Hockey Bears hope to live up to Alberta legacy

Sports

When the Bears ride to the ice in Clare Drake Arena on Friday night against the Manitoba Bisons in the first game of the two-game-into-three-game series, they'll be surprised by the evidence of Alberta's legacy. The Golden Bears (25-5-2 in the regular season) have won six of the past seven Canada West championship games (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 got to look up and you see the banners that wrap all the way around the rink," first-year Alberta assist coach James Eisler said. "I think when you come into the playoffs and step on the ice, you're just playing for you, you're playing for the Bears. It's a bit of history out there, and you feel like you don't get a done and you don't want to see the organization down. It's added pressure, but there's also added motivation. You've seen all those banners and step up."

The Bears could need all the extra boost they can get this week as they face their foes. In many ways, the Herd is an unknown quantity to the Bears. The teams met several 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 through Alberta won 8-4 and 6-1 the next time they met. Manitoba had just come off of an embarrassing non-conference tournament and weren't at their best.

Alberta head coach Tim Thomson thinks that Manitoba's recent series against UBC is a better indication of what their game is going to have to deal with this weekend.

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

"We know Manitoba just came out of a good series, and we know they're playing as good as they can," Eisler 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 bases are in place to contain the threat that Manitoba poses. "We've just got to work hard and come focused and ready to play," Bears defender 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 a little. I think it's just a matter of us playing our game and sticking to it."

"We were all kind of that year to prepare, we're so close, we've been skating for two hard weeks, and we're just ready to go and start playing."

Bears and Pandas try for matching golds at nationals

By ROBIN COLLUM

"We've trained for almost eight months now, and I think the big thing is that they do a really good job of picking up the intensity and coming at you, to their execution, how mentally focused they are when matches come up at one time I think that's probably the key," Eisler 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 is a new. There's a physical component that I think gets overlooked at a championship. It's been a long season, and physically, you can really build and push 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 volume of the best of it. If you can go through your team prepared by the time you're there, you haven't got a chance," Eisler said. "All we're talking is what we want to do when you're there."

In addition to their fellow Western teams, Alberta's athletes will match up against teams they're 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 think some of that pressure is 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."

Through the series 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 have met every one of three Canada West teams competing for the women's trophy. Through 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're played before and seeing some familiar faces," Pandas head coach Lance Hilder said. "It's all about getting ready for the matches, because you want to make adjustments on the fly, but I think we've got a good chance to do that.

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