

Volleyball Pandas primed to open '09/10

OCTOBER 21, 2009 - 7:40PM

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VOLLEY GOOD The Pandas face the Calgary Dinos to start the regular season.

Despite finishing with a mediocre 6–4 record in exhibition play, the Pandas volleyball team will be looking to up their play in time for this weekend’s Canada West opener at home against the Calgary Dinos.

“I think we are two pretty equal teams, but with very distinct styles. [Calgary] plays much more of a speed offence and we play more of a patient game with a higher offence,” head coach Laurie Eisler noted. “One of the challenges for us will be to adjust to that pace, because they play at a different tempo.”

Last Saturday, Alberta finished off their preseason schedule in Quebec City by dropping a highly competitive 3–2 decision to the host Laval Rouge et Or.

The Pandas finished the weekend tournament with a 1–2 mark, with their lone win coming against the same Rouge et Or team on Friday night. Still, even though they didn't win all their games and came out of the weekend with a disappointing defeat, head coach Laurie Eisler believed the trip out to Quebec was worth it.

“We played in front of a hostile crowd with drums and chants and the whole nine yards, so it was a great experience for our team to play in that context. In spite of the really challenging conditions we competed under, the team held up very well,” Eisler said.

The Pandas will need a complete team effort if they're going to take down the Dinos. Calgary finished with the same 16–4 record as Alberta in conference play a season ago, but based on the differential between sets won and lost, the Pandas took home the regular season title.

Alberta was handed a devastating defeat by the Dinos, however, in last season's Canada West bronze medal game as Calgary grabbed the conference's third and final berth to nationals on the Pandas home court.

“We are not the type of team that has dominant individuals, but rather a collective group needing to have a balanced offence that can come from anywhere on the court, as well as a balanced game in general,” Eisler commented.

Ultimately, however, the Pandas need to be consistent during matches. Taking sizable leads and, in turn, coughing them up are tough pills to swallow.

Against Laval the Pandas were up 14–10 in the fifth set, but failed to pick up the victory. Nonetheless, the Pandas were picked apart in the fourth set, losing 25–10, but came back with a lot of heart in the deciding set.

“I think the strength of our team right now is probably resilience and that is really important in volleyball, as is the ability to wipe the slate clean. We have shown that this is a really strong characteristic of this group.

“It’s hard to win in volleyball and as it was pointed out to me over the weekend, losing is hard too,” Eisler chuckled.

The Pandas kick off their highly anticipated Canada West campaign against the Dinos this weekend, with action getting underway in the Main Gym at 6:30 p.m. on Friday and 8 p.m. on Saturday night.