

Golden Bears linebacker to return to International Bowl for second year

FOOTBALL PROFILE

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Despite experiencing a disappointing season on the field in CIS play, third-year Golden Bears linebacker Connor Ralph is headed back to Austin, Texas for the International Bowl.

It will be Ralph's second year representing World Team in their annual game against Team USA held by the International Federation of American Football on Feb. 5. The game sees a group of top university-level football players chosen from various countries such as Canada, Japan, Mexico, American Samoa and in different parts of Europe.

They'll square off against a team of top American college football players. Despite the relative low stakes of the game, Ralph's experience with the game last year showed him that it's more competitive than other similar types of games.

"It's real competitive — it's not like your typical all-star game," Ralph said. "Everyone wants to win, and in the last two international competitions, Canada has beat the US twice, so they're going to be coming with everything they've got, so hopefully we can make it a third."

Ralph was one of several Canada

West players chosen to the U-19 team after racking up 79.5 total tackles in two seasons with the Bears. As a part of the International Bowl last season, Ralph was on the first World Team to ever defeat Team USA at the event.

“There’s a lot of talent (in Canada) that almost goes under-recognized because the States get all the media attention when it comes to football. After I play those American kids, I think there’s a lot of Canadians who aren’t far off from being at that level.”

CONNOR RALPH
GOLDEN BEARS LINEBACKER

With the lack of international competition for the United States in football and their strong record at this event, there's extra motivation for Ralph and the rest of his team to defeat the American squad to prove the strength of international competition compared to American university football players.

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Comparing the American and Canadian athletes that will be playing each other in Austin, for the most part Ralph sees the competition being even.

He explained that no matter the background of each player on World Team, they all want to prove their home country can play football at as high of a calibre as anywhere else.

"There's the freaks who are really athletic down (in the United States) moreso, like the Cam Newtons and stuff like that," Ralph explained. "Other than that, I think there's regular athletes, and once they're in the program, the training makes them better. But I honestly don't think there's a ton of difference between the top athletes here and the athletes down there."

"As an athlete you want to be the best and you're thinking about that when you're there. They're going to Alabama or Texas and you just want to prove that you could have been in their shoes too, and able to go to those schools if you lived down there."

Bears hope to maintain undefeated record nearing playoffs in Manitoba this weekend

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While modesty is a great policy, it can't be denied that the statistics heading into the weekend heavily favour the undefeated Bears. The team has only dropped eight sets all year, which is 18 less than the Bisons, who boast the second-lowest mark in the conference.

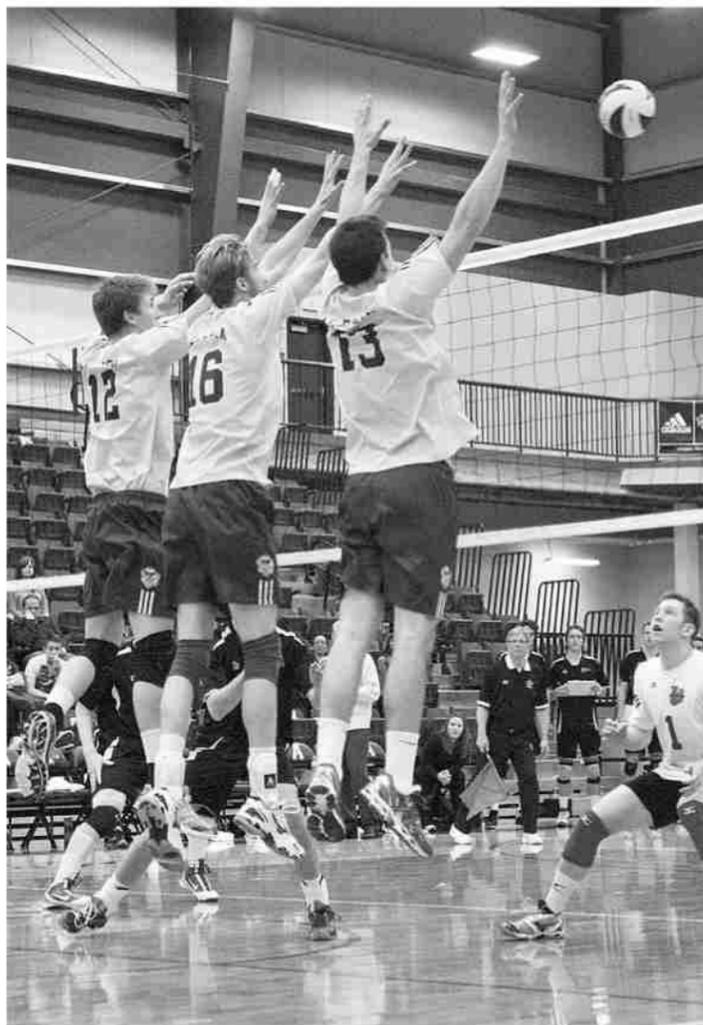
"(Manitoba) is a really good team and playing in their gym is going to be tough," Olmstead said. "We were in Brandon a week ago, which was one of our harder trips this season, and we expect the same deal next weekend."

While stingy defence has been a source of pride for the Bears, the team's ability to score points has truly stood out this season. The Bears lead the CIS in a number of offensive statistics, with 13.82 kills per set and 13.02 assists per set. That offensive success can largely be attributed to Olmstead's stellar play, who sits alongside senior right side Mitch Irvine in the top six in the CIS in a number of individual offensive statistics.

"(Irvine) is the powerhouse of the team. He's a really strong hitter and is good at getting by the block," Bears sophomore Kevin Proudfoot said. "(Olmstead) is our man in the clutch. He hits the ball with pace but also has a variety of shots to get through pretty much whatever the defence throws at him."

Manitoba enters the weekend having won four straight matches to secure a playoff berth, and they now find themselves in a three-way tie for third in Canada West at 12-6. The Bison's defence ranks amongst the top in the nation, and their 213 blocks and 799 digs respectively rank as the second and third best marks in all of CIS.

"Manitoba is always a hard gym to play in. Their fans are loud and



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they are always a feisty team, so we are just going to have to do the same things we have been doing all year. If we can do that, I think we will be fine," Bears left side Ryley Barnes said.

This weekend's action marks the first time the two teams will meet since the Bisons eliminated the Bears in the semi-finals of last year's

Canada West playoffs. Manitoba is in the thick of a playoff positioning race to secure a home playoff quarterfinal, and would no doubt love the opportunity to hand Alberta their first loss. Not only will the Bears' perfect season be on the line, but the team will also be playing for a measure of redemption this weekend against the Bisons.

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