

Women's volleyball elite ready to converge on Edmonton for national championship

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Win the national championship and your recent struggles will be forgotten. That's exactly what the Pandas volleyball squad is looking to do as they host the 2010 CIS National Championship tournament in the Main Gym this weekend.

Back in October, Alberta was considered a strong contender for the national crown and at the Christmas break they sat second in Canada West with a 10–2 record. However, since then they've struggled to win against tougher competition and lost eight of their last 10 matches, including two straight against Trinity Western in the quarterfinal round of conference playoffs.

As a result, the Pandas enter the their national quarterfinal match against the undefeated and second-ranked Université de Montreal Carabins looking for a spark.

“We're not looking at what happened down the stretch, but rather at our opportunity on Friday night against Montreal. Yes, we have struggled to achieve the outcomes we were striving for; however, we're a way better team than we were seven or eight weeks ago,” Pandas head coach Laurie Eisler explained.

Despite losing their last seven matches, the Pandas have been a focused, yet loose bunch in practice. Eager to step on their home floor with the opportunity to make good on their second life, the Pandas are looking to prove that their second-half swoon was an aberration more myth than reality.

The task will not be simple as the QSSF Champion Carabins were the best all-around statistical team in the country during the regular season. They were first in the nation in blocking (3.37 per set), second in services aces (2.18 per set), and second in attack efficiency (26.9 per cent).

In mid-October, Alberta and Montreal met in Montreal for an exhibition match which saw the Carabins dispose of the Pandas in four sets, though the match didn't count towards the standings.

“The Carabins are a very experienced team with continuity and they know how to win. Against them, and in every match this weekend, we have to trust that the work we have put in up to this point in the season will help us succeed and achieve our goal of winning the tournament.”

“There are no magic pills or magic wands available at this time of year. We need to play hard, be aggressive, and fight and scratch for every single point,” Eisler noted.

Although the Pandas face a tough road to this year's National Final, history is on their side. The last four times the Championship was held in Edmonton — 1999,

1998, 1997, 1995 1995, 1997, 1998 and 1999 — the Pandas were the ones celebrating on their home court.

As an underdog in the 2010 Championship, the Pandas pose a threat to their fellow competitors because they enter this weekend well-rested and rejuvenated after a two week break away from competition and the stresses of travel.

“It is incredibly hard to win a championship, but we're rested, fit, strong, and ready physically for the challenge of playing three consecutive days. If you cannot get up three days in a row to play for a title there is something wrong with your wiring,” Eisler said.

With the support of the hometown crowd, the Pandas will take on Montreal in the final national quarter-final match Friday evening at 8 p.m.