

Hoops Bears ready for 'Horns

PETE YEE
Sports Staff

With only two games remaining in the regular season and having already clinched a playoff spot, the Bears basketball team is hoping to use this weekend's series to build momentum as they head the playoffs. A pair of victories this weekend against the last-place Lethbridge Pronghorns (2-18) would also allow the Bears (14-6) to finish out the season with a better record than last season.

Alberta head coach Don Horwood has been emphatic that the Bears should improve upon last year's numbers as a way to measure the team's progress on the road back to the national-championship level of play—they've missed the cut for the past two years.

"One of the goals we had at the beginning year was to improve on last year's performance," he said. "We want to try and get better each year and move towards the national championship."

The Bears are the favourite going into the weekend series, which will be a rematch from earlier in the season when the Bears earned two wins in Lethbridge by 44- and 40-point margins. Since then, however, the 'Horns have added sharpshooter Danhue Lawrence to their roster.

In just ten games with the team, Lawrence has become Lethbridge's leader on the court, leading the team in several categories including points and rebounds per game, with 15.6 and 6.2 respectively. The addition of Lawrence is definitely something to take note of as he offers a new look for the 'Horns, who have been playing better as of late—including a 83-79 win over the Winnipeg Wesmen last weekend.

"There is an unknown for us; we haven't [played] against him, so we don't know how we're going to match up with him; we don't know how we're going to defend him right now," Horwood said.

The Bears want to finish the season off with a series sweep, something



FILE PHOTO: PETE YEE

STAY ON YOUR TOES Fourth-year Alberta guard Patrick Unger (22) and his teammates will try to stay consistently good this weekend against Lethbridge.

that has eluded them for most of the season. A sweep would also help them maintain their current momentum for the post-season.

On the other hand, though Lethbridge has yet to win on the road this year, they've built up a little bit of momentum and have nothing to lose. While Alberta has already clinched a playoff spot, Lethbridge is definitely out. They'll be looking to end their year on an up note.

"You don't want to be the team that lets them win on the road. That's something we've [got to keep] from happening," Horwood said. "There's always a potential for a letdown for us right now, and that's our challenge obviously this weekend: try to get two victories which we should get."

As it's the final series of the regular

season, Horwood will also be concentrating on keeping his players focused on the playoff series next weekend and from succumbing to lacklustre play this weekend. The Saskatchewan Huskies, who the Bears have drawn in for the first round of the playoffs, will be a major obstacle.

"We know we have a really tough series next weekend against Saskatchewan—they'll be coming up here [with] a lot of confidence because they have beaten us twice already this year, they beat us in our gym, and they beat us last year," Horwood said. "They are a different team than they were last year, but we are all know they are very capable."

The Bears will shoot it out with the 'Horns on Friday and Saturday at 8pm in the Main Gym.

Pandas control own court destiny

All that's standing between Alberta's women's basketball squad and a first-round playoff bye is this weekend's series against last-placed Lethbridge team

PAUL OWEN
Managing Editor

The formula is simple for the Pandas basketball team (15-5) as they prepare to host the Lethbridge Pronghorns (5-15) this weekend: win both games and clinch first place in the division and a first-round playoff bye.

Currently tied with Calgary for the top spot in the Canada West Central Division, Alberta owns the tiebreaker between the two teams on the strength of their 3-1 record against the Dinos this season, putting them in the driver's seat for a weekend off at the start of the post-season.

But while the Pandas control the situation atop the standings, it will take a pair of victories over the 'Horns to keep it that way. It's a feat the Pandas have pulled off in each of the past three match-ups between the two teams, but Edwards noted it could be more difficult this time around due to Lethbridge's improved work ethic.

"They've played really hard all year long. Unlike last year's team, which played hard for awhile and then, if things didn't go well, you could get the game up and kind of run away

with things, they don't do that this year at all.

"They're much improved, their kids play harder for each other, they have better team chemistry, and they work hard," he explained, adding that there are some potential matchup problems for the Pandas when facing the Pronghorns.

"They're ready to get towards playoffs."

SCOTT EDWARDS
PANDAS HEAD COACH

"Their little point guard's good: Steph Elford. As long as Ashley [Wigg] does a good job of containing her and keeping her feet moving and doesn't reach, she'll be fine there," he continued. "[Third-year forward] Ashley McClenaghan—who gave us fits all last year too, as well as this year when we played them the first time—she's the big one for us; we've got to do a better job on her this weekend and try to find a way to shut her down. If she gets going, they're very tough to beat."

Despite the increased challenge

expected from their opponents, according to Edwards, holding their own destiny at home is a much preferred position for the Pandas than the one they were in a year ago. Then, the team had to travel to Lethbridge and try to sweep the Pronghorns while hoping Calgary would upset Saskatchewan. Edwards also noted that it's a spot his team is better equipped to handle after their experiences last season, when they went all the way to the national final.

"I think they're gaining maturity on the floor and they've sort of seen it all now. They're ready to get towards playoffs. I see this team ramping up towards playoffs differently than a year ago," he said.

"Last year, they were very excited to be in the playoffs, and they knew they had a shot at going far, but they didn't know what it looked like. This year, they know exactly what it looks and feels like, and now they have to prepare themselves in a different way, with maybe less emotion but more of a business-like approach."

The Pandas tip off against the Pronghorns at 6:30pm on Friday and Saturday nights.



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