

Peerless playoff predictions pt 1

All of Alberta's teams have made the playoffs; here's how I think they'll fare



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COLLUM

Sports
Commentary

Alberta's major varsity teams will reach the end of their respective regular seasons in the next couple of weeks, but for each of them, the next few games are only the beginning—the Bears and Pandas hockey, basketball, and volleyball teams are already gearing up for spring.

All of Alberta's teams have clinched playoff spots already, so all that's left to be decided in the last few matchups of the year for most of them is exactly where they'll place and who they'll be up against. But that uncertainty isn't keeping me from making fearless predictions, so here's the lowdown on what I think some of Alberta's teams have coming to them in Canada West post-season play.

Bears hockey

The only Alberta team with more than two games left in their regular season, the ice Bears (20-3-2) are nevertheless secure in their position at the top of the Canada West heap. They've already clinched first place in the conference, and as such are guaranteed a bye through the first round of the playoffs.

In Canada West, the top six of the conference's seven teams are admitted to the quarterfinals, with the first- and second-place teams earning byes. They'll then each host a best-of-three series to determine who makes it to the conference final.

This year, my bet—and it's not a particularly daring one—is that the final will be between Alberta and the Huskies (16-4-6) in Edmonton.

Meeting in the conference final is hardly an unusual situation for these

teams—if it happens this year, it will be the seventh year in a row, and the games will be must-sees for even casual hockey fans. Whoever makes it out of the quarterfinals, neither Alberta nor Saskatchewan will have any problem dispatching them. The final will be much tighter, but not too tight. These teams have met four times in the regular season, and the Bears have won each time, though usually not by a very wide margin. My money's on the Bears to win in two games and head to nationals in Moncton.

Pandas hockey

This is probably the most exciting year yet in Canada West women's hockey, as the Pandas finally have some real competition for the title of best team. The Pandas (19-2-1) have had the Manitoba Bisons (17-3-2) nipping at their heels all season, and it's no stretch to predict that they'll face off in the conference final (neither Saskatchewan nor Regina—the other two playoff teams in third and fourth place respectively—will be much of a hurdle in the semis).

What happens in that series—which, barring the freak chance that last-place Lethbridge (3-17-2) sweeps Alberta this weekend, will be at Clare Drake—will be exciting for anyone interested in the future of women's hockey in Canada West. For years, the Pandas have dominated, skating circles around the opposition and racking up huge scores. They've won six national championships since the 1999/2000 season, but with the rise of the Bisons, it looks like there could be something resembling parity on the horizon.

That said, the Pandas have won three of the four matches the teams have played this year—Manitoba put up a 3-2 victory the first time they met, but Alberta followed that up with 2-0 win, and then swept the next series 3-2 and 5-2—so I think they'll prevail and head to Ottawa for

the CIS championships.

Pandas volleyball

Compared to how things stand for the hockey teams, the Pandas' playoff situation is much less clear-cut, and a lot rides on the results of this upcoming weekend, particularly for the teams at the top. On Saturday and Sunday, the Pandas will face Manitoba here in the Main Gym, and most of the league will be paying close attention to what happens.

Seven of Canada West's eleven teams make it to playoffs, with the first-placed team earning a bye in the first round and hosting the Final Four. Right now, Manitoba (17-1) and UBC (17-1) are battling it out for the top spot, and Calgary (14-4) and Alberta (13-5)—third and fourth respectively—are each trying to secure third.

As the Pandas and Bisons face off, UBC is up against fifth-place Trinity Western (12-6). The Spartans should be able to take a set or two away from the Thunderbirds, though I highly doubt they'll win a match. But if the Pandas can beat the Bisons twice—which is unlikely but conceivable—sets won and lost would become the deciding factor for first place. As for Calgary, they play Thompson Rivers (4-14) this weekend and will almost definitely win both games.

All of this means choosing a post-season winner is even tougher, but because three teams from Canada West will advance to nationals this year, all the Pandas have to do is medal in Canada West. They shouldn't have any trouble doing that—last year's national champions, they have plenty of experience in tough playoff spots—and even if they can't beat UBC or Manitoba, neither Trinity Western nor Regina—their likeliest first-round rivals—should pose a problem.

Check back on Thursday for the rest of Robin's post-season predictions.



LAUREN STIEGLITZ

MAKING WAVES The U of A's synchronized swim team, a non-varsity club, performed their aqueous arts on Saturday night, putting on a water show in the West Pool in the Van Vliet Centre. Swimmers performed both group and solo pieces.

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