

sports

Nationals tipping off at VIU, at long last

VIU hosting Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association women's b-ball championships March 25-27

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NEWS BULLETIN

Nothing's going to stop nationals from happening this time.

After a two-year wait, Vancouver Island University's women's basketball team finally gets to host the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association championships this coming weekend, March 25-27, at the VIU gym.

It's been a long, strange path to nationals for the Mariners women. They had been anticipating hosting the CCAA championships in March 2020, but that event was cancelled at the last possible moment due to COVID-19. Then the 2020-21 season got cancelled, too, and so it's taken until now for the Mariners to get what's rightfully theirs – a chance to host and, maybe, a chance to win.

"It's a blessing and we're going to do our best to take full advantage of it," said Tony Bryce, the team's coach.

The VIU women were put together to be a championship-calibre squad, and showed it during the regular season, as the team went undefeated in PacWest play. The M's women were upset in the provincial final by a hot-shooting Okanagan Coyotes team, but their host berth keeps the playoffs going.

Kiara Johnston, VIU forward, said the team is close to where it needs to be for the



VIU Mariners player C.J. Buckley puts up a jump shot during a PacWest regular-season game last month at the Vancouver Island University gym. (News Bulletin file photo)

start of nationals.

"We're focusing on the little mental things that we need to do to get there," she said. "I think honestly, that loss helped us with that by forcing us not to focus so much on the bigger picture, but realize that we're here in this moment, and be present and learn from it and do what you can."

VIU will face the top-ranked Lakeland Rustlers on Friday, March 25, to try to advance to the semifinals.

It's a challenging opponent, but the M's think they match up and will try to find an advantage with their physicality and depth. Bryce said the opponent is similar to VIU in a lot of ways, and said his team can be successful if players share the basketball and stay accountable at both ends of the floor.

VIU is led by point guard Amber Lease, the PacWest Player of the Year, and all-star forward Shayce Johnston, while Lakeland is led by

star guard Tori Dugan and high-scoring forward Bilge Topaloglu.

The Mariners have veterans who have played in big games at national championship tournaments in the past, but they also know the atmosphere will be something different and something special when they take the court in their home gym.

"For a lot of us, we've been waiting for this for a long time," said Lease, a graduating player. "I think there's

going to be so many emotions, so many feelings. We're going to be excited, we're going to be nervous, some of us might even be a little sad because it's going to mean that it's coming closer to the end. But in the big scheme of things, I think what's really going to keep us zoned in is no matter what any other person is feeling on our team, there's somebody else that's feeling that too."

Kiara Johnston, also a graduating player, said "it's a dream come true" for nationals to actually be happening, and Bryce said it feels like closure not only for VIU's veterans, but maybe even for some of the alumni who never got their chance.

"It just means a lot to be able to play at home in a gym that we've worked so hard in for so long, and to be able to hopefully achieve the biggest goal that we've ever had on this floor," said Lease.

GAME ON ... CCAA nationals start Friday, March 25, at the Vancouver Island University gym, with the first game at 1 p.m. that day. VIU and Lakeland will meet in Friday's feature game at 6 p.m. The national championship final will be Sunday, March 27, at 7:30 p.m. For more information, visit <http://ccaa.ca>. For tickets, visit www.eventbrite.ca and search for CCAA women's basketball nationals 2022.

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Four Nanaimo Clippers players battle for a puck along the boards during Sunday's game against the Coquitlam Express at Frank Crane Arena. (Greg Sakaki/News Bulletin)

Clippers near end of regular season

No matter how the regular-season finale goes, the Nanaimo Clippers have put themselves in good position for playoffs.

The Clippers, with a win and a loss this past weekend, are third in the BCHL's Coastal Division and play the Victoria Grizzlies on Friday, March 25, at 7 p.m. at Frank Crane Arena in the regular-season finale.

Look for more on the BCHL post-season in the next issue of the News Bulletin.

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