



**STRAIGHT TO THE POINT** Together, the Pandas and UBC Thunderbirds own the Canada West leaderboards in most categories. This weekend, both teams will be trying to back up those numbers.

STUTREBELCO

## Volleyball Pandas vie for playoff position with UBC

Fourth-place U of A team prepares to host second-place T-Birds

ROBIN COLLUM  
Sports Editor

With only six regular-season games left in the year, the Pandas volleyball team is heading into this weekend's games with the post-season consequences at the front of their minds. Ranked fifth in the country, the Pandas (11-3) will play host to the second-ranked UBC Thunderbirds (13-1), and the results will have a big impact on the Canada West standings and playoff matchups.

The top four teams in Canada West—Manitoba, UBC, Calgary, and Alberta—are all within four points of each other, so there's plenty of room for the conference rankings to shift, and the next few games are particularly important.

"It definitely puts more pressure on each game, knowing that who we play in the playoffs is dependent on these games," Pandas outside hitter Jocelyn Blair said. "But we do have a lot of control over where we finish."

"It's kind of good knowing that we're playing the teams that are ahead of us [in the standings] coming up. It's all up to us."

"Calgary's in a really good position, Manitoba's in a good position, UBC's in a really good spot, but we are too because we control a lot of it," Pandas head coach Laurie Eisler agreed. "It's nice to have that still up for grabs at this time of year because sometimes one team just kind of pulls away, and nobody's able to catch that top spot. But it's all wide open still."

Eisler is happy with her team's position, even if they're not on top at the moment. She pointed out that Alberta was in third place going into the final four last year and ended up winning gold at nationals. She said they're looking forward to a similar challenge this season if it comes to it.

"I think there's something to be said for

having to fight for everything you get," she said. "To be able to stay at home through the rest of the league games and playoffs, and then to travel to nationals, would be an awesome recipe, but we'll deal with whatever we're given. Anyway you look at it, I can script it into something pretty positive."

The T-Birds are certain to be tough competition for the Pandas this weekend and vice versa. The Pandas lead the conference in hitting percentage and service aces, kills, and assists per game; UBC follows closely in the latter two categories. Meanwhile, the T-Birds have the best opponent's hitting percentage in Canada West.

"I expect really tough matches," Blair said. "We've been watching video of them and preparing, and it looks like it's going to be a really close game."

"They've got a lot of offensive power," Eisler said. "So if they're able to control their first contact, the offence is really tough. For us, it's a matter of trying to get them out of rhythm a little bit and out of sync, extend some rallies, and just make them earn every point the hard way."

T-Birds and Pandas also dominate the individual statistics leaderboards in Canada West. UBC players hold the top spot in hitting percentage and service ace and assist averages. Blair holds the best kill average, and U of A athletes are second in individual block and assist averages.

"Our team is going to have to have a really balanced attack," Eisler said. "They're too good to go at one-dimensionally, and so we're going to use a sort of multi-pronged approach, where they're going to have to be aware of everyone on the court, and so any one of us at any time can make that impact."

The Pandas will serve up against the Thunderbirds on Friday and Saturday at 7pm in the Main Gym.

## Pool veterans hope to make post-season splash at home

This weekend's Canada West championships in Edmonton will be the final home meet for some of Alberta's strongest swimmers

MARC AFFELD  
Sports Writer

With the U of A's swimming season heading into the final laps, the Canada West championships being held in Edmonton this weekend are a bitter-sweet reminder that the end is near for some veteran members of the team.

"I think what I'm going to miss the most is the team atmosphere. Having a group of guys and girls you show up to school with everyday, [who] you see everyday and get to share all these experiences with," Bears team captain Mike Vanden Ham said. "Day and night, you live with these people, and they become your brothers and sisters, basically. I think that will be the hardest—leaving that family and moving on."

"[They're] the reason I came back in the first place," agreed veteran Rob Stanger, who took three years off from the team. "I missed the whole atmosphere of hanging out with people, sharing the same interests, and going for the same goals and everything like that. It's the best feeling."

Third-year swimmer Adam Amer explained how veterans like Vanden Ham, who joined the team in the 2001/02 season, contribute both in and out of the pool.

"[Vanden Ham's] got this way of bringing the whole team together—

everyone just loves him to death, and they respect him completely," Amer said.

However, the end of his CIS eligibility doesn't mean the end of Vanden Ham's swimming career.

"I'm looking forward to becoming active in the alumni association and really helping the team in that sense. As well, I've been tossing around the idea of professionally coaching a varsity team or possibly a club team."

"His swimming career will never end; he just loves the sport so much," U of A head coach Bill Humby said.

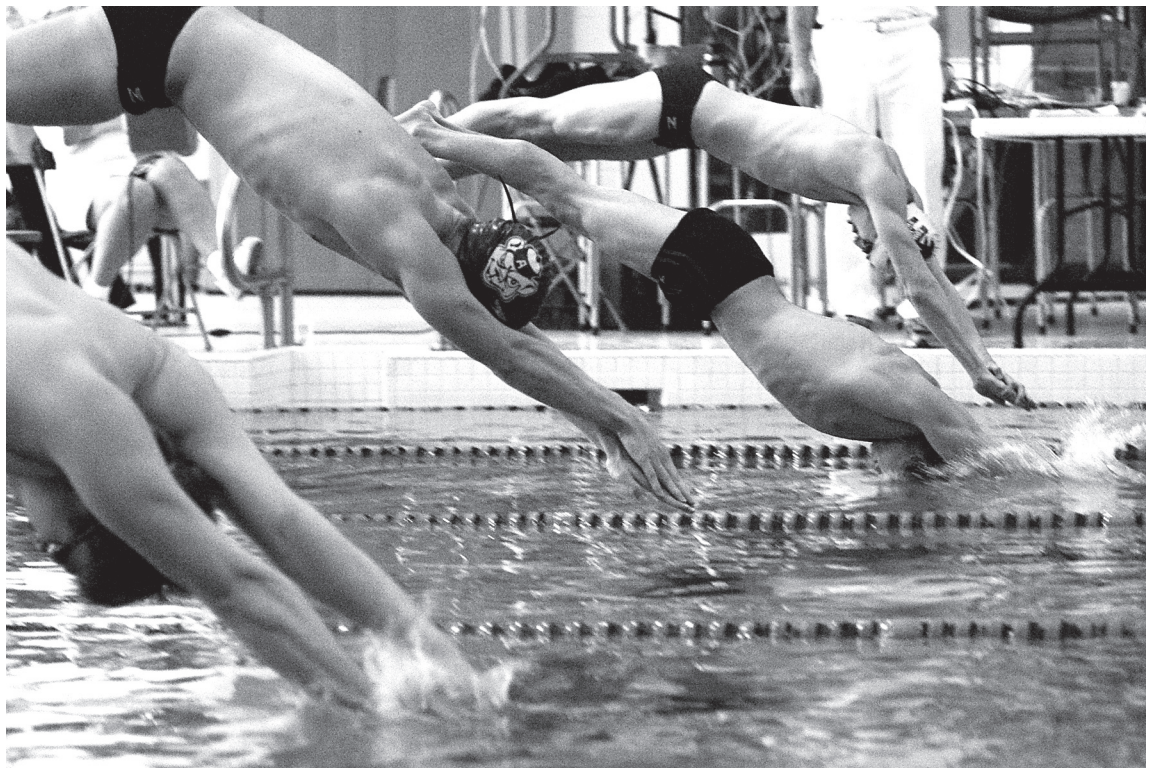
Another swimmer winding up his last year of CIS eligibility is the Bears' most consistent finisher, Jian-lok Chang.

"It's going to be a big loss when he leaves because he's been our all-star for the last three years," Vanden Ham said.

"Jian-lok is quite a unique character and definitely contributes a lot to the team," Amer added.

But reminiscences aside, the Bears and Pandas have high expectations for their placements this weekend.

"Last year, [the Pandas] were fifth," Humby said. "Victoria creamed us, and Manitoba just barely beat us. This year, I don't think Manitoba is an issue, and I think we've got the depth to beat Victoria—I think the girls can finish third, which would



FILE PHOTO: NEIL WILDING

**LIKE A HOT KNIFE THROUGH BUTTER** The best swimmers in Canada West will dive in this weekend in Edmonton.

be a big step for them."

The Bears and Pandas are both looking to have more swimmers qualify for the CIS championship, which takes place in the end of February at UBC. The team has nine men and eight women who've already quali-

fied for the meet.

"The plan is to go in there this weekend, use our depth, and make every single event really count," Humby said. "You can't think about teams like UBC and all of their national championships—you have to think that their

tenth guy isn't as good as our tenth guy."

The Bears and Pandas host the Canada West Championship this weekend at the Kinsmen Pool. Action starts at 10am on Friday and Saturday and at 1pm on Sunday.