

Pandas, turf gang up against UBC field hockey

Unfamiliar field conditions and an energetic Alberta team kept the defending national champions to a weekend split at Foote Field

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In most sports, having the home field advantage manifests itself as a mental edge stemming from a friendly crowd, a good night's sleep, and familiar locker rooms. In the case of the Pandas field hockey team this weekend, however, it was the field itself that made a difference, discomfiting their opponent and helping them earn a weekend split against a powerhouse from UBC.

The Alberta took on the defending national champion Thunderbirds at Foote Field on the weekend, winning 2-1 on Saturday but dropping Sunday's game 1-0.

Unlike the other teams in their conference, the Pandas play on a converted football field rather than a designated field hockey surface, and the difference between the two types of artificial turf can have a huge effect on the game.

T-Birds head coach Hash Kanjee was blunt in his assessment of the field conditions, and admitted that the unfamiliar surface affected his team's play.

"It takes away the skill element of the game, for both sides," he said. "It's slower, and the ball bounces all over the place."

"Saturday, one of the things that was frustrating for me was that this field doesn't lend itself to some of the skills we practice at home, and it's slower, so we didn't get to do some of the things that we do on a regular basis. I think we're going to have to practice on it a

few times before we meet the Pandas again."

Though Kanjee wasn't too happy about how the weekend turned out, the Pandas were pleased they could manage a win on Saturday, even if Sunday's result was less satisfactory. The team is fairly young—nearly half of this year's players are in their first year—while the T-Birds are returning with all but a handful of their championship-winning side.

"I told someone at the beginning of the weekend: if we could get split against UBC, we would be happy," Alberta head coach Carla Duncan said. "I think when we look back at this tomorrow, having a split against the top team in the country—and by far, they will be the top team in the country again—we're happy. We're ecstatic."

For all Duncan's fervor, she recognized the holes in her team's performances, especially during Sunday's loss.

"[Saturday] we were much sharper. We were technically much better and tactically a little more disciplined. We were patient, and we took advantage of our opportunities when we got them," Duncan said. "[Sunday], we went a little bit individual. We're really a passing team, but we started to carry the ball, and we turned the ball over in possession."

On Saturday, the Pandas came back from a 1-0 deficit in the first half, potting two in the UBC net in the second—the first goal from forward Jennifer Zwicker, and the second off a short corner by defender Stephanie Madsen.



WHAT, NO SKATES? Alberta midfielder Erin Mason (left) does her best to keep the ball away from UBC on Sunday.

KATEWADE

On Sunday, however, they couldn't pull off the same sort of energy after the break, and weren't able to regroup after Thunderbird Elisa Milosevich's goal in the 49th minute.

"Today they just put us under more pressure," Duncan said after Sunday's game. "With their constant pressure, we struggled to get the ball out of the backfield. They have some very experienced players and some very skilled players; we have to give credit where credit's due."

Kanjee said he felt that the win was

a matter of wearing Alberta down in the second half rather than a surge from his side.

"I think it's more a question of their falling apart, just like we did on Saturday," he said. "I thought, after the goal that Alberta got, that we went really quiet, and they just gained momentum; whereas, today we sort of stepped up, and Alberta got quiet."

In addition to Zwicker and Madsen, Alberta leaned on fourth-year midfielder Erin Mason, who was a second-team All-Canadian last year.

"We relied heavily on Erin, and we can't afford to do that," Duncan said. "[She's] a fantastic player, but she can't do it all. As a whole, we need to step up and be a little bit better."

Kanjee praised Mason too, and said that her presence on the field was a definite source of concern for his team.

"We were looking out for Erin," he said. "She's a very, very tough little hockey player, and she will give any team, either in Canada West or CIS, a lot of trouble. She's very talented."



FILE PHOTO: ZHENDONG LI

LEARNING TO WALK Rookie defensive back Rhys Coppens, who grew up watching the Bears play football, is now trying to help them make the playoffs.

Pressure makes diamonds for new Bear

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For the average first-year student coming straight out of high school, the pressure of university classes, homework, and studying can be incredibly daunting. Rookie defensive back Rhys Coppens, however, is not your average first-year—he also has the uncertain future of this year's Golden Bears football team to worry about.

The pressure stems from the fact that after the Bears' disappointing playoff miss last year, considerable attention is being directed towards the team's defence this season, which boasts four new starters, including Coppens. He doesn't seem overly worried about being under the microscope, though.

"It's kind of nice having the attention on us," he says. "Especially throughout the week and before a game, most of the view is on the secondary just because we're so young."

Bears head coach Jerry Friesen is pleased with the way Coppens has been handling everything. He said that Coppens has a positive attitude towards the attention the whole team—and the defense in particular—are getting.

"[He's] competitive, and competitive players enjoy the challenges that they have in front of them," he said.

"He's rising to the challenges."

That competitive spirit has already led Coppens, a recent graduate of St Francis Xavier high school, to considerable success on the field. He spent part of his summer helping Team Alberta win a gold medal in the 2007 Football Canada Cup in Sherbrooke, Quebec, where he was named Defensive Player of the Tournament.

Coppens has already begun to prove himself as an important addition to the Bears' secondary. In his first start of the season, he earned himself a game-high 13 tackles during a 24-22 loss to the University of Regina Rams. Friesen credits Coppens' success on the football field primarily to his athleticism.

"He's a very good athlete all-around," says the Alberta bench boss.

Coppens is also hoping to use his athleticism this season to help the Bears out on special teams. In the first three games of the season, he has returned six kick-offs for an average of 24.7 yards per carry.

An Edmonton native, Coppens grew up watching U of A football and is comfortable knowing that he has friends and family in the seats at home games.

"I like the attention," he says. "It's pretty comforting having people in the stands no matter what, cheering for you."

So far, it seems that the Golden Bears coaching staff has been successful in transitioning him from a high-school athlete into a university football player.

"They're really good at explaining what to do," Coppens says. "As a new guy coming in, [Friesen] has been really helpful."

When it comes to fellow players, Coppens names veteran defensive back Scott Stevenson, who is in his last year of CIS eligibility, as a huge influence on the field.

"[Stevenson] is really good at helping you out. He knows the game really well," he says. "If I have any questions, I go to him."

Encouragement from fellow teammates extends off the field to other aspects of Coppens' first-year university student life as well, he says.

"I'm not necessarily in a lot of their classes, but they give you pointers. If they catch you hanging around SUB too much, they'll tell you to go study."

With the outcome of this season looking as cloudy as ever, the Bears can at least feel confident in the fact that Coppens has the potential to be an important team leader, even in the near future.

"As he develops into a more mature football player, he'll become a leader," Friesen says. "His skill level out on the field is of leadership value to us right now."