

# Facing WolfPack, Pandas keep one eye on playoffs

ROBIN COLLUM  
Sports Editor

The Pandas volleyball team will be looking to regain their momentum and get back to their usual winning ways this weekend. The fourth-place Pandas (11-5) are coming off a disappointing series that saw them lose two important games at home, and they need a pair of wins against the Thompson Rivers WolfPack (4-12) this weekend both to lift their spirits and keep them competitive in the standings.

According to Pandas head coach Laurie Eisler, her team is confident and working hard toward its playoff goals.

"It was a little disappointing to fall short to UBC, but we know they're a really good team—they're tied for first in the league—so we know we're competing," she said. "It's just a matter of sticking with it and not bailing—keeping the chins up—and we'll see what happens in the next couple of weeks."

The Pandas are the heavy favourite heading into this weekend. While Alberta leads Canada West in kills and service aces, with the second-best hitting percentage, TRU's in the bottom three in hitting, opponent hitting percentage, kills, and blocks.

Nonetheless, TRU isn't a team to be taken too lightly. They've managed to steal sets away from some of the best teams in the conference, and the Pandas will have to be on the lookout for fourth-years Richelle Walton, an outside hitter, and left side Laura Plouffe, as well as fifth-year middle Lauren Stockstad.

"They're a team that's been taking sets off all the top teams—they took sets off UBC; they took a set off Manitoba this past weekend," Eisler



PETE YEE

**THROWING IT DOWN** This weekend, the Pandas will be trying to move up from fourth in Canada West, while TRU want to nab the seventh and last playoff spot.

said. "There's not a lot of pressure on them, I don't think, based on where they are right now, so they're going to be going for it for sure."

With only four games left until playoffs, it's impossible for the defending national champion Pandas to catch up to UBC and Manitoba, who are tied for first in Canada with 30 points each. It's unlikely that Alberta will be able to overtake third-place Calgary, either.

For that to happen, not only would

the Pandas have to win the rest of their games, but the Dinos would also have to lose their two games to TRU later this month.

Alberta's position reminds Eisler of where her team was near this point last year. The Pandas finished the regular season 16-4 and in second place, but the third-, fourth-, and fifth-place teams were all within four points.

"It's very similar, in many senses, to what we went through last year, so for

the ones who are more veteran, they don't necessarily like going through this—there's another way—but they understand that you don't always get there the easy way," she said.

That veteran presence on the team has been extremely useful to the Pandas so far this year. They retained all but one of their starters from last year, and returning athletes like middles Samantha Wojtkiw and Alexa Berton, setter Daryll Roper, and outside hitters

Tiffany Proudfoot and Canada West kill leader Jocelyn Blair have been invaluable on the court.

"You start cashing in on experience this time of year," Eisler said. "You know what the veterans are going to do, and the ones that have had that experience, they know what it takes. Eventually, that starts really working for you."

The Pandas will be on the court at 6:30pm Friday and 8pm Saturday.



FILE PHOTO: MIKE OTTO

**INCOMING!** Fifth-year libero Kevin Hatch defends. Hatch, Brock Pehar, and Adam Kaminski will play their last regular-season home games this weekend.

## Trailing TRU team seeks to steal sets

Sitting in a distant fourth place in Canada West, the WolfPack has modest expectations as it takes on the Golden Bears, the country's top-ranked team

ROBIN COLLUM  
Sports Editor

Thompson Rivers University has been in CIS competition for less than three years, but its men's volleyball team is on rise and beating higher-ranked, more established teams. The WolfPack (8-6) will be in town this week to try to do some damage against the Bears (12-2), who lead the CIS rankings.

The 'Pack has managed a few upsets so far this year against the other top teams in the conference; two weeks ago, they beat third-place UBC (12-2) on Saturday and forced the game to five sets the night before. They also captured two sets against Winnipeg (12-2), the defending national champions, earlier in January.

But despite TRU's fourth-place position in Canada West, they're not quite in league with the top three teams in the conference. Alberta, Winnipeg, and UBC each have 24 points, and TRU sits far back with only 16 and only four games left in the regular season. But TRU head coach Patrick Hennelly is happy with the position his team is in.

"I'd say we're the leader of the middle of the pack," he said. "I set my goal at being .500 this season, and we're on pace for that. Even if we drop

two this weekend, we're still .500 going into that last weekend.

"We are playing some pretty good volleyball right now, and hopefully we have enough to battle the number-one team in the country."

**"I'm not expecting to win; I'm expecting to compete."**

**PATRICK HENNELLY**  
THOMPSON RIVERS HEAD COACH

Hennelly knows his team isn't up to the level of play yet that the conference leaders can deliver and has tempered his ambitions accordingly.

"I'm not expecting to win; I'm expecting to compete. I would love to take a set off them, [and] I would love to keep every [set] competitive into the 20s," he said.

"My goal is to come out of this weekend with a positive result, and a positive result for us can be taking a set off Alberta."

To the Bears, however, getting two wins this weekend will be essential in order to keep up with Winnipeg and UBC in the tight race for first in Canada

West. Alberta head coach Terry Danyluk will be relying on his team's depth and versatility to carry them through the next two weekends and into playoffs.

"We don't really focus on one or two guys carrying the load. We try to make sure that everyone's doing their job," he said. "I think we've been a little bit of everything. Most of our systems have been functioning pretty well, and it's one of the things that I think makes us good; we can do a lot of things well, not just one or two.

"We're not playing our best right now, and we've had a few little nagging injuries and stuff that we're working through, but for the most part, things are pretty good.

While the Bears will be using the series to fine-tune their game, the 'Pack sees it as an opportunity to test themselves against the best competition in the country.

"It doesn't get much tougher than going into the last couple of weekends of the year, must-win games for Alberta and must-win games for us," Hennelly said. "Every game now counts, and you're playing the number-one team in the country at home. I expect Alberta to be at the top of their game."

The Bears will see TRU on Friday at 8pm and at 6:30pm on Saturday.