Pandas and T-Birds match up in CIS gold medal rematch

VOLLEYBALL PREVIEW

Pandas @ T-Birds

Friday, Nov. 2 at 7 p.m.;
Saturday, Nov. 3 at 6 p.m.;
MacEwan Centre, Edmonton, Alberta.

Andrew Jeffrey

After last season saw the Pandas volleyball squad and UBC split wins in championship games during the playoffs, this weekend will see what the new year brings to this impressive rivalry.

In 2010-11, the Pandas defeated the Thunderbirds in the conference championships after a UBC Canada West three-year, but after a short turnaround, UBC defeated the U of A in the CIS national finals for their fifth straight national championship.

“They’re a team that keeps getting better as the season goes,” Pandas head coach Laurie Eisler said about UBC. “UBC head coach Doug Reimer did a very good job, and he builds that team over a season, so what you see in the fall isn’t necessarily the same team you’re going to see in the second half, meaning that they’re continually improving. It’s the factor of knowing how to win and the experience of the athletes that have had that amount of success.

“We’ve been there in that same situation as a program, and it gives us a real confidence with knowing that you’ve been there and done that.”

While last season’s loss in the national championship game was heart-breaking for the U of A, their ability to end UBC’s Canada West dominance was a good sign for the U of A program.

“You don’t learn how to lose all the time, and the fact that we were able to break through in their gym, in the Canada West final with all of those chips on the line, really was a great learning opportunity for our team and an opportunity to build some confidence around that,” Eisler said.

“Nationalals were within our sights, and there’s absolutely no shame in that we lost to a really good opponent that stepped up their game when they needed to.”

For the individual Panda players, getting the chance to compete against a team as successful as UBC is an exciting opportunity to measure how they stack up against one of the best competitors in CIS.

While this can be exciting for many veteran players, it also provides a challenging introduction for some younger Pandas.

“It’s intimidating for some of the new players for sure, but maybe not so much for the older ones because we have a history with them,” fifth-year Panda setter Jaki Ellis said.

“As younger players, with the first years not really knowing anything, but the fact that (the Thunderbirds) are five-time national champions, I’m sure it’s intimidating for them.”

Going into their early series of games this season, the Pandas boast a 2-0 record after winning their first two games at home this past weekend against the University of Saskatchewan.

UBC, on the other hand, split their weekend series with the nationally first-ranked UVic Spurs. With no possession action between the two teams, this weekend will mark the first matchup between the teams since CIS nationals last season.

While the tournament on both teams hasn’t been significant, Eisler sees some key changes that could alter the results of this weekend’s games.

“I think that both teams have lost some really key people in the lineup and so are rebuilding themselves in that respect, as probably for (UBC) they’re more in relending mode,” Eisler said.

“They’re playing a more traditional offensive system than what they played last year. For our team, it’s similar in that we’re a different team than we were last year. But it honestly seems so long ago that we’ve had this group together since August 13, and this is who we are.”

*The Pandas are grouped in Pool A with the OUA champion and defending national champion Gryphons, and the OUA finalist Axewomen. On the other side in Pool B, the AUS champions and host St. FX X-Women, RSEQ champion Concordia Stingers and OUA finalist Queen’s Gaels were grouped together.*

Alberta will play Gryphons and Axewomen at 7:30 p.m. on Friday and Saturday morning, with the potential to compete for the Monixx Trophy in the championship game at 2 p.m. on Sunday afternoon. This is Alberta’s first CIS championship appearance since 2009.

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