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TARA STIEGLITZ

**RIGHT DOWN THE LINE** The tennis team is in tough trying to grow the sport in Edmonton and become competitive.

## NAIA play presents different challenges for tennis squads

TREVOR PHILLIPS  
Sports Writer

The website for the Alberta tennis teams looks like a page that's under construction. The list of events down the right side is pitifully short in comparison to the other varsity teams, the media kit looks like a scrapbook from the '60s and the rosters link leads you to a dead end—a demoralizing sight for any Alberta collegiate tennis fanatic. However, for tennis director and Pandas head coach Russ Sluchinski, restoring the once proud tradition of U of A tennis is more than just a cut-and-paste procedure.

"I wouldn't say we are in a rebuilding phase but in a building phase," Sluchinski said. "There's a lot we have to do to get where we want to go, but we don't have the resources to get there right now."

The plan, though it has had difficulty gaining momentum, is to build up the organization through local or grassroots players to garner some attention from recruits around the world. But in order to start this construction phase, Alberta has changed the structure of its program. For starters, tennis is the only University program that competes in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA)—a league comprised mostly of American colleges. It's an arrangement that brings with it both positives and negatives.

"We are in a unique situation being the only varsity team in the NAIA, but it's not easy for us to play teams because the nearest program in our conference is a 13-hour drive," Sluchinski said. "We are at a disadvantage there

because other teams have more competitive opportunities, being closer to one another."

In the NAIA, Alberta competes against teams from across the United States. This year, the Bears and Pandas exchanged ground strokes with Southern Oregon University, Albertson College in Idaho, 16-ranked Lewis-Clark State College from Idaho and a handful of clubs from California. Though Alberta didn't compile a very good record this season against their regional opponents (1-6), Sluchinski sees this year as an early step in upgrading to a better version of the Bears and Pandas.

"I think our teams are constantly improving, and we have taken steps to improving our program with coaching and recruiting," Sluchinski explained.

"Mariko Wakefield is one of those players that has stepped up this year; she is a player that came through the junior ranks and has improved in our program."

Going up against highly ranked schools in the NAIA has put Alberta tennis at a bit of a disadvantage: the milder weather and increased athletic training available in the States makes it easier for opposing schools to practice. Still, Sluchinski looks at the talented junior ranks of Edmonton and the brand new Saville Centre not only as opportunities to level the playing field, but as means to attract top-end talent as well.

"We have indoor courts with this beautiful brand-new facility, and since Alberta ranked fourth in junior tennis, we need to take the next step in acquiring that top-level local talent,"

he noted. "Right now, we need to improve our schedule by increasing the amount of games we play and we need to create more funding to create more scholarship opportunities."

Paul Freund is the sort of player Sluchinski is looking for. He's worked his way up through the junior leagues in Edmonton and has now found himself in his third year as a top doubles option and formidable singles player for Bears head coach Corey Stewart.

"People play three or four hours a day in junior tennis, and the players in college tennis are the cream of the crop of those athletes," Freund said. "So it's definitely a step up, but the coaching here is excellent; I was actually coached by Corey Stewart before I played here, so that helped me adjust."

Stewart is in his second year with Bears tennis and has an extensive history in training high-performance athletes, not only in tennis but a variety of other sports. The addition of Stewart to the coaching staff is something Sluchinski thinks benefits the image and quality of the program.

"Corey is one of the top coaches in Western Canada, and splitting up the coaching duties has been great for player development," Sluchinski said. "I think it's a great thing for the program to have Corey on board; he brings a ton of experience and knowledge into the fold."

Though all the meaningful matches have been played and the tennis season is now over until action starts again in November, the Bears and Pandas can still be found hammering tennis balls in the back areas of the Saville Centre looking forward to next season.