Ice Pandas' loss at national final is a win for rest of Canada

Alberta's fourth-place finish this year heralds the start of a new era of parity and challenge in women's university hockey in Canada

Losing the bronze-medal game at nationals last weekend was the least of the Pandas' worries. The thing that's happened to the Pandas hockey program since the 2000-01 season but was also the best thing to happen to women's university hockey in Canada since it was made an official CIS sport in 1997.

For years, the other teams in the league have been trying to catch up to the Alberta juggernaut, and this season, it finally happened. Though there have been rumblings of parity for the last few seasons, this is the first concrete evidence that it has actually arrived. The Pandas' fourth-place finish in Ottawa marks the beginning of a new era in women's hockey—one where, hopefully, you wouldn't be able to pencil in the CIS champions before the season even begins.

The Pandas have dominated the league almost since its inception. They have won the Canada West banner ten out of the past eleven years—the 2000-01 season, when they lost to Regina in the conference final, is the one exception. Their record at nationals is even more impressive: Alberta has made it to all but one CIS championship—2000-01 was the year they didn't qualify—since the inaugural 1997 tournament and have won either gold or silver at every one of those nine finals. They held on to championships banners, which is two more than all of the other past winners combined. That's not even enough proof of the stranglehold the team has had on success. Alberta also went on a 103-game winning streak that lasted from 17 February 2001 to 13 March 2007, when they lost in the national final to the Wilfred Laurier Golden Hawks. Add exhibition games, and that number jumps to 122. They also won seven years without a home loss, a streak that ended this October. Before this season, the Pandas won something .511 (144-78) in regular-season play.

This year, after going on an impressive 21-0, the Pandas lost to the Laurier unit, and then to Manitoba in the bronze-medal game. Laurier went on to lose in the final to the McGill Marauders, while the Pandas became Alberta's biggest rivals, but for the past few years, the Pandas have been able to keep them down. The biggest difference in the league this year wasn't changes in the Pandas situation—through this year's incomparable, full as it was of rookies, wasn't the best they've ever been. What's happened is that all the other teams have gotten much, much better, and for that, they have Alberta to thank. That the competition was so close at this year's national championship is, in part, because of the Pandas' supremacy in the early days of the league.

The Pandas were as dominant as they were because success breeds success. They had the clout to recruit the best and cultivate that talent in a winning atmosphere. Alberta attracted the best athletes year after year, and mentioned these recruits to the players' parents' names. In the mid-90s, women's hockey was just beginning to come into its own. When it became a full-fledged sport, it was necessary to have a competitive opportunity to seriously pursue their passion at school. School had been semi-prof opportunities like the Minnesota Golden Gophers or Calgary Oval X-Treme available for quite a while, and there had also always been the chance to play at a lower level in ladies' hock or on a university intramural team. But CIS acceptance means that female hockey players could aim Professional if they were interested in training and for the team.

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The Pandas' success brought publicity to the sport and helped inspire more young athletes to continue playing hockey at a high level. The more women played, the bigger the talent pool became, and the more good athletes that all of the CIS teams had to choose from when recruiting.

The way you improve is by playing against the best, so once those athletes were in the league, they got better through exposure to the top teams—Laurier, McGill and, of course, the Pandas.

This isn't to say that the Pandas will all of a sudden stop being one of the teams to beat, either nationally or on a conference level. They're well-coached, and can boast some of the best players in the league, like Becca Varga, Alanora Cannon, Rachael Davee, Jen Newton, and Alanna Doucette.

Instead, it's just going to make them stronger. As their competition improves, the Pandas will have to continually step up their own game. This will mean more legitimacy for women's hockey. Spectators know that the Greens and Gold were almost guaranteed to win against their conference opponents and thus that victory would probably be largely ignored. That's no longer the case, and hopefully Canadian hockey fans will come to recognize that CIS women's hockey teams are, in relation to their competitors, of as high a quality as the men's.

Of course, there's parity, and there's parity. The Pandas are still going to have proven like their 7:1 mauling of Saskatchewan or their 9-2 win over Saskatchewan earlier this year. But those exist in any league—just look at the Bears' two five-goal wins against Saskatchewan last weekend. But what won't happen again—for anyone—is another 100-plus winning streak or six-year dynasty.

And that's a good thing.