

Cross-country team ready for nationals

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[CLAUDINE CHAMPION](#)

CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT The Bears and Pandas cross-country runners travel to Kingston this weekend on the shores of Lake Ontario for nationals.

The Golden Bears and Pandas cross-country teams will be at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario this Saturday for the 2009 CIS national championship.

Both teams head into nationals having only competed in three events — the Huskie Open, the Dino Open, and the team's home race at Hawrelak Park, the Stewart Cup — yet head coach Georgette Reed believes that her teams will be ready to go on Saturday.

The squads were also scheduled to compete in Winnipeg at the Bison Open in mid-October; however, with the rise of the H1N1 pandemic and the pressures of midterm exams, Reed decided it was in the best interest of the athletes to rest up ahead of both the Stewart Cup and nationals.

“Competitively, it looks like we haven't done a whole lot, but we've been really strong with the training, and the results from Stewart Cup are quite positive, and we're looking to get results at nationals,” Reed said.

The Bears will be led by Jamie Weikum, who'll be competing in his third consecutive national championship, as well as a formidable contingent which includes Harry Moore, Cody Carver, Joel Lauzon, Graeme Law, Jaden Ostapowich, and Max Leboeuf.

“Jamie is a veteran and he has improved every year. He's definitely going to be one of our strong leaders out there, but we have some young guys — Ostapowich and Leboeuf — who, if they run up to their potential, can give us three scores near the top,” Reed noted.

The Pandas are fresh off their victory at the Stewart Cup, and the seven-woman team headed to Kingston includes Lindsay Acheson, Hayley Degaut, Danika Medinski, Alana Soderberg, Cassandra Tomas, Joelle Stenger, and Natalia Szykarczuk.

“This year we have seven strong athletes on each side that made our qualifying standards, and since [the] Stewart Cup everybody has been really focused,” Reed remarked.

The course at Queen's is expected to be a fast one and the athletes shouldn't have troubles adjusting to it during their practice trials.

“[Queen's] is one of those courses that's set up to race fast and we knew that,” Reed explained. “We prepared our Stewart Cup [course] to make sure it mimicked a little bit of what the athletes would expect at nationals.”

Ranked ninth in the country on both the men's and women's sides, the Bears and Pandas won't be amongst the favourites to medal, but winning the overall team aggregate at the Stewart Cup means that the runners are heading into nationals with confidence.

“We tell the athletes be prepared to do whatever it takes to race their very best on the race day,” Reed said. “If we can score under 100 points for both of our teams then we have a real shot at the medals.”

In fact, the last two times cross-country nationals were held in Ontario in 2002 and 2004, the Alberta men took home bronze medals.

Coach Reed is hopeful that this pattern repeats itself and will include the Pandas this time around.

“We are hoping that a return to another Ontario course will result in the first podium appearance of many to come.”