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Success a surprise for track teams

NICK FROST
Sports Staff

After a strong showing at the Canada West Championships to end a season that was otherwise shrouded in uncertainty, the University of Alberta track teams have medal aspirations as they travel to Montréal to compete in the CIS Championships this weekend.

At the beginning of the 2006/07 season, neither the Bears nor Pandas would've anticipated that they'd have this much momentum going into the year's pinnacle event. Both squads lost several important pieces—none bigger than last year's triple gold medallist, Carline Muir. Looking forward however, both Alberta teams are finally in the mindset that they're much better than their relative inexperience may have once made them seem—particularly with a silver-medal performance by the Pandas and fourth-place finish for the Bears at Canada West.

"It was a rebuilding year for us," coach Georgette Reed said. "We lost a few key people from last year's squad. However, I still think that we've got a lot of good young talent on both sides of this team, and should have some good results. We're hoping for, at least, a top-five or -six finish for both teams."

After showing up everyone but the Calgary Dinos at the conference finals, the women's team will be heading into Montréal with the highest expectations they've had all season. Even the national rankings don't appear to be much of a concern to them, as the ninth-ranked Pandas defeated three of the four Canada West teams ranked ahead of them in the conference championships. Anchored by strong sprinters in the 60m and 300m dashes, as well as the 4x200m and 4x400m relays, the Pandas are preparing to surprise a few people on the track at Nationals.

"The Pandas will probably score a



FILE PHOTO: PETE YEE

RAISING THE BAR The Bears and Pandas have hope for medals at Nationals this weekend, even though they started the season with low expectations.

little bit higher than the Bears because they've really come on this year and have given us some great results recently," Reed explained. "We've had strong performances all year from people like Janelle Khan, Aimée McMillan, Melissa Jeremy, Breanne Carter and Zannifer Carter. That whole group has done quite well for us."

While the men didn't finish with a medal at Canada West, it's hard to discount them from being in the thick of the medal hunt at Nationals. Though they aren't heading into this weekend ranked as high as they were in 2005/06 (fourth in the country), the Bears hope to improve on the bronze medals they picked up last year. The men's team is currently ranked seventh in the country, and boasts a veteran laden roster—highlighted by fourth-year sprinter Neville Wright, who will be a definite medal contender in the men's 60m dash and 4x200m relay, and fifth-year triple-jumper, Jason Moss.

"Of course, Neville Wright will be a huge weapon for us going in," Reed said. "Being that this is his last year,

I think he's really going to try and dominate in the men's 60m dash, as well as be a contributor on the men's relay team. We've also got Jason Moss, who is also in his last year and is probably hoping for a better showing at Nationals in the triple jump than he had at Canada West."

After getting a good look at the rest of the field throughout the year, Reed believes that both her teams are now at a level where they should be able to put up a solid fight against the best the country has to offer and come away with a favourable result.

"I think we should stack up very well at CIS," Reed said. "We're really strong in some events more than others, but we generally feel good going in. We're pretty strong in the women's 300m dash, as well as the 4x200 and 4x400 women's relay teams, and we've also got some strong competitors in the jumping events."

The CIS Championship starts Thursday at 2:00pm ET at McGill University and continues until Saturday evening.

Time to knock rocks between the sheets

TREVOR
PHILLIPS



Sports
Commentary

March has come, and that means it's time for Canada's other, other original past-time to take centre stage. There are only two times in a man's life when it's okay to wear a skirt while manning a broom, and the Brier is way better than any Scottish wedding I've been to.

This weekend, the country's greatest stone hurlers and sweepers make their way to Hamilton to challenge for the Tim Hortons Tankard, more commonly known as the Canadian men's curling National Championship. It's a glorious time to be a curling fan—waking everyday to the blood curdling screams of men yelling "Harder!" and drifting slowly off to sleep as they sing "Whoa, whoa!" Really there are no sweeter sounds than the love song of the rock-caster. Unfortunately, the only ones making their way down to Copps Coliseum to take in the Grey Cup of curling this year are the players.

For too many draws this week the more than 17 000 multi-coloured seats of the arena have been empty, and the energy has been sucked out of the place. This is despite the fact that this year's Brier has an incredibly strong and talented field. There are

two past Brier Champions (Alberta's Kevin Martin and Manitoba's Jeff Stoughton), a two-time World Champion (Ontario's Glenn Howard) and an Olympic gold medallist (Newfoundland's Brad Gushue). Eleven of the twelve skips are making at least their second appearance at the Brier—Howard leads the way with nine, while Nova Scotia's Mark Kehoe is the lone rookie. Still, the lure of seeing some of the world's best curling isn't enough to drag Hamiltonians out to the pebble.

What the Canadian Curling Association (CCA) needs to recognize is that the Brier—and the female version, the Scotties Tournament of Hearts—needs to stay in the heartland of curling: the Prairies. From Lake of the Woods to Lake Louise, there's nothing better to do than to go down to the Brier Patch at 9am and get drunk off coffee and Baileys. Last week Lethbridge, a fine city in the heart of the Bread Basket of Canada, hosted the Tournament of Hearts to great attendance and intense atmosphere. For most of the tournament, the building was full—even though the curling was one-tenth the talent level of the men's championship in Hamilton.

In four of the last five years, the Brier has been held in Prairie venues: Calgary in '02, Saskatoon in '03, Edmonton in '05 and Regina in '06. When the first three cities hosted, they attracted over 235 000 people each for the eight day event—the highest numbers ever seen by the

CCA—with Edmonton breaking the record with over 281 000 patrons at Rexall Place. In Regina, the host city was shocked to find out that they had made over a million dollars in profit by hosting the event. Surely, this is enough evidence to show that curling matters in the Canadian flatlands. Yet, when the annual tourney was held in Halifax in 2004, a little less than 159 000 people made their way through the turnstiles at the 11 000 seat arena.

Now, this argument isn't based on the ideology that bigger is better; having fewer people in the crowd affects the game as well. When there's less warmth from all the bodies in the arena, the ice stays colder longer, which makes the stones curl less and the shots less challenging. Additionally, curling fans are a unique bunch that party with the intensity of a European soccer fan or a pre-shaved-head Britney Spears on a post-rehab drinking binge. Most importantly, nowhere else in the world can you hear TSN curling analyst and all around great guy Vic Rauter go nuts when a stone flies through the house on the sixth day of action. It's that kind of love for the game that keeps you coming back for more.

So CCA, I say keep the Brier in the only place that can appreciate it: the West. And to the East Coast I say nothing because I am ashamed of you and your lack of respect for the greatest game on ice that doesn't involve skates. Except for you Newfoundland, I know you love curling too.