

Silver anniversary for acclaimed Bears coach

Don Horwood continues his Hall-of-Fame work with the Bears basketball team this weekend at the home-opener of his 25th season

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When the average Edmontonian makes a list of this city's sports heroes, it's fairly safe to say that Don Horwood's name doesn't come up nearly as often as it should. But as hockey- and football-centric as we may be, it's practically impossible to ignore a career that spans four decades—25 of those years as the Bears' head coach—and includes three CIS Coach of the Year awards and three national championships.

This past summer, Horwood was recognized for his service to the U of A, the Bears basketball program and the city by being inducted into the sports wing of Edmonton's Hall of Fame. Though the feeling of having such an honour bestowed upon him has had time to sink in for Horwood, he still marvels at the company with which he now belongs.

"Can you imagine being inducted into a Hall of Fame where they have guys like Wayne Gretzky, Mark Messier, and all the football greats like Warren Moon and Hugh Campbell?" Horwood said. "It's almost numbing to even think of that. Especially in a city like Edmonton, where the Oilers are kings and the Eskimos are next, you're kind of flying under the radar—that just makes it even more tremendous that the city would recognize what I've managed to accomplish here at the U of A."

Not bad for a guy who started out coaching at high schools in Newfoundland and British Columbia. When he was recruited to coach the Bears in 1983, it almost didn't seem like a step up, according to Horwood, because at that time, no one paid any attention to the team. However, Horwood made it his aim to try and resuscitate Alberta's basketball program.

"There weren't many fans in those days," he said. "My first year here in the fall of '83, I'd say we'd be lucky to have even 200 fans in attendance—we weren't drawing well at all. We had few names, if any, that people recognized. And they certainly didn't recognize the coach's name; it was some high-school coach from Victoria. There wasn't a reason or a strong feeling to be optimistic about the season or



FILE PHOTO: MIKE OTTO

JUST PUT THE BALL IN THE NET Hall-of-Fame inductee Don Horwood directs his players, including Andrew Parker, middle, during a practice.

about the team. One of my goals was to help improve that."

Since then, things have completely turned around: fans of the Bears always have reason to be optimistic about the team's chances of contending both in-conference and nationally, thanks largely to Horwood's skill. Team captain Alex Steele, now in his third season playing under Horwood, said it's his coach's work ethic and his ability to teach that make him a good coach.

"One of his coined terms is 'excuses don't change anything,' so that's one thing that we'll always remember for sure," Steele explained. "Apart from that, he just really teaches you how to grow up and learn from your mistakes, and

he really teaches you how to be a man and play the game like a man. You mature under him, for sure, but you also learn a lot about the game mentally and physically.

"He wants to win worse than anyone else I've ever met. That means the world to us, and it means that everyone wants to bring it every night. We're glad that he's our coach, and we wouldn't want it any other way."

Horwood will lead his squad (2-0) onto the court in his 25th home opener as the Bears' head coach this weekend, as the team takes on the Saskatchewan Huskies (1-1). While they'll have to contend with All-Canadian Andrew Spagrud and the physically intense battle that the Huskies

bring to the table, Horwood is so confident in his current squad's ability to get the job done that he's even willing to call them the best he's ever coached.

"Right now, the team is looking awesome," Horwood said. "I told the guys [Monday] at practice that, in my opinion, we're the number-one team in the country right now. We're an exciting team to watch right now, and, as a matter of fact, I would say that this might be the most exciting team that I've had here at the U of A. I mean, we've had really good teams here before, but this team does a lot of dynamic things."

Tip-off goes at 8pm on Friday and Saturday night at the Main Gym.



FILE PHOTO: ERINNE FENWICK

ROCKET PANDA The Pandas are in the unfamiliar position of being conference favourites this season and hope they can prove why against the Huskies.

Pandas face familiar foes on court

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Despite playing them seven times last season, the Pandas basketball squad (2-0) isn't quite sure what to make of the Saskatchewan Huskies (1-1) as they roll into town this weekend.

Gone from the Husky team that lost to the Pandas in last year's Central Division final are two-time CIS Player of the Year Sarah Crooks and fellow conference all-star Ashley Dutchak, a duo that combined for 45.1 of Saskatchewan's 79.6 points per game last season.

"It will certainly be a different mindset for us," Pandas coach Scott Edwards said. "A year ago, it was not an easy way to prepare, but we knew what we were expecting from them every night, and now with those two kids gone, we've just got to focus more on overall defence and team concepts, rather than just stopping individual athletes. That will hopefully be more to the style we play anyways [...], so it should be hopefully not too much of a problem for us."

While both teams will have to adjust to not having Crooks and Dutchak on the floor, Alberta won't have an easy time of it, according to Edwards.

"They're a more balanced team than they were a year ago; the scoring is distributed a little bit better. They've got one kid—Kim Tulloch—who's playing really well, and we kind of expect her to play the same. It should be a classic Huskies/Pandas battle," he said.

Tulloch notched 20 points in each of Saskatchewan's first two games last weekend and will have a key role to play in a Huskies attack that is trying to find a way to replace over half of its scoring from last season. Still, the Pandas don't foresee any surprises from their divisional rivals.

"We've played all their athletes—it's not like they have a bunch of new kids who we didn't know about—but they're running much harder this year in transition trying to get easy baskets that way, and they're pressuring a little more full court, so there's a lot more preparation in terms of our mental prep to get ready for the game than a year ago," Edwards explained.

On the opposite side of the ball, Edwards noted that not much has changed between the two teams: his team is still undersized, and will be relying on their athleticism to make up for that disadvantage.

"They're a bigger team than they

were a year ago—they've added a couple of nice young kids with size—so hopefully we'll be able to get out and run [to counter that]," he said. "Against Saskatchewan, we're going to have to be able to push their guards and make them play full court for 40 minutes and see how tired we can get them. Hopefully they'll make some mistakes by the fourth quarter, and we'll get after them then."

Coupled with Alberta's success last season—the Pandas were CIS silver medalists—the loss of the Huskies' two best players have left the Pandas the clear-cut division favourites for the first time for anyone on the team, and it's a position that Edwards—in only his second year with the U of A—notes comes with some growing pains.

"For [the players], for the first time in their career dealing with expectations has been interesting to watch," he said. "We've struggled early in the pre-season—I think this past Saturday night was easily our best game of the year; we finally showed the team I think we're capable of becoming, and they're starting to believe that of themselves."

Tip-off is at 6pm on both Friday and Saturday in the Main Gym.