



MIKE OTTO

**BUMP** These are the last two games of the regular season for Pandas like Sam Wojtkiw (5) and Daryll Roper (white, right); they could also be the toughest ones they've seen in of the second half.

## Playoff seeding on line as Pandas host Bisons

ROBIN COLLUM  
Sports Editor

If there has ever been a time for the Pandas volleyball team to step up and prove that it deserves to hold on to the national title, this weekend is it. Alberta (13-5), currently sitting in fourth place in Canada West, will host the Manitoba Bisons (17-1) in a series that will not only test the Pandas' skill but also help determine seeding for the playoffs.

The Pandas are vying for third place in the conference—and a more favourable seeding position—with Calgary (14-4). Manitoba, meanwhile, is tied in first with UBC (17-1), with a first-round bye in the balance.

"It's an important weekend for Alberta, and it's an important weekend for us," Bisons head coach Ken Bentley said. "They're still the defending champs, and we have to go into their gym and try to win two. Likewise, they would love to have two so they could host their playoff. There's a lot at stake, and it will be difficult."

The Pandas recognize the challenge ahead of them, but Alberta head coach Laurie Eisler feels that her team can handle it.

"If we're not ready now, we never will be," she said. "It's business as usual. It's not like we do anything extra-special just because it's Manitoba or because it's the number-one team, but the thing you can always count on is that athletes love to rise to the occasion, so they're excited and fired up about it too."

"It's great playing such great competition this time of year. When you look at what's ahead, we want to make sure that we're prepared—and there's no better preparation than to play the top team in the country."

The young Bisons squad—Manitoba's roster boasts only four players above their third year—has dominated against almost every team in the league. They went to five sets in both the games against their closest competition, UBC, winning once. They lead Canada West in both hitting percentage and service aces.

"They have a really solid starting lineup," Eisler said. "Their strengths are around the front court, blocking, and their attack is very strong. And they're really steady—they don't make many mistakes—so you really have to beat them."

The Pandas, meanwhile, are experienced, powerful, and technically proficient. According to Eisler, they'll have to draw on all their strengths in order to be successful this weekend.

"You have to get them out of their system of play, and that means being an aggressor," she said. "You can't play tentatively, and you can't play into their hands, which would be doing the things that are predictable."

"We have to show some patience, knowing that they're going to do some really good things and they're going to be hard to stop. They're going to be frustrating, and we'll have to deal with that. To beat them, we're talking a two-and-a-half-hour slugfest, so you've got to be prepared to compete against them in the long term."

And the Bisons don't see the weekend as a sure thing.

"We're not the only team in Canada West that has a chance at winning," Bentley said. "I expect it to be very difficult, and I expect Alberta to play great. That's what we'll try to prepare for, and hopefully we're up to the challenge."

The Pandas will face the Bisons at 2pm on Saturday and Sunday in the Main Gym.

## Hockey Pandas to polish up for playoffs vs Pronghorns

Home series against last-place team in Canada West will give Alberta the chance to perfect its game before the post-season begins

MATT PRETTY  
Sports Writer

The Pandas hockey team will look to extend its momentum, tune up for the playoffs, and cement its position atop the conference standings this weekend, as they host the Lethbridge Pronghorns for their last regular season series of the season.

The second-ranked Pandas (19-2-1) need only one point in two games—or a Manitoba loss to Regina—to clinch the number-one playoff seed. The sixth-place Pronghorns (3-17-2), on the other hand, have already been eliminated from playoff contention, so this will be their last series of the season.

It will mark the 'Horns' first and only trip to Clare Drake this season, as the previous four matches between the two teams have all been contested in Lethbridge. Alberta has won all of those games, skating away with 7-1 and 4-1 triumphs in October and a pair of shutouts by scores of 4-0 and 3-0 in November.

Despite the previous lopsided results, Pandas head coach Howie Draper still feels that the Pronghorns will be able to pose some unique challenges to his team.

"[Lethbridge has] recently been a fast team that will forecheck pretty hard and create a lot of pressure," he said. "They've given us some difficulty on our breakout, and they've got some really good goaltending, so it's made it

difficult for us at times."

The Pronghorns, for their part, will be focusing on simply continuing the progress they've been making since the beginning of the year.

"We've been improving steadily over the season, and we want to get some points this weekend and absolutely go out on a high note as far as the season's concerned," Lethbridge head coach Doug McLeod said.

Though Lethbridge has had trouble generating offence this season—the Pronghorns have only scored 25 goals so far this year, only five more than Pandas forward Jen Newton, who leads Canada West in scoring—McLeod expects improvement in that area as well.

"We've been working on that over the last while," he said. "We've scored more goals in the second half than we did in the first. Part of that is our inexperience—we've got quite a few young girls—and the second part of it is simply going to the net harder and taking advantage of opportunities to shoot the puck when we have them."

Draper would also like to see his team get better in a few key areas of their game. Although Alberta has taken the fewest penalties in conference play, Draper knows the weekend likely won't be played entirely five-on-five. As a result, he considers the weekend an opportunity to work on the Pandas' special teams play in particular.



FILE PHOTO: PETE YEE

**STICKIN' IT TO THE WOMAN** The Pandas want to focus on their offence and special teams play against Lethbridge.

"[It's] another area we really hope to improve in, both our penalty kill and our power play," he said. "We'd like to see where we stand."

Not that Alberta's power play is in a slump: last Saturday the Pandas scored

on three out of four power-play opportunities against UBC. However, one of the Pronghorns' strengths is their penalty kill—it's at 86.5 per cent, good for third in Canada West—and how those two strengths match up could be key.

"We want to see if we can take that to the next level so that we have that added confidence going into playoffs," Draper said.

Games begin for both Friday and Saturday at 7pm in Clare Drake.