Leah helps Pandas cope with Bisons to land CanWest gold

First-year centre's breakout with three-point night against Manitoba highlights dominating weekend on the ice for Alberta

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Sports Writer

For the ninth-consecutive time, the Panda hockey team had reason to celebrate when the final horn sounded on the Canada West Final. With a pair of shutouts of the Manitoba Bisons, Alberta adds yet another conference banner to the rafters of Clare Drake Arena.

Friday night saw a dominant Pandas squad that contains Manitoba 5-0, resulting in a 4-0 win, but the Bisons were able to make a better show of it on Saturday. The score was still comfortable, 24-12, but held Alberta to only two goals in a 3-0 loss. Friday night saw conference all-star Holly Teeter add another 60 minutes to her shutout streak—which is up to 234:00—while five-year Dana Winge was between the pipes on Saturday for her first playoff action.

"Maybe we didn't finish this weekend—we didn't generate a lot of offensive opportunities—but at least [Sunday's] game was a little more back and forth," said Bisons head coach Jon Bemmel, who was named Canada West Coach of the Year. "We have to generate more scoring chances than we did, Alberta doesn't give you a lot of chances.

While veterans Lindsey McAlpine and Tori Boettli—the country's top-two scorers—were held to zero on the weekend, combining for only three points and one goal, the sweep of the Bisons reached a dominating weekend for first-year centre Leah Copeland, who put up a pair of goals and an assist in Friday's Alberta victory.

Among those first-year players who proved their value is product of Calgary centre leds Copeland, who contributed to Friday's final score against the Bisons with two of her own goals and one assist. Copeland's emergence is important for veteran-led Alberta squad that loses McAlpine, Tarryn Berry and team captain Kaye London after this year.

"We're going to take a blow," Copeland said. "We'll be able to fill some of those roles though not to the extent of their experience, but we have a lot of young players coming up." While Copeland stood out for Alberta, it was Manitoba goaltender Stacy Corfield—who made 55 stops over the weekend—who stood out on her head for Manitoba. While Corfield was proud of the effort her team put forth, she was disappointed they didn't adjust sooner to the flow of the game.

"The officiating was little different than what we've been used to," Corfield said. "They were letting a lot go, but when we picked up on the fact that they weren't calling as much, we were able to pick it up a little bit and turned using it to our advantage." While the Bisons fell this weekend, they will join the Pandas as both teams head to Ottawa in two weeks for the CE Championships.

MAD SCRAMBLE IN FRONT: Lindsey McAlpine fights for the puck in front of Manitoba goalie Stacy Corfield during Saturday's 2-0 Alberta victory.

Trio of blueliners pick up defensive intensity for puck Pandas in playoffs

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Even when the Panda hockey squad's third-year Canada West Champion backstop has guaranteed the Pandas to win a goal since 9 February, when they beat U of C 7-4. When the goalie has been Holly Teeter, Danielle Isles or Dana Winge, the Pandas defensive corps has worked well and completely shut down the opposition.

"Our defensive unit has been improving the entire year, and they're peaking right now," Pandas head coach Howie Draper explained. "I think they're doing great, and that's really important for us heading into Nationals." There are three defencemen who form a solid core on the Alberta blue line, and each bring a unique element to the team. Among Donahue is a gifted veteran that the Pandas coaching staff thinks he has the ability to be the best defenceman in CIS. Travis McNell is a hard-working bundle of aggression and Rayanne Reeve is the weak spot, making her the most effective, while sticking to defenceman coach Jack Donahue's back-end philosophy.

"Make the quick, tap to tape and keep things simple," Donahue said.

"The simplicity keeps it consistent," said McAlpine. "Against Manitoba, McNell was all over the ice, blocking shots, playing physical and directing traffic. Her five-hour shutout was a welcome addition to Clare Drake as she kept her streaky and responsible. "We already had her best game of the year (Friday night)," Donahue said. "Her game is simple and hard. She's a great team player and a great communicator.

"She plays a huge role on the team," Reeve added of McNell. "She is one of our most skilled players, so she needs to believe in her ability."

"I think she has a huge impact in any game she plays in, and she has really stepped her game to the next level." Heading into Nationals, the Pandas are in top form and are among the favourites as they compete as champions and take their third title in eight years. With Donahue, Reeve, and McNell watching the back-end, Alberta is proving that good things do come in threes.

REARGUARD

Alanna Donahue
A four-year from Grand Cache, Alberta. Donahue has two goals, 14 assists and two goals.

Rayanne Reeve
A former of Calgary, Reeve is a first-team Canada West all-star this season.

Trisha McNell
The third-year Edmonton native has one goal and three assists, but is plus-eight for the season.

CLEAR THE CREASE LIKE A SNOWFLOW: Rayanne Reeve (18) has been a big part of a Pandas defence that hasn't allowed a goal in almost a month.