The Athletics Crystal Ball

The varsity athletics season is finally upon us and the 25 University of Alberta Golden Bears and Pandas teams are looking forward to a season full of triumphant victories and fast-paced action. After hours of research, number crunching, and head-to-head debate, local sports experts Evan Daum and Matt Hirji outline this season's most intriguing storylines and predict where 10 varsity teams will find themselves at the end of the year.

Pandas Hockey
Projected regular season finishes: 2nd How far will they get: Nationals

After winning the national title last year with a 2-0 victory over the women's hockey juggernaut that is McGill, it's safe to say 2009-10 was a special year for the Pandas. They've lost some key players, and coupled with Manitoba and Saskatchewan looking very good, this season is shaping up to be one of the most competitive out west in years. The Pandas will have an all-new offensive team again, but with a new starting goalie and some key players missing from a year ago, don't expect the Pandas to dominate the conference like in years past.

Bears Hockey
Projected regular season finishes: 1st How far will they get: Nationals

The Bears were once again the cream of the crop in the Canada West last season, but came up just short of their 14th national championship with a crushing OT loss at the hands of Saint Mary's. With a lot of new faces, it's a bit of a question mark just how the Bears will stack up against the rest of the conference. Calgary, Manitoba and Saskatchewan all look strong again this season, but the Bears have enough veteran leadership and key players returning that they'll be very good this year.

Pandas Volleyball
Projected regular season finishes: 3rd How far will they get: West Final Four

They finished sixth last year in Canada West during the regular season, which is lower than usual for the perennial powers, but don't expect a repeat of that sixth-place finish this season. With only one fifth-year player last season, the Pandas were an extremely young team and should only get better over the coming years. That upper core through the standings should start this year in the most dominant volleyball conference in the country.

Bears Volleyball
Projected regular season finishes: 1st How far will they get: West Finals

Much like the Pandas, the Bears were a relatively young team in 2009-10, and should only get better this year. They were hardly slouches last year, finishing first in the conference and would've been in the national championship final a year ago if it weren't for a very un-luckiest loss against Calgary in the national semifinal. Terry Danyliw has strong veteran returning this season and along with his men's team ready to roll. The Bears should come out with a new sense of focus this year. Expect big things from this powerhouse.

Bears Football
Projected regular season finishes: 3rd How far will they get: Conference final

The Bears are 2-0 and while worthwhile this year would be rated similar to last year as far as where the Greens and Gold would finish during the regular season, that won't be the case. The Golden Bears have proven they can be successful running or passing the ball. We see a third place finish in this season future, and a surprise win come playoff time. There will be some growing pains, but thanks to a true playmaker in Julian Marianell behind centre, the Bears look much improved.

Pandas Field Hockey
Projected regular season finishes: 3rd How far will they get: Nationals

Going on their third coach in as many years, the Panda Field Hockey will be back-up to repeat last year's performance at nationals where, in many people's eyes, they claimed second place. Stephanie Skadla, the second mommy head coach, is taking the clipboard for a team that has relied upon the veteran leadership of its players in recent years. However, following the graduation of forward Buzzy Hughes, the team will be looking for some younger players to make an impact this season.

Bears Basketball
Projected regular season finishes: 3rd How far will they get: West Final Four

The Count Bears are looking rejuvenated this year. After a challenging season last year in the wake of the retirement of 25-year head coach Don Hurwood, the Bears learning curve with new head coach Greg Friesen seems to have flattened out. With a career floor commuter as the new head coach who can relate to the young Count Cubs, the action inside the Main Gym this season should be much better then in years past. Reiniboth, the return of fifth-year guard CG Morrison and the notable improvement of last year's rookie class should catapult the team to an appearance at this year's nationals.

Pandas Basketball
Projected regular season finishes: 1st How far will they get: Nationals

With their sneakers laced up tight, this year's incarnation of the Pandas basketball team is looking to go one better. Last year, the Count Pandas had their hopes of CIS National glory dashed by the 1B St. Hildykes. But this season promises to be a successful one, as the players who saw out last year with injuries make a return to the court. Pandas head coach Scott Edwards has proven year in and year out that he is capable of putting his players in the right position to win and this year should be no different. A slew of returning players, including Marissa Hayter — last year's second-team CIS all-star — will bring the Pandas the experience and familiarity needed to succeed in varsity basketball.

Bears Soccer
Projected regular season finishes: 1st How far will they get: National Finals

After a heartbreaking overtime loss last season in the CIS West Final, the Foot Bears are looking motivated to take a big step in the National Championship this year. The newly formed professional soccer team FC Edmonton has done wonders for the university team. Drawing on the experience of new recruits who have played in other high-calibre leagues in North America, the Bears junior team looks poised to have a breakthrough season this year. The additions of Sam Lang and Morgan Johnston, both with extensive experience with the Pacific Development League and FC Edmonton will shore up head coach Ken Vodviry's team ability to defend while maintaining an aggressive offensive counter-attack.

Pandas Soccer
Projected regular season finishes: 2nd How far will they get: West Final Four

Expectations will be high when the Pandas step on the pitch at least half the season, but the Foot Pandas will be challenged every step of the way. After an impressive showing last weekend against the University of Saskatchewan, the Foot Pandas should be able to hold their own against a strong contingent of CIS West opponents. In a division where only five points separate the top four, the opportunity to vie for a spot at playing in the National Championship, the Pandas will have to rely upon the veteran leadership and the best and the boldest to make it to nationals.