

# Pandas set to endanger Chinese hockey team

Unable to find proper competition at home, Team China's preparing for Worlds with games against Canadian teams like the U of A

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When you live in Canada, it's easy to take our hockey culture for granted. Nearly everyone is at least a casual fan of the game, and millions of Canadians—male and female alike—play it.

In China, this isn't the case. There, hockey is mostly unknown or ignored, and the female players are few. This means that the Chinese women's national hockey team doesn't get a lot of competition in its own country.

So they came to Canada, and this Saturday, they'll be facing off against the Pandas.

"It's really hard to get games in China," coach Steve Carlyle explained. "There are a few boys' teams, but hockey is not a huge sport, as you can imagine, in China."

The team is in Alberta for three months to help them train for the IIHF World Championships, which will be held in Harbin, China, in April next year. Calgary's semi-pro women's team Oval X-treme, are hosting the Chinese, and they have use of the Calgary Olympic rink and facilities.

In addition to the upcoming game against the Pandas, they've had a chance to play other colleges and universities, midget teams, and Western Women's Hockey League teams like the X-treme. The depth of competition is a huge change from their situation at home.

"There are only about 200 women that actually play [in China]," Carlyle said. "So that puts us at a bit of a disadvantage; you probably have more than

200 playing in Sherwood Park. They're trying to compete internationally with that kind of a base, so it's a difficult task; not being able to get opposition creates a problem for them."

But playing in a hockey-mad country like Canada has been a huge help for the team, according to Carlyle.

"They're trying to learn a lot about Canadian hockey," Carlyle said. "We're playing maybe a little different systems than they've played in the past, and they're coming along quickly with those, and really improving over the games that we've played."

"The girls work really hard. They train twice a day either off-ice or on-ice. They take it very seriously, and they work very hard at it."

Saturday's exhibition game won't just help the Chinese women, though. Pandas head coach Howie Draper expects his players to get a lot out of it as well.

"It gives us a great opportunity to play a team of a really high calibre," he said. "Any time we can play a team that's very skilled, it can only help us get better."

"I think it's also just a great experience for our players to be able to play players from a different country, from a cultural perspective as well as from a personal development perspective."

The Pandas played their last conference games of the fall semester last weekend—earning two shutouts against Lethbridge—and Draper sees this as a good way to wrap up the first half of the season.

"I think we want to keep it as light as possible and have a lot of fun. We



FILE PHOTO: LAUREN STIEGLITZ

**THE PEOPLES' PUCKS** National—and capitalist—pride will be on the line when the Pandas go up against Team China.

want to have a lot of flow this weekend and look forward to the game, rather than get too serious about it."

And though they'll be playing China's best, Draper's confident his players will be able to hold their own on the ice.

"History has shown that they're very good with their sticks, but that they aren't necessarily as physical," he said. "I think that our advantage will likely be our ability to play defence. I think the Chinese team, though, they're going to be very skilled; my

experience is that maybe they don't quite have the ability to finish that some other teams throughout the world would have. I think we'll probably out-defence them."

The puck drops on Saturday night at 7pm in Clare Drake.

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