

Lone fifth-year grads from puck Bears empty-handed

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After the disappointing loss to Saskatchewan in the Canada West final, most of the Bears hockey team took solace in the fact that there's always next season. But winger Scott Henkelman, the only Bear graduating this year, had to deal with the reality of hanging up his Golden Bears uniform for good.

"I'm really sad," says Henkelman, a tough, checking forward who has been a key part of the Alberta penalty kill in his time with the team. "Saskatchewan played very well tonight and there's nothing we can do about it now. All we can do is go on to the rest of our lives, I guess."

Bears head coach Eric Thurston wishes Henkelman could stay on for another season and had nothing but praise for the graduating forward.

"Scotty is a class kid," Thurston says. "I have the utmost respect for him; we say Scotty Henkelman is the definition of Golden Bear because he comes everyday with a smile on his face; he's personable; he works hard; he makes our other players better; he makes our team better."

After five years with the Alberta hockey club, Henkelman had his hopes of a third CIS title squashed by Saskatchewan on Sunday night. For a player who has experienced the success Henkelman has, it was a difficult way to finish his career, and left the Education student reflecting on what he'll miss about playing for Alberta.

"By far the thing I'll miss most is every single person on this team," he says. "A lot of my good friends have come from here, and I'm sure we'll stay in touch forever. In CIS hockey you're here for school, so it brings you all together and you've got that



TARASTIEGLITZ

HE'S A CRIER Scott Henkelman played his last game as a Golden Bear in Sunday's 4-3 loss to Saskatchewan, and admits he tends to get teary-eyed.

camaraderie in the room. It brings a team close together and you end up becoming better friends; I'm really going to miss it."

The abrupt end to his tenure as a Bear certainly left Henkelman dejected, but looking back over the last five years, it's only fair to say that he can be proud of his accomplishments in an Alberta uniform. With the exception of this year, Alberta won the Canada West championship each season, as well as two National titles, while Henkelman—who scored a pair of goals in last year's semifinal win over McGill—was with the team, moments which stand out for him as favourites.

"By far the last two seasons winning the National Championships was indescribable. I cried every

year, and the best time I cried was when we won," he says. "Beyond the championships, the fans here and the guys on the team have meant a lot to me."

Henkelman, who was one of Alberta's assistant captains this year, brought leadership to young team in need of it with eleven rookies in the lineup this year. Thurston notes that he really led by example on and off the ice.

"He works hard in practice, and that's able to show guys what it takes to win," Thurston says. "He's got two championship rings that he can be very proud of, and he can be proud of taking a young group of guys and showing them what it takes everyday to be a Golden Bear and to be a champion."

Canada West hockey needs new top dogs

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It must suck to be a Calgary Dinos hockey fan. After all, it's been twelve years since they've taken the conference crown. For the Lethbridge Pronghorns, it's been 14 seasons since they hoisted a Canada West banner to the rafters. That's because, when it comes to university hockey west of the Lake of the Woods, the discussion begins and ends with Alberta and Saskatchewan. The two schools have combined for the past eleven men's titles, and except for the 2000/01 Regina Cougars, no women's team besides the Pandas has ever been named Canada West champ. With the same teams facing each other year-after-year in the playoffs, the conference has become stagnant.

Sure, it was a surprise that the Saskatchewan Huskies beat the Golden Bears Sunday night to capture their first banner since 1999/2000, but it was bound to happen eventually—the two teams have squared off with the conference on the line for each of the past six seasons. The complete lack of parity is hurting the development of CIS hockey. The assumption is that Alberta and Saskatchewan will be the post-season finalists on a yearly basis, it's more difficult for the fans in Lethbridge, Calgary, Winnipeg, Vancouver and Regina to feel attached to their squads.

Lethbridge and UBC both made strides towards making the conference a four-way race—and the Dinos were highly competitive before star forward Jarret Lukin tested positive for cocaine and was removed from the team—but when the playoffs came around, neither could make much noise, and Alberta made quick

work of UBC after the Thunderbirds beat the Pronghorns in the first round. The strides they have made this season weren't enough to upset the balance of power, and even if both teams improve by the same amount next season, it may not be enough to crack the top.

Alberta and Saskatchewan play in front of terrific crowds all season long because fans have become addicted to the success the teams have had—and because Saskatoon is so sports deprived that they have no choice but to obsess over their university teams. UBC's perpetual putridity has earned them small, unenthusiastic crowds at their games, and one half-decent season hasn't been enough to change that.

On the women's side, things are much worse. Alberta has dominated the sport since the team was formed ten years ago. Counting their 2006/07 title, which they won last week, Alberta now has nine Canada West banners. They've lost seven conference games in their history and regularly score more goals than their opponents have shots on net. The sheer talent gap is almost insulting.

Gone are the days of 2003/04 when the two Alberta squads combined to go undefeated in conference play, and it's good that the other teams in the conference have become good enough to beat either squad if they take a night off. But to be able to pencil in both the Bears and Pandas—as well as the Saskatchewan men—for 20 wins and first place in the conference makes a mockery of Canada West hockey. Saskatchewan's conference title shakes things up a little bit, but it still doesn't change the fact that Huskies and Bears blew away the rest of the competition in Canada West for the sixth straight year. Until the other teams can close the gap, Lethbridge fans will prefer the Hurricanes, Regina fans the Pats and Winnipeg fans the Jets—even though they don't exist anymore.

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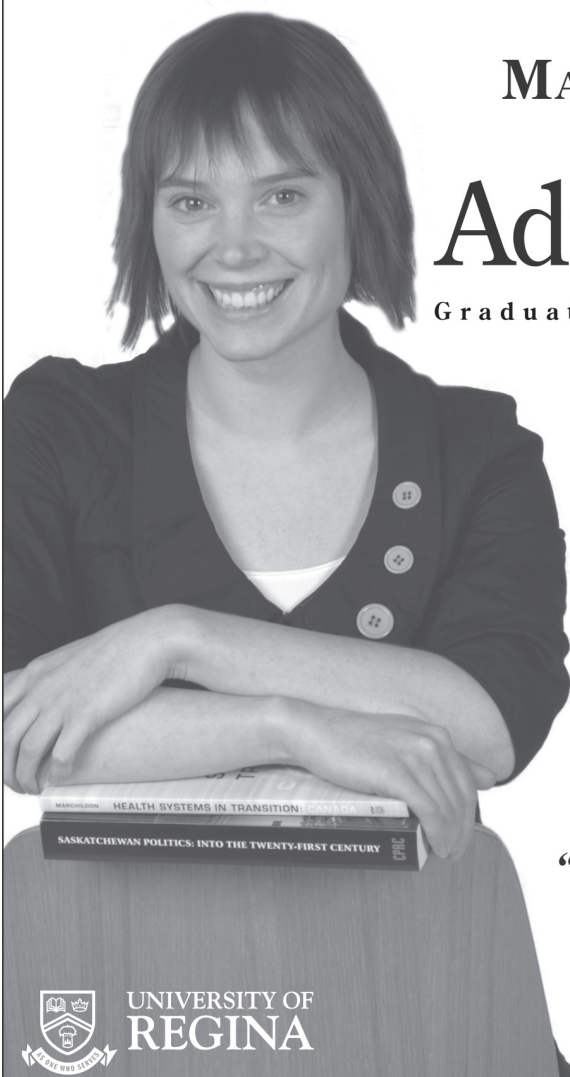
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