



FILE PHOTO: TARASTIEGLITZ

TAKE IT AND RUN The rugby Pandas are practicing up to maul opponents such as the Pronghorns this weekend.

It's showtime for Rugby Pandas

For the first time, Canada West teams will meet before the conference clincher

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

While some U of A teams may get tired of their travel schedules or complain about how much time they spend on the road, the Pandas rugby squad has the opposite problem. Unlike other varsity sports, rugby doesn't have a regular season—this is the first year in which the teams have even played each other before the Canada West finals.

This year, there will be a seeding tournament in advance of the conference finals, which will determine rankings—a vast improvement over the old system, according to Pandas head coach Matt Parrish. The tournament, which is Alberta is hosting this weekend, will be a round-robin competition between the U of A, Victoria Vikes, UBC Thunderbirds, and last year's CIS bronze-medallist Lethbridge Pronghorns.

Because there are only four Canada West teams, being able to play each other even once before the finals is hugely beneficial, according to Parrish.

"We used to just base [seeding] on the results from last year, so this year we've got a bit more competition and can get an idea of what we're like this year," Parrish said. "We get more games over a longer period of time. It's just more competition, which is

what we need, really."

The teams haven't formally met since last November, where the Pandas placed third. That outcome was a surprise to Alberta, who were expecting another Canada West title for their team. The Pandas enjoyed a streak of CIS golds from 1999/00—the first year the sport was played in CIS—until 2003/04, and won the Canada West title the two seasons after that.

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MATT PARRISH
PANDAS RUGBY HEAD COACH

"We [...] didn't win it last year, and that was a real shock for a lot of people," Parrish said. "You get used to winning, but you always know there's going to be a time when you don't."

Parrish describes the 2006 season as "a real rebuilding year" for the Pandas, who lost a number of their most experienced players in the previous few seasons. Most of last year's athletes are returning for this season, however, and Parrish is optimistic

about their chances.

"It's looking promising," he said. "This is a good chance for us; we want to get back to winning it."

Parrish predicts tough games, especially against the T-birds and 'Horns.

"I think the top two teams from last year—UBC and U of L—will be pretty close to where they were last year. Lethbridge have recruited some good players, and so have UBC," he said. "I would expect [UVic] to be the weakest team at the tournament."

The biggest benefit of this weekend's tournament, even more than the seeding advantage, is the chance to scope out the competition before the finals.

"The advantage of this is that even if things don't go well results-wise, we still have the chance at Canada West finals to [change]," Parrish said. "Obviously it would be nice to win [this] and to go in as the number one seed, but if things don't pan out exactly, at least it gives us a chance to try out some of the things we've been working on in practice."

"I think it'll be good for everyone that way. It'll give everyone a chance to sort of size up where everyone's at and what we need to do come the tournament in October. That'll be the big thing."

Alberta's first game is 10am Friday at Foote Field East.

Same volley, more balls

The men's volleyball team are trekking out of town this weekend too, but they're heading west for a couple of exhibition games in Penticton and Kelowna against the TWU Spartans.

The only other exhibition action they've seen so far has been against the Team Canada Masters, which Alberta won 3-1. Take that, federalism.

Great Lake Skaters

Following the volleyball teams on the road this weekend is nothing—the real travellers are the Bears hockey team. They're heading all the way to the wilds of Thunder Bay, to take on the Lakehead University Timberwolves. The last time these two predators met was in 2006,

when they faced off for the CIS title. That time, the Golden Bears came up on top.

The Bears have had a pretty busy off-season. On top of a trip to Banff to play UBC, they played in the Huskie Invitational last weekend in Saskatoon, drawing 4-4 against Saskatchewan and mowing over Manitoba 5-1.

Short-shorts / no shorts

Vice-newsie Ryan "I want to have a wedding" Heise is saddened that the seasons are turning because the cold weather means an end to a happy summer of free-balling. Opinionated gentleman-artist Conal Pierse, on the other hand, proudly reports that because he showered today, he put on fresh underwear after two days. "I don't have very sweaty balls," he explained.

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SPORTS SHORTS

Compiled by Robin Collum

V-ball ladies cleaning up

The defending national champion women's volleyball team will be away this weekend, in one of many pre-season games on their schedule. This time, they'll be at the University of Regina, though they don't play the Rams—they'll be matched up against Brandon, Manitoba, and Winnipeg.

The Pandas have won all but one of the rest of their exhibition games so far—the exception being the match against the visiting NIFS Japan team two weeks ago.