



FILE PHOTO: ANDREW RURAK

**THIS IS THE GUN SHOW** The Pandas lost the best player in the country after last season, but they swept their last two games and are more than ready to see what Regina will bring to the court.

## Pandas, minus Dodds, go Cougar hunting at home

Last year's CIS MVP is gone, but Alberta volleyballers soldier on

MARC AFFELD  
Sports Writer

For most varsity teams, losing just one starting player in the off-season would be considered a loss, but not a hugely significant one. In the case of the Pandas, however, that one player happened to be arguably the best volleyball player in Canada in Tiffany Dodds. They aren't letting her departure get them down, though.

"We don't focus on what we don't have; we focus on what we do have," head coach Laurie Eisler said. "What we do have is six out of seven of our starters from last year, and that's an unbelievable group to be starting with."

This summer, Dodds, last year's CIS Player of the Year and CIS Tournament MVP, attended a four-day tryout for a South Korean professional volleyball team—the Hyundai Green Foxes of Seoul—and in early October, she signed what is believed to be the highest-paid contract ever for a Canadian female volleyball player.

Despite losing such an important player, however, the Pandas are directing their attention to the positive aspects of the situation.

"It's a reality of CIS that rarely do we repeat anything from year to year because there's always change-over," Eisler explained. "Even if it's the same athletes, they are changing, evolving, and becoming better players."

"I think we've adapted really well," Pandas captain and starting setter Daryll Roper agreed. "It's true that she was a really big part of our team, but we also have lots of depth this year."

Helping the Pandas transition is the fact that they've filled Dodds' position with another veteran—fourth-year outside hitter Kaylan Berg. Her teammates, such as fourth-year outside hitter Jocelyn Blair are looking forward to seeing what she brings to the court.

"The person that we have replacing [Dodds] is a different style player," Blair said. "[Berg] is really fast and quick in the back row, so she can run plays that Tiffany couldn't run."

Having Berg starting, rather than someone new to the program, lends what Eisler feels will be welcome consistency to their game plan.

"We're not going to do things a whole lot differently than we did last year," Eisler said. "The success we had was due to tremendous work ethic and a group of athletes that are really open to making the changes that needed to be made."

**"I think we've adapted really well."**

DARYLL ROPER  
PANDAS CAPTAIN

Coming into this weekend, Alberta's record is impressive, having lost only two of their 16 pre-season games and taking Brandon in three straight sets on both nights in their first two conference games last weekend. Blair was also named the Canada West Female Athlete of the Week for her exceptional performance against the Bobcats. That said, it doesn't look like the Pandas will be resting on their laurels any time soon.

"We've got a great record coming out of the pre-season, but all that does is show how you stack up against other teams," Eisler said. "It doesn't mean anything come March."

The Pandas will play their first home games against the Regina Cougars this weekend. The last time the two teams met, in late September, the Pandas came away with a three-set sweep, but Eisler insists the Cougars are a better team than their 0-2 record shows.

"We handled them, but we haven't played them since, and I know they've grown a lot. They're a hard working team," she said. "They've just come off tough losses to Manitoba, so I'm sure they want to put some wins in the win column."

Regina's also going to be gunning for them. "It's a little different playing against opposing teams who have the underdog mentality," Blair said. "I think that because we're the defending national champions, they are going to try that much harder to beat us."

The Pandas play at 6:30pm on Friday night and at 8pm on Saturday in the Main Gym.

## Number-one hockey Pandas to face off with Saskatchewan

VICTOR VARGAS  
Sports Staff

They may have lost their top four scorers from last year, but it hasn't slowed the Pandas hockey team (6-0-0) at all; they've won all their games and are currently ranked as the number-one team in the country.

The Pandas coaching staff puts the team's success down to their players rising to the challenge of having lost so many first-liners.

"The tradition gets passed down from year to year, so it is just a matter of time [until] people waiting in the wings will feel it's time to shine," assistant coach Judy Diduck said.

In particular, head coach Howie Draper has high hopes for the partnership of forwards Jennifer Newton and Leah Copeland. Newton has had eight goals this season and eight assists, while her linemate Copeland has two goals and eight assists.

"We've got them on a line together, and they are really dynamic, and they've had an outstanding season so far," Draper said.

Another pleasant surprise has been

the success of the rookie players: forward Nicole Pratt has already scored 2 goals and 1 assist, and Katie Borbely has notched one goal and two assists herself.

"Some of our rookies that are up right now are also very, very strong offensively, and I think they've surprised us a little bit. We didn't feel they'd have the impact as quickly as they've had," Draper said.

Still, Draper is cautious not to claim too much success this early in the season. He noted that his team didn't play as well as they could've against Lethbridge two weeks ago, despite the scores—Alberta won 7-1 on Saturday and 4-1 on Sunday.

Nonetheless, Draper hopes that with the team fully rested from the bye weekend they just had, they'll be ready for their games this weekend against the Saskatchewan Huskies (2-4-0).

"Last year in the second half of the season, when we played them, they beat us. Actually, I felt they outplayed us in all the games in Saskatchewan," he said. "They are typically a team that works very hard, and that's their advantage."



FILE PHOTO: TARA STIEGLITZ

**PRACTICING HER HOCKEY CARD POSE** The Pandas will be at home this weekend, playing against the U of S Huskies.

But no matter where the Pandas and their opponents sit on the national or conference rankings, Draper doesn't believe that the rankings are

necessarily the best indicator of the quality of a team, especially this early in the regular season.

"The rankings themselves are more

of a promotional tool more than anything," he said.

The Pandas play at Clare Drake Arena this Friday and Saturday at 7pm.