

Tartleton outstanding in Nationals win

PAUL OWEN
Sports Editor

As vaunted as their offence has been this season, Pandas netminder Holly Tartleton proved the adage that goal-tending wins championships.

While all eyes were on McGill's Charline Labonté—a goalie for the National team—Tartleton outduelled her counterpart in the CIS final as Alberta downed the Martlets 4-0 at the University of Ottawa to win their second-straight National title and sixth in eight years.

"It was pretty cool; it was neat to be on the ice with her," Tartleton said of Labonté. "The thing is, she doesn't have any effect on my game; she's the farthest player on the ice from me."

The fifth-year keeper capped her CIS career in stellar fashion, posting shut-outs in five of the six playoff games she was in. Though she faced a reduced workload in the Canada West playoffs, Tartleton was relied upon heavily in this weekend's games.

"I don't think we could ask for a better ending to her career. She's never really gotten the attention she deserves as a result of playing on a team that doesn't allow a lot of shots, but she was really tested this weekend and she came up big," Pandas head coach Howie Draper said. "A couple games could have gone either way had some of the shots she stopped gone in."

The senior made 19 saves in her final CIS win, and kept her cool during McGill's four power plays. For keeping the Martlets off the scoresheet, she was named the Player of the Game, a tournament all-star and awarded the third gold medal of her career. Still, Tartleton attributes the team's commitment to defence



JASON CHIU, THE FULCRUM (CUP)

LAYING DOWN ON THE JOB Holly Tartleton (bottom right) was a key part in making this picture possible, shutting out McGill in the CIS championship game.

for only allowing two goals all post-season.

"[Defence] was a huge focus all year, and we just peaked at the right time. It's obviously a team thing for us—it's not just the defence and the goalies, but also the forwards coming back and making life easy," she said.

Despite Tartleton's claims otherwise, fifth-year assistant captain and CIS Player of the Year Lindsay McAlpine heaped praise upon Tartleton for her play in the nation's capital.

"Holly's one of my best friends

and I was so proud of her; she stood on her head for us and made some huge saves to turn to momentum around in a couple games," McAlpine said. "She gave us confidence in our defensive zone and had an outstanding tournament."

Adding to Alberta's defensive tenacity in the post-season was a hunger to prove they were still the best team in the country. After losing only four regular season conference games in their first nine years, the Pandas dropped three this season

alone, losses that Draper admits helped his team be more prepared for Nationals.

"When we played against Regina and they beat us, they were flying by us. They were owning us in our defensive zone and in front of our net; they were owning us offensively in the neutral zone, so we thought then and there we had to make some improvements. The players bought into that, and the rest is history," he explained. "At the time, those losses are devastating when you don't lose a

lot. Ultimately, they help you prepare; they give you an indication that you need to get better in certain areas."

Though some considered Tartleton the weakest link on this Pandas squad, the netminder holds no ill will towards them. After all, she has a shiny gold medal to keep her warm at night.

"There are always critics, and they always have to find something," she said. "If they want to pick on me, I'm fine with that. We have the banner," she said.



FILE PHOTO: MIKE OTTO

AHEAD OF THE PACK Despite having a long way to travel, Saskatchewan could be a step ahead of the rest at the CIS Finals, according to Eric Thurston.

Thurston learning from playoff loss, picking Moncton at Nationals

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Golden Bears hockey head coach Eric Thurston's had "a lot of heartache and a lot of sleepless nights" since his team was upset by the Saskatchewan Huskies in the Canada West final.

Thurston is still heading to Moncton for the CIS Championships, but it will be only as a spectator—the first time the Green and Gold have been absent from the ice at Nationals in a decade. Still, Thurston sees it as an opportunity to gain experience as a young coach—he just completed his second season at the helm of the Bears.

"[Losing is] something that I need to learn from as a coach and get better at [dealing with]," he said. "As a coach, I have to be better. I have to make sure our team is 100 per cent prepared. Everything that is laid out for them—what we expect of them—has to be built in throughout the year."

Alberta's reign as two-time defending champs is over, though their replacement will be unknown until Sunday. However, a roster that featured only nine returning players from last year's gold medal winning squad, Thurston saw a lot of positives this season. He noted that his team's

work ethic impressed him—a far cry from earlier in the year when it would dip and cost the team wins—and that the team was developing a deep understanding of the expectations that come with being a player for Alberta.

"Sometimes you need to lose in order to know how to win. Maybe we took things for granted this year," he said. "The season ended too soon, and [the players] have a lot of pride in this program. Every player and every coach has to look at themselves and say, 'What can I do to make our team better?'"

With the tournament looming, Thurston sees the top two teams—the Huskies squad that knocked his club out and the host Aigles Bleues—as the

teams to beat.

"I think Moncton will take it. I think it'll be Moncton and Saskatchewan in the final. Saskatchewan's got big strong forwards and a good defence, and it might be [Huskies coach Dave] Adolph's turn. They might want it more; they've been so close [the past two years]," he said. "Moncton's got a very good team; they loaded up for this tournament. I think Saskatchewan will do well, but it's always tough to travel so far. Teams that bus in or are hosting have a big advantage."

The CIS men's national championship begins—sans Bears—Thursday at 11am MDT, when the Huskies take on the fifth-seeded University of New Brunswick Varsity Reds.

THURSTON'S PICKS

Moncton Aigles Bleues

Seed: First
National ranking: First
Conference: Atlantic
2006/07 record: 22-4-2
Playoffs: 4-0, AUS gold
Nationals since 1963: 13
Medals: four gold, one silver

Saskatchewan Huskies

Seed: Second
National ranking: Fifth
Conference: Canada West
2006/07 record: 16-9-3
Playoffs: 4-1, CW gold
Nationals since 1963: twelve
Medals: one gold, four silver