

Alberta Pandas

2008-09 conference record: 22-2-0 (1st)

2009 CW playoffs: 3-2 (2nd)

Last CW title: 2008-09

Last CIS title: 2006-07

EDMONTON - Although another first-place regular season finish was in the cards for the Alberta Pandas last season, the team actually took a step backward, losing to the Manitoba Bisons in the Canada West final, preventing the Pandas from even heading to the CIS national championship.

The season features a number of fresh faces on the squad, replacing veterans who finished their tenure in Panda colours. Gone are Jennifer Newton, Patty Tulloch, Mia Mucci, Lindsay Robinson and Miranda Miller, but in their stead, 2008-09 CIS Coach of the Year Draper sees a great collection of talent.

“I like what I’m seeing from Melody Howard from a finesse standpoint. She sees the ice very well offensively and has a set of hands to match. Katie Stewart, having very strong puck skills and thinking the game at a high level already, will be an offensive threat as well. Monika Moskalski has been a nice surprise, giving everything she has each and every shift. She blocks shots, doesn’t hesitate to jump in as our first forechecker and has proven to be an extremely coachable player.”

“Meagan Cornelssen adds size to our forward unit. She’s a natural athlete who plays the game with a high degree of energy and courage. Scoring a few goals for us in the preseason already, I think we’re just scraping the surface of her potential. Emily Burton brings grit and determination while Alannah Kedra, though injured, is a skilled forward that should give us a little more offensive punch when she’s healthy. Finally, Michala Jeffries is a young goalie who will be great for us in the future. She’s settling into her new team very well and is starting to show us why she has been rated very highly among midget goalies her age.”

The wisdom that comes with age will be utilized by the newcomers as they draw from veteran experience, provided by last season’s CIS Player of the Year, Tarin Podloski, as well as Leah Copeland, Rayanne Reeve and Andrea Boras.

Also on the Alberta defence is the 2008-09 Canada West Rookie of the Year, Stephanie Ramsay, who is a “threat every time she is on the ice and she has room for growth as well.”

Yet the team will be reminded that a repeat of last year’s 22-2-0 regular season record and constant presence at the top of most, if not all, the statistical categories are sweeter when your post-season performance is even more successful.

UBC Thunderbirds

2008-09 conference record: 8-15-1, 4th

2009 CW playoffs: 0-2 (t-3rd)

Last CW title: none

Last CIS title: none

VANCOUVER - The UBC Thunderbirds head into the season looking to build on the successes of last season.

“I’m expecting a similar jump this year,” said UBC head coach Nancy Wilson. “Last year we were extremely young. As a team we are stronger and more experienced, so I think mentally and physically we are just that much more prepared to take on the season.”

In addition to being more experienced, the T-Birds have some new faces who Wilson anticipates will contribute to the team’s upward progress in the CIS with the biggest boost coming along the blue line.

Among those new players are Rayna Cruickshank, who comes to UBC from the Canadian U-18 team, and Christi Capozzi, who was with the U-18 Provincial team last year.

Also returning on defence is Kelsey Halvorson, who is coming off a big 2008-09 campaign in which she was the T-Bird’s top-scoring defender. Although the defence may have the biggest new names, for Wilson, improving UBC’s offensive output is a key to continued improvement.

“We need to score more goals this season,” says Wilson. “That will be the crux of our preparation leading into the season: attack.”

Among those expected to lead the charge to the net are speedster Lisa Bonang and veteran winger Jenny Mahovlich, who led the team in points and assists last year. Alisha Choy is another veteran expected to contribute while the smooth-skating Tamara Pickford moves full-time to the wing after playing both forward and defence the last two seasons.

Wilson also expects improved performances from talented second-year forwards Kaylee Chanakos and Kaitlin Imai, both of whom had promising rookie campaigns last year.

T-Birds goalie Melinda Choy, who won a gold medal with Team Canada at the 2009 FISU Winter Games, has the talent to help the T-Birds make another playoff appearance. Last season Choy led Canada West with 691 saves – over 150 more than the next closest goalie. In fact, Choy made more saves than any other goaltender had shots against.

Wilson expects to offer Choy some relief this season, not just with improved team defence, but also in the form of strong back-up keepers, Katie Schertzer and Katherine Pettengill.

With more experienced personnel and some talented new recruits, the T-Birds have a roster that should allow them to continue to challenge the upper echelon of Canada West.

Calgary Dinos

2008-09 conference record (ACAC): 17-5-0 (1st)

2009 ACAC college playoffs: 5-2 (1st)

Last CW title: none

Last CIS title: none

CALGARY – Just two years into her coaching career, Danielle Goyette completed a remarkable turnaround for a Dinos squad that had not had a season above .500 since 2000. Now, Alberta college gold medal in hand, Goyette and the Dinos embark on a much bigger challenge: a step back up to the CIS level for UC's first Canada West action since 2002.

"It's a dream come true for the players," Goyette commented. "Many of our players came to the University of Calgary because they were told that the Dinos would be in the CIS soon."

The challenges are many. Canada West is home to two of the top teams in the country in Alberta and Manitoba, so there's better competition. The travel schedule of the ACAC, which featured home-and-home series every weekend and travel no farther than Edmonton, pales in comparison to the schedule they will face this season from Vancouver to Winnipeg.

"I'm nervous to see how the players react to travelling on the plane," Goyette noted, adding, "I think we are going to have a big challenge this year because we don't know the teams, so we will have to be well-prepared. It will be a lot more work for me to know their game and make sure that my players are ready to play against them."

But the Dinos are ready to face the challenge. In Goyette's first two seasons the team went from perennial basement dwellers to the class of the ACAC, and the chance to play for a world champion and Olympic gold medalist has certainly helped in recruiting. A preseason exhibition tournament in Lethbridge featured CIS opponents Saskatchewan and the host Pronghorns along with the NCAA's Robert Morris University – and the Dinos went 3-0 to win the tournament.

"If you look at them player for player they may have more talent than us, but I think that our work ethic as a team allowed us to play with them," said the two-time Olympic gold medalist. "When we started against Lethbridge we knew we could compete. After we beat them, it gave us confidence to know that we weren't that far from the CIS level. I told the girls, 'it's not a big jump between the two leagues.'"

League play is another story, of course, but the early signs have been encouraging and a core of veterans that have been with the Dinos through the lean years want to make the most of their final years. The two fifth-year players on the team are forward Danielle Boyce and goaltender Katie Urness, and both will play key roles as Calgary steps up to Canada West.

Goyette wants those veteran players to lead by example.

"Those players know what to expect, they know what kind of coach I am, they know the team, they know the system. When you play the game and think you don't react as fast, but when you've been on the team you know what to do and you can be a step ahead of the play. I want the veterans to do this and lead by example."

Boyce has CIS experience, playing at Mount Allison University in Nova Scotia before transferring to Calgary, while Urness was the all-star goaltender in the Alberta Colleges Athletic Conference last season, setting league records for both career shutouts and single-season shutouts. They join fourth-year seniors Beccy Niehaus, captain Cait O'Hara, Shannon Davidson and Nicole Kuglin as the core of a young Dinos squad that is looking to shake up Canada West in its first season.

Goyette added that their objective this year is simple. "Our goal is to finish in the top four and make the playoffs."

Lethbridge Pronghorns

2008-09 conference record: 4-19-1 (6th, missed playoffs)

Last CW title: none

Last CIS title: none

LETHBRIDGE - With a year under her belt, second-year head coach Chandy Kaip used the summer to put her stamp on the Lethbridge Pronghorns, and with the addition of 11 new faces, the team is now truly hers.

For the second consecutive year, the Horns had a long time to think about the past season after failing to qualify for the post-season, and it will be a young team again this season. There is a solid returning group ready to compete, and with only four fifth-year players, the group will be together for years to come.

Eager to address their biggest weakness last season, offensive production, Kaip has brought in a stable of young, speedy forwards headlined by Jenna-Marie Durnin. At the inaugural Esso Cup - Female National Midget Championship - Durnin scored six goals in six games, including two in the finals, one of which was the game-winning goal. She also scored the game-winner in the Wildcats' semifinal victory. Vanessa Fusick will also be counted on to contribute as a freshman.

Fifth-year forward Charlette Hainer, along with assistant captain Dayna Janzen and Shelby Ballendine will be relied on to lead the young Horns forwards and increase their offensive output this season. Ballendine accounted for thirty per cent of the Horns' goals last year (12). After a strong freshman season, Brittany Kaye will need to take another step forward.

Fifth-year captain Kendall Tremblay returns for her final season to anchor the blue line, while Amy Van Buskirk returns from injury and will be a great asset to the team. Van Buskirk was having a strong rookie season before suffering a season-ending injury just after Christmas.

The coaching staff is really excited about rookies Glenda Edie and Jasmin Teske. They see the ice well and have added a lot of strength to our blue line.

Senior goaltender Kailey McMaster, as the incumbent, is expected to provide solid goaltending, but will be pushed by NCAA transfer Ashley Kavanagh. After sitting out last season due to CIS transfer regulations, Kavanagh is eager to challenge McMaster for the starting role, leaving the Horns confident in both their goaltenders.

Manitoba Bisons

2008-09 conference record: 21-2-1 (2nd)

2009 CW playoffs: 4-1 (1st)

2009 CIS Nationals: 1-2 (4th)

Last CW title: 2008-09

Last CIS title: none

WINNIPEG - Look up at the rafters this year at the Max Bell Arena (U of M campus) and you will see a shiny new 2008-09 Canada West championship banner hanging for the Bisons women's hockey program.

The Bisons are coming off one of their most successful seasons, in which they became reigning conference champions for the first time ever in the program's 13-year history and earned a fourth trip in five seasons to CIS Nationals.

This season the squad will have some major changes, as they lose five fifth-year players. Brenna Leary was a 2008-09 Canada West First Team All-Star and the top Bisons defenceman with 20 points. Co-captains Leanne Kisil, third in team scoring with 22 points and Katherine O'Rourke, who had 12 points last season; forward Sarah Stebeleski, who was fifth in team scoring with 19 points, and stalwart defenceman Amanda Schnell had 11 points last season), have all graduated.

Head coach Jon Rempel, in his sixth season, has balanced the loss with one of his best recruiting classes. He has seven newcomers ready to make an immediate impact this season. Forwards Rachele Bosc, part of the 2008 Team Manitoba U18 team and 31 points last season, Amy Lee, of the Team Manitoba U18 team at the last two Nationals and scored 61 points last season, Jordyn Hrehirchuk, Kristin Cockerill, from the 2008 Team Manitoba U18 team), along with defenceman Caitlin MacDonald, who is just 17-years-old and finished last season with 33 points, are all with the program. Goalie Tara Lacquette, part of the Team Manitoba U18 team at the last two Nationals, is also aboard.

Despite the massive changes, Manitoba should still be battling to defend their Canada West title as they lean on their returning veterans. 2009 Canadian Winter Universiade gold medalist goalie and 2008-09 Canada West First Team All-Star Stacey Corfield returns for her fifth season, and wants to finish her career on a winning note. Corfield had another stellar season while close to the top in the conference in several categories with a 1.55 Avg. (second in Canada West), seven shutouts (second), .924 save pct. (first) and a conference-leading 21-2 record.

In addition, veterans back this season include 2008-09 Canada West All-Star and top-five conference scorer with 32 points Addie Miles; Tammy Brade was top Bisons goal scorer with 19; Becca King had 12 points last season; 2008-09 Canada West All-Rookie member Nellie Minshull had 19 points in her first season and a solid defence core led by Erica Holmes, Chelsea Braun.

Regina Cougars

2008-09 conference record: 7-16-1 (5th, missed playoffs)

Last CW title: 2000-01

Last CIS title: none

After a tough start to the 2008-09 season while relying heavily on a crop of first-year players, Regina vastly improved after the Christmas break and fell just two points short of qualifying for the Canada West post-season.

With that crop of rookies now experienced second-year Cougars, head coach Sarah Howald feels that her team is in a much better position than it was at this time in 2008 and hopes to build on the progress it showed in the second half of last season.

“The second-years have developed nicely, and we’re going to depend on them in a lot of situations,” Howald said. “We’re going to be young again, but all the pieces are in place for us to keep improving as a team.”

Of the 21 players on the Cougars’ roster, 15 of them will be in their first or second years, and only forward Kelsie Graham is in her final season of eligibility.

Graham is also the team’s top returning scorer, as the 5’10” product of Moose Jaw scored seven goals and added nine assists for 16 points last season. Fourth-year forward Kelcie McCutcheon will also be heavily relied upon for offence, as she scored seven goals and 14 points last year while playing mostly on a line with Graham and graduated forward Kara McGeough.

Howald put together a line consisting of three rookies last year, and the trio caught fire after Christmas and was a key reason for the team’s turnaround. Gina Campbell, Paige Wheeler and Rianne Wight all return this season as second-year players and will see plenty of ice time in all situations. Kendra Finch, a league all-star with the Regina Rebels last season, is a talented rookie forward who has already shown a penchant for finding the back of the net.

Fourth-year defenceman Jayme-Lee Green is the team’s top returning blue-liner. Green had eight points last season, seven of which came on the power play. Stefanie Banilevic, the sole third-year player, returns after leading the team’s defencemen in even-strength points last season. Howald expects first-year defenceman Nicole Hollingshead, who compiled 20 points in 22 games last year for the Weyburn Gold Wings, to make an immediate impact with the Cougars.

Returning in net is third-year goalie Lisa Urban, who started all 24 Canada West games for the Cougars last season. Urban, who had a 4.24 GAA and an .847 save percentage to go along with her 7-16-1 record, will be backed up by second-year Naticia Leskun.

Saskatchewan Huskies

2008-09 conference record: 10-13-1 (3rd)

2009 CW Playoffs: 0-2 (t-3rd)

Last CW title: none

Last CIS title: none

SASKATOON - After finishing third in the Canada West standings the last two years, the Saskatchewan Huskies are poised to take a stab at a top two position.

Armed with an older more experienced team, the Huskies will look to improve on the 10-13-0-1 record from one year ago. In 2008-09, the Huskies proved they were a team not to be taken lightly. Highlights included remaining in the CIS Top 10 for all 17 weeks of the national poll, as well as becoming the first team to defeat the eventual Canada West champion Manitoba Bisons.

The top line of Breanne George, Shaye Christiansen and captain Chelsea Purcell reeked havoc on other teams, scoring 73 of the team's 194 points last season. All three return to help boost the team's offence. Other offensive power returning is sophomore Danny Stone (13 goals, six assists) and Kelsey Tulloch (seven goals, 10 assists). George was named a Canada West Second Team All-Star.

The Huskies will need to replace starting defensive partners Crystal Kappel and captain Robin Ulrich. Both graduated in 2008-09. The two combined for four goals and 14 points. Ulrich has been a conference All-Star the last two seasons. Blue-liners Kristen Bews (three goals, nine assists) and Madison Duffin (one goal, six assists) will be looked at to step into the holes left.

Returning to the bulk of netminding duties will be 2007-08 Canada West All-Star Vanessa Frederick. Frederick, who had an injury-plagued 2008-09, played in 10 games with a 3.26 goals against average and a .891 save percentage. Two seasons ago, Frederick posted a 9-6 record and a .903 save percentage. With the departure of both Chauntal Armet and Lisa Lafreniere, rookie Brianna Workman will back up Frederick.

“Although we graduated four key members of our team last season, we still have a team that is experienced,” said Huskies head coach Steve Kook, who heads into his fifth season at the helm. “We’ve done a good job of increasing our skill and finding some character players who recognize the expectations that come with being part of the Huskie program.”

After a year of sitting on the sidelines after transferring from other post-secondary institutions, forwards Julie Paetsch and Cindy Lukianchuk will suit up for the green and white. Both will be boosts to the Huskies offence. In 2007-08, Paetsch scored seven goals and 14 assists for the Regina Cougars, while Lukianchuk had six goals and four assists for Hamilton College in New York. Also joining the Huskies are defenceman Megan Frohaug and forward Shelby Davey from the ACAC champion University of Calgary Dinos. Davey was named an ACAC Second Team All-Star last season after scoring eight goals and six assists. Frohaug finished the season with seven assists.