

U of A tennis takes on West's best

San Diego is home to the ideal pre-season tournament for a select few Pandas and Bears, who will face the top North American competitors there this week

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

In Edmonton, the leaves are falling and most students are pulling out their woolly sweaters, but it's always sunny in San Diego. That's where four members of the U of A tennis team are heading this week, to compete in the Intercollegiate Tennis Association's Western Championships.

The Bears and Pandas are each sending two athletes to California for the pre-season tournament, in which they will play against some of the best competition on the west coast.

The ITA tournament—which is an individual rather than team competition in singles and doubles—is the first stage on the way to finding an overall college winner. Tennis players from all ranks and categories compete until, at the end of the season, only the best are left.

"Eventually it gets to the point where you have the winners of all your division, and you have basically a true college champion in singles and doubles, so that's really neat," head tennis coach Russ Sluchinski said. "What's even neater is that in the singles, the winner often gets a wild card into the US Open.

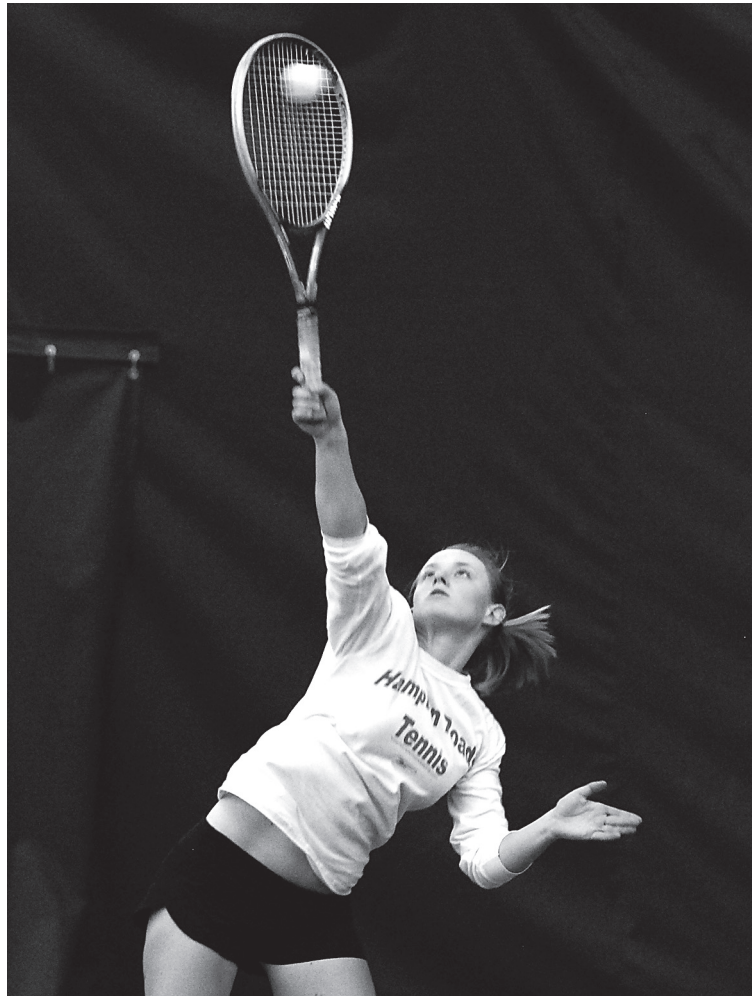
"Our players aren't there yet, but we play in the process, and try to progress through."

From the Pandas, Alberta is sending Susi Fleischhacker and Ingrid McKibbin, while Owen Schlosser and Lane Richard will represent the Bears. Sluchinski considers the four to be some of the U of A's best athletes, and thinks that they'll be able to acquit themselves well in front of the American competition.

"[Richard] has got a very good all-court game," Sluchinski said. "He's solid serving, returning, and going to the net—pretty much everything. He's got a good junior tennis background.

"Owen is more of a baseline player," he continued. "He's very fit, very in shape, and very quick. [He's] very solid off of his groundstroke. He generally stands back and plays more of an Agassi-style game."

As for the women, Alberta has some international flavour on its



SHAUNMOTT

SWAT TEAM Ingrid McKibbin practices in advance of her trip to San Diego.

roster: Fleischhacker is a transfer student from Germany. She's back at the U of A after playing here in her first year, a season in which she was named both Alberta Rookie of the Year and Pandas MVP.

"We're pretty excited to have her back for this year," Sluchinski said. "She basically doesn't beat herself. She can attack off the backhand, has a very good feel for the court and the ball, and is tactically smart."

Sluchinski feels that the combination of Fleischhacker and McKibbin will be able to do some damage in San Diego.

"[Ingrid] is a very solid player as well. The two of them should pair up well in doubles, even though they haven't played doubles together before," he said.

Whatever results Alberta returns with, the experience will have been a valuable one. Because the pool of competition is so large—and includes the strong tennis schools in California—Sluchinski isn't too concerned about wins and losses right now. He's more interested in seeing his players perform their best, regardless of the final score.

"There'll be some schools there that have some of the best players in college tennis; it just depends on who you draw," he explained. "It's not whether we win or lose, but whether we go out and play and compete well.

"At the end of the day, when we go back and play these teams later on [in the regular season] in a team competition—not as an individual—we'll know what we need to improve on."



RUTH MCGAFFIGAN

THOSE AREN'T TURKEYS, THEY'RE PEOPLE! Hundreds of students gathered on campus Saturday for the annual Turkey Trot fun run, which is the official kick-off to the University's United Way campaign. First-place won a frozen turkey.

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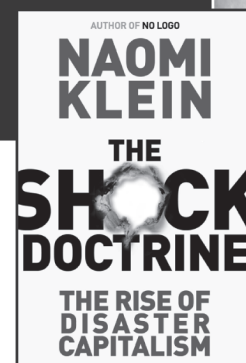
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