Pandas soccer team have their eyes on national prize

**SEASON PREVIEW**

**Cameron Lewis**  
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**Overview:** The Pandas have been consistent in Canada West soccer over the past five seasons. Over that span, the Pandas have made it to the finals of the Canada West play-offs three times, winning twice. Their most dominant season came last year, as the team lost only one game all season en route to their second Canada West championship in three years. Despite success in their conference and multiple appearances at nationals, the Pandas are still looking for the U of A’s first CIS National Championship since 2005.

**Key players:** Julia Ignacio is entering her fifth and final season with the Pandas and will need to have an other incredible season to give her team a shot at championship glory. Ignacio dominated the league last year, finishing atop the league in both goals and assists. As a result of her amazing season, Ignacio was awarded Canadian Women Player of the Year, Student Athlete of the Year and was named a Canada West First Team all-star.

**Last season:** The Pandas only lost three games last season. One of them was a regular season game against Trinity Western University, who went on to win nationals for the second year in a row. The other was against Montreal in the semi-finals of the CIS championships tournament that ultimately ended the team’s championship dreams. The Pandas were dominant in conference play last season, going 9-1-2, good for second place behind Victoria in the Canada West standings. The Pandas rapped through the playoffs, defeating Fraser Valley, UBC and Trinity Western on their way to being crowned Canada West champions.

**This season:** Just like the Golden Bears, the Pandas are facing a new angle of conference play. All games will be played between teams in the same division, so the Pandas won’t see any teams from the Pacific division until the playoffs. As a result, the Pandas have a fairly weak regular season schedule, as the teams from B.C. provide the stiffest competition.

While this will make it easier for the Pandas to finish first in their division, it could provide a disadvantage as they won’t be able to get an eye on their toughest competition. With the change in scheduling, the Pandas have a very easy road to the playoffs. The key for them will be to remain healthy and well rested throughout the season in order to prepare for powerhouse Trinity Western and UBC in the playoffs. The Pandas will play MacEwan University in a regular season for the first time in Canada West history this season, as the Griffins are playing their inaugural CIS season this year. The Pandas and Griffins will square off in the battle of Edmonton for the first time ever to finish the regular season on Oct. 18 and 19.

**Prediction:** The Pandas will get over the hump in Ignacio’s final season and win their first CIS championship since 2001.

Bears soccer looks to bounce back after disappointing season

**SEASON PREVIEW**

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**Overview:** Despite their disappointing finish last season, the Golden Bears soccer team have been a force to be reckoned with in Canada West over the past decade. The Bears have finished with a winning record in each of the past six seasons, including a first place finish and Canada West championship in 2011. Although they’ve seen a amount of success in their conference, the Bears haven’t been able to win a CIS National Championship since their home win in 2006.

**Key players:** For the Bears to be successful, Marcus Johnstone has to come up with another strong season. The fifth-year starter was awarded rookie of the year in 2011 and has been named a CIS all-star three times in his career. Last season, he led the Bears with five goals and seven points and new sits tied for most goals in Bears club history.

**Last season:** The Bears had a solid season in 2013, finishing second in Prairie Division with a 7-4-2 record. Their first round playoff game against Fraser Valley resulted in disappointment, as the Bears were immediately knocked out of the single game elimination tournament with a 1-0 loss. The Bears were hoping for a much better result in the playoffs after coming up last one win shy of a Conference Championship in 2012. The Bears finished on top of the Prairie Division in 2012 with a 9-2-4 record. Being the host team, the Bears were heavily favoured to win the Canada West Championship Tournament. They kicked off their playoff run with an easy 3-1 win over Trinity Western University, booking them a ticket to the finals against UBC.

A heartbreaking 2-1 loss resulted in the Thunderbirds hoisting the Canada West Championship trophy on the U of A’s home soil.

**This season:** As a result of changes in Canada West’s schedule policy, the Bears will only play teams in their own division this year. This change will likely be positive for the Bears, as they struggled against opponents from the Pacific division last year. Canada West is expanding to 14 teams this year, as Thompson Rivers and UBC Okanagan will make their debuts in the Pacific division and MacEwan University will join the Bears in the Prairie division. In order for the Bears to finish on top of the Prairie division and earn a bye in the first round of the playoffs, they’ll have to take advantage of the weaker teams in the division. The Bears closed out their season last year losing their final three games, including two losses to a non-playoff team in Mount Royal. With two other tough teams in Saskatchewan and Calgary vying top spot in the division, the Bears can’t afford to give away wins to weaker opponents.

**Prediction:** The Bears finish on top of the Prairie division, but come up short to UBC yet again in the playoffs.