

Hockey Bears hope to live up to Alberta legacy

Team's long history of success on the ice adds pressure and motivation as they lace up against Manitoba in Canada West playoffs

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

When the Bears take to the ice in Clare Drake Arena on Friday night against the Manitoba Bisons in the first game of their best-of-three playoff series, they'll be surrounded by the evidence of Alberta's legacy.

The Golden Bears (21-5-2 in the regular season) have won six of the past seven Canada West championships (46 overall) and two of the last three national titles (twelve of those in all). Most of those banners are on display in the Drake, reminding the current Bears squad of what they're playing for—and what standards they're trying to live up to—as they take on Manitoba (13-13-2).

"Anytime you step on the ice here, you've just got to look up and you see the banners that wrap all the way around the rink," first-year Alberta left winger Eric Hunter said.

"I think when you come into the playoffs and step onto the ice, you're not just playing for you; you're playing for the Bears. It's a bit of history out there, and you feel like if you don't get it done and you don't win, you're letting the organization down. It's added pressure, but then it's also added motivation. You see all those banners and step up."

The Bears could need all the extra boost that they can get this week as they face the Bisons. In many ways, the Herd is an unknown quantity to the Bears. The teams met several



FILE PHOTO: TARA STIEGLITZ

NOT QUITE FLEXIBLE ENOUGH The Bears will be relying on their top lines, including Tim Krymusa (white) to score like this against the Bisons this weekend.

times in the regular season this year, but those meetings may not be much help in predicting how the game will go. Their first series, which was split, was way back in October, and though Alberta won 8-1 and 6-1 the next time they met, Manitoba had just come off of an arduous non-conference tournament and weren't at their best.

Alberta head coach Eric Thurston thinks that Manitoba's recent series against UBC is a better indication of what his team is going to have to deal

with this weekend.

"I had a chance go to Winnipeg and watch the University of Manitoba play UBC, and they played very well," he said. "They really took it to them; they had very good goaltending; their defence did a good job moving the puck, so it's going to be a really tough test."

"We know Manitoba just came out of a good series, and we know they're playing as good as they can," Hunter said. "We saw what they did to UBC;

we thought that was going to be a tough battle for them, and they ended up sweeping."

Alberta finished the season at the top of the conference, so they had a bye through the first round of playoffs. They've used the time to ensure that all of their basics are in place to counter the threat that Manitoba poses.

"We've just got to work hard and come focused and ready to play," Bears defenceman Harlan Anderson said. "Having two weeks off,

sometimes you start a little slow, so we've got to be prepared to maybe weather their storm to start. I think it's just a matter of us playing our game and sticking to it."

"We worked all year to get that bye week, and we earned it against Saskatchewan by finishing first," Hunter added. "We've had two weeks now to prepare; we're in shape, we've been skating for two hard weeks, and we're just ready to get going and start playing."

Bears and Pandas try for matching golds at nationals

Both of Alberta's volleyball teams are looking for the country's highest honours as they take on familiar foes at CIS championships

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Alberta's men's and women's volleyball teams are on the other side of the country this weekend, competing in their respective national championships, and though they're both gunning for CIS gold after finishing at the top of Canada West, the two teams have different agendas.

The defending national champion Pandas finished the regular season 14-6 and in fifth spot, but took down higher-placed teams like UBC and Manitoba on their way to their second straight Canada West title.

The Bears, on the other hand, went 18-2 in the regular season, never letting go of their number-one spot on the national rankings. But instead of going into Laval this weekend as reigning champions like the Pandas are doing at the University of New Brunswick, the Bears will be looking to prove themselves. The Bears have made the gold-medal match in each of the past four years, but have lost in three of them, including a heartbreaking 3-2 game to Winnipeg last season.

"Obviously when you don't win a championship when you're that close, it's something that you think about all the time," Bears head coach Terry Danyluk said. "I think some of that exists for sure, and I think they'd love to have another opportunity at that game. The most important thing is that we don't look too far ahead. In order to

get the chance to do that, they have to get by round one and round two."

Though there will be teams at both tournaments from across the country, the Bears and Pandas will each see a lot of familiar faces across the net. Half of the eight teams playing in Laval this weekend are from this conference, while the Pandas are one of three Canada West teams competing for the women's trophy. Though Canada West teams are split between two pools in both cases, chances are high that both Alberta teams will face at least one of their conference rivals.

"It's nice playing someone that you've played before and seeing some familiar faces," Pandas head coach Laurie Eisler said. "It's always challenging when you're playing someone that you don't really know because then you're having to make adjustments on the fly, but I think we're good at that too."

In addition to their fellow Western teams, Alberta's athletes will match up against teams they've seen in previous championships. The Pandas' first game, for instance, will be against Saint Mary's—they met last year in the first round as well.

"In either scenario, you just make the best of it. If you haven't gotten your team prepared by the time you're here, you haven't got a chance," Eisler said. "All we know is what our team is going to do, and we're going to play well and play really well under pressure, and then the challenge is for [the other team] to be able to match that."

In the end, the opponents don't matter to them; what it comes down to is what the Pandas and Bears can bring to the court, both mentally and physically.

"We've trained for almost eight months now, and I think the big thing is that they do a really good job of preparing to play, and when it comes down to it, it's their execution, how mentally focused they are when matches come up one at a time. I think that's probably the key," Danyluk said.

"Psychologically, you have got to be able to keep your game together," Eisler agreed. "But a lot of it's physical—being able to put three really good matches together in a row. There is that physical component that I think gets overlooked at a championship. It's been a long season, and physically, you can really build and peak for this competition."

Both Alberta's teams are fit and focused going into the weekend, their coaches say. They also have the advantage of playoff experience.

"I think we've been seeing the advantage [of experience] over the past two weeks," Eisler said. "This is when you draw on that experience and the toughness—the type of volleyball that I think is capable of winning championships."

The Bears' first game will be against the Universite de Montreal on Thursday at 6pm EST, while the Pandas face Saint Mary's Thursday at 1pm AST. Men's games will be broadcast through www.cisport.ca.



PETE YEE

TEAR DOWN THIS WALL The Bears and Thunderbirds are two of the four Canada West teams representing this conference at nationals this weekend.