
Nationals trip: Seventh
Medals: One bronze

With their loss to York in the OUA final, the Marauders have bought themselves a rematch for last year's opening round against the Simon Fraser Clan. SFU won a thriller 57-56 in overtime last time around, and the two teams should be poised to play each other just as tightly this season.

Reigning CIS defensive player-of-the-year Chiara Rocca provides a solid presence on the back end along with Lindsay DeGrout, the Mac star who led the OUA in rebounding and was fourth in points-per-game (18.05).

Dan Plouffe, CUP Sports Bureau Chief



Simon Fraser Clan
Seed: Fifth

National ranking: Third
2006/07 record: 21-2
Playoffs: 3-4, CW bronze
Nationals trip: Sixth
Medals: Two gold, one bronze

Putting a devastating 81-58 loss in the conference semi-finals behind them, the Clan stayed alive with an impressive 84-73 win over Winnipeg for Canada West bronze to earn their way to Newfoundland.

At 6'4", rookie Laurelle Weigl was red hot in the critical game, shooting 11-12

from the field. Senior post Julia Wilson, who has struggled in the playoffs, can still break out as she demonstrated with her eleven points—all in the last quarter—against Winnipeg. Only UBC beat SFU in the regular season, and they added two more wins in the division final. Unfortunately for the Clan, if they can get past McMaster, the Thunderbirds loom as a potential semi-final opponent.

Gregg Whitlock, the Peak



Memorial Sea-Hawks
Seed: Sixth
National ranking: NR
2006/07 record: 14-6

Playoffs: 2-0, AUS gold
Nationals trip: Sixth
Medals: None

The host Sea-Hawks will have momentum on their side, thanks to last weekend's AUS championship win over Dalhousie, as they pursue their first CIS medal. Conference MVP Katherine Quackenbush is well known for her defensive abilities, but has really stepped up on offence, especially from behind the arc, to lead the team in scoring.

Rookie forward Victoria Thistle, also a Sea-Hawk soccer player, offers strength and athleticism; she owns the team's best shooting percentage. Memorial is undersized in the post, but coach Doug Partridge says his team makes up for it by being quicker and more athletic in several positions.

Courtney Barbour, the Muse



Laval Rouge et Or
Seed: Seventh
National ranking: Tenth
2006/07 record: 14-2

Playoffs: 2-0, QSSF gold
Nationals trip: 13th
Medals: One silver, two bronze

It's unusual to say that an entire conference is in rebuilding mode, but the fact that Laval was able to outclass its four Québec opponents with a team that has more rookies than returning players suggests that's exactly the case.

The Rouge et Or have missed only one Nationals this decade but have never won the big show. QSSF rookie-of-the-year Marie-Michelle Genois led the conference in scoring while second-year forwards Myriam Lamarre and Karine Bibeau were also offensive forces.

Dan Plouffe, CUP Sports Bureau Chief



Dalhousie Tigers
Seed: Eighth
National ranking: Eighth
2006/07 record: 16-4

Playoffs: 1-1, AUS silver
Nationals trip: Seventh
Medals: One silver

Despite the fact that they already had a guaranteed berth in Nationals, the Tigers loss to Memorial in the AUS final hurt them quite a bit as they now face the daunting task of taking out the defending national champs in the first round.

It'll take a miracle from the likes of Kathleen McNeil and veteran Kelly Donald on offence, and plenty of rebounds at both ends from Laurie Girdwood as Dalhousie takes on powerhouse UBC in the tournament's opening contest in search of its first CIS medal since 1980.

Dan Plouffe, CUP Sports Bureau Chief



FILE PHOTO: ANDREW RURAK

REACH FOR THE TOP The Pandas hopes for a medal at Nationals are up in the air as they compete in St John's.

Mining gold on the Rock

The Pandas basketball squad returns to Nationals for the first time since 2001 prepared to do damage with a young, dangerous squad and a high seed

PAUL OWEN
Sports Editor

Even head coach Scott Edwards was a little surprised that his Pandas basketball squad upset Simon Fraser and made it to the Canada West gold medal game last weekend.

"Yeah, I was a little shocked," he admitted. "[The players] were mad about how they played [SFU] last time, and they wanted to redeem themselves in their effort level. We really jumped on them early, and we really shocked [them], and they never recovered after the first quarter."

Though Alberta lost to UBC in the conference final, the second-place finish still netted them a trip to the CIS Championships hosted in St John's by Memorial University. For a team coming off back-to-back 9-11 seasons, it's been a long road that took them from the start of the season to Newfoundland, but it's one that they feel has yet to reach its destination.

"I'm excited that everyone around us is pleasantly surprised so far, but we have to set high goals for ourselves and I'll be really disappointed if we don't play well this weekend," Edwards said.

But more important for the Pandas than playing well will be playing consistently. Edwards believes that his team has the ability to outscore any of their potential opponents, but noted that they've yet to impress in two consecutive games in the playoffs. With

only two players with more than three years experience, the Pandas are one of the youngest teams in the tournament, and harnessing their excitement and nerves will be a challenge.

"They're so excited to be here that I don't think it's going to be any problem getting them ready to play," Edwards said of his team, who arrived in St John's on Tuesday to prepare for the tournament. "Hopefully we can use their youthful energy to get their legs going, and hopefully they can play through jitters by just playing hard."

As well as fighting through their nerves—none of the players had won a playoff game before this season—Alberta will need to control themselves on the court, according to Edwards.

"How we handle adversity and when things don't go our way [is key]. If we have a poor shooting night, how do we compete defensively to give ourselves a chance to win anyways? What if there's an injury? What if there's foul trouble? What if, what if, what if? [That's] been our biggest challenge all year," he admitted.

Most notably, point guard Ashley Wigg will need to play like she did in the conference finals for the Pandas to have a shot at gold.

"I've asked kids like Ashley Wigg to start playing with emotion that is channelled properly, and in [the Canada West Final Four] you saw a kid who played two great basketball games and didn't let anything get to her," Edwards said. "She could be the

best player on our team if she chooses to play the way she did [against UBC and SFU]. If she plays like that, we'll be tough to beat."

Working in Alberta's favour is their second-seed in the tournament of eight teams. While it's not a ranking Edwards feel the Pandas necessarily deserve, it allows Alberta to avoid Simon Fraser and UBC—the two teams in the field that have defeated them this year—potentially until the final. Instead, the conference champions of Ontario, Québec and the Atlantic—York, Laval and Memorial—stand between Alberta and Saturday's gold medal game.

"Our side of the draw is full of all the conference champions, so we're certainly up against it that way because all these teams have championship mettle and they've proven they can do it in their own conference," Edwards said.

"The seeding is probably high for who we are as a team. Even looking at the [other teams], we have the most losses of any team in the tournament, yet we're the two-seed. I think that's more of a reflection on our conference and the tough games we play. I don't think we're the second-best team here, but we want to go out and play with those teams."

The Pandas start their title quest Friday at 3:30pm MST against the Laval Rouge et Or. The gold medal game will be live on the Score Sunday at 2pm.