New coach brings new talent to track team

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The 2013 season represents a period of change for track and field at the University of Alberta. Led by freshman coach Wes Moerman and a handful of new assistant coaches, the team is in the midst of a transitional year that has seen an abundance of talent come and go. Moerman replaced last year’s head coach Georgette Buse over the summer as part of U of A Athletics’ new Alberta Model.

“Our focus for Canada West this year is just to do a small amount of events and do them really well. That’s going to set us up for the sustained success we are looking for with both the athletes and the coaching staff,” Moerman explained.

“I don’t really know where we are going to stack up in the conference, and I don’t really pay attention to that. Our focus is just to be excellent in the day-to-day things and let the big shine take care of itself.”

While expectations may be reasonably modest for the Pandas and Bears teams, the U of A hosting nationals this season and the next could provide a motivational boost.

As the best school, the U of A has been working towards improving and building upon last year’s CIS championship results. Where the Pandas placed seventh and the Bears placed 13th. This year’s track and field season began a few weeks ago with the Golden Bear Open at the U of A, and Moerman expressed confidence in his team’s ability to compete in sprinting and field events.

“Our sprinting group is strong. We have two excellent runners in first-year Katrina Martin and second-year Leah Wallace; both are within the top eight in the country right now,” Moerman said.

“In the men’s 60-metre we have Ben Williams, who is top six in the country. Our sprinting group this year is young — most are first and second-year athletes — so the future is promising in some of the premier events.”

Leading the way in the field events is defending CunWest male field athlete of the year Stephan McPhae. McPhae won gold in the long jump last season at the CunWest championships and at nationals, and is poised to defend his title this year at home. He headlines an impressive core of field athletes that also includes our defending CIS long jump champion.”

The new coach is also a strength,” Moerman said. “We’ve made a number of technical improvements in the field events and hope for self-sustained success.”

But without a doubt, the team’s most glaring weakness is a shallow distance core, which took a big hit in the wake of the recent personnel changes.

Prior to the start of the cross-country season last fall, a number of the U of A’s top distance athletes decided to part ways with the varsity team in order to continue to run with former Bears and Pandas distance coach Glen Playfair, who was let go during the massive coaching changes in the offseason.

Moerman didn’t allow for his athletes to train and run with Playfair, which wasn’t the case when Reid was coaching the team.

“I had been running with (Playfair) for six years. When it became clear I couldn’t run with my old coach and still be a part of the Bears, I made the decision to leave the team,” former Bears track captain Graeme Law explained.

Law was entering his final year of eligibility, after being the Bears’ top runner in the men’s 1,500 and 3,000-metre events at the Canada West Championships last season.

Law was not alone in his decision to leave the university team in order to run with Playfair, who is the head coach of the Edmonton Thunder track and field club. Other Bears who left the team for the same reason included David Felt, Curtis Asencio and former captain Donovan Hacking.

“There were four of us that decided to leave. Distance wasn’t a huge aspect of the team to begin with, but all of the faster people left,” Law explained.

Five members of the Pandas made the same decision to leave the team, four of whom continue to train with Playfair as members of Edmonton Thunder. Former U of A athletes Hayley Eugen, Alana Soderberg, Nicole Soderberg and Claire McMas ter all left the team after being the top female distance runners for the Pandas in recent years.

“It was a shock to hear that (Play fair) wasn’t going to continue as the U of A distance coach this year. As soon as I heard the news, I knew that I would no longer train as a Panda. (Playfair) was a great coach — it just wouldn’t be the same,” former distance runner Amy McLean explained.

“Suddenly, all the core distance runners still continue to train with him.”

In an interesting turn of events, many of these athletes competed against their former teammates in the recent Golden Bear Open. Donovan Hacking placed third in the men’s 800-metre run, while Ni cole Soderberg placed second in the 1,000-metre run and third in the 3,000-metre race.

Despite losing almost all of the top-end talent for long distance track events this season, the Bears’ roster still features a number of up-and-coming distance runners who will try to fill the gap left by the loss of nine prominent athletes.

The U of A has two more events before the CunWest Championships for these runners to continue to mature. This weekend, they’ll travel to Winnipeg, while their top athletes will also head to Seattle to compete in the University of Washington Friday Classic against NCAA schools.

Moerman admitted the team lacked depth in the distance events, but expressed confidence that the program was progressing towards a successful rebuild.

“Our distance runners have all made progress. From a straight performance level, the distance events are remarkably tough this year,” Moerman said. “We are not really looking to have a huge impact in the CIS in distance just yet — we are building towards that.”