

Bears hockey primed to reclaim streak against Oil

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

Matching professional players against varsity student-athletes may seem like a one-sided exercise, but those involved with the annual exhibition game between the Golden Bears hockey team and the Edmonton Oilers rookie squad would disagree. In truth, the teams are almost evenly matched, both in the challenge the game presents to them and the benefit it brings.

Rob Daum, both the Oilers' newest assistant coach and current Bears head coach Eric Thurston's predecessor behind Alberta's bench, is able to gauge how useful the exhibition game is for both teams.

"Leading up to it, they're all in training camp, so it's a good chance for the rookies to play against another team instead of just each other, and it's a useful evaluation tool for the team," he explained. "It's terrific for the Oilers to support the Bears program, especially from a public relations standpoint, but it's also a good opportunity to evaluate players and for them to play in a different environment."

The Bears get both excellent opposition and a boost in their public profile as Clare Drake Arena is packed with Oilers fans and news crews eager for a glimpse of the newest recruits. The Oilers rookies, on their part, use the game as a way to gauge their progress after a gruelling training camp.

The Oilers do need to bring their best game to the ice for the match, as the Bears can be a formidable opponent. In fact, the annual showdown has been almost neck-and-neck over the years, with Alberta holding a slim 10-9 series lead over the Oil—much of that total thanks to a five-year winning streak for the Bears that the Rookies finally managed to break last September.

The Bears are eager to avenge last



FILE PHOTO: NICK WIEBE

RACING FOR THE PUCK The Bears hope that they'll be able to skate right past the professional competition when they meet the Oilers rookies on Monday.

season's loss with the experience they've gained in the intervening year.

"It's always a good game," Thurston said. "Last year we had quite a few guys who had never played in the game before because of such big turnover the year before, and it's usually a game we let our veterans play in. They're looking forward to it."

Of course, both teams will have strengths and weaknesses in the game next week. The Oilers will put forward

an extremely talented batch of young players, but they have not been skating together for very long. The Bears, though some of them are perhaps not as skilled, have more experience and are used to playing together as a team.

Daum emphasized that playing the rookies gives the Bears an extra mental boost as they launch their season.

"It's an exciting time for the Bears because it's pretty much the only time of the year that they're perceived as

somewhat of an underdog," he said. "They relish that, and they relish the opportunity to show what they're capable of."

The Bears have good reason to be confident going into Monday's game. Ranked number one in the country during the regular season last year, they only graduated one player: Scott Henkelman.

At the end of the day, Thurston seems less concerned with the outcome of the

friendly match than simply anticipating an exhilarating match-up for his players.

"The Oilers scouts and management do a very good job of drafting, so their power level is always very exciting to watch," he said. "It's an exciting game for our guys because they get to show their skills and their abilities for the Oilers brass watching in the stands."

The puck drops at 7pm on Monday, 10 September at Clare Drake Arena.



FILE PHOTO: PETE YEE

NO GRABBING It'll take a lot of fight for the U of A to win as often as last year.

Grass greener at home for Pandas soccer

Rebuilt team happy to have home-pitch advantage for season opener at Foote

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When the Pandas soccer squad takes to the pitch for their home opener on Saturday afternoon, they'll have good knowledge of the terrain on their side. It's a good thing, too, because most everything else about how the young team will perform is still unknown.

The Pandas graduated eight players from last season's Canada West silver-medal team, which also earned an impressive 11-2-1 record. Now, those who follow the league are watching to see how the rebuilt team performs against strong Canada West competition.

"We get to be a bit of a dark horse. We're going to have a lot of learning to do, and no one really knows what to expect," said Liz Jepsen, Pandas head coach.

Jepsen, who was named CIS Coach of the Year last season, appreciates last year's success, and acknowledges the positive legacy it set up. She doesn't want to rest on her laurels, though.

"I got that accolade last year, but I attribute that to the squad that I had, and I think that what we did is battle hard to be well organized, to learn how each other plays, and apply some

great soccer principles," she said. "To me, I think my challenge always as the coach is to bring that to the next season. Now we need to bring all the new girls onto the page so that they understand the Pandas program—what [Pandas soccer] is all about—and [ensure] that those veterans who are coming back get even better at what they've been doing."

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LIZ JEPSEN
PANDAS SOCCER HEAD COACH

The team has enlisted eleven players fill the vacancies in the roster and Jepsen is ready to take on the challenges her new side is facing.

"I think people expect a lot of holes. However, we do have depth and quality [with] the players in development," she said. "I'm looking forward to seeing our new players—like players in previous years who have trained

hard and shown dedication—become great Pandas."

Several of the new additions to the lineup look particularly promising, but good recruits or not, the Pandas will be glad to have the home-field advantage.

"I like to think that there's a certain feeling—a certain spark, a breath of fresh air—as you walk onto a pitch that you know," she explained. "You come back to your park, and you have that muscle memory; you know how it feels and what to expect. Whereas when you're in someone else's park, there are unknowns, like the parking's not there, or the bus driver took a wrong turn, or we can't get in for our training. It gives you an advantage to not have to worry about all the things that won't happen."

The Huskies lost their head coach at the end of their 3-9-2 2006 season. This year's squad is mostly first- and second-year players, but Jepsen doesn't discount them.

"Bringing in new coaches will bring in a newly raised spirit for them," she said. "They'll have a different look, and combined with what they had in the past, that should be an additional bonus for them."

The games will be on Saturday and Sunday at Foote Field at 12pm.