

No nationals for silver-medal rugby team



I'M OPEN, I'M OPEN! The Pandas (dark) beat UVic, but lost Canada West gold to Lethbridge last weekend in Victoria.

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

It's not often that a team that suffers only one defeat in their entire season gets shut out from the national finals, but such is the case for the U of A's women's rugby team.

The Pandas (3-0-0) lost only one game in their two-tournament season—the Canada West gold-medal match this Sunday against Lethbridge—but they'll miss out on nationals. After sweeping the conference seeding tournament at home earlier this year, Alberta ran all over hosts Victoria on Friday to put them in the gold-medal game, which they lost 3-0. Canada West only gets one spot at the rugby championships.

"We're obviously disappointed in the final result," Pandas head coach Matt Parrish said.

This is only the second time in team history—but the second in a row—that the Pandas have failed to make it to nationals. That said, they're happy with their silver medal, a better result than last year's third-place finish.

"There is the tradition there with the Pandas of success, and I think obviously [the players] were disappointed, but I don't think they were as disappointed as last year, just because they played well this weekend and it wasn't for lack of effort, or heart," Parrish said. "Some things just didn't come off, and those things happen in every sport."

After their previous success this season, the Canada West results came as a surprise to the Pandas.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't expecting to win," Parrish said. "I didn't expect it to be anything but a close game, but I thought we had a chance to win it."

Canada West gold used to be the norm for Alberta, who won the conference from the school's first year in the sport in 1999/00, to the 2005/2006 season. But Parrish sees

the end of that dynasty as a good thing for the sport overall.

"I think what's happened is that CIS—and also in general women's rugby—has gotten better," he said. "I also think the quality of coaches in CIS has gotten better, so the standard's come up."

The gold-medal game was an unusually low-scoring affair, with the only points coming on a penalty from last year's CIS and Canada West Player of the Year Ashley Patzer. Parrish explained the low-offence game by saying that he and Lethbridge coach Neil Langevin's strategies essentially cancelled each other out.

"We managed to nullify each other, and we just didn't quite know how to respond to it," he said. "Our plan A didn't work, and we didn't respond well. That's not a reflection on the players; it's just a reflection on us as coaches."

"We played well, but Lethbridge played a little better than us."

Alberta still emerged from the weekend with a slate of awards. Parrish was named Canada West Coach of the Year, Annika Eriksson was declared tournament MVP, and six Pandas were named to the conference All-Star team. Parrish wants his players to appreciate the honours, rather than dwell on the end of the season.

"I hope the players take it as a little bit of acknowledgment of their hard work and play," he said. "They were initially just disappointed, and just like, 'Oh, okay,' but I would hope that when they actually think about it in a month or so they sort of go, 'Well, it was nice to get recognized.'"

Parrish is already looking ahead to next season. First of all, because Lethbridge is hosting, Canada West will get two spots, but the Pandas will also be returning the majority of their players.

"We can build off things rather than starting again, which will be nice."

Preseason prep for Basketbears

Alberta will practice with their new players at the Golden Bear Invitational

BEN CARTER
Sports Staff

For a team with high expectations this season, a visit from three top-flight Ontario programs should go a long way in determining the potential of this Bears basketball squad. In their final games before beginning their Canada West season, the Bears host the Waterloo Warriors, York Lions, and Ottawa Gee Gees in this weekend's Golden Bear Invitational tournament.

The event follows a weekend away in Victoria, where Alberta beat UVic and Brandon but lost to the defending national champions Carleton. Bears coach Don Horwood is awaiting the challenge that this weekend's opponents can pose for his team.

"We need to play as good teams as possible so we get an idea of exactly how good we are and what we need to do to improve," he said. "All three of these teams are going to be a big test, but we feel Ottawa on Saturday will be the biggest test for us this weekend."

The Gee Gees are currently ranked

fourth in the country, while Waterloo and York have been successful for a number of seasons. The U of O was a national semi-finalist last season, eventually losing to Carleton.

"They worked hard; they defended hard; I was very pleasantly surprised with our effort last weekend. We think we have the whole package."

DON HORWOOD
BEARS HEAD COACH

Alberta only graduated two players last season, but those two players—Tyson Jones and Scott Gordon—were a large part of the Bears team, and their roles need to be filled. So far, though, Horwood is seeing a lot of encouraging signs from his young team. The Bears went 2-1 in last weekend's preseason tournament,

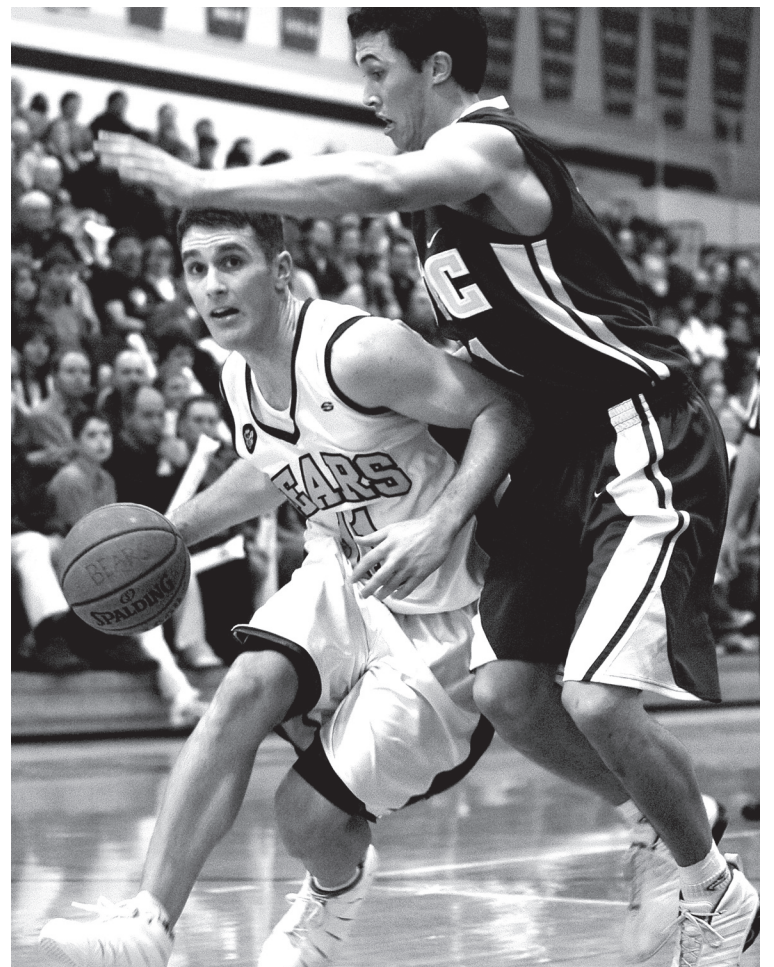
and Horwood was greatly enthused by what he saw from his team.

"Alex [Steele] and CG [Morrison] were consistently our best players all game, [and] Andrew Parker had an outstanding, monster game on Sunday," he said.

"The guys surprised me. They worked hard; they defended hard; I was very pleasantly surprised with our effort last weekend. We think we have the whole package."

At this point in the pre-season, Horwood is more concerned with how his team plays and responds to general game situations and competition, rather than what the opposition shows them. But just because they're not looking out for particulars doesn't mean the Bears won't be taking something away from this weekend's games.

"Part of playing these games is learning how to play against different styles," he explained. "It's a matter of playing different teams and different styles and us having to adjust to those styles. That's what we try to do in the pre-season is to get used to that kind of basketball."



FILE PHOTO: PETE YEE

YOU MUST BE THIS TALL ... The U of A will get practice with top CIS teams.