

Pandas Basketball ready to tip the season off

OCTOBER 5, 2009 - 6:25PM

[Nathan Liewicki](#), Sports Staff



[PETE YEE](#)

NOWHERE TO RUN Katie Arbuthnot (left) is part of very young Pandas team.

Coming off of a bronze-medal performance at last year's CIS Championship, the Pandas basketball team will look to use last year's postseason drive as a springboard to a new year full of heightened expectations.

Last year, the Pandas finished second in the Prairie Division of Canada West, which helped propel them to a third-place finish in the conference's year-end tournament and a berth at Nationals. Still, despite last season's strong play, head coach Scott Edwards will be without the services of three of his four leading scorers from 2008/09.

"It's going to be a much different squad that we put on the floor this year," Edwards noted. "In terms of minutes played, we lost four of our top seven players from last season, so it will be a challenge. We have some kids that need to step up."

In particular, the loss of last year's leading scorer Ashley Wigg leaves a huge void in the Pandas backcourt — one that the younger guards will need to fill.

"Ashley was that one kid who could really break down a defence, get to the rim, and create offence for us. We don't have that type of athlete this year, so it's going to take more of a collective effort to play good team basketball throughout the whole year," Edwards commented.

"The girls are going to have to play very well as a unit of five on a nightly basis if we are going to be as successful as we want to be."

Last season's Canada West Rookie of the Year and second-year guard Nicole Clarke will be one of the Pandas whose responsibilities will increase with Wigg's departure. This past summer, Clarke, who finished as the team's second leading scorer last year, played in Thailand on Canada's Junior National Team.

In addition to the returnees, the team also welcomes a pair of transfer students: Georgia Popovici from Grant MacEwan and Stacey Sperling from King's College.

Last year, the Pandas used their great contingent of guards and strong presence in the paint to generate offensive opportunities. This year, however, Edwards believes his offense will be more inside-oriented, which should, in turn, lead to more opportunities to drain three-pointers.

“I like our group of forwards. We aren’t the tallest group, but we are physically tough and athletic; therefore, I think we will be able to have a stronger inside presence,” Edwards said. “I think we can stretch defences with our three-point shooting, which should be a more prominent part of our attack this year.”

Defensively, the Pandas must be disciplined. Not being one of the bigger teams in the country means the Pandas will have to defend and rebound well as a unit to give themselves a chance to win every night.

Alberta doesn't have an abundance of Canada West experience on this year’s squad, but many of the first- and second-year players are former provincial team members who've competed at the national level.

“We have youth, but I think its experienced youth and there is a big difference between them,” Edwards stated.

The basketball Pandas will take to the hardcourt for their annual Hoopfest tournament October 9–11, when they play host to Windsor, Bishops, and Regina.