



GIMME FIFTEEN Jocelyn Blair and Samantha Wojtkiw go for the big block against the UBC T-Birds this weekend as Tiffany Proudfoot gets ready midcourt. The Pandas lost both games in four sets.

PETEYEE

Pandas can't keep up with T-Birds at the net

Alberta power offence not enough to beat strong UBC blocking

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

The Pandas volleyball team, fourth in Canada West, has a winning record over most of the teams in the conference, but this weekend, they weren't able to win more than two sets against the second-place UBC Thunderbirds (15-1). Alberta (11-5) lost 3-1 to UBC on both Friday and Saturday night.

The weekend's losses made clear that the Pandas still have a ways to go if they want to be serious contenders when playoffs come around in the middle of February.

"It was really challenging and disappointing, obviously," Pandas head coach Laurie Eisler said. "We're not where we want to be or where we need to be yet, but the positives are that when you play a team that's that good, and played that well, it really exposes what you need to do."

It was the T-Birds defence that undid the Pandas on the weekend. UBC put up 28 blocks and 64 defensive digs on Friday, and 18 blocks and 53 digs on Saturday night. It proved too much for Alberta's usually dangerous offence, and that led to mental lapses on the Pandas side.

"I think we ended a lot of rallies with just bad decision-making and made a mistake instead of keeping the rally alive and forcing them to beat us," Eisler said. "The biggest thing was we're just not scoring points off our serve game."

The Pandas still have several weekends ahead

of them before Canada West playoffs, though, and Eisler is confident that her team will be ready when the time comes.

"There were lots of positives. Some of that volleyball was brilliant," she said.

"Time is still our friend. As long as we can stay positive and stick with it and really work on those things that are hurting us right now and try to make things better, then we have a fighting chance."

The T-Birds also felt that the weekend's matches were a good way to evaluate how they stack up in Canada West, though for them, the prognosis was obviously more positive.

"We always repeat that it's a team that's not going to give up or go away even if you get up on them," UBC coach Doug Reimer said. "For both teams, it's been a while since they played one of the top teams in the league—not playing matches that they're 'supposed' to win, but matches where you're not exactly sure what's going to happen."

The T-Birds have an even tougher schedule coming up than the Pandas. Next weekend they take on the third-place Dinos (14-2) in Calgary, and the weekend after that they'll face fifth-place Trinity Western (10-6).

"It's good to know that we are up to the challenge," UBC left side Liz Cordonier said. "You come up against teams like Alberta that have so much skill, and it's good to know that you're out there to fight as well."

U of A swimmers advance by laps and bounds to bronze

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

Though the UBC Thunderbirds have long been the team to beat in Canada West swimming, this weekend's Canada West championship meet in Edmonton showed that the tides may be changing. The T-Birds got some serious competition from both the Calgary Dinos and the Bears and Pandas, losing to the Dinos in both the men's and women's standings and fighting the Bears for second place.

This weekend, the Alberta men kept close behind the T-Birds, finishing with 509 points compared to UBC's 588, though far behind the 945 team points Calgary posted. U of A's women weren't quite as close to second place, trailing UBC's 702 team points with only 414, but both Alberta teams earned a handful of medal finishes and several more swimmers qualified for nationals.

"We made some big improvements over last year, and that's a good start," U of A head coach Bill Humby said.

The strong finishes from Alberta's athletes are a good sign for the Bears and Pandas, who have struggled in recent years trying to keep up to UBC and Calgary. UBC has won nine of the past ten Canada West women's titles and eight of the past ten men's titles, and the T-Birds are ten-time defending national champions in both men's and women's swimming.

The Pandas especially have shown improvement against those powerhouses, moving up two places from fifth at last year's Canada West meet.

"It was probably the best [conference finals] I've seen for our team since I've been here," fifth-year Bear Mike Vanden Ham said. "We've never



LAUREN STIEGLITZ

LOOK MA, ONE HAND The Bears and Pandas hosted the Canada West championships this weekend, and both teams impressed with third-place overall finishes.

been this close to second place on the men's side, and the women have come a long way too, to come back to third—and a strong third, not just a barely-third."

Vanden Ham thinks this weekend's positive results are an indication of possible change in the Canada West swimming landscape, and predicts further success for the U of A.

"It shows a bit of shift; UBC's sort of falling off their dominant path, with

Calgary overtaking them by a lot and us being able to nip at their heels," he said. "It was really exciting for me to see that our program's coming along and that we're moving forward finally."

While the biggest individual names at the meet, like Olympic hopefuls Callum Ng and Annamay Pierse, were from UBC, Alberta now has 19 swimmers—five more than last year—qualified for nationals, and several Alberta swimmers stood out for

Humby on the weekend. In addition to the number of medals earned by Alberta swimmers, there were some more personal victories. Humby was particularly proud of Carly Perreux, who posted a qualifying time during Sunday's 200m breaststroke final.

"Carly had struggled for the last little while, starting last year a little bit, so I was really proud of her for the perseverance she showed," Humby said. "There was a point, in November,

when she was sort of in the black hole. She was in a new training program, she was lifting weights, she was really sore, she was really tired, and she was swimming really slow.

"But she didn't give up; she just fought back all the way, and every race since December, she's just gotten faster and faster and faster."

The Pandas and Bears who have qualified for nationals will travel to UBC at the end of February to compete.