

Pandas, Martlets get set to renew old acquaintances

Teams have combined to win last five national championships

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University of Saskatchewan Huskies' Megan Frohaug, right, battles University of Alberta Pandas' Melody Howard during February CIS action.

Photograph by: Chris Schwarz , The Journal , File

Edmonton's University of Alberta Pandas and Montreal's McGill University Martlets are the two biggest powerhouses in Canadian Interuniversity Sports women's hockey, between them winning the last five national championships.

Both teams are intent on starting off on the right skate when they face off Thursday afternoon in the opening game of the 2011 tournament at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont.

The Martlets enter the tournament with a perfect 24-0 record as champions of the Quebec conference and the No. 1 seed for the fifth straight year.

The Pandas, meanwhile, are coming off back-to-back losses to the Manitoba Bisons in the Canada West final. Alberta (19-6-5) is the No. 6 seed and got into the championship for a record-tying 12th time (McGill has also made 12 appearances) thanks to a rotating berth assigned to Canada West.

Pandas coach Howie Draper, who was not behind the bench against the Bisons because he was leading Team Alberta's under-18 women's hockey team to the gold medal at the Canada Winter Games, feels the recent defeats will help his team prepare for the Martlets.

"Those losses against Manitoba have further fuelled our team to achieve some payback, and playing against McGill is another motivator," Draper said.

The Pandas have dominated the Martlets at the national championship, winning all six previous meetings, including a 2-0 shutout in last year's title game that ended the Martlets' 86-game winning streak.

Alberta also defeated McGill in the gold-medal games in 2000 (2-0) and 2007 (4-0), and leads all schools with seven national titles.

The Martlets beat the Pandas 3-0, at the Bison Hockey Holiday Classic in Winnipeg on Dec. 31.

Draper isn't sure why the Pandas have an unblemished record at nationals against the Martlets, but offered one theory.

"I think in early (years), we were the more skilled team of the two," Draper said. "I think the last few times against them, maybe they didn't quite expect us to play like we did. They may have taken us a little lightly."

Martlets head coach Peter Smith disagreed.

"We have a lot of respect for our opponents," Smith said.

Although Smith acknowledged there is pressure on his team, he knows his experienced group will be ready for the Pandas.

"I think the No. 1 seed has a target on its back, and we've had it all year long," Smith said. "We have a good team and lots of confidence and we will go with that as our focus."

Draper said McGill will get the Pandas' best shot.

"The pressure is on McGill to win," he said.

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