

# Bears' man of Steele gets Canada West recognition

Player of the Year has led Alberta team to Calgary for conference Final Four

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Sports Editor

The Bears basketball team is headed to the Canada West Final Four, and they have Alex Steele to thank for it. The efforts of the fifth-year Bears guard, who was just named conference MVP, have helped the Bears get within one win of a spot in the national championships.

Alberta earned the wild card spot into the Final Four after finishing the regular season 16–6 and beating the Saskatchewan Huskies in the first round of the playoffs before losing to Calgary this past weekend. They'll play the Brandon Bobcats (20–2 in the regular season) on Friday night, and the winner of that game will advance to nationals as well play for conference gold on Saturday.

The highest the Bears were able to climb in the national top ten this season was ninth, in the second week of January, while Brandon finished the year in second place. That said, the Bears are one of only three Canada West teams to have beaten the 'Cats in conference play this year.

Alberta beat Brandon 106–93 in Edmonton on 17 November (Victoria prevailed against Brandon earlier this term, while Regina was able to take a game away from them in their divisional playoffs series this past weekend). The Bears also managed to beat them in pre-season play, and head coach Don Horwood—who was named 2008 Canada West Coach of the Year—feels confident going into the weekend.

"Obviously we feel that we have a chance to beat Brandon; we've beaten them twice this year. This is a different scenario, so we know it's going to be very tough, but, hey, two winners Friday night go to nationals," Horwood said. "If somebody had said in September, 'You're going to be playing in that game,' that's all you could hope for. And that's where we are."

It's unlikely that many people outside the Bears organization would have made such a prediction at the beginning of the year. They haven't attended nationals since 2004/05, and they've been overshadowed by big-name teams like Calgary and Brandon in Canada West this year despite beating both them and UBC—the fourth team that will be there this weekend—during the season.

Horwood never doubted that his team had the potential to come this far, however.

"I thought we had enough talent," he said. "I didn't know if we'd compete hard enough; I didn't know if we had the character, but throughout the year, the guys have shown that. I thought it was a little lacking last week against Calgary, but I think we've shown all year that we have enough character to go down there and compete to win on Friday night."

"We know they're all good, but we think we're just as good as most of those teams if not better. We have no reason not to think that we can beat any team in Canada West this year," Steele agreed.

This past weekend, in which the Bears lost 87–78 and a shocking 90–66 to their division rivals, was almost certainly their worst showing of the year, but the Bears know what



FILE PHOTO: PETE YEE

**HUNGRY FOR BASKET** Newly-minted Canada West Player of the Year Alex Steele (11) went for the basket during a Bears' playoff game versus the Huskies.

they have to change to keep the losing from becoming a trend.

"We have to rebound really well. If we don't out-rebound them, we have to be able to rebound with them, so that's a real key for us," Horwood said.

"Last weekend, Calgary killed us on the boards. They were getting second and third shots, and we were having to foul them, and they were making their free throws. As long as a team keeps doing that to you, it's pretty hard to beat them."

Alberta's single best weapon against their Canada West competition, however, will continue to be Steele. The guard has been the nucleus of the team's scoring this year, propelling Alberta through injuries and slumps—efforts for which he was recognized by this week's award.

Steele was fifth in Canada West scoring, second in free throw percentage, fourth in steals, and sixth in assists. In January against Trinity Western, he scored a career-high 40 points.

"It feels good, but a trip to nationals would feel even better," Steele said. "I've worked hard over the years, and to have something like this now is kind of special. In that respect, it's great. But going to nationals—I've never been there—is the most important thing."

"It's well-deserved," Horwood said of the award. "In September, of all the teams that you're talking about, which teams would you have expected to be in the Final Four? We probably weren't one of them. Calgary was, Brandon was, UBC was, and then it was wide open. We're here because of Alex."

The Bears will play Brandon on Friday at 5pm, and then will advance to either the bronze medal game at 5pm Saturday or the gold-medal match at 7pm at the Jack Simpson Gym in Calgary. For those not interested in jumping on a Greyhound to catch the games, they'll be webcast on [www.nutv.ca/streaming](http://www.nutv.ca/streaming).

## Stealing the hardcourt hardware

Alex Steele, a transfer from Grant MacEwan in his third season with the Bears was recognized by Canada West's coaches for his stellar 2007/08 season. Check it.

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