

Get back in the game

Forget to follow the University of Alberta's teams last semester? Our mid-season update will catch you up on everything you've missed

PANDAS HOCKEY

"We're going to win a national championship." Pandas hockey coach Howie Draper doesn't equivocate. His team won the CIS championships last year, and he fully intends to repeat. Though he's missing some of the best players from last year—including 2007 Marion Hillard Award winner Taryn Barry and 2007 CIS Player of the Year Lindsay McAlpine—Draper's probably not being overly optimistic, either. Currently the second-ranked team in CIS, the Pandas are dominating the Canada West conference.

The season so far has had some low points. In early November, the Pandas lost in their home rink for the first time since October 2000, and UBC replicated the feat two weeks later. But Alberta was soon on an upswing again, and they haven't lost a conference game since.

Also lending weight to Draper's prediction is that the Pandas have already shown themselves to be up to the level of the best teams in the country. Over Christmas they played McGill and Wilfred Laurier, first and third respectively. Alberta beat McGill and lost 3-2 to Laurier.

"We've got the ability; we played the top

two teams in the league when we were in Guelph, and we've shown that we can compete against them," Draper said.

Of course, his high expectations are predicated on the team's continued improvement.

"Our three next weekends of play are against teams that have proven to be highly competitive, so we have to continue to get better," he said. "There's a lot of areas that I think our consistency isn't exactly where it needs to be in order for us to be successful in reaching our goals."

—Robin Collum

PANDAS BASKETBALL

The hoops Pandas defied expectations last year by going all the way to the national final with a new coach and only one fifth-year player. Accordingly, all eyes have been on them this year to see if they can repeat that success.

Having cracked the national top ten this year—they're currently in fifth spot—the Pandas (9-3) are certainly on track to do some damage in the post-season. Forward Kristin Jarock thinks another national appearance is feasible for her team, but that it's hardly a sure thing.

"I definitely think we have the potential, but it's going to take a lot of hard work. It's definitely not going to be as easy as it was last year because we have a target on [our] back."

The Pandas' schedule in the new year is fairly mixed: wins are nearly assured against teams like Lethbridge, Winnipeg, and Trinity Western, but Alberta will have to be in top form when they face Saskatchewan—who handed them one loss already this year—UBC, and Simon Fraser. The SFU match, a home game, may well turn out to be the hardest match they face this whole regular season. It will be a rematch of last year's national final in St John's: SFU beat the Pandas 72-68.

"I think it'll be a very emotional game," Jarock said.

If the Pandas want revenge for that loss, they're going to need to elicit good performances from everyone, including their strong core of fourth-years: Jarock, Ashley Wigg, Trish Ariss, Katie Barrett, and Michelle Anderson.

Only time will tell if Alberta can pull off another playoff run like last year's, but it certainly shouldn't be ruled out.

—Robin Collum

PANDAS VOLLEYBALL

On the face of it, it might seem that the Pandas volleyball team (7-3, in fifth place in Canada West) has had a weaker-than-usual start to the season. But head coach Laurie Eisler is happy with where her team sits so far and positive about what the rest of the season holds.

The Pandas have a lot to be optimistic about. They have a balanced, talented roster led by a strong core of returning players.

"I think we feel like we're on track and we're doing the things we need to do to contend, and that's all you can really ask for at this point," Eisler said. "But there's a lot of work left to be done. We're far from any sense of satisfaction; we're more focused on what's ahead of us right now, which is the University of Winnipeg."

The Pandas take on Winnipeg next weekend on the road, after a bye weekend that will allow them to recover from the sweep they just suffered against Calgary. The Pandas only have three home weekends left in the season, but they

include matches against Alberta's biggest rivals: the University of Manitoba and UBC.

The Pandas strength as a team comes from their depth and well-roundedness.

"I don't think there's any part of our game that we rely on heavily, and I don't think there's any member of our team that we rely on heavily," Eisler said. "It's a nice balanced system and approach to the game."

Eisler hopes that the the Pandas will be able to repeat last year's national-championship win.

"[Our goal] is to win—it always is. You don't embark on something like this otherwise, and I think set the bar high and go after it. I can't think of any single reason why we shouldn't think we can do it."

"I think we have an experienced lineup but also experience with winning. I think those attributes will start to show themselves more as the season goes."

—Robin Collum

BEARS HOCKEY

Boasting a 13-3-0 record, the top spot in Canada West, and a lead in almost every major Canada West statistical category, the Bears will be looking to repeat the sweeps they executed over most of the teams in their conference in the first half.

The Bears' biggest challenge will come during the last week of conference play,

where they will be looking to avenge being swept by UBC earlier in the season as they battle the Thunderbirds under the lights at Clare Drake Arena.

While the players themselves are already looking strong, expect those performances to continue into the second half. Golden Bears players currently own half of the spots in Canada West's top-ten scoring list with forwards Eric Hunter, Tim Krymusa, Ian McDonald and Dylan Stanley, as well as defenseman Harlan Anderson, leading the charge.

The Bears defence has received a boost with the return of blueliner Kyle Fecho, who missed the first half of the season after sustaining a knee injury in a car accident this past summer. On the defensive side of the ice, goaltender (and Oiler-for-a-day) Aaron Sorochan continues to shut down the opposition, having played twelve of Alberta's 13 conference victories, and will continue to be one of the strongest goaltenders in the country.

—Nick Frost

BEARS BASKETBALL

It's going to be a tough second half for the Bears basketball team (8-4). The U of A will face some of the strongest competition in the conference between now and the division playoffs, and with only four home games left after this past weekend's split against Calgary, the Bears will be fighting for second place in the Central division in other people's gyms.

Though Calgary has a probable lock on first place in the division, there's only two points separating second-place Alberta from Saskatchewan. The second-place finisher gets the home court advantage when playoffs come around.

"We want to hopefully beat

Saskatchewan at home and go into Calgary and play of best-two-out-of-three Central division final," Bears coach Don Horwood said.

For that to happen, the Bears will have to get the most out of their best players: guard Alex Steele has been consistent in his playmaking and high scoring as expected, and a number of others have been showing improvement, many of whom are having their best seasons so far. It will also help that point guard CG Morrison is back in the lineup.

"I think we have a lot of guys who are contributing and can contribute, [but] right now, they don't all seem to be going at the same time," Horwood said. "Obviously, our goal is to have all our players playing at their peak level or close to it in the key games."

—Robin Collum

BEARS VOLLEYBALL

The Golden Bears volleyball team (9-1) has successfully taken on almost every team in Canada West, not to mention some of the best NCAA Division I teams in exhibition games. So it's not too far of a stretch to expect that Alberta will once again make it to the CIS championships, for what would be the seventh straight year. Last year, the U of A lost in five sets to the Winnipeg Wesmen in the final, and Winnipeg is the only team to beat the Bears so far this season.

But while the Bears

aren't willing to take anything for granted, they're still cautiously optimistic.

"I think we're quite happy with where we are right now," assistant coach Dale Johns said. "We realize that obviously it's only halfway and that things get tougher as we get closer to the end of the regular season and into playoffs, but I think we're all looking at the right things right now, and we know we need to improve in certain areas."

"Once you make it to nationals, then it's anyone's. When you get there, the team that puts three good games back-to-back-to-back ends up winning, and that's basically all you can hope for—just to get there—and then, hopefully, you can be playing your best at that time."

The Bears have an extremely strong starting line, including three fifth-years, but they also have a bench that could beat a lot of the teams in Canada West by themselves. Players to watch out for this year include Joel Schmuland, Thomas Jarmoc, Adam Kaminski, and Brock Pehar.

—Robin Collum

File photos (from top): Shaun Mott, Mike Otto, Stu Trebelco

