

Underdog Pandas set to defend National title

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To capture the program's sixth National Championship, the Alberta hockey Pandas have to overcome some unusual adversity. For the first time since 2001, the Pandas are heading to the big dance at the University of Ottawa not only as an underdog, but without the first-seed—a seat they have held for the better part of a decade.

"We have always been first, and there has been that pressure with being number one," Pandas head coach Howie Draper said. "[This year] we are the underdogs going in as the [third]-seed, so it will be interesting to see how we respond."

This means that the Pandas will be forced to play three games in three days to capture the gold medal. It's an unusual scheduling quirk that helped them capture gold last year and will cause problems for the Pandas this year. Even with the two-hour time change though, both players and coach seem confident in their conditioning.

"We are in a really tough pool, and we have a good rival with Laurier having met them the last two times in the gold medal game," Pandas captain Kaye London noted. "We won't have a problem [adjusting to the time change]; we will have a couple days off until we play."

"It is a tough draw this year with Laurier and Ottawa in our pool, but the hardest thing will be playing three games in three nights to win it all. It will certainly be a test of our endurance," Draper added.

The pressure on the defending



FILE PHOTO: PETE YEE

FIRST THE CONFERENCE, THEN THE WORLD The Pandas have finished dominating Canada West and take on the rest of the country in Ottawa this weekend.

champs doesn't stop with the shorter schedule and the underdog status. The Pandas also carry with them the responsibility of success, and having that crown atop their heads is something Draper thinks is more of a bulls-eye than a shield.

"There is a little bit of a target there," Draper said. "But, that target has been there all year in Canada West play, and we have been up to the challenge."

In the ten years of women's hockey in the CIS, no club has been honoured

and rewarded more than the Pandas. They own nine conference championships and seven national medals (five gold and two silver).

"It means that you know how to be successful and how to win those big games," London said. "We have won championships and lost championships, and that experience teaches you how to be a champion."

The Pandas arrived in the capital Wednesday afternoon, and will start their title defence Saturday night. While

the schedule makes things more difficult for Alberta, it also gives them an extra day to prepare for the unfamiliar competition, though Draper noted that he doesn't plan on deviating from what got them to Ottawa in the first place.

"You can't really make any changes at this point; you just hope that everything you taught and worked on is going to benefit your club in crucial situations," Draper said. "You just let them go; you're a tactician, supplying your players with information and

staying positive."

The Pandas will need all the positives the coaching staff can supply to climb the biggest hurdle they've faced in the program's young history. Alberta will play the loser of the Ottawa-Laurier game Saturday night at 7:30pm and then play the winner of that same game Sunday night at 7:30pm. Should they win both, they will then play in the CIS Championship Monday night at 7pm, which can be seen live on the Score.



FILE PHOTO: JEFFREY GREENIAUS

A CHANGE OF ATTIRE Aaron Schulha (4) no longer wears the Green and Gold. Instead he spends his time coaching some of his former teammates.

From a Golden Bear to the bench

Aaron Schulha's road to the team's coaching staff took him through Denmark

ANDREW RENFREE
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When the Bears volleyball team struggled this season, Aaron Schulha wished he could throw down his clipboard, don a jersey and jump on the court.

Schulha played for Alberta from 1999–2001 and again in 2004/05, but with his playing days over, the former Bear is now taking a Masters in coaching and finds himself in an assistant coaching role this year alongside head coach Terry Danyluk and long-time assistant Dale Johns. For Schulha, one of the biggest challenges is sitting on the sideline when the action on the court gets heated.

"It's been tough not playing this year," he notes. "I kinda wished I could play, especially when things weren't going as we had hoped on the court at some points this year. You really get the itch to be out there and wish you could do more about it."

The transition from player to coach hasn't been an easy one for Schulha—son of athletic director Dale Schulha—who says that he found it difficult to change his mindset completely over the last season.

"The big [challenge] that I noticed was changing that role from friend and teammate with a lot of the guys to the coach-player relationship," Schulha says. "I did have a tough time at the beginning knowing how to separate

the two—I'm still good friends with the guys off the court. But ... when we're at practice I have that coach role and they have that player role, and it needs to stay that way."

After graduating from CIS volleyball, Schulha went to Denmark to play professionally last season. His trip was made easier because he played with former Golden Bear Jeremy King, who graduated the same year. The pair also lucked out with a Canadian coach, so they didn't have to learn Danish.

"Getting to check out a different culture and make some new friendships was great," he says. "I was pleased with the way I played and it was nice to kinda get away from the guys I had gotten so used to playing with; knowing that I could do it on my own without that great surrounding cast at the U of A was nice. When I went to Denmark they expected me to be one of those guys that gets 15–20 kills a match, so that was probably the most rewarding thing."

Yet a touch of homesickness, and an offer from Danyluk to take an assistant coaching position brought Schulha back to U of A. He notes that working with Danyluk, one of the most respected coaches in CIS volleyball, is an honour and a great opportunity to learn more about the game. Over his 14 years as Alberta head coach, Danyluk has amassed an impressive win record of over 75 per cent. He's coached the

squad to two national banners and six Canada West titles, and is a four-time CIS Coach of the Year.

"[Working] with a coach like that, you can learn a lot," Schulha says. "He is probably the most knowledgeable guy I've met with respect to the sport of volleyball. He knows everything about every possible position and everything about the sport, and it's great to see a mind like that at work."

For Danyluk, the choice to bring in Schulha was an easy one when considering the type of player he was.

"Our selection of [young coaches] is based on personality traits and their ability to work within the team structure," Danyluk explains. "Aaron was the epitome of a team person; he was a great leader on our team; he worked really hard, and he brought all of those characteristics in as an assistant coach. He not only provided us with some leadership; he provided us with ball control, and he provided us with a work ethic that was very similar to what he had as a player."

Danyluk shouldn't reveal too many trade secrets, however, as someday fans might even see Schulha as a head coach in CIS volleyball.

"The reason why I got into this Masters of coaching program was to hopefully be a college coach and then work my way up to university coach—that's definitely my plan," Schulha notes.