

# Field hockey ready to face UBC

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Sports Writer

The ball's about to drop on another year for Pandas field hockey this weekend at Foote Field and—just their luck—they've drawn the powerhouse defending national champions from UBC for their first series. But two-time CIS Coach of the Year Carla Duncan, is excited about the early challenge.

"[This weekend] is about evaluation and finding how we measure up against the best team in the country," Duncan said. "There are a lot of positives to be had this early in the season, and I think we are going to surprise them."

Catching the champs off-guard is going to be difficult for the young Panda team. Not only did Duncan replace nine players from last year's roster—including the team's MVP and only first-team all-Canadian, Davinder Bal—but her opponents have also had the benefit of an international training camp this summer, which the Pandas didn't.

The T-Birds traveled to New Zealand to play some of the best teams in the world, compiling a 2-3-2 record. Duncan admitted that tournaments like that are good for UBC's players, but that the T-birds are a strong team mostly because of their home province's rich talent pool.

"I think that all programs need to put those events into their schedule because they can be extremely positive for conditioning and development," Duncan explained. "But UBC is a great program because they have a very good development system, a rich feeder system, more players in



**X MARKS THE SPOT** The Pandas will open the season against the UBC T-Birds. FILE PHOTO: PETE YEE

that province, and the national team is based there."

Working in the underdog Pandas' favor is a change in scheduling by Canada West program. In the past, three of the four conference schools would host a four-team round-robin tournament during the season. Now the system is similar to the schedule that other sports follow: teams will play each other four times—twice at home, twice on the road—which will drastically change the way teams compete. It's something Duncan thinks is a positive both for the Pandas and the sport.

"Having two-game weekends instead of three-game weekends puts [field hockey] on line with other sporting teams like ice hockey or soccer, and that's great for the league, but [this format] also allows for more coaching opportunities. With three

different opponents in one weekend, it was difficult to prepare your team," Duncan said. "With only one opponent, it allows for better coaching [and] better endurance, which should mean better games and should result in more rivalries."

With the prospect of more effective coaching—and the two-time Coach of the Year at the helm—the new schedule should be a definite positive for the U of A. Still, the Pandas face the prospect of looking up at UBC and Victoria in the standings again this year. But the quality of their competition won't change the team's ultimate objective, according to Duncan.

"The main goal is to get to a national championship and play for a medal," Duncan said. "In lots of ways this is a rebuilding year, but the people we have recruited are very, very strong, and we think we can surprise."

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