

Football Bears nearing red zone on season

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

It's a do-or-have-the-season-die home game this weekend for the football Bears, and they're going to have to put on their best performance yet if they want to beat visiting Saskatchewan. With only one game left in their season, Alberta (2-5) still have a chance to make the Canada West play-offs, but it will require a win against the eighth-ranked Huskies (4-2), along with a little bit of help from Calgary and SFU.

The Bears have played Saskatchewan, now third in Canada West, once this fall already, opening their season in Saskatoon in August. The Huskies slammed them 45-14 in that game, but U of A head coach Jerry Friesen is confident that his team is better now than they were at the beginning of the season and can give the Huskies a run this Saturday.

"I think we've improved," he said. "Have we improved enough? That's going to be tested on Saturday. We'll find out. The improvement we've had with our football team is significant. Now it's a matter of, as we compete against the better teams in our conference, [making] sure our level steps up to that competitive level of other teams."

Friesen's main concern as the weekend approaches is getting his players to put their training into practice.

"Number one is just execution," he said. "No matter what game, you want to be consistent in your execution. It's a key factor, and especially against [Saskatchewan]."

The Huskies are on the rebound from a surprising and disappointing loss last weekend to the fifth-place Calgary Dinos (2-4). Down by three points with no time left on the clock, the Dinos managed a 51-yard field



FILE PHOTO: PETE YEE

YOU KNOW, IT HELPS TO BE ON YOUR FEET The Bears ran straight through SFU's defences, but it's unlikely they'll get to see any playoff action this season.

goal, beating Saskatchewan 20-19.

The team will be looking to redeem themselves for the upset this weekend against the Bears, who at sixth place are ranked even lower than Calgary in Canada West.

"Calgary played very well, but we turned the ball over in the red zone, which has been a continual problem for us," Huskies head coach Brian Towriss said. "We fumbled twice on the one and another time on about the 14, and those are mistakes you can't

make if you want to come away with some points. You lose by one in the end, and it's not going to sit too well. But we did some good things, and in some areas, we improved—we've just got to hang on to the football."

Towriss singled out a few members of his lineup who he thinks will be especially effective this weekend, including safety Dylan Barker and wide receiver Leighton Heron.

"Heron is an exciting player. Pound for pound, he's one of the toughest

guys in the league, and he comes to play every week," he said. "Barker makes a lot of plays for us at defence, and he's a big-impact type of hitter."

In order to make the playoffs, the Bears will have to neutralize Saskatchewan, but that's not the entire equation: they also have to hope that Calgary loses to this weekend and beats UBC the next. But since it's out of their hands—and somewhat of a long shot—Friesen is trying to put the post-season pressure out of his mind, and instead concen-

trating on the task ahead.

"I'm just looking at this game and making sure that from our last game we improve from it, our execution level gets consistent, our players play their best football when it's needed," he said.

"That's the important part. Everything else, all the other peripheral things that are going on, it doesn't matter."

The game is at 2pm on Saturday at Foote Field, and on the Team 1260.

Hockey Bears get set to go 'Horn hunting on home ice

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

High-scoring front lines get all the applause, but Bears hockey head coach Eric Thurston is much more interested in what his players do when they don't have the puck. Going into this weekend's series against the Lethbridge Pronghorns (2-2-0), Thurston is devoting a great deal of attention to the Bears' defensive efforts.

"You have to play solid in your own end," he said. "Defence in any league, in anything, wins championships. It's easy to play offence because you've got the puck, but defence is done through battling, position, and commitment."

Alberta (2-1-1) began the season with a pair of losses to UBC, but came back this past weekend with two victories against Calgary at home. Thurston is confident the team will be able to maintain that trend, but says it won't be easy.

"Lethbridge is a very physical team. They come and work very, very hard. They might be the hardest working team in the league," he explained. "We have to make sure that we bring the same work ethic against them—the same commitment to being physical, to battle in all the ugly areas, in the corners, and in front of the net."

That's where he feels a continued concentration on defensive play will be important. The Bears have four strong lines of forwards, he noted, so advancing the puck shouldn't be an issue.

"I think we have four really solid lines that I think, on any given night, can bring some offence

to the table. I think they key will be having all four lines committed to battling and playing defence."

In contrast, Pronghorns head coach Greg Gatto views his own lineup as slightly more of a question mark. With 16 players on the 24-man roster in only their first or second year, the 'Horns are a growing program looking to build on their playoff appearance last season.

"We're very young, so we're making a lot of rookie mistakes," Gatto said. "I'm only graduating one player after this year, so that's a good stepping stone for our future, but we're not just looking at the future, we're looking at right now too."

Gatto says that, despite the fact they have the same record, his team feels like an underdog coming into Edmonton.

"I think there always is an [intimidation factor]," he admitted. "[Alberta's] always a top-end club that's a national power every year. Especially for Lethbridge, where we're just starting to build ourselves up after a long stretch of mediocrity, if you want to call it that. We've got to get ourselves up to that level."

That said, however, they're determined to keep what Gatto calls the "mystique" of the Bears from getting to them. The team has a number of star players of their own. Second-year left winger Mark Shefchyk was the top scorer in Canada West—and 2007 CIS Rookie of the Year—while third-year right wing Jason Roberts was tied for second in scoring. Gatto believes the difference this year is that that top line now has some backup.



FILE PHOTO: SHAUN MOTT

SNOWPLOW The Bears face Lethbridge this week and hope to beat them like they did Calgary.

"I think our depth has gotten better. I think that was always our weakest link—we had one good line and three lines that were very okay," he said. "Now we've got two or three lines that can go, and that makes a big difference when you're playing the U of As, the U of Cs, and the U of Ss."

Gatto said that one of his team's biggest issues is that they seem unable to maintain their intensity

through an entire weekend series. They've won both of their Friday night games, but lost their Saturday matches.

"Inconsistency is an issue," he said. "We play really well one night and then just let the foot off the gas because we figure we're going to be really good again, and we haven't been."

The puck drops between the two teams at Clare Drake Arena on Friday and Saturday at 7:30pm.