

Hoops Pandas just one win away from nationals

Alberta squad wants a Canada West banner, but its ultimate goal is to silence critics by earning spot at the CIS championships again

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

There's only one win standing between the Pandas basketball team and a spot at nationals, but the teams guarding those games have all beaten Alberta in the regular season this year. The Pandas will be in Vancouver for the Canada West finals, and they're after a medal—and a trip to nationals—against Simon Fraser, UBC, and Regina.

The Pandas, who finished the regular season 17–5, will be facing UBC in their first game on Friday night. It was at the T-Birds' hands that Alberta suffered their worst loss of the season on 1 February, falling 86–49 on the road. But the Pandas are determined to put on a better showing this time.

"Every team lays an egg every year, and that was ours, and it's not going to happen again," fourth-year Pandas forward Trish Ariss said. "UBC needs to be looking over their shoulders because we're coming for them, and we aren't going to play the way we played against them last time. I'm really excited because I know we are just as good as them."

"It will be a totally different game," forward Kristin Jarock agreed. "I think we learned a lot from that game, and I think [this] is going to be a good one."

Alberta head coach Scott Edwards is optimistic about his team's chances as well, but he isn't taking UBC lightly.

"They've got three outstanding fifth-year players who aren't going to settle for not getting to nationals," he said. "I expect them to play their best basketball, and we've got to get over the hump we had against them last time and come back strong and go down there expecting to win."

"I know we deserve to be there, but what we do with that opportunity when we get there is up to the kids and how much we want to play, how consistently they want to shoot the basketball, and how consistent our

defensive effort's going to be."

The Pandas are coming right off a gruelling Central Division series against the Saskatchewan Huskies. Alberta won in three games, but exposed both their strengths and weaknesses as a team.

As is usually the case when they're playing well, the Pandas were able to distribute their scoring between several players. Each night had nine players putting points on the board.

"[Edwards] likes to call it 'scoring by committee,' and that's one of our strengths," Ariss said. "We're harder to stop when everybody's scoring, and it's not one person that a team is looking to shut down; it's everybody that they're going to have to shut down in order to beat us."

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TRISH ARISS
PANDAS FORWARD

On the other hand, on both Friday and Saturday of that series, the Pandas had trouble keeping their drive up through 40 minutes. They remedied that on Sunday, and also reminded themselves that, in order to win, it's essential they shoot and rebound successfully.

"The games we've lost this year have been all been ones where we've shot the ball poorly—in the 20s—so we can't have another game like that in the Canada West finals, or we're not going to make it through to Saskatchewan," Edwards said.

"[We'll need] to play the way we did on Sunday—just tough," Jarock

agreed. "We didn't let anybody push us around, we set the tempo, we were the first on loose balls, and that was the deciding factor. We finally played a fourth quarter and scored."

If the Pandas can win on Friday night, their most likely opponent in the gold medal game will be SFU, the team that beat them in last year's CIS final. The Clan, who went 22–1 in the regular season and didn't once relinquish their position at the top of the CIS rankings, also prevailed against the Pandas in Edmonton in January, though by a narrower 75–73 margin.

"We're going to go out and beat UBC, and I think the entire country is expecting SFU to beat Regina, but who knows in that game," Ariss said. "It doesn't really matter to us who we play because we're going to give it our best in the gold medal match, but if it's SFU, all the better because we want another shot at them anyway."

The Pandas' silver-medal win last year surprised a lot of people—like this year, they finished the regular season in the fourth spot on the national top-ten list—and many on the Alberta squad feel that they're still being undervalued as a team. This playoff season, they're out to show that last year's run wasn't just luck.

"People seem to think U of A's been in the shadows for the past few years and last year was a fluke, and we're out to prove that it wasn't, that we're actually a force to be reckoned with," Ariss said. "I don't know why people don't expect much from us because we've proven time and again that we deserve to compete in this conference."

"Every one of the teams we're going up against are ones who beat us in conference play, so I certainly think we're the underdogs," Edwards said. "But it's always good to have a little something that you're working towards to get yourself fired up to play."

The top three teams at the end of the weekend will head to Saskatchewan to represent Canada West at nationals.



PETEYEE

TIP-TOP SHAPE Forward Kristin Jarock and her fellow Pandas are going to focus on shooting and rebounding this weekend in the Canada West Final Four.

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