

Pandas bring east and west together at home court for Hoopfest preseason action

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The Pandas basketball squad will look to defend their home court this weekend when they play host to a trio of highly skilled teams at Hoopfest this Thanksgiving weekend.

Having only played one preseason game to this point — a 72–47 loss to the Saskatchewan Huskies eight days ago in Lloydminster — the Pandas will look to shake off those first-game jitters when they kick off the annual tournament against Regina, Windsor and Bishop's.

“It ended up being a tough game for us [versus Saskatchewan] and I think a bit of youth and inexperience showed up,” head coach Scott Edwards noted. “We were down 25–5 after the first quarter, but we really got our act together in the second half, and I was quite proud of the effort overall.”

It may have been just one game, and a preseason game at that, but poor opening-quarter performances like the one against the Huskies doesn't generally bleed confidence. Still, the Pandas can use the lopsided defeat as a motivational tool in preparation against the three formidable opponents they will face this weekend.

“I like our chances against the three teams. We brought them here because they are all competitive and we wanted to have some tough games right off the bat,” Edwards explained. “Certainly our preseason is shaping up to be very difficult, which should help us prepare for Canada West play.”

Under the guidance of second-year head coach Alex Perno, Bishop's University will be making its second consecutive appearance at Hoopfest. The Gaiters boast last season's Québec Université League Rookie of the Year, Annick Stephanny Charles, as well as Katy Germain, a First-Team QUBL All-Star.

Windsor is the defending OUA Champions, and Edwards' team will be in tough against them. Nonetheless, there's a familiarity factor between the Pandas and Lancers; they met in the Bronze Medal game at Nationals last season with Alberta pulling out a thrilling 64–62 victory.

“Windsor is a really big team with long, tall, athletic forwards and a very good little point guard,” Edwards pointed out.

The Regina Cougars also competed at Nationals last season as the host, one-upping the Pandas by capturing the silver medal.

“Regina is young this year and they lost a lot of kids from last season, but they still have a talented group and are always competitive in Canada West,” Edwards said.

Hoopfest 2009 will feature three of the top-four teams from last season's CIS National Championship and the games will give the young Pandas a chance to prove themselves to the coaching staff.

“These three games are really important for us to start generating some confidence as a group and start learning how to play on the floor together,” Edwards commented.

“The girls are starting to ramp themselves up [in practice] and compete even harder and I think as we head into our non-conference schedule, we are seeing them starting to get focused and ready to play.”

The Pandas will take to the hardcourt at 8 p.m. on Friday versus Bishop's, again at 6 p.m. Saturday against Windsor, and finally against conference rival Regina at 1 p.m. on Sunday in the Hoopfest finale.