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Number 1 Bears rollin' right along

Weekend sets up first place decider Saturday vs Saskatchewan

by Philip Preville
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"We can't take them for granted." This is, of course, the rhetoric that gets thrown at reporters when last place teams are in town. The 1-4 Calgary Dinosaurs and the 1-4 Lethbridge Pronghorns were in this weekend.

The Bears weren't at their best, but when you're Number One sometimes that's okay. The end result was a pair of wins and a 6-1 record for the Green and Gold.

Friday marked the return to the U of A campus of both the Dinosaurs and, perhaps more importantly, the "Cheer for Beer" promotion. Although they were an excellent team once upon a time last month, Gary Howard's Dinosaurs have been slipping steadily since their number five ranking at the beginning of conference play.

And Alberta was fired up for this provincial rivalry. The Bears' most potent weapon, the full-court press, once again produced some early baskets and a 32-23 halftime lead. But likewise their biggest weakness, the beginning of the second half, came back to haunt them. U of A came out flat to start part two, and the Dinosaurs capitalized on it, working their way to within three points. Alberta was once again forced to sweat for a win.

They didn't find any breathing room until post Dean Peters, playing like a guard, drove the lane for a finger-roll-lay-in and a foul. Peters downed the freethrow for a nine point lead with three minutes on the clock. The game ended 65-59.

"Our defense kept us in there," said coach Don Horwood, who was not exaggerating. Alberta's defense has been both a consistent and a big-play unit which hasn't broken down since the conference opener in Saskatoon. "We were particularly poor on offense tonight, and it's a good thing the defense didn't collapse."

The Golden Bears were indeed in defect of the cardinal virtue of offense on this night, with forward Mike Kornak suffering a particularly bad outing. Kornak, who has been playing All Canadian calibre basketball all year, seemed no less intense on this evening, but had one of those nights where he couldn't sink a ball even if he were blessed with wings. But the 1500 fans gave thanks for Chris Toutant's hot hand.

Toutant, who has solidified a spot in the starting lineup, shared the scoring lead with Sean Chursinoff with 14 points. Peters finished with 12 and Mike Suderman had 11.

Saturday evening was a date with last year's conference champs, the Lethbridge Pronghorns, who fit into the "rebuilding franchise" category. The Bears did a demolition job on Lethbridge to the tune of 95-68, leaving them to pick up the pieces and start again.

The Pronghorns, a comedy of errors, were a team of travelling violations, off-balance lay-ups and kamikaze ball handling. Playing with a reckless abandon surpassed only by Grace Jones' performance in Conan the Destroyer, the Horns' unorthodox play left Alberta quite perplexed at times.

The Bears, however, produced a 21-point halftime lead that would not be diminished. "We wanted to

build on the lead so we could get everybody in," said Toutant. Everybody who dressed did get the opportunity to sweat, and nobody left an empty column on the scoresheet.

Mike Kornak found his touch once again and scored 19 for the Bears, while Suderman added 13 of his own.

The Golden Bears get Monday and Tuesday off for winning both games, then begin preparing for next Saturday's game against the Saskatchewan Huskies. "Grudge match," says Toutant, and his eyes light up at the thought of Dogs. "They beat us, (season opener in Saskatoon) and we want it back."

"Our destiny is in our own hands," says Horwood. At 6-1, the Bears are guaranteed a playoff spot, but a win over Saskatchewan could mean home-court advantage right through playoffs for Alberta.

The Huskies, meanwhile, seem to have returned to the form that put them into the final four last year. Earlier this year Saskatchewan, who are virtually the same team as last year, struggled with themselves to find some consistency. After a loss to Calgary in November, coach Guy Vetric spent over an hour in the dressing room, talking to his players one by one.

In The Paint: They'll be in town Saturday at 3 P.M. to decide first place in Canada West.

Mike Kornak pulls down a rebound in Alberta's second win of the weekend.



photo Paul Menzies

Lethbridge takes it at the 'Horn

by Tim Enger

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Ten seconds. That's all it took to ruin the Panda Basketball team's weekend.

That was the amount of time it took for Lethbridge's Angela Hlavka

to take the ball coast-to-coast and put up an ugly turnaround jumpshot from just inside the key. It caught nothing but net to give the Pronghorns a one-point lead with four seconds remaining in Saturday night's contest, all of this occurring after Alberta post Yolanda Krueyer had put the Pandas up by one via a

leaping leaner from the baseline with just 14 seconds left.

The Pronghorns hung on to win 51-50.

"It's hard to lose that way after you have played tough defense for the entire game except for the last few seconds," said rookie guard Patti Smith.

Another painful stat that Alberta must live with is the fact that the last second basket by Hlavka would be the only points she would score from the field all night.

"It's so easy to pick out the bad things we did tonight," said Panda head coach Diane Hilko. "But we really didn't play that bad of a game."

In fact, the Pandas performance on Saturday night was head and shoulders above the horror show they presented last week against the Pronghorns, losing by 17 in Lethbridge. In total Alberta out-rebounded the Pronghorns 33-15, as well as having better fieldgoal and freethrow shooting percentages, and dominating most of the rest of the statistics save for the one that counted most.

Friday's contest against Calgary was much the same as the Pandas finally beat the Dinnies, a feat they have been trying to achieve all year.

"Each time we've played them this year we've gotten closer and closer to them," said forward Kathy Keats. "We knew that we could beat them, it was just a matter of executing properly."

And execute they did, as after

trailing the Dinnies for most of the first half Alberta turned it on for the remaining five minutes to take a 26-20 lead by halftime.

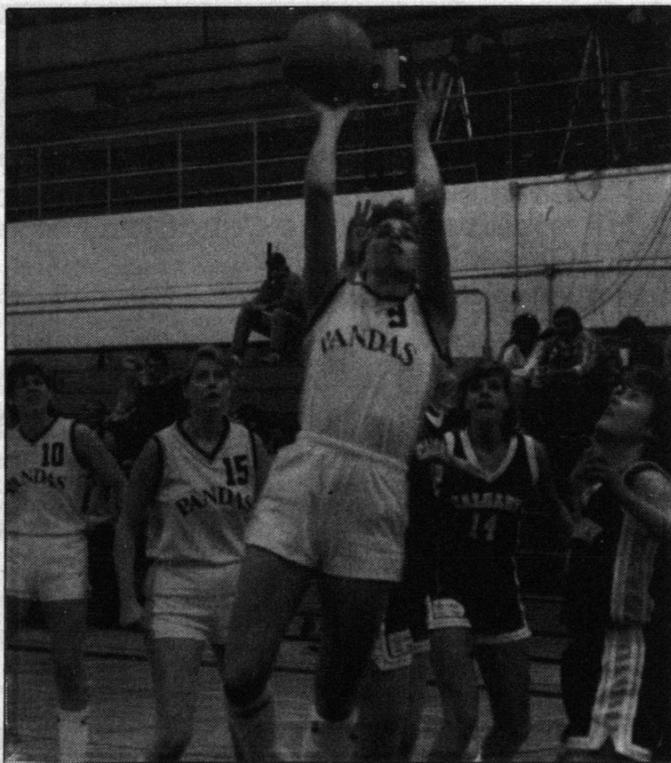
They were to increase that lead to as much as 12 points during the second half, while fighting off a Calgary rally near the end of the game to come away with a 56-48 victory.

Although the decision was a sweet one for Alberta, the real story lay in the play of senior Lisa Janz. Not only did she tie for the scoring lead in the game with Krueyer (14 points), but she all but removed the Dinnies premier forward and former National Team member Karen Degner from the game, out-rebounding her on the defensive boards 5-2 and stuffing her three times.

The most redeeming feature of the Lethbridge game the next night was how close it was. Neither team held more than a six point lead at any point during the game.

"It was so close all the way that you couldn't let up at all," said Krueyer. "But we never gave up and, though that was a terrible way to lose, now we know that we can play with any team in this league and we're going to surprise a lot of teams before we're done."

THREE POINTERS: Janz was Alberta's leading scorer in the Lethbridge game with 12 points followed by Keats, who scored all her 10 points in the second half. . . . The Pandas next action is at home next Saturday vs. the University of Saskatchewan Huskies at 1:00 P.M.



Zofia Yeomans with an easy layup in the Calgary win. photo Paul Menzies