

V-Ball Pandas set to host Herd with second place up for grabs

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The number-four Pandas volleyball squad will be back in action in the Main Gym for their first home conference matchup in 76 days when they take on the second-ranked Manitoba Bisons (11-2) in a pair of key matches this Friday and Saturday.

At 11–3, the Pandas currently sit third in the conference, but are only a half-game back of Manitoba for second, and therefore, it is clear that this weekend's contests with the Bisons are important for playoff positioning. Also still remaining on the Pandas schedule is a pair of home contests with top-ranked UBC in February.

“I think the schedule maker did us a favour with giving us a tougher second half. It is good preparation for us as we prepare for the playoffs,” head coach Laurie Eisler asserted.

Manitoba heads into the clash with the Pandas riding a nine-match winning streak, as well as an impressive 8–1 road record. Led by a trio of offensive weapons who all rank in the top-ten in hitting percentage in Canada West — Kristi Hunter, Ashley Voth, and Tricia Mayba — the Herd will present the Pandas with their stiffest test of the season.

Undoubtedly, however, the Pandas will be up to the challenge of suppressing Manitoba's vaunted front court come Friday evening. Eisler's team ranks second in the conference in blocking, and that skill set will need to be on full display against Manitoba.

“Offensively, [Manitoba] is just loaded with talent and that's something we need to be concerned about. Along with our service game, our blocking has formed the foundation of our team and it will be a deciding factor this weekend,” Eisler said.

The Pandas rank first in Canada West averaging over two service aces per game and if they're able to serve as they have been all season, the Manitoba setters and attackers will likely have limited options.

A huge part of Alberta's effective service game is attributable to the play of fourth-year physical education student Tiffany Proudfoot. She leads Canada West in aces (110), kills (201) and points per game (4.50).

“Tiff has played amazing for us this year, but she's not the only player who has been clutch. Lately our middle has started to emerge as more of a threat, and Krista Zubick's latest transformation to the right side has been key for us offensively and defensively,” Eisler explained.

To those not entirely knowledgeable in the volleyball community, the fact that the Pandas have played 53 sets to this point in the season might give rise to concerns about fatigue. Nevertheless, coach Eisler believes her team is fit as can be.

“Having a bye last week gave us an opportunity to boost our physical training, which is sometimes a neglected aspect of volleyball in the second half of the season,” Eisler noted.

Number-two Manitoba waltzes into the Main Gym to battle number-four Alberta this weekend with Friday's match beginning at 6:30 p.m. and Saturday's tilt starting at 8 p.m.