

Dinosaurs end Bear dream year

by Randal Smathers

Calgary & Alberta 6

CALGARY — The Golden Bears hockey club looked like favorites to walk into the University hockey championships. The Calgary Dinosaurs stepped on the Bearstoes and will be doing the dancing at the nationals instead.

After winning on Friday and losing on Saturday, the Bears came out like winners in the third game. Rookie Adam Morrison continued to lead Bear playoff gunners with a goal and an assist in the first period.

"We knew they'd be keying on Sid (Cranston)," said Morrison. "I thought our line played pretty well all weekend. We had a quite a number of goals, considering we're supposed to be a checking line."

The teams also traded powerplay goals in the period, which ended 3-1 Bears. The Dinosaurs came right back in the second, however, scoring with two Bears in the penalty box at 1:08, and again before the second penalty expired at 2:20. They went 4-for-4 on the powerplay on the day, with another goal at 7:29 during a man advantage.

"It's tough when you score that many powerplay goals on you," said Morrison.

"I think the powerplay won the game for us," said Dino forward Barry Bracko. "We were down 3-1, then we got those two quick goals in the second period and I think it turned the game around for us."

Special teams were critical, as the Brandon referee, Eric Dunton, was execrable all series. His total lack of consistency was the only flaw in an otherwise thrilling three-game series. Clare Drake was diplomatic after the loss, saying that the referee "had a tough job to do. We had some second penalties called... that they didn't, and that's hard to take. There's no sense beefing about it. It's a tough series to officiate."

The Dinosaurs were up 5-3 before Alberta connected on a powerplay of their own, when Sid Cranston used a great screen by Stacey Wakabayashi to beat Dino starter Grant McPhail. Twenty-one seconds later, Darin Bozell to beat McPhail on a carbon copy of Cranston's goal.

The Bears had awful second periods all weekend, getting outscored 11-5 over the three games. With the game tied at five, both teams' seasons were reduced to a single period, and the Dinosaurs took it to the Bears early in the final 20 minutes.

Drake represents the traditions that surround Bear hockey. Only Toronto has a comparable history to the U of A.

When you go into a relatively modern rink like Father Bauer in Calgary, you realize just how much history is in old Varsity Arena, with all its sounds and smells, and that row of championship banners in the rafters.

The players are aware of the ghosts that linger in Varsity rink: Defenceman Parie Proft's voice choked a little last week, when he was talking about Bear pride.

The current crop of players haven't hurt the team's reputation any. The team will miss their retiring veterans: Jack Patrick, the worst skater on the team, but the hardest worker; Dennis Cranston, team captain, with all that implies at the U of A; Jeff Helland and Dave Otto, forwards who made the third and fourth lines almost as good as the first and second; and Darren Turner, the diminutive goalie who just kept coming up big for his teammates.

Finally, there is Parie Proft, the best defenceman in the league the last two years, whose absence on Saturday showed how much he provided to the team when he played. Once again, you don't know what you've got until it's gone.

There may be a few more players who'll leave, notably Sid Cranston and Stacey Wakabayashi, but they're not sure, or if they are, they're not telling. More significant in the long term is the fact that Coach Drake may retire in the off-season.

His long-term right hand man is Billy Moores, who won a national crown in 79-80 during a previous Drake break. He is the logical successor to Drake, and would carry on the winning tradition at the University.

In this light, Sunday's loss to Calgary is a temporary setback for the Bears as this year's team, although they didn't win a title, kept alive all that's best about Bear hockey. Thanks for one hell of a year.



Goalie Darren Turner hunts down a loose puck in front of his net.

Photo Randal Smathers

Terry Jones scored on a scramble just 20 seconds after the final period started, and the Dinosaurs went to a 7-5 lead at 3:15. "They scored on the first shift," said Bears captain Dennis Cranston. "We can't be allowing that." Todd Skokowski made it close, but the Dinosaurs played tough defence to hang on and eventually win 8-6.

"Some games we're a little disorganized in our own end, but I think tonight we proved that when the chips are down we can play good defence," said Dino Brent Meckling.

"We wanted to win the first five minutes, it was a big key to the period. Obviously we didn't, and we couldn't recover," said Sid Cranston.

Meckling, who has stepped into the captaincy since Ken Vinige broke his wrist late in the season, scored the final two Calgary goals. Meckling dominated the game, with a hat trick and three assists. "It feels great," he said. "We've been so close the last couple of years here."

"It's a tough loss," said Drake. "We've got some seniors who we think are quality people, character guys, and this is a tough way for them to go out."

The Dinosaurs now prepare to face the best of the rest in Toronto March 17-19. Dino coach George Kingston feels that the two week break going into the nationals is critical for his club. "We've got six injuries we're quite worried about."

It used to be that Canada West teams used to beat the shit out of each other (on the weekend) and then on Thursday they'd be playing for the nationals. There's no doubt that three of the best teams in the country right now are Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Calgary.

RED LINES: Defenceman of the Year, Parie Proft, missed the second game as a result of getting his third misconduct of the year during Friday's opener. Proft was steamed because he got called for holding on a play when his helmet was removed via a Calgary headlock. Wes Craig also sat on Saturday with a sore wrist, courtesy of a slash. Gord Thibodeau played well the whole series with a bad knee.

Bears top scorer struggles

by Randal Smathers

The Golden Bears will get over losing to Calgary in the Canada West finals on Sunday, but you'd never know by the mood in the dressing room after the game.

There's no standard for measuring disappointment, but nobody was more upset than Sid Cranston. His line, the offensive strength of the team all year, struggled in the playoffs, accounting for only three goals in the three games of the finals.

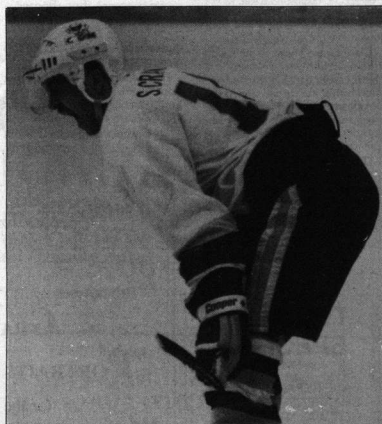
"That's where I came up short (scoring), that's where I'm not supposed to come up short," said a despondent Cranston after the game. "It bothers me to know that I really let the coaches down, my teammates down... and myself down, I guess. It really bothers me."

Cranston led the CWUAA in regular season scoring, with 34 goals and 46 assists, setting records for assists and total points (80).

Coach Clare Drake was much less critical of his player's performance than Cranston was of himself.

"I thought he played quite well. I think his linemates struggled a little bit for a while," said Drake. "They're not quite as quick as some of the other guys, maybe that hurt a bit." The series was played on the international ice surface of Father David Bauer Arena.

Cranston's linemates are Wes Craig and Curtis Brandolini. Both were hurting, as Brandolini suffered a broken nose during the second period of the second game, but came right back to finish the game. Craig missed that game altogether with a sore wrist, apparently the result of a slash.



Sid Cranston, MVP: Most Vocal Player?

Photo Randal Smathers

"Unfortunately we really couldn't put the puck in the net," said Brandolini, an assistant captain with the Bears. "That's why we're sitting in here with glum faces."

Cranston had said earlier in the week that he was still trying to score four goals a game, like he did against weak sisters Manitoba and Regina late in the season, when he was Canada West player of the week for consecutive weeks. Ultimately, the pressure to "make things happen" was too much to overcome.

Cranston "has the option" to renege on that year-end goal, if coach (Drake) is back. "I'll probably be back. I'm only going to come back if I'm prepared to play, if I have the desire to play, if I'm not going to fool anybody, just come here and put in time. That's not going to do anybody any good."

Team captain Dennis Cranston, Sid's younger brother, probably expressed the team's feeling best. "There were a lot of things. We lost as a team. No one's pointing fingers. It's all team."



Randal Smathers

Coach of the Century

Sports fans, myself included, have a bad tendency to take success for granted. It wasn't until I went to Calgary to watch the hockey Bears play, that I realized how lucky I am.

It is my great fortune to have reported on the Bears hockey beat this year, watching as good a hockey as I have ever seen, short of the NHL. I have also had a chance to work with one of the class organizations in sports.

The class starts with the Coach, captain C. Clare Drake is the best coach in the history of college hockey, one of the best anywhere.

I had always been on a first-name basis with my coaches when I played, and early this year, I asked a Bears veteran a question about what "Clare" had done, only to be greeted with a blank look for a few seconds. "Oh, you mean Coach," he said. After a while with the team, I realized the degree of respect the players have for Clare Drake, and that's the reason they only call him Coach.

He made life as a green reporter easy, answering all my dumb questions patiently, and for that I thank him.