

Hardwood Pandas return home after B.C. sweep

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Number-nine ranked Alberta ready for another top-10 opponent

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HEADING UP The Pandas grabbed both games in B.C. last weekend to move up in the CIS top-10.

Fresh off a pair of victories on the west coast against the fifth-ranked Victoria Vikes and the UBC Thunderbirds, the hoop Pandas return home for a pair of heavyweight tilts with the fourth-ranked Regina Cougars.

The Pandas enter the weekend tied with provincial rival Calgary atop the Prairie division standings in the Canada West with a 5–1 record, and will be looking to carry over their solid road play into their first home game since Halloween. The Cougars sit right behind the Pandas and Dinos in the conference standings with a 3–1 record.

Regina defeated Alberta at the Pandas annual Hoopfest Invitational in early October, controlling the play and tempo for the entire game on their way to a 70–57 win. There are, however, many similarities between the two squads and that should result in two tightly contested and entertaining contests this weekend.

“They got the better of us in the preseason, but I like how we are playing right now and I would take this team into any game right now,” head coach Scott Edwards noted.

“Regina and us are really similar type teams — one big forward inside, a bunch of athletic players on the perimeter, and quality point guards.”

Against the Cougars, the Pandas will need to establish a presence on the offensive glass if they're to create second chance scoring opportunities. Defensively, the Pandas will need to rebound consistently if they hope to prevent Regina's Brittany Read from having easy put-back baskets.

“Rebounding is going to be huge for us. We need to be consistent with our efforts at both ends of the floor [...] Regina generates lots of opportunities off offensive rebounding and hustle plays,” Edwards explained.

Another key for the Pandas will be stopping Regina's starting shooting guard Joanna Zalesiak, who dropped 20 points on the Pandas at Hoopfest. Originally

from Poland, Zalesiak played last season at the University of Texas at El Paso and her transfer to Regina has provided them with a strong presence in the backcourt.

“Last time we didn't know much about her as a player, but now we have been able to scout her and be more prepared for her,” Edwards said. “We will need to get a hand up and contest every shot and hopefully we're able to make her miss quite a bit.”

In the preseason, moreover, Regina opened the game on a 13–4 run and completely took the Pandas out of their rhythm. The Pandas will need to jump off to good starts if they hope to outlast the Cougars this time around.

This weekend's games against Regina mark the start of a tough four-game home stretch for the Pandas going into the Christmas break, which also includes a pair of games against number-two Saskatchewan.

“We have to come out with some confidence in our game. These are two huge weekends and hopefully we can net a few wins and keep our momentum going into [the break],” Edwards stated.

The Pandas and Cougars will renew their Canada West rivalry on Friday and Saturday, with tip-off scheduled for 6 p.m. both nights. The games can also be heard online at www.pandas.ualberta.ca.