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PETEYEE

MISSED PREY Brandon's Allie Butz (white) tried without avail to defend against Pandas like Ashley Wigg this weekend.

Revolving door of coaches to blame for Bobcats' record

A long string of short-term coaches and lack of attention compared to their men's program have meant losing seasons for Brandon women's basketball

PAUL OWEN
Managing Editor

If you're searching for a basketball powerhouse, Brandon, Manitoba is probably one of the last places you'd think to look. But with four titles and five more appearances in the final since their first trip to nationals in 1979/80, the Bobcats have proven to be one of the most successful programs in CIS men's basketball.

The same, however, can't be said about the Bobcat women.

Currently 0-6 on the season—and losing by an average of 21 points per game—the Bobcats have been the worst team in the country for the better part of a decade. The team hasn't won a conference game since 30 January, 2004, almost four full seasons ago.

"It's difficult to walk into a gym every night and have a whole bunch of expectations on you from everywhere across the country and still hold your head high," fourth-year forward Jennalee Burch says.

The problem in Brandon appears to start from the top down, where the women's side has had five coaches in the past seven years, making continuity an issue for players involved in the program.

"There's been a high turnover of coaches, and with a high turnover of coaches, there are not as many student-athletes willing to make a commitment to a coach or a school that may be leaving within the next two years," current Bobcats head coach Jaime Hickson says. "On the women's side, the program has been treated as a bit of stepping stone for some coaches—the ones who have taken it in the past have got it so they could

take a better job and move on."

For Burch, this coaching carousel became too much last season, when she took a year away from the team.

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JAIME HICKSON
BRANDON HEAD COACH

"In the last four years, we've had three different coaches, and it's hard to build a program like that. It's hard to connect with a new coach, and then another one and another one, and I couldn't handle it anymore, personally," Busch explains, adding that after watching the team from the sidelines last year, the strides they made under Hickson made her want to come back.

However, the men's side is also now on their third coach in three years, and have had no trouble staying competitive: they earned a silver medal at nationals last year, losing by three to Carleton in the final. Hickson attributes this difference to the reputation that the men's program built in the '80s and '90s under Jerry Hemmings, when they won their four titles and made nationals a record 24 times in

a row. Meanwhile, the women's program doesn't have that recognition to fall back on.

"The men's program has had the tradition of Jerry and everything he built there. Brandon men's basketball, you can mention that to anybody across Canada, and they know who it is," she says. "They know what type of program, and the standard that's been set with them. Whereas the women's program, they've continued to struggle because they haven't always had the support from the University that we have now.

"In order to recruit and bring in the talent, you have to be a profitable program. The men's program has been profitable. They've been profitable in their recruiting, and good players come; you want to play with the best. The women's program hasn't been profitable in years, so it's hard to attract. Right now, we're working towards that, and we are becoming profitable. We're starting to draw some of the positive attention and change the image of our program because the image hasn't been great."

Burch, on the other hand, points to the continuity that the Brandon men's team has had—seven players return this year from the team that lost to Carleton, and an eighth, Chad Jacobsen, is now an assistant coach—as the reason for their success.

"Although the coaches have been turning over in the men's program, the players have been sticking around, and that's a big thing," she notes, adding that losing all the veterans after her first year was difficult on her as a developing player. "That's why they've been having their success, and we've been starting from square one almost every year."