



## **Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips February 21, 2025**

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

- PAGE 03: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski paces '4 Nations' scorers despite OT loss to Canada
- PAGE 05: Columbus Dispatch: 4 Nations Face-Off: Team USA captain Mike Erzuzione honors Blue Jackets' Johnny Gaudreau
- PAGE 06: Columbus Dispatch: Too cold for ice: Ohio Stadium begins transformation for NHL Stadium Series game
- PAGE 07: Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets star Zach Werenski shining in 4 Nations Face-Off: 3 things to know
- PAGE 09: The Athletic: Blue Jackets returning to health after break, and forward help could be on the way
- PAGE 11: BlueJackets.com: Blue Jackets getting healthy as Saturday's return nears
- PAGE 13: BlueJackets.com: Werenski leads all scorers at 4 Nations Face-Off
- PAGE 15: The Hockey News: Zach Werenski Is In For A Huge Test Tonight
- PAGE 16: The Hockey News: Looking Ahead As The Blue Jackets Return to Action Saturday Against The Blackhawks
- PAGE 17: The Hockey Writers: Blue Jackets React to 4-Nations & Zach Werenski's Performance

### **Cleveland Monsters/Prospects**

#### **NHL/ Websites**

- PAGE 19: The Athletic: How Connor McDavid, Jordan Binnington lifted Canada to 4 Nations title over U.S.: Takeaways
- PAGE 23: The Athletic: Where could the U.S. have the edge over Canada in the 4 Nations final?
- PAGE 25: The Athletic: The biggest hockey game in ages, plus early March Madness intrigue
- PAGE 27: The Athletic: What we know about the recent burglaries at the homes of NFL, NBA and NHL athletes
- PAGE 31: The Athletic: Everything you need to know about 4 Nations Face-Off final as U.S.-Canada battle looms
- PAGE 34: The Athletic: Five reasons Team Canada will definitely beat Team USA (and vice versa)
- PAGE 38: The Athletic: What can the NHL learn from its 4 Nations rule experiments?
- PAGE 42: The Athletic: Why the most skilled hockey players in the world will play a conservative 4 Nations final
- PAGE 45: The Athletic: 16 stats 4 Nations edition: Does Team Canada need more offense?
- PAGE 51: The Athletic: How to watch 4 Nations Face-Off Final: U.S. takes on Canada in emotionally-charged rematch
- PAGE 52: The Athletic: Supercharged U.S.-Canada finale to have anthem animosity, maybe a fight, but mainly heart
- PAGE 54: ESPN: Grades, top players from Canada's epic OT win over the U.S.
- PAGE 57: ESPN: Who makes Team USA at the 2026 Olympics? Locks, maybes, rising stars
- PAGE 63: Sportsnet.ca: Team Canada delivers win for their country: 'That's the Canadian way'

PAGE 65: Sportsnet.ca: Canada Player Ratings: Best players meet moment  
PAGE 67: Sportsnet.ca: U.S. Player Ratings: Slavin's defensive brilliance on display  
PAGE 70: Sportsnet.ca: From the boardroom to the ice: Inside the mad scramble that brought 4 Nations to life

## **Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski paces '4 Nations' scorers despite OT loss to Canada**

**By Brian Hedger – February 21, 2025**

Zach Werenski is coming home from the 4 Nations Face-Off as the tournament's leading scorer, but the Blue Jackets star didn't get what he wanted most.

Werenski and the United States lost to Canada, 3-2, in overtime Thursday night at TD Garden in Boston on Connor McDavid's goal 8:18 into OT. Werenski's assist on a go-ahead goal scored by his defensive partner, Jake Sanderson, in the second period was his sixth assist and sixth point in four games, pushing him past Canadian captain Sidney Crosby into the tournament's top spot for points.

Werenski also made history by joining former Canadian legends Bobby Orr and Denis Potvin as the only defensemen in league history to lead an NHL international tournament in scoring. Orr and Potvin accomplished the feat as teammates for Canada in the 1976 Canada Cup, each finishing tied with Soviet forward Victor Zhulkov to lead all scorers in that tournament with nine points each.

Werenski, according to the NHL, is just the fourth defenseman to start an NHL sanctioned international tournament with at least one point in the first four-plus games, joining Potvin, Sweden's Calle Johansson and Paul Coffey — who did it twice for Canada at the 1984 Canada Cup and 1996 World Cup of Hockey.

Werenski skated 23:07 in the championship tilt, third most for the U.S., and finished with one point on the assist plus four shots on seven attempts. He finished the tournament with a 0-6-6 scoring line and 20:42 average ice time while putting 13 shots on net.

Werenski now rejoins the Blue Jackets for a game Saturday at Nationwide Arena against the Chicago Blackhawks. It's the team's first game since breaking for nearly two weeks due to the 4 Nations Face-Off, which means Werenski didn't get any down time.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said after the Jackets' practice Wednesday that he expects the star defenseman will play against Chicago and may take some practices off to rest his legs for a playoff push. A group of Blue Jackets players planned to watch the 4 Nations title game together, including dual citizens Cole Sillinger, Mathieu Olivier and Sean Kuraly.

### **Johnny Gaudreau's memory evoked with ceremony, late game chants**

Prior to the game, honorary U.S. captain Mike Eruzione met Canadian honorary captain Wayne Gretzky at center ice wearing a U.S. jersey with Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau's No. 13 and name on the back, which the U.S. team has displayed in its locker room and used as a postgame "player of the game" award after wins. Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were killed Aug. 29 after being struck by a vehicle while riding bicycles near their home in Salem County, New Jersey.

Their memories were also honored near the end of regulation with the game knotted at 2-2. Fans of the U.S., and possibly some from Canada, filled the arena with chants of "Johnny ... Hockey!" to elicit a reminder of Gaudreau — who starred at Boston College before his NHL career with the Calgary Flames and Blue Jackets. Matthew Gaudreau also played for Boston College, including an overlap season with his older brother.

### **Mitch Marner, Connor McDavid combine to net OT goal for Canada**

It was a touching moment but wasn't enough to push the U.S. to victory for a second time in the tournament. McDavid won a faceoff against Toronto Maple Leafs star and U.S. captain Auston

Matthews a little more than eight minutes into OT, camped out in the slot and ripped a wrist shot past U.S. goalie Connor Hellebuyck at 8:18 for a signature winning goal to end it.

The pass to McDavid was delivered by Mitch Marner, who sent the puck past Matthews to exploit his NHL teammate's defensive lapse leaving the world's best player wide open between the circles.

In the end, after two days of political bluster spouted by the American side based on incendiary comments issued by a sitting U.S. president who contacted the U.S. team in their locker room via phone Thursday, Canada won a trophy that may never be handed out again in a tournament created by the NHL and NHL Players' Association. They paraded it around the ice after Crosby received it from NHL commissioner Gary Bettman like it was the Stanley Cup, while the Americans sulked in their the locker room.

The rivalry is scheduled to be renewed among NHL talent at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan-Cortina, Italy. As for Werenski, it's time to refocus on the Blue Jackets' season sitting just one point behind the Detroit Red Wings for the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference.

The teams play twice in the next week, including a highly anticipated meeting March 1 in the 2025 Navy Federal Credit Union NHL Stadium Series matchup at Ohio Stadium.

## **Columbus Dispatch / 4 Nations Face-Off: Team USA captain Mike Eruzione honors Blue Jackets' Johnny Gaudreau**

**By Lori Schmidt and Eleanor Kennedy – February 21, 2025**

Before the United States of America and Canada squared off Thursday night in the championship game of the 4 Nations Face-Off hockey tournament, gold medalist Mike Eruzione, honorary captain for Team USA, paid tribute to Johnny Gaudreau.

The captain of the 1980 Olympic team came out to the rink at Boston's TD Garden wearing a sweater adorned with the late Columbus Blue Jackets star's No. 13.

Eruzione helped author the "Miracle on Ice" against the Soviet Union in the semifinals. Thursday, he chose to honor the memory of the Blue Jackets forward who died at the age of 31 when he and his brother Matthew were struck by a car while they were bicycling. Both brothers died at the scene.

The man who collided with the Gaudreaus in August has been charged with reckless vehicular homicide and aggravated manslaughter.

Team USA has honored Gaudreau many times throughout the tournament among the numerous other memorials since Gaudreau's death.

USA Hockey has dedicated a locker stall to display his No. 13 jersey for games and practices during the tournament.

Guy Gaudreau, Johnny and Matthew's father, skated during a U.S. practice session last week as he's done this season in the NHL with the Blue Jackets, Philadelphia Flyers and Calgary Flames.

## **Columbus Dispatch / Too cold for ice: Ohio Stadium begins transformation for NHL Stadium Series game**

**By Nathan Hart – February 21, 2025**

Ohio Stadium has begun its transformation into an NHL arena as it prepares to host its first ever outdoor hockey game.

The Columbus Blue Jackets will take on the Detroit Red Wings in the 2025 Navy Federal Credit Union NHL Stadium Series at Ohio Stadium on March 1.

Crews are hard at work getting the field ready. Wednesday afternoon, workers wearing bright fluorescent vests crisscrossed the football field, carrying materials and driving forklifts. The turf was almost completely covered with plastic plates, the only remaining sign of the field's branding a Big Ten Conference logo that had yet to be covered.

There's no ice rink yet, though. No man-made ice had been made for the game as of Wednesday because of the weather, Ohio State University President Ted Carter said at a press event.

"Believe it or not, it's a little cold here now for us to even turn all the water on, so we need the temperatures to come up just a little bit, but they're going to make ice here starting on Friday," Carter said.

Once it's installed, two NHL Mobile Refrigeration Units can maintain the rink in temperatures of up to 70 degrees, Carter said.

Carter is no stranger to hockey. He first played the sport at age 3, skating on a pond near where he grew up. He went on to become the team captain of the U.S. Naval Academy's team, where he received his undergraduate degree.

### **Is Ohio Stadium winterized?**

Ohio Stadium was recently winterized to accommodate the expanded College Football Playoff's first-round home game. That expansion helped make the upcoming hockey game possible, Ohio State Athletic Director Ross Bjork said at a press event.

"We had to upgrade the stadium. We don't want to host a game, right? We want to be in the top four and have a bye (week) and all those kind of things. But you have to have your stadium ready," he said.

How much are Stadium Series tickets?

The upcoming game may be the first of many hockey matches at The Horseshoe. Ohio State aims to host an outdoor college hockey game — like the one OSU's teams played at Wrigley Field in January — in the future, Bjork said.

Over 80,000 tickets for the upcoming game have been sold, according to Carter. The remaining tickets are available for purchase via Ticketmaster. The lowest-priced tickets remaining are around \$60; club tickets are listed for as much as \$900.

Carter, for his part, had a message for fans on the fence.

"If you're wondering about whether or not to come to this, buy a ticket," the OSU president said. "This is historic. It's going to be an experience you've never, ever seen before. Even if you've never seen a hockey game, come to the Shoe and see it."

## **Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets star Zach Werenski shining in 4 Nations Face-Off: 3 things to know**

**By Brian Hedger – February 21, 2025**

Zach Werenski has already put an impressive stamp on the NHL's history books before he's even finished playing for the United States at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Werenski, 27, leads the tournament with five assists and is tied with Canadian captain Sidney Crosby for the scoring lead at five points each heading into a highly anticipated rematch between the U.S. and Canada in the championship Thursday in Boston.

After downing Canada 3-1 on Saturday at Bell Centre in Montreal, Werenski and the rest of the star packed U.S. roster will try to sweep their biggest rival by taking the tournament's championship Thursday at TD Garden (8 p.m. ET, ESPN, ESPN+).

The first game began with three fights in the game's first nine seconds, so buckle up for whatever happens next. As for Werenski, here are three things to know about his first midseason "best-on-best" experience:

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski climbing ranks among United States defensemen during international tournament play**

Just as he's done all season for the Blue Jackets, Werenski is shining for the U.S. going into its rematch with Canada. After starting the tournament with three assists in a 6-1 victory over Finland, Werenski added assists in the win over Canada and a 2-1 loss to Sweden on Monday in Boston.

### **4 Nations Face-Off final: Date, time, how to watch United States vs. Canada rematch**

His five points, all on assists, didn't just knot him with Crosby atop the tournament's scoring leaders. They also entered his name into historical annals. Werenski's assist Monday tied him with Derian Hatcher for second-most points by an American defenseman in a single NHL international tournament and he's just two points from tying Brian Leetch for the top spot.

Hatcher and Leetch each set those marks while helping the U.S. defeat Canada twice to win the 1996 World Cup of Hockey for the first time. Hatcher had 3-2-5 in six games and Leetch had 0-7-7 in seven games.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski among all-time assist leaders for NHL international tournament**

Werenski's five assists in his first three games at the 4 Nations Face-Off also put him into exclusive NHL territory in terms of assists among all players regardless of position.

According to the NHL, he's just the fifth player to compile that many assists in a single league-hosted international tournament while playing four or fewer games.

With one game left, Werenski trails only Sweden's Peter Forsberg (seven assists at the 1996 World Cup), Canada's Gilbert Perreault (six assists at the 1981 Canada Cup), Sweden's Daniel Alfredsson (six assists at the 2004 World Cup) and Sweden's Calle Johansson (six assists at the 1996 World Cup). Werenski is also the first defenseman to collect five assists in a single NHL international tournament since Finnish defenseman Kimmo Timonen finished with 1-5-6 in six games during the 2004 World Cup of Hockey.

Alexei Kasatonov holds the all-time mark with 10 assists for the former Soviet Union during the 1981 Canada Cup.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski likely securing U.S. roster spot for 2026 Winter Olympics

The 4 Nations Face-Off is the first time NHL players are allowed to play “best-on-best” international games since the league hosted the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

They can also play in the IIHF’s men’s world championships each spring in European locations, but many elite players are busy during that timeframe playing for NHL teams in the Stanley Cup Playoffs. As they’ve shown thus far in the first 4 Nations tournament, it means a lot for players to represent their home countries.

While bragging rights are the main thing on the line in this tournament, the 4 Nations rosters will likely resemble those constructed by the U.S., Canada, Finland and Sweden for the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan-Cortina, Italy. Should that be the case, Werenski’s performance at the 4 Nations tournament should go a long way to securing him an Olympic invite for the U.S. next year.

The NHL has also announced it will co-host the 2028 World Cup of Hockey along with the NHL Players’ Association, which will be the fourth tournament of its kind. Werenski will still be in his prime NHL years for that one at age 30.



## The Athletic / Blue Jackets returning to health after break, and forward help could be on the way

**By Aaron Portzline – February 21, 2025**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Before the Columbus Blue Jackets' final game heading into the 4 Nations Face-Off break, right winger Kirill Marchenko was spotted in and around the dressing room, working with the training staff to find a comfortable and effective face shield to be attached to his helmet.

That was the first sign that Marchenko, who suffered a broken jaw on Feb. 2 in Dallas, was working toward a return that was much sooner than expected.

A bigger sign was revealed on Wednesday when Marchenko — crowned with a helmet more suited to the NFL than the NHL — joined the Blue Jackets as they reconvened for practice in Nationwide Arena after the long in-season break.

Marchenko has been medically cleared to return, as have captain Boone Jenner (shoulder surgery) and veteran defenseman Dante Fabbro (concussion), who also took part in practice.

While all three look to be all systems go for Saturday's return to action against the Chicago Blackhawks, general manager Don Waddell and coach Dean Evason said a decision would be made later this week after they've taken part in three practices.

"We'll watch them and evaluate them and talk to the medical guys," Evason said. "We've got three days. Don't rush. We'll see after that third day how everybody feels and we'll make a decision."

Those three players — two top-six wingers and a top-pairing defenseman — would provide a huge boost to a Blue Jackets club that stumbled into the break on a four-game losing streak (0-3-1), yet remains just one point out of the final wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference.

While most of the staff and players headed off to warmer climes during the break, Waddell continued to grind behind the scenes. Not only did he spend a few days with AHL Cleveland, but he's kept pushing to add an impact forward that could help the Jackets over the next two months.

Waddell has made it clear that he's not interested in trading a first-round pick unless it's for a young, impact forward who has remaining term on his contract or is a restricted free agent when his current contract expires.

A more likely trade is a mid-round pick of a mid-level prospect for an established veteran who is a pending unrestricted free agent.

One name — and it's a familiar one — may have risen to the top of Waddell's list.

Veteran forward Gustav Nyquist, who spent three seasons with the Blue Jackets beginning in 2019-20, is a pending UFA with the Nashville Predators, who have been one of the NHL's biggest disappointments this season after a major offseason investment.

Nyquist, 35, has just 9-11-20 in 53 games with the Predators, but he's one season removed from a career-best 23-52-75 in 81 games. He can play on either side of center, plus he's been a reliable penalty killer and solid second power-play contributor throughout his career.

According to Puckpedia, Nyquist carries a salary-cap hit of \$3.185 million, but that won't be a problem for the Blue Jackets. Nyquist, who was traded to the Minnesota Wild at the 2023 trade deadline, left the Blue Jackets on good terms and has remained close friends with several players.

Waddell's desire to add a forward became more pronounced when center Sean Monahan went down on Jan. 7 with a sprained wrist, an injury that ultimately required surgery. He could return before the end of March, but it's unclear how limited he'd be — on faceoffs, especially — with a surgically repaired wrist.

Further, the Blue Jackets have been frustrated by the lengthy absence of winger Yegor Chinakhov, who has a lower-back injury that seems to tighten whenever he resumes skating. Chinakhov hasn't played since Nov. 27, and he wasn't on the ice Wednesday when the Jackets returned to action.

Chinakhov has seen multiple doctors, Waddell told The Athletic, including a trip to New York City earlier this month. Repeatedly, Chinakhov and the Blue Jackets have been told he doesn't require surgery, but there's no timetable on his return.

One other significant player — veteran defenseman Erik Gudbranson — is likely to resume skating in the near future, and could be ready for a return in mid- to late March.

The Blue Jackets are now barely a week away from playing an outdoor game in Ohio Stadium, facing the Detroit Red Wings at 6 p.m. on March 1 in the NHL's Stadium Series. The NHL season resumes on Friday, and the Blue Jackets and Red Wings are only one point apart in the battle for the final wild-card spot.

Six days after the outdoor game is the NHL trade deadline. After that, the Blue Jackets will have a better idea of what their lineup will look like for the stretch drive. It'll be the franchise's first playoff push since the 2019-20 season when they beat Toronto in the qualifying series and lost to Tampa Bay in the first round.

The schedule sets up pretty well for them, too.

The Blue Jackets don't play another game outside the Eastern Time Zone this season. After a four-game road trip to Florida (Tampa Bay Lightning and Florida Panthers) and New York (New York Rangers and New Jersey Devils), the Blue Jackets play 11 of their final 18 games in Nationwide, where they are 17-6-4 this season.

## [BlueJackets.com/](http://BlueJackets.com/) Blue Jackets getting healthy as Saturday's return nears

By Jeff Svoboda – February 21, 2025

There was plenty of joy at Nationwide Arena on Wednesday, and not just because the Blue Jackets were happy to be together and back on the ice after 10 days apart.

There was the grin of Dante Fabbro, who skated with the team for the first time since suffering an upper-body injury Feb. 2 at Dallas. There was the omnipresent smile of Kirill Marchenko, who was back on the ice after being hit with a stray puck and suffering a broken jaw in that very same game.

But no one was happier than Boone Jenner, who went through his first full practice with the team at 100 percent and appears very close to making his season debut after suffering a shoulder injury that required surgery on the last day of training camp in October.

Well, other than Dean Evason, maybe. The Blue Jackets head coach could have all three at his disposal when the team plays its first game after the 4 Nations Face-Off break Saturday vs. Chicago at Nationwide Arena.

Of course, nothing is yet set in stone.

"Obviously, we'll watch them here and we'll evaluate and then talk to the medical guys, and then ultimately it's the player that makes that decision," Evason said. "We've got three days (of practice), so there's no rush. We'll just see after that third day how everybody feels, and we'll make a decision who gets into our lineup."

But if you ask the three players in question, it sure sounds like the goal is to be in the lineup against the Blackhawks. Here's what each had to say when meeting with the media Wednesday after practice.

### **Boone Jenner**

No offense to Marchenko or Fabbro, but considering Jenner is the team captain and is yet to play this season, no return might be more anticipated than his.

And while Jenner couldn't say for sure if he would be in the lineup Saturday, it sure sounds like he's ready around a month after spending the last month ramping back up to game speed.

"We'll see what the next couple of days bring, but that's my goal," Jenner said. "It's been my goal for a while, to play in that (Feb.) 22nd game right after the break. So we'll see. Keep going with the process and see how the next few days go, but I feel great. I feel like I'm ready to go."

Jenner's reputation proceeds him, but in case you need a reminder, he's the longest-tenured player in CBJ history with 715 games played over 11 seasons, plus the third-most goals (192) and assists (364) in a union blue uniform.

Then there's the leadership he provides with his ability to drag players into the fight, plus his versatility, as Jenner can play center and wing, is a faceoff expert, and is a dependable player in all situations, from power play and penalty kill to critical end-of-game scenarios.

He underwent surgery the day before the season after taking an awkward fall into the boards Oct. 4, with a five- to six-month timeline for his return. Four-and-a-half months later, he appears on the precipice of a return.

"It's huge," he said. "I just wanted to come back as quick as possible."

## **Kirill Marchenko**

It also goes without saying that having Marchenko back would be a boon to the Blue Jackets considering he leads the team with 21 goals, is second with 55 points and also is atop the NHL with a plus-31 rating.

It took the freakiest of weird circumstances to put Marchenko on the shelf, as he was sitting on the bench during the team's game at Dallas when a wayward puck flew out of play and struck him on the jaw, resulting in surgery Feb. 3.

Yet Marchenko was back on the ice over the 4 Nations break skating on his own with a facemask protecting his jaw, and he took to the ice for practice Wednesday wearing the same contraption.

"It's fine," he said of the mask. "I can't skate without the mask right now."

The good news for Marchenko was he didn't have to have his jaw wired shut – one might say it's great news considering how talkative the animated wing often is – and he's been able to eat solid foods over the last few weeks.

That's in stark contrast to Jenner, who had to stick with smoothies for around a month a season ago when he suffered a similar injury.

"I gave him some recipes, but he doesn't need them," Jenner joked Wednesday. "He can get some solid food down. It's awesome to see him back out there with us."

Like Jenner, Marchenko wouldn't commit to being in the lineup Saturday, but it sounds like it's trending that way.

"I feel fine and try to be positive," Marchenko said. "We'll see. I don't know right now. I have two more days to skate, and we will see on Saturday."

## **Dante Fabbro**

Fabbro has become quite an important piece of the team as well, stabilizing the team's top defensive pair after being claimed on waivers from Nashville in November.

He's been out since taking an elbow up high in the first period at Dallas, and he said it took him a few days to feel back to normal. But Fabbro was able to get in some skates over the break and seems ready to get back to action.

"So far, so good," Fabbro said. "I'm excited to be back with the team and practicing and looking forward to our next game here and getting things started off on the right foot."

"I'm healthy now, and I feel great."

Fabbro has fit in perfectly on a pair with Zach Werenski since his arrival, posting four goals, 13 points and a plus-14 rating while skating over 21 minutes a game over his 37 contests with the Blue Jackets.

With Columbus in the thick of the playoff race when things get back under way Saturday, Fabbro is excited to be among the Blue Jackets ready to make a charge toward the postseason.

"You could see obviously today we had a few more bodies out there, and some key players," he said. "For us being out there and being able to skate a few days before this game, I think it's time now to kind of push each other. We're talking about taking our game to the next level and not changing who we are and how we want to play, but just turn it up a notch. We're pushing for a playoff spot here."

"I think everyone's excited, especially myself. I can't emphasize that more, so it's good to be back."

## **BlueJackets.com / Werenski leads all scorers at 4 Nations Face-Off**

**By Jeff Svoboda – February 21, 2025**

Zach Werenski has traded one shade of blue for another this month, suiting up for Team USA at the NHL's 4 Nations Face-Off.

It was a chance for the Blue Jackets defenseman to represent his country in a best-on-best tournament for the first time since joining the NHL, and also an opportunity to take the Norris Trophy-caliber form he's displayed all season and show it off on a stage featuring the best players in the world.

And Werenski certainly disappointed on the world stage. The standout defenseman had a point in every game and finished as the tournament's leading scorer with six points, all assists, including three helpers in the opening game vs. Finland and a single assist in following games vs. Canada, Sweden, and then Canada again in the championship game.

BlueJackets.com kept tabs on Werenski as the tournament took place.

### **4 Nations Schedule**

Thursday, Feb. 13: USA 6, Finland 1

Saturday, Feb. 15: USA 3, Canada 1

Monday, Feb. 17: Sweden 2, USA 1

Thursday, Feb. 20: Canada 3, USA 2 (OT)

### **Recaps**

#### **Feb. 20: Canada 3, USA 2 (OT)**

The championship game of the 4 Nations Face-Off did not disappoint, and neither did Werenski.

The CBJ defenseman again turned in an impressive performance, but Connor McDavid's goal 8:18 into overtime was the difference as Canada won the tournament that turned into must-see TV across both countries.

Werenski added to his assist streak as he had a helper on Jake Sanderson's second-period goal that gave the U.S. a 2-1 lead, as the Blue Jacket shot the puck on net, then saw Auston Matthews collect the rebound and throw it into traffic where the onrushing Sanderson was able to finish.

Werenski finished the game with 23:07 of ice time, four shots on goal, seven shot attempts, a plus-1 rating, and a 17-8 edge in shots on goal at 5x5 for Team USA when he was on the ice.

#### **Feb. 17: Sweden 2, USA 1**

Thirty-five seconds into Monday night's game, Werenski notched his fifth assist of the tournament

Unfortunately, that was all the scoring for Team USA, as the Swedes scored twice in the second half of the first period and was able to hold the lead the rest of the way.

On the opening shift of the game, Werenski raced the puck up the right side of the ice and put a shot on goal, with Chris Kreider cleaning up the rebound to make it a 1-0 game.

Werenski was all over the ice from there, but the Americans couldn't get another goal. The CBJ defenseman was named third star of the game, skating 23:44 and finishing with a plus-1 rating, six shots on goal and eight shot attempts.

**Feb. 15: USA 3, Canada 1**

In a showdown of the world's top hockey powers that lived up to the billing, Werenski and Team USA earned a 3-1 win over Canada on Saturday night in a game that caught the attention of the sports world.

The anticipation for the showdown was high, and only heightened by the fact there were three fights in the first nine seconds of the game. In the end, the United States rallied from an early 1-0 deficit, scoring a goal in each period to get the win.

Werenski assisted on the opening goal by Jake Guentzel to give him four helpers in two games thus far. In the end, Werenski skated 13:47 as Team USA protected the lead, putting two shots on goal among his six shot attempts with two blocked shots.

With the win, the United States advanced to the championship game of the event with two wins in two contests.

**Feb. 13: USA 6, Finland 1**

Werenski had a historic three-point showing as Team USA pulled away to victory with four third-period goals against the Finns.

The CBJ defenseman notched three assists to tie the record for helpers by a defenseman in NHL international tournament history. Team North America's Shayne Gostisbehere was the last to do so in the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

Werenski had the second assist on the first goal for Team USA as Brady Tkachuk tied the game at 1 in the first period. He then added a pair of power-play helpers on Matthew Tkachuk goals in the third period, notching the first assist on tallies that made it 3-1 and 6-1.

Werenski also finished plus-2 and played a team-high 21:45.

## The Hockey News / Zach Werenski Is In For A Huge Test Tonight

**By Jason Newland – February 21, 2025**

Zach Werenski and his Team USA mates are going to have their hands full tonight against Canada. Will Werenski be leaned on or will his minutes be paired down like they were in the first game these two teams played last week?

In the 3-1 win against Canada on the 15th, Werenski was paired mainly with Adam Fox and played a total of 13:47. Many CBJ fans thought this was a slight to Zach, but in fact, it was a strategy employed by Mike Sullivan.

Werenski's playstyle is that of a roving defenseman who plays with an offensive mindset. While trying to hold a lead against Canada, the American coaches decided to play Werenski and Adam Fox a bit less. That's no slight to those two defensemen at all, it was just that at that moment, the USA decided to play their defensive defensemen a lot more to try to keep the lead.

But now Charlie McAvoy is out and that means that Werenski may be counted on to play more of a defensive style. This is Zach's time to shine.

Against Finland and Sweden, he did just that and played big minutes in the process. In the Canada game, he had an assist. In that game, he and McAvoy got a serious dose of humility when Connor McDavid blew by them both at a whopping 22.67 miles per hour. No defenseman on Earth was stopping McDavid on that play.

Charlie McAvoy won't be playing tonight due to injury, so Werenski will need to step up and play huge minutes in an attempt to beat the Canadians in Boston. Quinn Hughes won't be joining the American squad as hoped, so this defensive unit will need to play elite tonight.

Can Zach Werenski rise to the occasion and slow down Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, and Sidney Crosby?

Zach Werenski has hit the international spotlight and has everyone talking about him. He's going to be a Norris finalist, and so far, everyone who has finally got to watch what Columbus fans have watched all season long agrees - Werenski is a Norris candidate whether anyone likes it or not.

## The Hockey News / Looking Ahead As The Blue Jackets Return to Action Saturday Against The Blackhawks

**By Spencer Lazary – February 21, 2025**

With the 4-Nations Face-Off Tournament coming to an end tonight between Canada and the USA, NHL teams are slowly ramping back up their practices ahead of the season resuming on Saturday, Feb. 22.

The Columbus Blue Jackets will be back in action on Saturday as they take on the Chicago Blackhawks. This will kick-start one of the hardest final stretches in the NHL.

The Blue Jackets currently sit just one point out of the second wild-card spot in the East and two points out of the first spot. They are in the thick of it, along with eight other teams.

**The current wild card standings are as follows:**

**WC 1: Ottawa Senators - 62 Pts**

**WC 2: Detroit Red Wings - 61 Pts**

**3: Columbus Blue Jackets - 60 Pts**

**4: Boston Bruins - 60 Pts**

**5: New York Rangers - 58 Pts**

**6: New York Islanders - 57 Pts**

**7: Montreal Canadiens - 55 Pts**

**8: Pittsburgh Penguins - 55 Pts**

**9: Philadelphia Flyers - 55 Pts**

**The Blue Jackets' next opponents are:**

**Feb 22: at Chicago Blackhawks**

**Feb 25: Home vs. Dallas Stars**

**Feb 27: at Detroit Red Wings**

**Mar 1: Home vs. Detroit Red Wings (Stadium Series)**

**Mar 4: at Tampa Bay Lightning**

The next five games have huge playoff implications, as three of them are against teams in the playoff hunt.

The games against the Red Wings are crucial, but none is bigger than the game on March 1—the outdoor Stadium Series game.

The Blue Jackets may also have some reinforcements when they return to action. Their injury list is not only long but also filled with skill. Kirill Marchenko was seen skating with a full cage and could return to the lineup shortly after the break ends.

For now, we will all be cheering on our very own Zach Werenski as he looks to win the 4-Nations Face-Off Championship with Team USA.

Best of luck, Zach.



## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets React to 4-Nations & Zach Werenski's Performance

**By Mark Scheig – February 21, 2025**

Adam Fantilli missed the start of the game between the United States and Canada on Saturday night. He had good reason to do so.

"I missed the start of the game. I was watching my brother play against Minnesota," Fantilli said. "And I booted right over to a local bar to watch the game. From then on, I was glued to the TV. It was sick."

The 4-Nations Faceoff has been a tremendous event for fans to watch. Imagine what that's like from the perspective of a player. Thursday night will be no different.

"It's the best hockey you can watch right now," Fantilli said. "I was watching the game with Luke Hughes and we were saying it's probably the fastest hockey game that's ever been played to be honest. That's really cool to watch."

The excitement level can be felt throughout the Blue Jackets' locker room. There's even a little bit of a divide within the room for a couple of reasons.

First, the Blue Jackets' room has a heavy Canadian presence in it. But then second, their teammate Zach Werenski has had a great tournament to the point where he has an outside chance to win MVP.

We spoke to Fantilli and Kent Johnson for the Canadian perspective and James van Riemsdyk for the United States perspective. No matter what happens in the game Thursday, allegiances to their country win out. But they also want Werenski to shine too.

### **Fantilli & Johnson**

Johnson admitted also missing the start of the game Saturday night. He got a bunch of texts about the fights. But then he settled in and watched the rest of the game.

"Such a good hockey game," Johnson said. "It's unreal. Every player out there is so good and they're there for a reason. It's just really fun to watch. I'm really excited for Thursday."

Both Fantilli and Johnson have had their moments with Team Canada. It shouldn't come as a shock to anyone that if asked, they would do whatever it takes for their country even if that means dropping the gloves.

"I think anytime if you're teammates, if that was what I had to do, I'd do it," Johnson said. "Maybe luckily for me, it's not really going to be called upon me."

"Of course," Fantilli said. "I've never been scared to fight. If the time's right especially in a situations like that where you're playing for your country, everybody's got to be up for it even if it's not in your game. It's still part of the game and I think it still has value."

### **van Riemsdyk**

Like Fantilli and Johnson, van Riemsdyk couldn't wait to watch the game Saturday. He just got back from his trip to Florida in time to watch.

"That was amazing," van Riemsdyk said. "That was great to watch and really entertaining."

van Riemsdyk did go on to say that he was somewhat surprised at the start of the game. But in the end, everything within the game was fun to see.

“Once you see some of the history as far as the stuff with (Keith Tkachuk) in 1996 with trying to set the tone in that tournament. I know playing at some USA Hockey events in the past, they still talk about that mindset from that team in ’96. So it doesn’t surprise me that two of his kids got out there and got everyone talking about hockey since then. That was exciting and fun to see.”

Like the Canadians, van Riemsdyk would answer the bell if the moment required it.

“I think in those sort of settings, you step outside your comfort zone a little bit as far as when you’re playing on that stage with that quality of player and that quality of setting. It’s best-on-best. I think it just goes to show you how much it means for the guys to represent their country and show how much pride they take in that. That amplified it to another level.”

### **Werenski’s Performance**

If there was one thing Fantilli, Johnson and van Riemsdyk could all agree on, it was how great Werenski has played in this tournament. They’re all excited that everyone gets to see him perform this way on the national stage. It’s something they’re used to seeing everyday.

“It is great to see,” Johnson said. “I’m honestly rooting for him even though I’m rooting for Canada. I’m really happy to see him succeed and do his thing. It’s not really surprising honestly. I think he’s arguably the best d-man in the world right now. It’s really cool to see him do it.”

“He’s got five points in three games. It’s unbelievable, man,” Fantilli said. “He’s been doing it for us all season and he’s been a horse. It’s just great to see. He’s on the other side. I’ll be rooting for Canada (Thursday.) It’s always great to see him do well.”

“It’s no surprise,” van Riemsdyk said. “When you play with a guy and you see him day in and day out, I think that’s when you can really appreciate how good a player he actually is. I got a chance to play with him at Worlds probably five years ago. You always know how good he is and how talented he is. That’s been the most impressive for me. It was from the first captain’s practice that we had here.”

Don’t be surprised to see several Blue Jackets get together to watch the final on Thursday night. There will be bragging rights on the line, perhaps more. But they also get to see Werenski do his thing. They can at least agree on that if nothing else.

## The Athletic / How Connor McDavid, Jordan Binnington lifted Canada to 4 Nations title over U.S.: Takeaways

By Fluto Shinzawa – February 21, 2025

BOSTON — With 11:42 remaining in overtime, Connor McDavid winged a shot from the slot past Connor Hellebuyck to give Canada a 3-2 win over Team USA on Thursday in the 4 Nations Face-Off championship game at TD Garden.

McDavid took a Mitch Marner pass out of the corner and snapped the puck over Hellebuyck's glove.

"Connor's the best player in our game," said Nathan MacKinnon, who was named tournament MVP. "For him to put it in like that in such an intense atmosphere and a hostile environment for Canadians was special. Hopefully, he can do that again next year (in the Olympics), too."

McDavid credited Marner for making the pass out of the corner. McDavid's job was to stay open in the middle.

"Your average hockey fan is not going to appreciate how impressive that is, to pick the puck up off the wall like that so calmly and make a great play," McDavid said. "Had his head up, drawing two guys to him and dish it to the middle. It's a great play. Fans might not appreciate how good that is."

### **Binnington a hero in Boston again**

While McDavid scored the winner, Jordan Binnington was Canada's overtime hero. The starting goalie turned back six U.S. shots in OT, including two from point-blank range by Auston Matthews. Binnington also dove to glove a Brady Tkachuk shot.

"You've got to give all the credit to Binner in overtime," Canadian forward Brad Marchand said. "He made five or six unbelievable saves that completely changed the course of that game. Tonight, we won the game of inches. That's the tough thing about these games when it's a one-off. Single-game elimination, they're tough to win. They're a great group. But we were a little bit better tonight."

Canada's goaltending was considered a weak point compared to the U.S. contingent. But Binnington, who won a Stanley Cup in Boston with the St. Louis Blues in 2019, was at his best at the biggest moment in overtime.

"I haven't seen it," Binnington said when asked of his theft of Matthews. "It's funny in those moments. I don't even remember. That's when you're into it. I was just battling and trying to do my job. Found a way to get the job done. Obviously, there's little moments like that that are more special when you win. I'll definitely check it out."

### **'Johnny Hockey!'**

During the third period, the TD Garden crowd started a "Johnny Hockey!" chant twice in honor of Johnny Gaudreau. The Americans kept the late forward's No. 13 jersey in their dressing room during the tournament. They handed out Gaudreau's jersey to the most deserving player after each win.

Matthews, the U.S. captain, gave Gaudreau's uniform to Brady Tkachuk after the U.S.'s first win over Finland. Tkachuk presented it to Jake Guentzel after the Americans beat Canada at the Bell Centre.

### **U.S. rides Slavin-Faber pair**

Brock Faber (28:50) and Jacob Slavin (28:32) led the Americans in ice time. Neither is known for having the up-ice skill of Zach Werenski, the team's most dynamic defenseman. But the Slavin-Faber duo served

as a thorough shutdown pair by being positionally sound, keeping tight gaps, angling opponents away from dangerous ice and moving pucks rapidly.

As proof of their defense-first worth, Faber had zero shots on net. Slavin had two. The coaching staff kept calling their numbers because of how well they checked.

“Slavin and Faber were tremendous the whole tournament,” U.S. coach Mike Sullivan said. “When we put them together, we hoped they would be a defense pair that would be hard to play against. And they were. I thought they do yeoman’s work. They do the thankless job. They defend against the best players. Their contributions don’t always show up on the highlight reel, but it just adds up to winning. You need those types of players. They’re glue guys. They’re the type of guys that help teams win. That’s why they’re here.

“I thought they both had tremendous tournaments. Jacob Slavin might be one of the best defending defensemen in the league, bar none. His mobility, his size, his reach. He defends the rush. He’s great at the net front. Brock Faber, in my mind, is an emerging star.”

### **Canadians exploit Adam Fox**

Team USA tried to shelter Adam Fox on the No. 3 pair with Noah Hanifin. But the Canadians still targeted the right-shot defenseman in the second period leading up to the tying goal.

Fox tried to exit the zone with a long-distance pass up the ice. Sam Bennett intercepted the pass and started the counterattack.

Fox tried to gap up. But he took a long twirl, which allowed Bennett and Marner to gain the offensive zone with speed. Once Marner cut into the middle with the puck, Fox went with the forward. This allowed Marner to find a seam for Bennett on the left flank into the space Fox vacated. Bennett beat Hellebuyck, making the game 2-2. Through regulation, Bennett led all players with six shots on net.

### **One Tkachuk up, the other down**

Brady Tkachuk was a monster this tournament. The Ottawa Senators captain scored in the first period. In the second period, his forechecking presence below the goal line opened space for Jake Sanderson to score from between the dots. Brady Tkachuk and Matthews were the Americans’ two best forwards in the title game.

Matthew Tkachuk, however, was a shadow of his usual menacing self. He did not take a single shift in the third period or overtime. Tkachuk was on the bench cheering on his teammates.

In the second, he was limited to six shifts. One shift lasted just one second. He appeared to have little of his skating pop. He did not play against Sweden because of an undisclosed injury.

“Matthew Tkachuk has an impact on our team in such a way that even if he wasn’t 100 percent and we weren’t able to utilize him for a lot of the game, his presence on the bench and in the locker room means so much to this group,” Sullivan said. “He’s all heart. He’s a heart-and-soul guy. So is his brother.”

### **Reinhart initiates opening goal**

In the first period, Werenski tried to go D-to-D deep in the defensive zone to Sanderson. Sam Reinhart made Werenski pay.

Reinhart anticipated the pass, picked off the puck below the goal line and went low to high to Thomas Harley at the left point. Once Harley handed the puck off to Nathan MacKinnon, Reinhart stayed in front of the net to screen Hellebuyck.

So when MacKinnon sifted a shot on net from above the tops of the circles, Reinhart's screen helped limit Hellebuyck's vision. The U.S. goalie did not appear to see MacKinnon's shot until it was past him.

### **Switching centers produces U.S. goal**

Late in the first period, the Americans flipped Matthews and Jack Eichel. The move paid off. On their second shift, Matthews and new wings Brady Tkachuk and Matthew Tkachuk produced the tying goal.

Matthews started the play by picking off Devon Toews' slow-moving pass to Cale Makar below the goal line. Matthews whirled around the net and threw the puck out front. Brady Tkachuk crashed the net and jammed the puck past Binnington.

Even after Matthew Tkachuk left the game, Matthews and Brady Tkachuk were a force together.

### **'Celebration of hockey'**

Even before the puck dropped on Thursday's final, the Americans and Canadians acknowledged the 4 Nations Face-Off had touched the sport in a way few events have.

"This tournament has had a huge impact on hockey, certainly in the United States. Without a question in North America. But maybe the world," Sullivan said. "These best-on-best tournaments bring out the best of the best. The commitment, the investment that all of these teams have displayed every night, in my mind, has been an unbelievable celebration of hockey.

"It's hard not to get excited about what we're witnessing. I would envision tonight would be the pinnacle of that with Team USA and Canada competing for the championships."

What has especially caught Sullivan's attention is how the tournament has instantly advanced the sport's progression. It is not just that some of the world's best hockey players have participated. They are also among the most competitive and imaginative athletes on the planet.

"These are the savants that, when they bring their creativity and brilliance to what they do out there, that's how the game evolves," Sullivan said. "That's what we're witnessing firsthand. I feel like I have the best seat in the house because I'm up close to it right behind the bench."

The tournament has also expanded the NHL's reach. It might encourage participants and viewers new to the sport to give hockey more attention.

"People outside the arena that normally don't discuss our sport are speaking about it at the water cooler," Canada coach Jon Cooper said. "I'm sure there's going to be watch parties, not only in our country but the United States, as well. People in Europe are going to tune into this game. And they should. Because it's richly deserved. It's richly deserved because you're watching two teams with a ton of passion to play this sport.

"And that's what this sport is. That's why people say the Stanley Cup's the hardest trophy to win. Because it's two months of that. That's why, when you're fortunate enough to lift that Stanley Cup, you know how hard it was to get there."

### **McAvoy's inspirational return**

Charlie McAvoy was released from Massachusetts General Hospital on Thursday. The Team USA defenseman had been hospitalized since Monday because of an infection in his right shoulder.

McAvoy read the starting lineup for the Americans. The defenseman was wearing a sling. Several of his teammates gave McAvoy a standing ovation. Brady Tkachuk hugged McAvoy after he finished reading the lineup.

The Boston Bruins defenseman was injured on Feb. 13 in the U.S.-Finland game. McAvoy suffered a significant injury to the AC joint in his right shoulder. He has been ruled out from his club team's game on Saturday against the Anaheim Ducks. The Bruins do not expect McAvoy to play next week, either.

## The Athletic / Where could the U.S. have the edge over Canada in the 4 Nations final?

By Emile Nuh – February 21, 2025

The Athletic has live coverage of USA vs Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off Championship.

The 4 Nations Face-Off championship game is upon us and if last Saturday night's clash between the U.S. and Canada is anything to go by, it shouldn't disappoint.

Team USA came out on top at the Bell Centre in Montreal, but whoever is victorious tonight will have all the bragging rights until we hit the ice again in Italy next year.

On the latest episode of "The Athletic Hockey Show," Hailey Salvian, Sean Gentile and former Team USA captain Brian Boyle discussed where the Americans could have the edge.

A partial transcript has been edited for clarity and length. The full episode is available on "The Athletic Hockey Show" feed on Apple Podcasts and Spotify.

**Hailey:** Teeing up the final between these two teams, we talked a little bit before you came on Brian about the edge that the U.S. clearly has in net. Connor Hellebuyck is arguably the best goalie in the world right now. It's probably not even an argument — he just is the best. He's likely up against Jordan Binnington. Other than the goaltending, where do you think the U.S. might have the slight or biggest edge over Canada heading into this game?

**Brian:** I would say the Faber-Slavin (Brock Faber and Jacob Slavin) pair. I don't know if ... see, this is where I hate answering these questions.

**Hailey:** Maybe it is just goaltending, maybe that's just it?

**Brian:** Obviously I'm American and Canada in hockey is the big brother, they just are. It's hard to beat your big brother (laughs) and the U.S. has been trying ...

**Sean:** You've got a lot of those don't you?

**Brian:** I've got a few big brothers myself, yeah (laughs), but I was eventually able to beat them in sports. But the U.S. is trying to change that and grassroots hockey has grown and there are more people here. There are 10 times more people here in the U.S. Hockey is not the most popular thing in the U.S., but to the guys that play, it's the only sport. I enjoy baseball, I played it a lot and I played football and all these things. But when you're a hockey player, you're a hockey player and that's what these U.S. guys want to show. I can't say Drew Doughty is going to go out and not have a great game and not shut somebody down. How do you do that? He's (missed) six games and then he comes in and he's been playing. There are so many good players in Canada, and Canada's top players are Connor McDavid, Cale Makar, Nathan MacKinnon and Sidney Crosby. Sid's doing it in a different way because it seems like he's not got the full use of his extremities right now, but he's still just making it happen. That's what you're up against. So that Faber-Slavin pair, if they can skate and shut down those aforementioned superstars on Canada, that is the key to the game.

I think Hellebuyck plays solid. The U.S. probably expects a good game from Binnington. He's a gamer obviously and he's won a couple of big games in this same building. Even though that was a few years back now, you can't ever doubt a champion. You expect them to find something. So where's the edge? I like that the U.S. made some moves where they took part of their top line and part of their 'third line' and mixed it up. I liked their middle six against Finland where they were playing more straight lines.

They have enough beef now with their skill. If Brady Tkachuk is 100 percent, I'm a lot happier. I was not happy with how he kind of hid in there. I don't know if it's a hip or ribs, but he might be labored. I'm sure he'll figure out a way to be a beast though, because he's incredible. So that pair, and then the Tkachuk brothers; that is what has put them over the edge. That is what reminds me of 1996 the most when the U.S. won. But I'm nervous. It seems like Canada loses in the round-robin and then when it's time to win, they win. They're all champions for that reason. They're on the team for that reason. They both have a great mix of skill, physicality, passion and leadership. It's hard to predict. I am nervous, but I'm very excited to watch it.



## The Athletic / The biggest hockey game in ages, plus early March Madness intrigue

By Chris Branch – February 21, 2025

Good morning! Win a title today.

### **Legacies: More important than the Stanley Cup? Maybe**

I was not in the room when NHL officials planned the 4 Nations Face-Off, but I can tell you with certainty that tonight's final, a matchup between Canada and the United States, is what they hoped for.

The entire hockey sports world will be watching. Experts expect ratings rivaling a Stanley Cup Final, or even better. No matter what happens tonight, the 4 Nations experiment is a massive win — and don't be surprised if other pro sports follow hockey's lead on this, in some form.

### **But what's going to actually happen? Let's hit some key points:**

Who's the favorite? Our friends at BetMGM have this at even odds entering the game, despite the U.S. win over Canada earlier in this tournament. A survey of The Athletic's hockey staff essentially confirmed that sentiment.

The irresistible alternate history: Canada coach Jon Cooper could've easily been behind the opposite bench tonight, as the dual citizen was recruited by both countries' programs at the same time. Literally — Hockey Canada and USA Hockey called Cooper within 10 minutes of each other back in 2017, when both needed a coach for the World Championship. Canada called first.

One major snag: The Americans are banged up. The U.S. has had multiple players go down this tournament, the latest blow coming with defenseman Charlie McAvoy falling ill with an infection. Quinn Hughes, the choice to replace him, is not with Team USA due to some light chaos with Hughes' NHL team, the Vancouver Canucks.

Above all, though, legacies are at stake, and we can look beyond Crosby for that. Sid the Kid is a legend, win or lose. But for Canada's Connor McDavid and the U.S.'s Auston Matthews — two of the sport's brightest stars — this will define their careers going forward.

Can't ask for much better than that.

Federal prosecutors charged seven members of a South American theft group for their alleged roles in a string of burglaries that targeted pro athletes over the last year, which totaled up to \$2 million worth of stolen valuables. Chiefs stars Patrick Mahomes and Travis Kelce are among the victims, along with Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow and Bucks forward Bobby Portis and others. All happened while the victims were playing games or otherwise away. Read our full report [here](#).

### **Venus back?**

Tennis legend Venus Williams will play at the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells next month, officials announced, thanks to a wild-card entry. The 44-year-old has not played a WTA Tour-level match in nearly a year and lost her only two appearances last year. We'll be watching, and Williams has plenty of history with Indian Wells.

The NFL is returning to Brazil next year, when the Chargers will open their season in São Paulo.

A male spectator at the WTA 1,000 Dubai Tennis Championships on Tuesday was removed after exhibiting "fixated behavior" toward Emma Raducanu.

Lewis Hamilton sounds confident Ferrari can help deliver his eighth F1 title. Hm.

Selection Sunday is less than a month away, which means it's high time to check in on men's college hoops. Two teams I want to talk about today:

The No. 15 Missouri Tigers, who beat No. 4 Alabama last night 110-98, arguably Mizzou's best win of the season. It was the 20th win for Dennis Gates' squad, which is quite nice, but is astounding when you remember this team went 0-18 in SEC play last year. Most coaches get fired after that season; Mizzou stuck with Gates, and now his team is thriving in the sport's toughest conference.

Then there's the Drake Bulldogs, who could be our best Cinderella story this year. Drake is led by first-year head coach Ben McCollum, a Division II legend, and a cadre of transfers from McCollum's former school Northwest Missouri State. Drake is atop the Missouri Valley Conference, which Jim Root says could be the most dangerous come tourney time. Remember this as you fill out your brackets.

### **Pulse Picks**

Baseball season creeps closer, which means fantasy baseball season is basically here. We have a robust toolkit for all your draft needs. Study up before winning it all.

Adam Crafton penned a startling tale about how the sons of Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo became unwittingly entangled in a bizarre betting scandal.

Golf season is finally churning ahead, and Brody Miller has a useful PGA Tour stock watch guide.

I really enjoyed the NBA All-Star player poll we conducted. I am against the 4-point shot ... for now.

Laughed out loud multiple times while reading this very serious article from Sean McIndoe, in which he poses the question we're all wondering: Is Kyle Connor McDavid the best same-name combo in NHL history?

## The Athletic / What we know about the recent burglaries at the homes of NFL, NBA and NHL athletes

**By Alex Andrejev – February 21, 2025**

Over the last five months, burglars seeking to swipe valuables have targeted the homes of prominent NFL, NBA and NHL athletes while the players have been away for road or home games, leading to a nationwide FBI investigation into the thefts. In a major update this week, it was revealed that federal prosecutors charged a group of seven Chilean men for their alleged roles in six of the recent burglaries, saying the individuals are part of a South American theft group.

In a criminal complaint unsealed Tuesday in Florida, an FBI special agent alleged the seven men “conspired to burglarize” the homes of pro athletes around the country and linked the group to break-ins at the homes of Kansas City Chiefs stars Patrick Mahomes and Travis Kelce, Cincinnati Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow and Milwaukee Bucks forward Bobby Portis Jr. The players were not named in the complaint but the descriptions match prior reports of those incidents.

The complaint also mentions two burglaries that were previously unknown to the public — one at the home of an unidentified Tampa Bay Buccaneers player that occurred while the Bucs hosted the Baltimore Ravens on Oct. 21, and the other at the home of an unidentified Memphis Grizzlies player while the Grizzlies hosted the Golden State Warriors on Dec. 19. There were multiple reports on Thursday that the Memphis player was Ja Morant, but the team would not confirm that when asked by The Associated Press and other media members.

The group of seven Chilean men was accused of stealing more than \$2 million in valuables from the athletes’ homes and charged with conspiracy to commit interstate transportation of stolen property, per the complaint.

### **When and where have break-ins taken place?**

There have now been at least 12 reported break-ins at the homes of pro athletes in the United States since September.

Burglars broke into the homes of Mahomes and Kelce in Belton, Mo., and Leawood, Kan., respectively, in the first week of October. The burglary at Kelce’s home occurred the same night the Chiefs hosted the New Orleans Saints on “Monday Night Football.” The police report for the incident indicated \$20,000 in cash was taken and there was \$1,000 worth of damage to a rear door. In the criminal complaint unsealed Tuesday, the FBI special agent alleges the burglars accessed the residences of the two Chiefs players in a “similar manner” to the burglary at the home of the unnamed Bucs player and that they “stole similar items such as jewelry, watches, cash, and other luxury merchandise.”

Portis’ home in Wisconsin was burglarized on Nov. 2, while the Bucks were playing the Cleveland Cavaliers in a home game. The complaint unsealed Tuesday alleged that two subjects stole a safe containing watches, jewelry, cash and personal items from Portis’ residence, as well as a Louis Vuitton suitcase and designer bags, with the total of his stolen property valued at around \$1.484 million.

The burglary at Burrow’s home, which occurred on Dec. 9, came while the Bengals were on the road at the Dallas Cowboys in a “Monday Night Football” game. The burglars stole “designer luggage, glasses, watches and jewelry valued at about \$300,000,” per the complaint.

In addition to the previously mentioned cases, there have been reported break-ins at the homes of NBA players Mike Conley Jr., Karl-Anthony Towns and Luka Dončić, NFL player Linval Joseph and NHLers Tyler Seguin and Evgeni Malkin in recent months.

The FBI has not said whether it is investigating those cases, nor has it announced connections to South American theft groups regarding those incidents.

In addition to identifying the seven men (three had previously been charged with crimes in Cincinnati for their alleged involvement in the Burrow break-in), Tuesday's unsealed complaint offered a more detailed account of how investigators believe the South American theft groups, also referred to as SATG or SATGs, operate and how they believe the recent burglaries were conducted.

Law enforcement officials have depicted SATGs as well-coordinated networks that typically work with "fences," meaning a person or group who knowingly buys stolen goods to resell for profit.

"Often, the buyer will pay in cash for the stolen merchandise to eliminate any methods of tracking purchasing information such as receipts or bank transaction data," the complaint says. "SATGs will then funnel the money into their personal accounts or send it to associates, co-conspirators, or family in their respective country."

The FBI special agent alleges that the Chilean SATG stole "jewelry, expensive brand watches, United States currency, and other high-value merchandise."

Broadly, these types of theft groups — which not only target athletes but also other wealthy individuals and businesses — often rely on using rental vehicles, fake identification and burner phones to make it more difficult for law enforcement to identify them, according to the FBI.

"SATGs will often work together in separate but similar groups, akin to individual cells," the complaint says. "By separating (into) smaller groups of four or five members, the SATG can target multiple victims, maximize their profits, and continue to keep a low profile while committing their criminal acts."

"However, though burglary groups may consist of four to five members, these separate groups often work in concert with one another, communicate with one another, and liaise with the same buyers of stolen merchandise."

In the case of the burglary at Burrow's home, investigators believe the men used fake IDs to rent a vehicle, drove across state lines, stole the items and returned to Florida.

Investigators used cell tower data from the areas around the burglarized homes, as well as search warrants and subpoenaed information to link the various cases, the complaint says.

### **What have the players said about the burglaries?**

On Wednesday after practice with the Bucks, Portis addressed the recent charges against the seven men.

"You put all you can into the game and then you come and, just, all your belongings are gone, things that you worked hard for," Portis said. "It's kinda gratifying that these guys have been caught because you work so hard for your things."

In the wake of the burglary at Portis' home in November, he posted a video to Instagram in which he offered a \$40,000 reward for information about the break-in leading to his items being returned. He also posted home surveillance video from that night that depicted two figures at his property.

In addressing the October break-in at his home in November, Mahomes called the incident "frustrating" and "disappointing" but declined to elaborate as the investigation was ongoing.

“Obviously something that you don’t want to happen to really anybody, but obviously yourself,” Mahomes said at the time.

Burrow commented on the break-in at his home in December, saying, “I feel like my privacy has been violated in more ways than one. Way more is already out there than I would want out there and that I care to share.”

“We live a public life,” he previously said. “One of my least favorite parts of that is the lack of privacy. That has been difficult for me to deal with my entire career. (I’m) still learning. I understand it is the life we choose, (but) it doesn’t make it any easier to deal with.”

### **What have the leagues said?**

The NFL and NBA issued security warnings to teams in November, with the NBA’s memo indicating the league received an FBI briefing that connected many of the burglaries to SATGs.

Pro teams typically have their own security departments, and the leagues work in collaboration with the teams, players, unions and law enforcement on security-related matters.

When asked in December about the home burglaries affecting players and what the league is doing to help athletes, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell said the league’s security department was in touch with the FBI and that he’d been in touch with the union and security department about the incidents.

“So, yes, there are things that all of us can do to take precautions and should do,” Goodell said at the time. “When you’re in a high-profile position or when you see somebody on television and realize they’re not home, you know, does that open up potential?”

“I think all of that is something that we all are trying to address. But it’s clear there’s some organized fashion here that we hope that the FBI and the authorities can handle.”

### **What are police, security experts saying?**

River Hills (Wis.) Police Chief Michael Gaynor, who was involved with handling the case at Portis’ home in Wisconsin, said in January that local police departments were in touch regarding the situation and that he was aware of incidents at the homes of other athletes.

“The time of the burglary was right at tip-off of the game,” Gaynor said. “It was a home game, so it maximized the probability that anybody that would be at the house would be at the game.”

Gaynor called the situation at Portis’ home “really unfortunate” and said River Hills police previously spoke with the Bucks’ security team about reminding players of the threats to their homes.

“Unfortunately, these athletes and their private homes, they’re targeted for going out there and doing their jobs,” Gaynor said. “We all know when they go to work and we know their schedules and where they’re gonna be. And unfortunately, that makes their private homes targets.”

Seth Krummrich, a security expert and U.S. Army veteran, noted the rise of savvy theft groups, which he said can leverage tech platforms to “access and defeat home security systems or home camera systems.” He also said those groups typically utilize human intelligence networks, such as talking to individuals with knowledge of property who might have information they can use to plan their heists.

“And then they’re able to target and move quickly when it comes to robbing an estate or overall theft,” said Krummrich, the Vice President of Client Risk Management at Global Guardian, a company that provides security services to various clients, including professional athletes. “That capability has gone up.

“And you’re seeing athletes or CEOs having more exposure now (more) than ever being on social media platforms. And when you think about athletes, their schedule is posted well in advance.”

## The Athletic / Everything you need to know about 4 Nations Face-Off final as U.S.-Canada battle looms

By Lauren Merola – February 21, 2025

The Athletic has live coverage of USA vs Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off Championship.

Getting ready to tune into the 4 Nations Face-Off championship between Canada and the United States on Thursday night but you haven't watched any previous games of the week-long tournament?

You've come to the right place.

Hi, friend! Let's get you caught up with what you need to know about the NHL competition finale.

### **What is the 4 Nations Face-Off?**

Let's get the technicalities out of the way first, shall we?

The 4 Nations Face-Off is an international hockey tournament featuring NHL players from Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United States representing their home countries. The four teams faced off in a round-robin tournament, with the first two games for each team being played at the Bell Centre in Montreal. Each team's final round-robin game, and Thursday's final, are being held at TD Garden in Boston.

### **But what makes the 4 Nations Face-Off special?**

Not only has the competition served as a stand-in for a humdrum All-Star Game (to make room in the schedule, the NHL did not hold an All-Star Game this season), but it is the first time that there has been a best-on-best hockey tournament since 2016. (Well, not quite best-on-best, but we will get to that later.)

The pride athletes have brought representing their country — which is so often left at home by players in other professional sports' All-Star Games — is palpable this tournament.

Oh, yeah? How so?

The passion is in the punches.

As the puck hit the ice for the opening faceoff in the U.S. and Canada's round-robin meeting, Team USA player Matthew Tkachuk and Canada's Brandon Hagel dropped the gloves in a spirited bout. On the faceoff following the fighting majors, Canada's Sam Bennett and Team USA's Brady Tkachuk squared off. On the very next shift, J.T. Miller and Colton Parayko also fought. With the game just nine seconds old, each team had three men in the box serving fighting majors.

Matthew's opening fight was the fastest ever in an international NHL game, topping the previous record of 20 seconds in the 1996 World Cup of Hockey. That record was set during another matchup between Canada and the U.S. — Matthew and Brady's father, Keith Tkachuk, and Bill Guerin, now Team USA's general manager, were among those involved in the melee for Team USA.

The Tkachuk brothers admitted after Saturday's matchup they were in a group chat with Miller, with each player planning to fight.

"We're out there playing for the flag, not the cameras," Hagel said in response. "That's a part of Canada that we have in there. We don't need to initiate anything. We don't have any group chats going on. We're going out there playing our game and giving it everything and doing it for our country."

Matthew sniped back Wednesday, saying, “The other team doesn’t like each other if they don’t have group chats.”

“Our team does not care about anything that they say,” he said. “There’s been a lot of chatter and talk from individuals, but we care about one thing in this room, and we have millions of people that are watching us and supporting us around this country. And we’re very prideful playing for them.”

What’s with all the booing?

Aside from fights, tack on some boos. In the same U.S.-Canada game, Montreal fans booed the U.S. national anthem in protest of President Donald Trump’s repeated suggestion that Canada should become the 51st state, referring to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as governor and his proposed tariffs on Canadian imports that would violate the North American trade agreement that Trump signed in 2020.

This is not the first time Canadian fans have booed the U.S. anthem at recent sporting events in protest of Trump’s rhetoric.

### **Do the players actually care about this tournament?**

The Athletic asked more than 110 NHL players just that. More than 80 percent said they did indeed care, and 15 of the 16 polled players participating in 4 Nations were all for it.

“The last time we had a full international, best-on-best tournament was the World Cup, and that was a week before I made the NHL,” one Team Canada player said. “In my entire career, we haven’t had this. ... With the Olympics next year, you want to perform well — to obviously win the 4 Nations and hopefully be a part of more of these events in the next few seasons.”

“I’m on it, so I will care about it, for sure,” one Team Sweden player said. “You look at the bigger picture, too, is the Olympics is right around the corner. So, it’s a big chance for me to show who I am, and it’s a coaching staff that I haven’t had too much to deal with in the past. Absolutely, I care about it.”

### **And the lone participating player who wasn’t interested?**

“I’d rather go back home to (my home country),” he said. “I’d rather (have) a two-week break. It sucks you miss the two-week break, but it’s cool you’re playing against the best players right now. Except the Russians aren’t allowed to be in there. That’s stupid. They’re the best players right now.”

### **About the whole ‘best-on-best’ thing ...**

Some could — and do — argue that the 4 Nations Face-Off is not a true showcase of best-on-best talent because of its exclusivity. Countries that produce top-tier NHL talents like Russia, Czechia and Slovakia aren’t included. NHL superstars like German native Leon Draisaitl and Russian native Nikita Kucherov, who are two of the NHL’s top three scorers this season, can’t participate.

One main factor around roster construction, and why there are only four teams represented, is that there must be enough NHL skaters to complete a full team. That’s why there is no German team, for example. Russia has the NHL representation to skate, but the league disallowed its participation due to the country’s war with Ukraine.

Despite the imperfections, 4 Nations is the closest thing we’ve seen to best-on-best hockey since 2016, when Canada won the World Cup of Hockey. That tournament started in 1996 and happened again in 2004 and 2016.

### **And so we meet again ...**



The United States and Canada were very much viewed as the top teams of the tournament. It's no real surprise to see them reach the championship.

Canada won its first game versus Sweden in OT on Feb. 12. The U.S. beat Finland 6-1 in its opening game on Feb. 13. The two powerhouses met for their second game days later, with the U.S. winning 3-1. Having secured two victories, the U.S. then also secured its spot in the championship.

A Canadian win over Finland in its third and final round-robin matchup set up the North American nations for a rematch in the title game Thursday night. It airs at 8 p.m. on ESPN, ESPN+, SportsNet and TVAS.

### **Who's the favorite?**

The Americans are considered a slight favorite, though they're battling some hefty injuries. Matthew Tkachuk didn't play in the team's last game as a precaution after he couldn't finish the game against Canada with a lower-body injury. Brady Tkachuk left last game against Sweden after colliding with the net. Charlie McAvoy was held out of last game due to an upper-body injury, as was Auston Matthews with upper-body soreness. All except McAvoy, who is out with a shoulder injury, are expected to play Thursday.

After being hopeful to play in the championship, reigning Norris Trophy winner Quinn Hughes was downgraded to out Wednesday night for Thursday's game after not getting medical clearance, his agent Pat Brisson said.

Still, Team USA has the stud goalie and probable tournament MVP in Connor Hellebuyck. Team Canada's Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon, respectively, follow as The Athletic's tournament MVP picks. Which makes you wonder, with such star power, will Canada really lose to the same team twice?

### **The standout stars**

The Tkachuk brothers have been the fulcrum of this U.S. team. Matthew has three points (2G, 1A) in two games while Brady posts two goals in three games played.

McDavid, MacKinnon and Crosby have made Team Canada go.

Crosby (1G, 4A) and American Zach Werenski (5A) are tied for most points with five each. MacKinnon, American Jake Guentzel and Finn Mikael Granlund are tied for competition lead in goals with three apiece.

## The Athletic / Five reasons Team Canada will definitely beat Team USA (and vice versa)

By Sean McIndoe – February 21, 2025

It's Canada vs. the United States Thursday night, and it's fair to say everyone is a little bit dialed up.

On one hand, that's great – hockey rules when it's played with real stakes, and it's been a long time since a game has felt this important. But more crucially, this makes life tough for me, a hockey writer who just wants to turn in a simple preview without getting yelled at. Do I know who's going to win? Yes, of course I do, but I also know that half of you aren't going to like the answer.

So here's the deal: I have five reasons Team Canada is definitely winning, and five more why Team USA is the obvious pick. You decide which ones you want to read. The only rule is that you're not allowed to read both because doing that is illegal and your continued scrolling of this article signifies your acceptance of the terms and conditions.

Agreed? Cool, let's do this.

### **Team USA is winning because: They have Connor Hellebuyck**

It's the goaltending. It was always going to be the goaltending.

Really, I could just end this whole piece right here. Connor Hellebuyck was already the best in the world coming into the season, he's running away with this year's Vezina, he's been all but unbeatable so far in the tournament (including against Canada), and he'll be rested heading into Thursday night.

Meanwhile, Canada has Jordan Binnington, who's made a habit out of giving up one weak goal each game. I mean, what are we even doing here?

In previous generations, giving Team USA the world's best goalie and Team Canada a guy who's barely average would have been considered evening the odds. But in a tournament where the rest of the rosters are as close as they've ever been, a massive disparity like this at the most important position is almost unfair. Team USA only has to skate Team Canada to something resembling a draw, and they probably win by multiple goals just based on the goaltending.

Yes, Hellebuyck is just one guy. But he's the one guy who's going to be standing in the way of every Team Canada scoring attempt. That's if the Canadians even get all that many, considering how safe they'll have to play it when they know every mistake can wind up in their net.

This is the nightmare scenario Canadians have been fearing for years, and now it's here. And it makes picking a winner in this game easy.

### **Team Canada is winning because: The Americans have Playoff Connor Hellebuyck**

Sure, Hellebuyck was great during the 2023-24 regular season. And he's been great so far during the 2024-25 regular season. Anyone remember what happened in between?

Oh right, he completely collapsed in the 2024 playoffs. Just like he did in the 2023 playoffs. And in 2020. And in 2021, once he got past Mike Smith and had to face Carey Price. On the bright side, at least he didn't collapse in 2022. (The Jets did not make the playoffs that year.)

So what's the deal? It's hard to say. It could absolutely be a case of small sample sizes messing with our perception, although the sample size isn't all that small anymore. Maybe fatigue is a factor, in which case you may want to check which NHL goalie led the entire league in saves coming into this

tournament. Or maybe the moments just get too big for him. And if he can't handle the first round of the postseason, how's he going to look in a game that all his teammates seem to be calling the biggest of their lives?

Meanwhile, two goalies in this entire tournament have won Stanley Cups. That would be Binnington and his backup, Adin Hill. No, Binnington hasn't looked great this week, and it's safe to assume Jon Cooper will have him on a short leash. But the last time Binnington played in a game this big was when he stopped 32 of 33 shots in Game 7 of the 2019 Stanley Cup Final. The last time Hellebuyck won a game this big was, well, he hasn't.

Hey, refresh my memory, which building was that 2019 Game 7 played in? Huh, interesting.

### **Team USA is winning because: They've got home ice**

Thanks for that reminder that the game is in Boston. That's going to be a major factor.

We haven't had a chance to really hear from the Boston crowd yet, since the only Team USA game the city has hosted was entirely meaningless. But it's fair to say those fans will be a factor, especially after how Canadian fans treated the Americans on Saturday.

But this is about more than just crowd noise. Team USA isn't just the home team in the eyes of the fans, but also the rulebook, meaning the Americans get last change. That gives Mike Sullivan control of the matchups, however he chooses to use it.

Canada had their shot at the Americans on their own home ice, in front of one of the loudest crowds in recent memory, and still came up short. Why would the result be any different when now it's Team USA with the home-ice advantage?

### **Team Canada is winning because: Some of Team USA's best players have gone cold**

Auston Matthews hasn't scored a goal yet. Neither has Jack Hughes. Both have just a single assist, which came on the same goal – the team's fourth of a 6-1 win. Kyle Connor's lone point, another assist, came in that game too. J.T. Miller hasn't done anything besides punch himself in the face. Nobody on the blue line other than Zach Werenski is producing much of anything, including former Norris winner Adam Fox. Even the Tkachuk brothers and Jack Eichel, who were unstoppable in the opener, have gone cold.

Put differently, the Americans had one big period where they ran up the score against the tournament's last-place team, and other than that they've been relying on goaltending and low-scoring hockey.

Meanwhile, Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon have looked dangerous throughout the tournament, and Sidney Crosby has more points than either of them. If a championship showdown is about your best players being your best, then Team USA might want to let some so-called stars know that the tournament has started.

### **Team USA is winning because: Their best players have gone cold and it hasn't mattered**

Oh, a few of the biggest names are slumping? Fascinating. And how many meaningful games has that cost this team? Oh right, zero.

Team USA didn't need its biggest stars to roll past the Finns, or to beat Canada. They treated the Sweden game like a night off because they'd earned one. This is the deepest American team ever, and that means that not everyone has to be at their best every night for them to win the whole thing.

**Put it this way:** If Matthews, Hughes, Fox and all the rest stay cold, so be it – Team USA will just have to rely on the best goalie in the world to play well enough to earn a low-scoring win over Canada, which is a formula they've already followed once. And if even a few of those guys suddenly rediscover their

games? Against Binnington? In terms of big-game humiliations for Team Canada, this could be the 1981 final all over again.

### **Team Canada is winning because: Sidney Crosby won't let them lose**

He's the tournament's leading scorer, and one of its biggest stories. With little left to play for in Pittsburgh these days, Crosby sure looks like a guy who's been laser-focused on this tournament for a long time, and is ready to leave everything on the ice.

And maybe more importantly, he's been here before. He scored arguably the biggest goal in international history in 2010. He's already won three best-on-best tournaments. It's big news when his team loses a game. And his teammates know that.

Meanwhile, Team USA has turned over the entire roster since the last major tournament. That's an impressive sign of how much new talent they've been able to develop, but they don't have a Crosby – a certified star who's been through this before and leads by example. In what will probably be a very tight game where nerves are high, that could absolutely matter.

But he will. Jacob Slavin has been one of those fun stories that pops up in these tournaments where everyone realizes just how good a player is while his team's own fan base yells "WE TOLD YOU" into the void. No, he probably won't add offense, but they've got plenty of that. What Slavin and Brock Faber have done is basically shut down anyone they're up against.

Hey, did we mention that Team USA has home ice and last change? Hope you enjoyed the Connor McDavid show while it lasted because you're not going to notice him much.

### **Team Canada is winning because: They're healthier (we think)**

This feels a little bit like the NHL playoffs, where the mantra that "everyone is probably playing hurt" rings true. Mix in a bad flu that's been going around, and health is an issue for both teams, including in ways we won't find out about until after the game. But it's still safe to say that Canada is the healthier team heading in.

Team USA will be missing Charlie McAvoy, and we're still not sure if Quinn Hughes can replace him (or how good he'll be if he does). Brady Tkachuk missed practice Wednesday. Auston Matthews and Matthew Tkachuk missed Monday's game. All three of those forwards will play, but are they 100 percent? If not, how close are they?

On the Canadian side, while they did lose Shea Theodore early on, the biggest health news of the last few days is that Cale Makar seems to be back to his old self. Chalk it up to bad luck for the Americans if you'd like, but the health scale has tipped to one side as this tournament has worn on.

This is real life, not some feel-good movie, and you never know how things will play out. But come on. If you've been a sports fan long enough, you can see exactly where this is all heading because the script has been in progress for years.

Yes, Canada has owned the best-on-best hockey world for nearly the past three decades. It wasn't supposed to be that way, after the Americans' stunning World Cup win in 1996 seemed to signal the dawn of a new era, but here we are. Full credit to the Canadians for winning five of the last six best-on-best tournaments.

But while all those wins have been piling up, the Americans have been growing the game, and building a deep talent pool. The 2016 World Cup may have been a disaster, but not a single player from that 0-3 roster is back. That unprecedented turnover speaks to the depth of young talent the nation has

produced, and we've known for a while that this current generation of American stars could all peak at the same time to create a monster. That's exactly what we're seeing.

After embarrassment in Nagano in 1998 and again at the World Cup in 2016, and plenty of ups and downs in between, the Americans now get a winner-take-all showdown with their rivals. And they get it not on some faraway rink in the middle of the night, but on home ice in prime time in front of what's likely to be one of the biggest hockey audiences in recent memory. The script has been perfect. All they need to do now is finish the story.

Sometimes the sports gods telegraph the ending, and that's OK. Especially when it's the right one.

**Team Canada is winning because: It's always Team USA's moment until it isn't**

If this is a movie, it's one we've seen before. Heck, 1998 was supposed to be Team USA's chance to win Olympic gold and cement their place on top of the hockey mountain, and instead they left Nagano in disgrace. But they've also had two cracks at Team Canada in a winner-take-all best-on-best final, including one in 2002 that came on home ice, just like this game. Those two games gave us Jah-yoe Sakic and a Golden Goal and a whole bunch of American excuses about how close they were.

And sure, they are close. They have been for decades. Close doesn't cut it when everything's on the line.

American fans can treat this game like it's playing out on a movie set if they want to, and that's fine. As a wise man once said, this tournament is about the flags, not the cameras. And it's going to be a Canadian flag left standing at the end, just like always.

## The Athletic / What can the NHL learn from its 4 Nations rule experiments?

**By Chris Johnston and Michael Russo – February 21, 2025**

BOSTON — The 4-Nations Face-Off hasn't just been about superstar performances, dream matchups and growing hockey.

It's also been, to a certain extent, about tinkering.

One interesting facet of the tournament has been how the NHL brought in new ideas and rules to see how they'd work and if they one day could be implemented in the league.

Not every idea is in consideration. Some were specifically designed for a four-team tournament among Finland, Sweden, the U.S. and Canada. But nevertheless, every rule change was once a new idea — and some of the ones used in the tournament have looked like hits (extended overtimes) while others have ... not as much (longer TV timeouts and shorter intermissions).

We've also seen cool new looks on the telecasts, such as a cameraman skating onto the ice from the penalty box to capture goal celebrations (like in the World Juniors), as well as referees wearing cameras, players wearing cameras in warmups and players and refs mic'd up. This summer, the league and television partners will meet to present ideas, exchange feedback and potentially make changes to the telecasts.

But the rule changes are worth assessing while the tournament is fresh, so for now, let's dive in on those.

### **10-minute overtime**

The tournament-opening game featured the longest-ever three-on-three overtime involving NHL players, taking more than six minutes before Canada's Mitch Marner ended it.

That prompted a wave of reaction and discussion — because it was six incredibly entertaining minutes, featuring 12 combined shots by Canada and Sweden, with four coming off Nathan MacKinnon's stick alone.

The NHL's general managers have previously discussed extending the length of overtime periods from five minutes to seven minutes, and in a broader sense would like to reduce the number of games decided by a shootout. But one of the reasons it hasn't happened is there are concerns about how much more taxing it will be for the league's top skaters.

### **So, what's the takeaway from here?**

It's mixed.

MacKinnon made it clear that he feels a 10-minute overtime period is too long. He said he'd consider supporting a switch to seven minutes. He was gassed after getting four overtime shifts covering 2:21 of the 6:06 played against Sweden.

"I usually feel better than that normally, but it was just an adrenaline dump," he said. "I can't believe I looked off Connor (McDavid) on that two-on-one, honestly, but I could barely see I was so tired on that rush. So I was happy when Marner scored because I didn't have much left to give."

The only other overtime played during the event ended quickly. Mikael Granlund sealed a win for Finland over Sweden at 1:49 by finishing off a three-on-one rush.

None of the 4 Nations games required a shootout.

The range of player opinions on a longer overtime makes it tough to handicap where we go from here. U.S. goalie Jake Oettinger said he was in favor of a change but noted that it required asking more of the skaters than someone playing his position.

“For the goalies, it’s nothing crazy,” he said. “I like it. It’s more fun, overtime, and there’ve been games where we’ve had great overtimes and it sucks when they end.”

Finnish forward Patrik Laine, meanwhile, joked that he wouldn’t mind if games went directly to a shootout and skipped overtime altogether.

“I don’t personally care,” he said. “I think some guys have a preference, but I think five minutes is enough. Especially the amount of great players that are out there, I think we should get an ending to a game in five minutes with all the guys on the ice.”

One notable voice in favor of a longer overtime period is McDavid, the game’s best player. He’s glad it was put in place for 4 Nations.

“I think it’s a great kind of trial run,” McDavid said. “Something that I think maybe the players liked. I think the fans liked it. It felt a little bit more like it’s in our hands.”

If Thursday’s final goes to overtime, it’ll be NHL Stanley Cup playoff rules: five-on-five, 20-minute overtimes until there’s a winner.

Had any 4 Nations games gone to a shootout, the NHL would have tested one other rule tweak affecting tiebreakers: Repeat shooters were going to be permitted in any shootouts that remained tied after the third round, just as they currently are in IIHF-sanctioned competitions.

In the NHL this season, a record 74.3 percent of games that have gone to overtime have ended before a shootout.

### **3-2-1 standings**

When everything was said and done in the round robin portion of the 4 Nations, Canada and the U.S. had two wins each, while Sweden and Finland each lost two games. But the final standings ended up like this:

**United States: 6 points**

**Canada: 5 points**

**Sweden: 5 points**

**Finland: 2 points**

That’s because of a points system that awarded three points for a regulation win, two for an overtime win and one point for an overtime loss. Canada had the tiebreaker and earned a spot in the championship game by virtue of its head-to-head win over Sweden.

Clearly, instituting something similar in the NHL’s regular season would have a dramatic impact on how the standings look. But don’t count on it being a topic of serious internal debate or discussion any time soon.

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman has been very clear that he sees the league’s “parity” as something worth celebrating. There’s certainly less separation in the existing system where two points are awarded for both regulation wins and shootout wins. Basically they’re valued the same way.

In fact, the main reason a different standings format was used for 4 Nations is because it made the tiebreaking procedure cleaner in a short event featuring just three games apiece.

Still, it was hard to ignore how drastically the pace picked up late in regulation of a tied Sweden-Finland game as both teams pushed for the three points rather than sitting back and waiting for a guaranteed loser point by reaching overtime.

There was also the potential for an entertaining scenario in which Canada might have pulled its goalie in regulation if it was tied late against Finland. It needed a regulation victory from that game to guarantee a spot in the championship, and coach Jon Cooper indicated they had planned for every scenario.

"Everything's been thought about, trust me," Cooper said. "I'll have a rolodex list out there on the bench. Hopefully it doesn't come to that."

Ultimately, it didn't — although it was close.

Finland scored twice with its own goalie pulled Monday afternoon to get the game back to 4-3 before Sidney Crosby iced the game with an empty-netter.

### **Changes to in-game breaks**

You may not have noticed watching on TV at home, but in the arena, it sure was noticeable.

The league and broadcast partners experimented with TV timeouts that were 30 seconds longer — going from two minutes to 2:30 — and intermissions that were one minute shorter — from 18 minutes to 17.

The consensus, U.S. defenseman Brock Faber said, is "most guys don't like it."

Some players were even stronger, like Finland's Erik Haula: "Awful. Terrible. Just awful."

"It can take you out of the game, especially if you're a third or fourth liner not getting a lot of minutes as it is," said Haula, who plays for the New Jersey Devils. "Third period, after TV timeouts, coaches are just gonna go with top-six guys, so it just kills you. The break is so big, you can play with two lines. I hate it personally."

It's clear, maybe out of habit, that it has thrown players off. Late in TV timeouts, as they wait for the game to resume, they skating around aimlessly. Linesmen aren't used to it, either. They've been going to the faceoff dots and just standing there waiting to get a signal to drop the puck. Players have followed and lined up ready to take the drop for 15, 20, 30 seconds.

"It feels long," Devils forward Jack Hughes said. "I didn't even know they were trying this, but you definitely notice. ... You start looking at the clock. It seems long. The minute mark, everyone is gearing up for the faceoff and guys are waiting at the dot for 45 seconds."

And this is a superstar who theoretically would benefit from a longer TV timeout. If top players get an extra 30 seconds to rest, a coach can keep throwing the top lines onto the ice even if they just played the shift before the TV timeout.

That sure has happened throughout the 4 Nations.

"TV timeouts are long as it is," Cooper said. "Can you recharge some of your top-end players? Of course you can. But then what does it do to the guys that haven't been out there, haven't been out before the TV timeout? And now you've got to wait through that. It's kind of the double-edged sword."

The United States' Matt Boldy doesn't see any reason to change it, but he also said "30 seconds is 30 seconds. It adds 90 seconds to a period. I don't think there's a lot of guys in the league that would say



that's crazy beneficial for them in a lot of ways. It's not like you're feeling on top of the world because you got an extra 30 seconds of rest.

"So I think it all depends on situations and scenarios, too. I think you'd still see certain guys you'd want on D-zone draws and the guys you want on O-zone draws."

Faber said what he really doesn't like is the shorter intermission because he has his routine down to the second.

"I'm normally ready right up until we have to go back out on the ice," Faber said. "With my routines and stuff between periods, I've noticed that has affected that a lot. I feel like I'm in a rush in the intermissions. It's much different. Feels much shorter."

One reason the league is experimenting with the change is to make it more consistent with other professional sports leagues and to tighten up the intermission shows on television.

But judging on feedback from coaches and players, this likely won't see the light of day during an NHL regular-season or playoff game.

## The Athletic / Why the most skilled hockey players in the world will play a conservative 4 Nations final

**By Arpon Basu – February 21, 2025**

BOSTON — Nathan MacKinnon was sitting at his Team Canada locker Wednesday after a long practice in preparation for the 4 Nations Face-Off championship game and referred to his teammate Connor McDavid as the best player in the world.

Not one of the best — the best. He didn't think about it, and no one within earshot really thought much of it.

MacKinnon is the reigning Hart Trophy winner as the NHL MVP. He is a Stanley Cup champion. He is definitely in the running for the title he bestowed on McDavid. So he should know.

Then MacKinnon was asked why he thinks McDavid is the best player in the world, and he chuckled.

"Do I have to explain it?" he asked in response. "It's a long list. I just watch him. He's been doing it for a decade. He's just so fun to watch. It's obvious."

This is what makes the 4 Nations so compelling, that MacKinnon can sit at his locker and talk about a teammate in those terms when he is a strong candidate to be considered the best of the best. He could also name Sidney Crosby, his team captain, in the same breath, even at age 37, for a title Crosby held for more than a decade. In the U.S. dressing room, you had Dylan Larkin refer to his captain Auston Matthews as the best player in the world, and while that might be debatable, it is not an outlandish claim.

This final game between Canada and the United States will have the best players in the world competing on the same sheet of ice for global hockey supremacy. They all care deeply about this. For almost all of them, it is the first time they have been able to play in a game like this.

The skill on the ice Thursday evening at TD Garden will be dazzling. Just pure, unadulterated offensive wizardry.

Just ask the best player in the world.

"I would highly doubt that," McDavid said. "So often you see two teams with so much offensive star power on either side, and it usually is a defensive battle."

Oh, right. This is hockey.

The first meeting between these teams, Saturday night in Montreal, was very much what McDavid described. It should only be heightened in the final, and it will be because of all that skill on the ice.

The skill is not there to put on a show. The skill is there to serve as a deterrent.

Don't make a mistake. Don't commit a turnover. Don't give the opposing team an inch. Because if you do, you have McDavid coming back at you, and that's terrifying.

"I think managing the puck, that's the key phrase," Team USA defenseman Jaccob Slavin said. "Because if you turn it over, you're not turning it over to a two-way, third- or fourth-line guy on any given night in the NHL. You're turning it over to what would be a first-line guy on any team."

What that means is a lot of chips into the offensive zone, dump-ins and retrievals, a style of hockey usually reserved for those third- and fourth-line two-way players Slavin was talking about, except it is the best collection of talent we have seen on the same ice sheet in close to 10 years doing it.

And that changes the calculus for the defensemen forced to go back for those pucks.

“The pace is completely different, it’s playoff pace, so you’re playing playoffs in the middle of the season,” Canada defenseman Cale Makar said. “Everything’s just got to be quicker. How you touch the puck, how you move it. Everything’s got to be moved before pressure (arrives), and that pressure’s just a little bit faster than normal.

“It’s definitely different, but that’s why you’re with the best players because those guys are going to put themselves in spots to hopefully do that.”

Team USA defenseman Brock Faber, who played a ton of minutes against MacKinnon and McDavid on Saturday, agreed that going back to collect pucks in this environment is far more difficult than what he’s used to in the NHL.

“It almost feels like there’s a little less structure on opposing teams’ forechecks,” Faber said. “Because everyone plays a different structure (in the NHL) so it’s more so just forwards reading off each other, which makes it harder as (defensemen), because a lot of teams you play, you know how they forecheck from video, for the most part. But in this, it just feels so different every time. That and every player on the other team is one of, if not the best player on their club team. So it’s better sticks, faster. It’s 100 percent more of a challenge. It’s something I’m still trying to get used to.

“It’s more of a challenge going back there because you don’t know what to expect.”

It is counterintuitive to think the best players in the world are there to ensure a good breakout off a dump-in. McDavid’s opening goal against the U.S. on Saturday was an example of what we hope to see from him on a stage like this.

But his opening goal in a must-win game against Finland on Monday is probably what we are more likely to see: a goal after chipping the puck in at the offensive blue line and picking off an errant Roope Hintz pass before scoring.

Canada goal!

Scored by Connor McDavid with 15:47 remaining in the 1st period.

Finland: 0

“I think any time you put that type of talent on the ice, managing the puck is just an essential part of winning,” Team USA coach Mike Sullivan said. “If you mismanage the puck, if you’re careless with the puck, if you chase offense, the unintended consequence of that is you can potentially give easy offense to the opponent. That’s something that we’ve talked about from day one, regardless of who we’re playing, is we’ve got to manage the puck appropriately in the critical areas of the rink.

“We don’t want to take the stick out of the players’ hands because these guys are elite players and we want them to trust their instincts, but you have to have an understanding of where we are on the rink and that risk/reward relationship.”

That risk/reward calculation is something NHL coaches talk about all the time. But if you think that calculation changes because of just how skilled these players are, you are right, it does. But not in the way you might think.

"You look at some of the goals that went against us, why we gave up two-on-ones, or why we gave up breakaways, that was all because we mismanaged pucks," Canada coach Jon Cooper said Tuesday. "Sometimes you just have to cut your losses. Not every shift is going to be a win. Sometimes there's ties. If you can have a whole bunch of ties, and throw in a few wins, and not have any losses, that's a pretty damn good game for you."

"That's the mentality we've got to put in with the guys, because these guys are superstars and they expect to win every single shift. But in this environment, against this talent, you're not winning every shift."

Then there is the fact that, yes, we are watching the best offensive players in the world, but we are also watching the best defensive players in the world. And that also enters the equation in a game like this.

"You also have to remind yourself you have the best defenders in the world, too," Team USA forward Kyle Connor said. "These guys can skate, they can make plays, but it's not just a one-trick pony. Everybody here can defend with the best of them, whether it's Matthews, (Jack) Eichel, all the top players we've got can shut down any other line."

"Nobody wants to make a mistake. The players are so talented here that if you make a mistake, you're going to pay for it for sure."

That mistake-free mentality applies to the best players in the world when they are facing the best players in the world. Larkin marveled at how well Matthews defended against Canada the last time around, and Matthews predicted that will again be more important than anything he can do offensively.

"You want to be in that tight game, you don't want to let them get their offense going, especially with the caliber of players that they have," Matthews said. "We're confident in the players we have over here as well. You hear it all the time, defense wins championships. You have to defend hard and check, especially against their best players."

And so, in a game that will have more eyeballs than perhaps any game this season, in a game that is resonating in the United States more than any other hockey game in years, in a moment where the beauty of hockey has a chance to shine with the most skilled players in the world, we are likely to see a game that is more of a chess match than a track meet.

Wouldn't it be fun if these two teams, with all the talent they have, just opened the throttle and allowed that talent to shine? If we got a track meet similar to how Canada and the Soviet Union played in the 1987 Canada Cup, with three games in the final that ended 6-5 and an iconic goal by Mario Lemieux from Wayne Gretzky?

Yes, it would be incredible. But it's not likely to happen.

"Everybody loves offense. Everyone would love that," McDavid said. "But ultimately that's not how we feel like we're going to be successful. I don't think that's how the other team feels they're going to be successful either. Not a lot of teams go in thinking, you know, we should win this one 6-5. You don't have that mindset."

From a pure entertainment value standpoint in a game that could resonate with people and bring new fans in, that's unfortunate.

But that's what it takes to win a hockey game. And both these teams are single-minded on that goal.

## The Athletic / 16 stats 4 Nations edition: Does Team Canada need more offense?

By Dom Luszczyzyn – February 21, 2025

In best-on-best hockey, every inch of space is earned and fought for. The game can be suffocatingly tense with teams battling hard for every ounce of offensive oxygen. Goals and chances are extremely hard to come by. We see that every year in the playoffs as the best teams go deep. We've seen it at previous international tournaments. And we're seeing it here again at 4 Nations Face-Off.

Here's the question that arises from that as the U.S. and Canada are set to square off in the championship matchup the hockey world has been begging to see for almost a decade: Does Canada have the offensive ability to beat the U.S.?

On its face, it seems like a ridiculous question for a team that has Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Sidney Crosby and Cale Makar leading it. There's no doubt Canada has the personnel capable, but the actual ability to drive offense has been lacking so far — especially in comparison to the U.S.

At five-on-five, Canada has played 170 minutes and has scored seven goals while generating 6.45 expected goals. That equates to 2.47 goals/60 and 2.28 xG/60. The latter mark would be the 25th-best in the NHL this season, according to Natural Stat Trick, sandwiched between Ottawa and Minnesota. In contrast, Team USA is at 3.06 xG/60, a mark that would lead the league.

That's a massive divide between the two nations, one Canada has to narrow in the final. Canada makes up for some of it with the best defensive game at the tournament (1.70 xGA/60 to USA's 2.21), but that's out of necessity due to the team's shaky goaltending. Canada's aim at this tournament has been to offset the weakest part of its game by sheltering its goalies as much as possible. But in turn, that move may have also neutered the team's biggest strength: its high-octane offense.

I'm not just talking about some of the bottom-six players, either — it's also the team's stars who haven't generated nearly as much offense as usual. McDavid, MacKinnon and Crosby have their points, yes, but it's alarming how little they're generating offensively. During the season, McDavid generates 3.56 xG/60, MacKinnon is at 3.28 and Crosby earns 3.33. At this tournament, they're well below that at 2.22, 2.66 and 2.54, respectively. Given the nature of the tournament, some drop-off is to be expected, but those are big fall-offs — especially for McDavid.

Canada is scoring when those three are on the ice and all three have delivered standout defensive performances. It wouldn't be a shock if any won tournament MVP after leading Canada to victory. But against a U.S. squad that's just as deep and backstopped by the best goalie in the world, Canada will need to throw a lot more at the Americans.

McDavid, MacKinnon and Crosby aren't the problem — far from it, considering the trio leads all forwards in Net Rating. The best have been the best, no question. But their underlying numbers at five-on-five suggest systematic symptoms throughout the lineup. It's not just them struggling to deliver as much offense as usual, and that could be a big problem against a tough-to-score-on American side. It could be what leads to Canada's undoing in the final.

Canada is capable of much more offensively. Now is the time to show it.

### **1. Point's promotion**

One way to jump-start the offensive game at five-on-five? Moving one of the team's best and fastest scorers up to play with McDavid. Brayden Point played really well on the third line, but it felt like Canada could've used more of him.

For the tournament, Point has been Canada's top forward in both xG generation (2.87 per 60) and goal scoring (4.52 per 60). Having him next to McDavid against Finland felt like a no-brainer. McDavid had his best game as a result, scoring two points while earning 76 percent of the expected goals. Offensively, his xG generation went up to 2.73 from just 2.02 in the two prior games. That's especially impressive given most of that came in the first period before the game got out of hand.

Point's promotion is a key change from Canada's first game against USA, one that could shift the balance in Canada's favor.

## **2. Canadian pressure points**

Looking through the scoring chance data, Canada seems to have two vulnerable areas heading into the final: the second pair and the fourth line.

Canada's second pair of Josh Morrissey and Colton Parayko have done well on the actual scoreboard and that fact should not be discounted in a best-on-best tournament. Allowing under one goal against per 60 is a commendable feat against the best in the world, but the team's offensive issues do seem to start there. Canada generates just 1.65 xG/60 with Parayko on the ice and 1.87 with Morrissey; otherwise, it's north of 2.5. The pair hasn't had much control of the puck during the first three games, leaving Canada spending a lot of time defending. Morrissey and Parayko are world-class defenders, but if that continues, they'll be playing with fire against the U.S.

As for the fourth line, Sam Bennett and Travis Konecny are the only Canadian forwards who have lost the scoring chance battle at the tournament, with 40 percent and 23 percent of the expected goals, respectively. Unlike the second pair, though, Canada has paid the price for it with Konecny being on the ice for 7.5 goals against per 60 and Bennett on for 5.5. They've also generated very few chances while not scoring any goals, all while getting the cushiest offensive zone usage on the team.

Seth Jarvis, for what it's worth, has been a lot more effective. Putting him back in the lineup for the final could alleviate that issue.

## **3. Doughty looks revitalized**

I was a bit worried about Drew Doughty coming into this tournament given how he looked in his return to the Los Angeles Kings. Doughty is still an elite player, but it looked like he was playing catch-up after a long lay-off — enough to question how effective he could be while thrown to the wolves against extremely difficult competition.

All those worries are gone now. No matter who he's played with, Doughty has been lights-out with a 73 percent xG rate. Swapping him with Parayko might be Canada's best course of action for the final given how the two have played so far.

## **4. Harley and Sanderson: 2026 Olympians?**

Thomas Harley and Jake Sanderson have only suited up for one game each at this tournament, but that one game looked especially promising for both players' futures with the national team.

When Harley was on the ice, Canada earned 90 percent of expected goals against the U.S. When Sanderson was on the ice, the U.S. earned 79 percent of expected goals against Sweden. Those are obviously excellent numbers, helping confirm the impact they've had at the NHL level so far in quietly dominating for their respective teams.

Harley and Sanderson are young and only getting better, and this taste of best-on-best action feels like only the beginning. Watch out for both over the next year. Now that their names are out there, they'll have more eyes on the day-to-day elite play they deliver. Both players could end up being pivotal cogs at the 2026 Olympics for their respective squads.

### **5. Hellebuyck: X-factor**

We always knew Connor Hellebuyck would be the X-factor for Team USA and it's no shock he's delivered so far. In his two games, Hellebuyck has stopped 45 of 47 shots (.957 save percentage) and saved 4.7 goals above expected. The X-factor, though, is what that presence allows the U.S. to do the other way, playing with a bigger offensive mentality.

Part of the reason Canada has played more cautiously probably has something to do with less trust in their goaltending. With Hellebuyck, the U.S. doesn't have that problem, and it's led to the team playing at a higher pace; more offensive oomph, with the confidence that they can give up more chances the other way. Hellebuyck has their back.

In non-U.S. games, the average pace at five-on-five is 3.78 xG/60 — a fairly consistent mark in each game. In games featuring the U.S. though, that jumps to 5.27 xG/60. That's a big difference.

### **6. Werenski: top five defenseman?**

If it wasn't clear before the tournament with Zach Werenski playing Norris-level hockey, it should be clear now after a sensational tournament: He is a no-doubt top-five defenseman.

At the tournament, Werenski has five points, tied with Sidney Crosby for the tournament lead. On top of that, he has a 62 percent xG rate and has outscored opponents 3-1 at the tournament. All that has led to a plus-1.47 Net Rating which leads all players at the tournament.

### **7. Fox's shocking usage**

One of the most surprising things at this tournament has been Team USA's usage of Adam Fox. The star defender is last among defensemen in five-on-five ice time at just 14.9 minutes per game. Definitely didn't expect that, and it's not like his numbers have been bad either.

### **8. Shutdown Slavin**

Data has been hard to come by for this tournament and one of the things I wish we could see is specific player matchups. Natural Stat Trick usually has it for each game, just not for this tournament.

Still, I was curious about Jaccob Slavin's usage against Canada so I did a manual check of his shifts. His xG rate wasn't great, but anyone who watched him that night came away impressed. That's partly because he wasn't on the ice for a goal against despite an extreme degree of difficulty, regularly going up against both McDavid and MacKinnon. Slavin played 22.3 minutes at five-on-five against Canada, 13.7 of which came against McDavid or MacKinnon. They may have got their chances, but not allowing them any points is a big win for Slavin.

### **9. Fourth-liner Connor**

Kyle Connor, this generation's Phil Kessel, has had a tough time fitting in to the USA lineup. Connor struggled in the top nine in the opening game and was immediately relegated to the fourth line where his struggles have only continued.

Connor is last on the team with a 28.5 percent xG rate and has been a defensive mess, allowing 3.36 xGA/60 — the worst mark at the tournament.

That's a shame given Connor had seemed to turn his defensive game around this season with the Jets, but his performance here outlines why his inclusion was a bit of a risk considering his one-dimensional reputation. When the competition ramps up, it becomes simultaneously harder to score and harder to defend. If Connor isn't doing the former in the top nine because he's struggling without the puck, it becomes hard to justify giving him more minutes.

In this tournament, though, there's nowhere to hide and even a fourth-line role becomes difficult for a player who can be a defensive liability. If Connor can't cut it in the top nine — and he hasn't — he doesn't have a great fit on the team.

#### **10. Tkachuk brothers' offense generation**

The Tkachuk brothers are well known for their innate ability to generate chances thanks to their chaotic playstyle and affinity for going to the dirty areas. In a tight tournament, it's no surprise that they're still the best in the business at setting up shop in high-danger areas and they've done so to an incredible degree here.

With Brady on the ice, the U.S. has generated 6.28 expected goals per 60. With Matthew it's 5.11. Aside from linemate Jack Eichel at 4.24, the next closest forwards at the tournament are Matt Boldy (3.70), Viktor Arvidsson (3.34) and Dylan Larkin (3.25). Every other forward is under three xG/60.

The Tkachuks have been out of this world and their health looms large for the final. Both should play — but can they be this effective?

#### **11. Sweden to the outside**

Sweden was left outside the final and it was partly because the team was kept to the outside for the entire tournament.

By shot attempt percentage, Sweden did just fine in every game and actually had a slight edge in each one. The Swedes were at 50.4 percent against Canada, 50.7 percent against Finland and 50.5 percent against the U.S.

But in terms of chances and getting in tight, Sweden got destroyed. Their xG percentage for the tournament was 44.4 percent and it was even worse looking at just high-danger shot attempts, where Sweden sits at a tournament-low 29.3 percent. The Swedes were at 28.4 percent against Canada, 30.3 percent against Finland and 29.3 percent against the U.S.

Not good enough.

#### **12. Forsberg and Dahlin underused**

In a best-on-best tournament, ice time is a tough conversation. Every player is great and most coaches know how to use them best. Still, it's hard not to look at Sweden's usage and wonder whether it cost them a spot in the final.

Filip Forsberg is arguably one of Sweden's most impactful forwards and was one of the few who controlled play for the team during the tournament. Yet he was somehow ninth on the forward depth chart, playing just 12.6 minutes per game at five-on-five along with PP2 usage.

Same goes for Rasmus Dahlin, who might be Sweden's current best defenseman and the only Swedish blueliner to out-chance his opponents. And yet he averaged just 16.4 minutes at five-on-five with no power play time until the third (meaningless) game, as well as no overtime usage. In a tournament where one point would have literally made the difference, the lack of three-on-three (where Dahlin usually thrives) was a baffling decision.



Going into the 2026 Olympics, Sweden needs to take a long look in the mirror at what went wrong here. With how the team was pushed to the outside and who earned the most ice, that starts behind the bench.

### **13. What's up with Pettersson?**

Okay so this was a lie...

"We're going to see a different Pettersson during this tournament. He's going to be a very good player for Vancouver when he comes back for sure."

Elias Pettersson's ice time dwindled each game as he continued to look like a complete non-factor every night. On the surface, that seems like part of the team's weird usage, but in this case it's fair to say Pettersson wasn't worthy of the ice time. The decrease in role was deserved as Pettersson was a key catalyst to Sweden's problem getting inside.

Pettersson was one of just three forwards at the tournament to not generate over 0.05 expected goals over the three games. Sweden generated just 1.7 high-danger shot attempts with Pettersson on the ice and allowed 13.4 against, giving Pettersson a ghastly 11 percent high-danger shot attempt rate at the tournament. Only his frequent linemate Jesper Bratt was worse.

Perimeter play doesn't win games against the best in the world.

### **14. Saros runs out of gas**

One thing Finland can usually rely on to keep things closer than expected is goaltending. In another year they might have got that with Juuse Saros, but not this season — his worst ever. Based on Evolving Hockey's GSAX model, Saros has allowed 3.5 goals more than expected this season — the first below-average season of his career. That ranks 48th among 62 goalies to face 500 unblocked shot attempts against.

Saros has been the league's biggest workhorse over the last few years and that workload looks to be catching up with him. It showed in his one start against the U.S where he allowed six goals on just 2.4 expected goals against.

The short leash put Kevin Lankinen, Saros' backup last season, between the pipes which only placed Finland further behind the other three teams. Without elite goaltending, Finland never had a shot.

### **15. Finland's lack of defensive depth**

We all knew Finland's defense would be a weak spot going into the tournament, especially after the team lost Miro Heiskanen and Rasmus Ristolainen. That played out almost exactly as expected with the top pair being overwhelmed in big minutes and the rest looking out of their depth.

That was especially clear with the team's third pair of Urho Vaakanainen and Nikolas Matinpalo, two replacement-level defenders who looked the part. While some might be encouraged by a break-even xG rate, the big issue with No. 7 defensemen is that they can get picked apart easily where it actually matters on the scoresheet.

**Case in point:** The duo were on the ice for five goals against in just over 35 minutes of ice-time, or 8.5 goals against per 60 — the worst mark at the tournament. That's not just bad luck; that's what happens when lesser defenders get exposed to the best in the world. Vaakanainen and Matinpalo were eaten alive by the U.S. and Canada especially.

### **16. Lack of Finnish star-power**

One of the reasons to buy Finland as a scrappy underdog that could make noise in a short tournament was the team's group of offensive stars. Aleksander Barkov, Mikko Rantanen, Sebastian Aho and Roope Hintz — all of them disappointed. Barkov and Aho had two points, Rantanen had a single goal (that Filip Gustavsson should've saved) and Roope Hintz was held off the scoresheet entirely. It's hard to dominate given the state of the team's blue line, but it was still a tough tournament for the team's best.

That's especially true for the Aho and Hintz pairing, who were counted on to deliver offense for the team and had a tournament-worst performance in that department. While the duo may have been strong defensively, they scored zero goals at five-on-five and generated next to nothing in terms of chances. The two were last among all skaters in xGF/60 with Aho at 0.55 and Hintz at 0.7 — a truly awful number.

Maybe that was by design as a shutdown unit. Maybe it was just their play. Either way, it was a bad look and one of the many reasons Finland struggled mightily at the tournament.

#### **17. Hughes could put a stamp on best-on-best**

One bonus stat thanks to the surprise news that Quinn Hughes would be joining Team USA for the final after Charlie McAvoy was ruled out.

The U.S. currently has a 56 percent chance of beating Canada without Hughes in the lineup and unfortunately, Hughes can only play if the defense corps suffers another injury. If another injury does occur and Hughes does play, though, the U.S.'s chances jump to 58 percent. In a tournament like this where Hughes is already replacing a great player, that's a big margin.

## The Athletic / How to watch 4 Nations Face-Off Final: U.S. takes on Canada in emotionally-charged rematch

**By Sarah Jean Maher – February 21, 2025**

The Athletic has live coverage of USA vs Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off Championship.

Hockey's 4 Nations Face-Off concludes Thursday with what should be an emotionally charged Canada-U.S. rematch — a "dream scenario" ending for the hockey world's long-awaited return of international best-on-best.

The rival countries will play for the championship at TD Garden in Boston.

Canada is led by league superstars Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and Sidney Crosby. They've gotten some shaky goaltending from Jordan Binnington but have another star on D in Cale Makar. Team USA boasts the best goaltender in the league in Connor Hellebuyck and elite offense from Jack Eichel, Jake Guentzel, Auston Matthews and Matthew Tkachuk.

Canada edged Sweden 4-3 in overtime in the opening game last Wednesday, while the United States opened its tournament with a 6-1 rout of Finland the following night. The North American rivals then met Saturday in their first best-on-best matchup since the 2016 World Cup of Hockey. The Americans pulled away with a dramatic, physical 3-1 victory that began with three fights in the game's opening nine seconds and punched their ticket to the final.

Canada defeated Finland 5-3 to clinch its berth in the final, while the U.S. dropped its finale to Sweden 2-1, resting stars Hellebuyck, Tkachuk and Matthews. Team USA recently lost Boston Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy to injury, and a number of other players could be game-time decisions.

Crosby and U.S. defenseman Zach Werenski lead the tournament with 5 points each.

Predictions from The Athletic's NHL staff:

Who will emerge as champions? Team USA has a slight edge at 51.9 percent.

U.S. goaltender Hellebuyck is the favorite for tournament MVP.

Sweden's Elias Pettersson, who finished the tournament with zero points, was voted most disappointing player by far, while Finland's Mikael Granlund, who scored back-to-back goals in the final two minutes against Canada, was voted most surprising player.

## The Athletic / Supercharged U.S.-Canada finale to have anthem animosity, maybe a fight, but mainly heart

By Steve Buckley – February 21, 2025

Bill Guerin nailed it the other day when he went on Fox and said there's "a little bit of a political flare" going on in the hockey rivalry between the United States and Canada.

Of course there is. President Trump, you'll recall, has taken to referring to Canada as "the 51st state." In keeping with that theme, the president has bestowed a new title on Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, calling him "Governor Trudeau." (As belittling, sophomoric Trump nicknames go, you have to admit that one is pretty good.)

And don't forget Trump's tariff threats, which could trigger a trade war.

Speaking of wars, the United States faces Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off championship on Thursday night at TD Garden in Boston.

Even as a politics-free stand-alone, the game is guaranteed to be memorable, which is why tickets are going for a minimum of \$1,250 on the secondary market, per The Athletic's Chris Johnston. And if the television ratings for the USA's 3-1 victory over Canada last Saturday night in Montreal are any indication, they're going to sizzle for Thursday's finale.

Politics and name-calling aside, United States-Canada is a for-real rivalry, especially when one takes into account the hammer-against-the-nail success the Canadians have had against the Americans over the years in international competition. Canada's record against the US is 13-4-1 in "best-on-best" competition, including victories in the gold medal games at the 2002 and 2010 Olympics. And don't forget that Thursday's championship game is being played in Boston, where Canadiens versus Bruins remains every bit as intense as Yankees versus Red Sox.

Now, back to Guerin's comment about that "little bit of a political flare," which reveals the Wilbraham, Mass., native to be a little bit of a political scientist. As general manager of the United States team, Guerin had an up-close-and-personal look at last week's United States-Canada matchup in Montreal, which got underway after the Bell Centre crowd loudly booed the American national anthem. And then the game began, and the boobirds were still settling in their seats when "Three fights in nine seconds!" cemented itself as an instant-classic sports catchphrase, right up there with "And down the stretch they come!" and "Do you believe in miracles!?"

### **Let's summarize:**

- Canadian fans booing the American national anthem.
- Three fights in nine seconds to start the game.
- A spirited victory by the United States.

Think there's anything more that can be done to draw attention to this game?

"We would love it if President Trump was in attendance," Guerin said during his Fox appearance. "We have a roomful of proud American players and coaches and staff, and, listen, we're just trying to represent our country the best way we can."

There's already been plenty of speculation about how the Garden crowd is going to react to the Canadian national anthem. I have some thoughts on that. Here goes: Do whatever you want. Take your

patriotism to whatever heights, or lows, you believe are suitable for the occasion. Cheer. Boo. Sit. Stand. Do something. Do nothing.

However, I do invite you to consider what took place at Montreal's Stade Olympique on the night of Sept. 18, 2001. The Montreal Expos were hosting the Florida Marlins in their first home game since the Sept. 11 terrorist strikes, and players on both teams lined the sidelines during the playing of the American and Canadian national anthems. The crowd was small — an announced 2,917 for a late-season game between two teams whose playoff hopes had long since vanished — but those who were there stood up and saluted America. According to the Miami Herald, "Five members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police marched in from center field under silence, leading a contingent of law enforcement and fire fighters who carried American flags and ringed the field for the anthem."

After the ceremony, the public address system played John Lennon singing, "Give Peace a Chance."

An 18-year-old Montreal woman, Isabelle Lepage, brought an American flag to the game. "I bought it in New York in 1997 in a shop near the World Trade Center," Lepage said, according to the Associated Press. "I wanted to show our solidarity with the United States."

Fast forward to April 15, 2013. Robin Watson of Vancouver had just competed in the 117th Boston Marathon in 2:15:33, which was 11th overall, making him the top Canadian finisher. He was at the Copley Place Hotel having lunch with family members — including his brother, Pete Watson, now director of men's and women's track and field at Boston College — when two bombs planted by terrorists went off at the finish line, just across Copley Plaza.

I reached out to Watson, now 41.

"I'll always love the city of Boston and the people of Boston just for the way they reacted to that," Watson told me. "They took care of us. It was their city that was under attack. It was happening in their community. But what I remember most is everyone around us making sure we were safe and secure.

"Something that will always resonate with me is that after the bombs went off you had more people running toward the explosion than away from the explosion," Watson said. "It was a coming-together. It was people helping people.

"Boston may have a reputation for being rough around the edges," Watson said, "but they care. They're good people."

Watson will be rooting for Canada tonight with all his heart.

Puck drop is scheduled for shortly after 8 p.m., following the playing of the Canadian and American national anthems.

## ESPN / Grades, top players from Canada's epic OT win over the U.S.

**By Kristen Shilton – February 21, 2025**

Heading into the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament, many expected the United States and Canada to meet in the championship game.

No one expected that the two countries' opening-round matchup would be so intense, though, or that the final game would be an instant classic, decided in overtime on the stick of Connor McDavid.

Here are grades for the United States and Canada, including the biggest takeaways, the key player to watch for the 2026 Olympics and lingering questions for each nation in the buildup to the Winter Games.

### **Grading the teams**

#### **Canada: A**

Canada had star power to spare in its lineup, but there was no way relying on just the top lines to contribute was going to get it past an equally stacked American team. Kudos to head coach Jon Cooper for recognizing that and tapping into all Canada had to offer.

The addition of Cale Makar on the blue line -- after he missed the round-robin matchup between these teams with an illness -- was a significant improvement for Canada, but its other elite skaters were still stymied. By midway through the third period, there were no shots on goal from players like Mitch Marner and Sidney Crosby. Beating an all-world goalie like Connor Hellebuyck isn't easy during the best of times, and Canada could have made him more uncomfortable.

In such an evenly matched game, open ice was hard to find. Canada cracked the Vezina Trophy favorite with savvy play that other countries in the event couldn't manage. That was a win in itself. McDavid producing the overtime game-winner was simply poetic.

#### **United States: A-**

The USA didn't need a group chat to outline its strategy. The final was no time for fisticuffs; it was more about finesse.

Fortunately, the Americans had that on display, too. Jake Guentzel might have been the most effective forward on both sides of this game, frustrating the Canadian defense with some flashy moves. And anyone who didn't recognize how good Jaccob Slavin can be got a masterclass in the way he dominated from the back end, with Ray Ferraro referring to him as an "eraser" in the defensive zone.

While both players deserve praise, it was maybe leaning too much on individuals who kept the U.S. from taking over earlier in the game. The team let Canada bring the action to it for the first two periods before turning up the heat in those final 20 minutes. Would the U.S. have run away with a victory had it pressed earlier?

### **What we learned**

#### **Depth makes a difference**

The stars showed up on both sides of the final, but depth skaters made their presence felt, too. Jake Sanderson and Sam Bennett pocketed second-period goals, showing why certain skaters were targeted by their countries for this short-term opportunity -- it's because they can make an impact.

Bennett was the one who drew Canada's second-period penalty, and while his countrymen didn't capitalize, he gave them a chance. And Sanderson wouldn't have been in the lineup if it weren't for an injury to Charlie McAvoy, which shows why roster construction is such a delicate task in these tournaments.

Given how quickly injuries can happen, teams have to trust whatever skaters are waiting in the wings -- same with Thomas Harley stepping in for Josh Morrissey -- and in an evenly fought matchup like this one, depth can move the needle.

### **Goaltending hardly a great divide**

There were long discussions around how Jordan Binnington would stack up against Hellebuyck in a final game. And it turns out both netminders were excellent.

Most of the game was evenly played in shots on goal, and Binnington came through with just as many clutch stops as Hellebuyck to give his team a chance to win. Earlier concerns about Binnington's ability to match Hellebuyck now seem silly, particularly as star players at both ends -- Auston Matthews and McDavid -- couldn't find twine early on.

The key for Binnington especially was to make the stop that counted, like when he stoned Matthews and Brady Tkachuk in overtime. He was Canada's OT MVP.

Hellebuyck was exceptional too; one of the goalies had to give up a winner, and in the end it wasn't a knock on either to see that puck cross the line.

### **Player to watch in the buildup to the Olympics**

#### **Sidney Crosby, F, Canada**

Crosby is, by all accounts, the heartbeat of every team he plays for -- whether it's the Pittsburgh Penguins or on the intentional front. Crosby will be 38 when the 2026 Olympic Games roll around. What can Canada reasonably expect from him in that tournament?

Crosby was Canada's points leader at 4 Nations going into the final, with one goal and four assists, proving that he's still incredibly effective even when he's battling an injury (there's a reason he kept that left hand in a hoodie during every media availability during the 4 Nations event). But will another year of NHL wear and tear allow Crosby to take on key responsibilities again in Italy?

There are a number of up-and-coming forwards in Canada's system, and while Crosby is guaranteed a spot on his country's Olympic roster, where he slots in will be fascinating.

#### **Auston Matthews, F, United States**

We did not see the best of Matthews in this 4 Nations tournament. He's battled injuries throughout the NHL season and didn't register his first shot on goal in the event until the championship.

And yet, Matthews is a generational scoring talent who can be a wicked game-breaker unlike anyone in the USA program. He was named 4 Nations captain for a reason, and if that opportunity didn't showcase all Matthews has to offer, then a healthy version at the Olympics could tell an entirely different story.

And if it does, what difference does that make for the USA in those Games? Matthews has excelled at every level and whatever he does in the offseason to guard against injury in the coming year will play into how he performs in Italy. There's no doubt what he's capable of but it's all about health and ensuring he's primed to be at his best next year.

### **Lingering questions for the Olympics**

### **How will Canada approach it's goaltending?**

Canada came under heavy scrutiny for its goalie choices in this tournament. Logan Thompson wasn't included among Canada's trio, and frankly deserved to be. Will he emerge as a starter for Canada when it comes to the Games? Or is what Binnington provided as the only Canadian goalie used at 4 Nations enough to give him the inside track to be Canada's No.1?

Or does another candidate emerge? Will Stuart Skinner or Darcy Kuemper push their way into the conversation?

Canada's top forwards and defensemen haven't been in question. It comes down to who its believes will give it the best chance in net, given that Jon Cooper didn't give either Adin Hill or Sam Montembeault a sniff at 4 Nations.

### **What will a healthy USA blue line look like?**

It looked for a moment like the USA might get Quinn Hughes in for the final, after he was originally sidelined by injury for the tournament. That roster addition didn't come to fruition, but what difference might Hughes have made? Especially if he was on a back end that included a healthy McAvoy, forced out of the tournament by an upper-body ailment?

The U.S. showed time and again it can generate offense, and its goaltending group was arguably the event's best. It's not that it lacked defensive prowess without Hughes and McAvoy in the mix, but it's hard not to wonder how much more dominant this team could be in Italy with all its top skaters available.

Because when it orchestrates a tight, shut-down game it can be as good or better than any opponent.



## **ESPN / Who makes Team USA at the 2026 Olympics? Locks, maybes, rising stars**

**By Greg Wyshynski – February 21, 2025**

Like every American hockey player over the past 45 years, the NHL stars on the United States 4 Nations Face-Off roster are obsessed with the Miracle on Ice.

More to the point, they're obsessed with the movie "Miracle," which chronicled that seminal moment in sports history when the U.S. upset the Soviets in the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics before eventually winning the gold medal.

After the U.S. beat Canada in Montreal, cameras caught Jack Hughes singing along to Aerosmith's "Dream On," which was featured in the movie. When Matthew Tkachuk declared that Team USA wanted to send a message that "it's our time," it echoed Kurt Russell's epic speech as coach Herb Brooks before playing the Soviets: "This is your time. Their time is done. It's over."

The Miracle on Ice still resonates because it's the greatest moment in U.S. hockey history, precisely because it remains the last time the men's team captured gold. The next four decades featured promising teams and talented players with the potential for Olympic glory, but all fell short of the ultimate goal.

The 2026 Olympic men's hockey team feels like the culmination of those years chasing gold. Generations inspired by the Miracle. NHL expansion into "non-traditional" markets, which created an unprecedented spike in elite talent. The slow, steady domination of Team USA at other levels of hockey -- such as world juniors, where the U.S. has won back-to-back titles.

"Our player pool is second to none. Over the last 20 years, USA Hockey has done a terrific job, with the overall focus on development of players at a young age," U.S. general manager Bill Guerin said last year. "But we're going to have to play the game and find out on the ice."

When the Americans hit the Olympic ice in Italy next year, they'll do so as a tournament favorite. As the 4 Nations Face-Off hinted at this month, the potential U.S. roster is deep with high-end scoring talent, physical players, defensive specialists and the greatest collection of goaltenders in the world. They can stand toe-to-toe with any hockey superpower in the world and -- thanks to players such as the Tkachuk brothers -- have the confidence to believe they're superior.

But the team that competed at 4 Nations merely offered a template for the 2026 roster.

"This is probably not going to be the exact lineup that we take to the Olympics," Guerin said before the tournament.

Here's a look at where the 2026 U.S. Olympic roster stands after the 4 Nations Face-Off, from the mortal locks for Italy to the players trying to bang the door down to join the team.

### **Forward locks**

**Jack Eichel, Vegas Golden Knights**

**Jake Guentzel, Tampa Bay Lightning**

**Jack Hughes, New Jersey Devils**

**Dylan Larkin, Detroit Red Wings**

**Auston Matthews, Toronto Maple Leafs**

### **Brady Tkachuk, Ottawa Senators**

### **Matthew Tkachuk, Florida Panthers**

It can't be overstated how important Matthew and Brady Tkachuk have been to the U.S. national team. On the ice, they create scoring chances and provide an antagonistic physical presence. Off the ice, they've infused the national team with a braggadocio that it has lacked since the mid-1990s, when players such as Jeremy Roenick and Brett Hull brought their big personalities to the locker room.

It's not all that different than when Matthew Tkachuk was acquired by the Panthers in 2022. GM Bill Zito rightfully called him a "generational talent," but also knew his attitude could have a transformative effect on the franchise. They made the Stanley Cup Final in his first season in Florida, upsetting the heavily favored Boston Bruins in the first round thanks to Tkachuk's defiant confidence. The Panthers won the Stanley Cup for the first time the following season.

"Brady and Matthew have the ability, through their personality, to give our team a whole lot of confidence and swagger," U.S. coach Mike Sullivan said during 4 Nations. "There's a certain determination that those guys have to want to win."

Matthew Tkachuk was one of the initial group of players named to the U.S. roster at 4 Nations. The other two were Matthews and Eichel, both of whom were cited for their skill and leadership. They're locks.

Guentzel continued his legacy as a clutch scorer with three goals and an assist through Team USA's first three games of 4 Nations. His 38 postseason goals since 2017 are the sixth most in the NHL during that span. As he has shown with the Pittsburgh Penguins and Tampa Bay Lightning, Guentzel can find chemistry with elite scorers and bolster their lines.

Hughes had an interesting ride in 4 Nations. He pumped 10 shots on goal in his first three games but only mustered a secondary assist in the Americans' rout of Finland. He struggled to create offense with his usual panache while shifting from center to wing. But the supremely talented New Jersey Devils star earned some valuable experience ahead of what will be another berth on the national team roster.

Larkin flashed his game-breaking speed and was the offensive difference-maker in the win over Canada in Montreal, scoring the go-ahead goal. The Red Wings center was used as a primary penalty killer for Sullivan. He did nothing in 4 Nations but help his case for the Olympics.

### **Forward maybes**

#### **Matt Boldy, Minnesota Wild**

#### **Kyle Connor, Winnipeg Jets**

#### **Chris Kreider, New York Rangers**

#### **J.T. Miller, New York Rangers**

#### **Brock Nelson, New York Islanders**

#### **Vincent Trocheck, New York Rangers**

I asked Boldy whether he viewed the 4 Nations tournament as an Olympic audition. "We're here to win and to play good hockey, so no, it hasn't really been on my mind," he responded.

That might be true, but so is this: Boldy has played himself on to the cusp of "lock" status for the 2026 team. He had a goal and two assists in the first three games and saw a bit of time on Sullivan's power play unit. Between 2024 IIHF worlds and 4 Nations, the 23-year-old winger has enough experience

ahead of the Olympics. The fact U.S. GM Bill Guerin also runs the Minnesota Wild gave Boldy a higher bar to clear than most on this team, and he cleared it.

Connor should end up on the Olympic squad as one of USA Hockey's top goal-scoring wingers -- he has 142 goals over his past four seasons, 13th best in the NHL. That said, he's a top-six forward without a spot in the top six thanks to Guentzel and Brady Tkachuk.

Being in the Tkachuks' group chat is great, but it's Miller's physicality and versatility that'll put him squarely on the Team USA radar for Italy. Like Larkin, he was a primary penalty killer for Sullivan. Unlike Larkin, he'll be 32 next winter.

Nelson (33), Kreider (33) and Trocheck (31) made the 4 Nations roster ahead of younger, more offensively-oriented players. In her player assessment article, ESPN's Rachel Doerrie noted Nelson and Trocheck "have struggled to impact this tournament in any meaningful way" after being added as gritty role players. That said, it's hard to imagine Guerin and Sullivan not bringing along some veteran, bottom-six grunts to balance out the skill guys in Italy.

#### **Forwards ready to draw in**

**Brock Boeser, Vancouver Canucks**

**Cole Caufield, Montreal Canadiens**

**Logan Cooley, Utah Hockey Club**

**Alex DeBrincat, Detroit Red Wings**

**Conor Garland, Vancouver Canucks**

**Clayton Keller, Utah Hockey Club**

**Matthew Knies, Toronto Maple Leafs**

**Jason Robertson, Dallas Stars**

**Tage Thompson, Buffalo Sabres**

**Alex Tuch, Buffalo Sabres**

Thompson is easily the one to watch after the U.S. called on him as an injury reserve player in 4 Nations. The 6-foot-6 Sabres center was one of the most curious "snubs" on the 4 Nations roster, given his offensive prowess (26 goals, 22 assists in 48 games with Buffalo this season). One assumes the expanded Olympic roster will mean he'll earn a spot.

Caufield (26 goals), DeBrincat (24), Keller (20), Robertson (20) and Boeser (18) all fall in that category of player who might not bring enough of the "total package" to warrant inclusion over the veteran, 200-foot players who made the 4 Nations team. But one could see the U.S. brain trust dedicating one of their extras to a pure offensive dynamo, in case anyone in their top six is injured. Caufield could have the inside track there, although 20-year-old Logan Cooley (43 points in 50 games) is an interesting case.

Knies is one to watch here, given his size (6-3), physicality and chemistry with Matthews. If you don't think the ability to click with a team's top scorer can't get you on the national team roster, just ask 2014 Olympian and Sidney Crosby linemate Chris Kunitz. Tuch is another physical option for the U.S.

#### **Defenseman locks**

**Adam Fox, New York Rangers**

**Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks**

**Charlie McAvoy, Boston Bruins**

**Jacob Slavin, Carolina Hurricanes**

**Zach Werenski, Columbus Blue Jackets**

Hughes is obviously the biggest change from the 4 Nations roster to the 2026 Olympic team. He initially made Team USA's roster but had to back out because of an oblique injury. Despite some rather intense speculation about his rejoining the team for their tournament final against Canada -- please recall Sullivan's ominous "Quinn Hughes is coming" declaration -- the Canucks said he wasn't medically cleared to participate.

He won the Norris Trophy as the NHL's top defenseman last season. He has 14 goals and 59 points to lead the Canucks, and is averaging more than 25:18 in ice time per game this season. He immediately becomes a top-pairing defenseman and power-play quarterback for the Olympic squad.

Theoretically, Adam Fox was supposed to play that role for the Americans in 4 Nations, but he had an ineffective tournament overall. More impressive than Fox in the tournament was a player who is right in the mix with Hughes for the Norris this season: Werenski, who was outstanding in 4 Nations and is having the best season of his NHL career, all with the Blue Jackets. He drove play for the Americans and led the U.S. in points (five) through three games. If he's healthy, he'll be in Italy.

McAvoy's tournament had an unfortunate end after he was hospitalized with an infection in his right shoulder and a significant injury to his AC joint, according to the Bruins. He had a strong tournament before that, including a hit on Connor McDavid in the win over Canada in Montreal that immediately landed on the highlight packages. Sullivan said McAvoy played "extremely well" in 4 Nations.

Carolina Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour was once asked whether Slavin ever makes a mistake. "You know what ... I don't know. I mean, I'm sure he does here and there, but not very often and that's pretty incredible, really," he said.

That's all one needs to know about Slavin, who reminded everyone that he remains one of the best defensive defensemen of the past 20 years while paired with Brock Faber during 4 Nations.

**Defensemen maybes**

**Brock Faber, Minnesota Wild**

**Noah Hanifin, Vegas Golden Knights**

**Jake Sanderson, Ottawa Senators**

Logic would dictate that if Slavin's a lock, Faber should be one too, given their chemistry at 4 Nations. But with a healthy Quinn Hughes, we'll put the 22-year-old right on the cusp. He has always played well beyond his years, and having Guerin assembling this team works in his favor.

Hanifin's best game might have been against Canada in Montreal, which isn't a bad thing to have on his résumé. Otherwise, the Golden Knights defenseman was solid but not spectacular. Sanderson hopped into the lineup for McAvoy in the Americans' last two games, and the 22-year-old was terrific. Sullivan called him "an emerging star" after replacing McAvoy.

"He's a mobile guy. He defends really well. He's got a high hockey IQ," Sullivan said. "I think he has an offensive dimension to his game. He's really good at joining the rush. We really like his game. He's a terrific player."

In theory, the U.S. could just run it back with the seven defensemen they've used at 4 Nations plus a returning Quinn Hughes and call it a day. But there are some other interesting options knocking on the door.

#### **Defensemen ready to draw in**

**John Carlson, Washington Capitals**

**Lane Hutson, Montreal Canadiens**

**Luke Hughes, New Jersey Devils**

**Ryan McDonagh, Tampa Bay Lightning**

**K'Andre Miller, New York Rangers**

**Seth Jones, Chicago Blackhawks**

**Brett Pesce, New Jersey Devils**

**Neal Pionk, Winnipeg Jets**

Carlson (35 years old) and McDonagh (35) could bring previous Olympic experience to the 2026 team; both played in the 2014 Sochi Games. But one senses that Team USA wants to skew a bit younger based on how it built the 4 Nations blue line.

Jones, 30, recently revealed that he's talking about trade options with Blackhawks management. The only way he's increasing his profile for an Olympic berth is probably to shine with a Stanley Cup contender.

Pionk, 29, doesn't get a ton of attention playing for the Jets, but he's a solid offensive contributor who can be a power-play quarterback. Miller, 25, has been up and down for the Rangers this season. Pesce was an injury replacement call-up for the championship game, and that warrants a mention.

The two most intriguing options here are Hutson, the brilliant 21-year-old rookie of the year contender for the Canadiens; and Hughes, also 21, who has really come into his own in his second NHL season with the Devils. Hutson's dynamic offense might not be enough to overcome concerns about the totality of his game from Team USA management. Hughes offers the tantalizing chance to unite Quinn, Jack and Luke on the same U.S. roster for the first time.

#### **Goalie locks**

**Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets**

**Jake Oettinger, Dallas Stars**

Hellebuyck won the Vezina Trophy last season, will probably win it again this season and finally quieted some critics of his play in pressure situations with his performance in 4 Nations. Now he gets a chance to do what Mike Richter, Ryan Miller and Jonathan Quick couldn't do: Deliver the first gold medal in men's hockey for the U.S. since the one Jim Craig won in 1980.

Oettinger had the misfortune of getting his only start in 4 Nations in a game against Sweden that (A) didn't mean anything, and (B) featured a short-handed American roster due to injuries. He still stopped 21 of 23 shots. His next start for the national team should be group play in the Olympics.

#### **Goaltending maybes**

**Thatcher Demko, Vancouver Canucks**

**Jeremy Swayman, Boston Bruins**

Swayman was the third goaltender on the 4 Nations roster. Demko was projected to fill that role for months ahead of the tournament, but last season's runner-up for the Vezina Trophy has had a nightmarish past 12 months, injury-wise. He has the talent to make the cut and be the third keeper in Italy, but not if he can't stay in the Vancouver lineup.

**Goaltenders ready to draw in****Joey Daccord, Seattle Kraken****John Gibson, Anaheim Ducks****Anthony Stolarz, Toronto Maple Leafs****Dustin Wolf, Calgary Flames****Joseph Woll, Toronto Maple Leafs**

Let it never be said the Americans don't have goaltending options. Some of these guys could probably star for Team Canada, or at least offer healthy competition as a backup netminder. But can any of them break through for a spot on the 2026 Olympic team?

The competition is now. And the Winter Games will be here before we know it.

## Sportsnet.ca / Team Canada delivers win for their country: 'That's the Canadian way'

By Eric Engels – February 21, 2025

BOSTON — The best player in the world ended one of the best games ever seen to claim hockey supremacy for Canada over the United States, Finland and Sweden.

“Somebody’s got to shoot in the net,” coach Jon Cooper said all throughout this 4 Nations Face-Off.

Why not Connor McDavid?

His shot to the top corner of Connor Hellebuyck’s net secured the 3-2 win 8:18 into overtime after Jordan Binnington saved Canada’s bacon.

“In overtime they kind of took over, honestly, and Binnington was unbelievable,” said Nathan MacKinnon, who opened the game with his fourth goal of the tournament and ended it wearing a gold medal and being named most valuable player.

It was Binnington who proved his worth with six saves before McDavid scored.

The “most scrutinized” player in the tournament, according to Cooper, “saved his best for last,” stopping Auston Matthews three times in the extra frame.

Then Matthews let McDavid slip by him and make his way into the slot.

“We just needed one look and Connor was very open, so that was very nice,” said MacKinnon. “Usually when he’s that open, it’s in the net.”

McDavid raised his arms after lifting a nation to the top of hockey’s biggest podium.

He, Sidney Crosby and MacKinnon led this team in a way only three of the greatest players of all time could. They did it by scoring the most points — finishing first, second and third for Canada — and by sacrificing the most for the betterment of the group. They did it as underdogs to the greatest American team ever assembled — a team that beat them 3-1 last Saturday — and they did it in hostile territory, in front of fans that booed the Canadian national anthem and filled the air with USA! USA! USA! and Johnny Hockey! chants all night.

At a time of unprecedented political friction between both nations driven by President Donald Trump slapping tariffs on Canadian goods and antagonistically referring to Canada as “the 51st state,” Team Canada delivered a win for their country.

Throughout the tournament, Cooper urged his players to “play the right way, the Canadian way,” and that’s what they did.

“They did all the right things,” Cooper said after taking a sip of what he referred to as his “Canadian-made” beverage. “For this group of players and the talent level they have, for them to do what they did away from the puck, that’s the Canadian way. That’s walking into a restaurant and opening the door for somebody to walk in first. That’s the Canadian way, and I couldn’t be more proud.”

A nation celebrated.

“I just hope Canada’s proud because every player in that room is proud to be a Canadian,” Cooper said. “And yeah, did we need a win? Not only our team, but Canada needed a win, and the players bared that on their shoulders.

"This one was different. This wasn't a win for themselves, this was a win for 40-plus million people, and the guys knew it and they delivered."

It was McDavid in the clutch, before later saying, "I struggled all night."

Mitch Marner made a beautiful pass to set him up after Cale Makar made one of several game-defining plays.

Makar was missing from last Saturday's loss due to illness but arguably stood out more than anyone in front of Binnington's crease to deliver this win for Canada.

The role players like Brad Marchand, who lauded Team USA as the best team he's ever faced, played their roles to perfection. Even the replacement players proved irreplaceable, with Thomas Harley initially subbing in for Makar and injured defenceman Shea Theodore last week before replacing Josh Morrissey (illness) and assisting on MacKinnon's goal Thursday.

Sam Bennett was scratched from the tournament-opening win over Sweden but came up with the goal that tied the championship game 2-2 after Brady Tkachuk and Jake Sanderson scored for USA.

Matthew Tkachuk, who played sparingly through the first half of the game — and not at all in the third period and overtime due to his lower-body injury — said after instigating the first of three fights in USA's win over Canada last Saturday that the message he, his brother Brady and J.T. Miller were sending with their fists was: "This is our time."

MacKinnon said after McDavid won it for Canada: "It feels good to be on top this time."

"They're an amazing team," the Cole Harbour, N.S. native added of the American team, which played without Quinn Hughes and lost Charlie McAvoy to injury earlier in the week. "They were the favourites coming in, but we pride ourselves on being the best hockey nation. For another year at least, we have some bragging rights. We've got to go do it again next February."

The Milano-Cortina Olympic Games are scheduled for then, and a claim to hockey supremacy will be available to more than just four nations there.

In Boston, Canada was crowned over three other countries that competed in some of the greatest games ever played.

"We wanted this one," said Mark Stone. "You've got 40 million Canadians sitting at home, and you feel the energy. Anytime you have the chance to play for our country or get to get the flag on our chest, it's a special, special feeling. It's hockey. That's what we do, right? It brings us together."



## [Sportsnet.ca / Canada Player Ratings: Best players meet moment](#)

By Ryan Dixon – February 21, 2025

The first-ever 4 Nations Face-Off — which doubled as the first best-on-best international hockey tournament in nine years — produced a familiar winner.

In an absolutely thrilling final, Canada defeated Team USA 3-2 in overtime on Thursday night thanks to a goal that instantly became the signature moment of Connor McDavid's career.

When No. 97's wrister whipped past American goalie Connor Hellebuyck's glove 8:18 into the extra frame, an entire country erupted over the result of a tournament nobody knew we'd all care this much about.

The Americans sure wanted it. Playing on home soil in Boston, Team USA held a 2-1 advantage through the midpoint of the game and had multiple, 10-bell chances to end it in overtime.

At the end of the day, though, the 4 Nations produced another classic Canadian hockey moment and — just like 2010, with Sidney Crosby's golden goal at the Olympics — it was the best player on the planet who provided the thrill.

A year from now, Canada will carry the best-on-best championship belt into the Olympics. Before we start thinking about that, though, let's grade the Canadian players on their performance in the 4 Nations title game.

### FORWARDS

**Connor McDavid 10/10** It's an odd feeling to ponder how poorly you can grade Connor McDavid. But for three-plus periods, it really didn't look like McDavid's night. There was just no space out there and pucks just seemed to be bouncing over his stick or getting knocked away from him when they were on his blade. Then he was left alone in the slot, got his look and made no mistake. McDavid was named MVP of the game.

**Brayden Point 9/10** Point's hustle to get back and make sure Team USA was called for icing led to the offensive zone face-off that directly preceded McDavid's goal. He got bumped up to McDavid's wing halfway through the tourney and will probably start the 2026 Olympics there.

**Mitch Marner 9.5/10** Marner started the night on the third line and made a wonderful feed to Sam Bennett on the second-period marker that tied the game 2-2. His creativity got him bumped up to play with McDavid and, sure enough, Marner feathered the pass to his new centre on the game-winner.

**Nathan MacKinnon 9/10** MacKinnon opened the scoring for Canada in the final and wound up leading the 4 Nations with four goals. He was Canada's best forward, start to finish, and took home 4 Nations MVP honours.

**Sidney Crosby 7.5/10** Crosby had a great chance to score late in the second and add to his big-game legacy with Canada, but Team USA defenceman Jaccob Slavin slapped a loose puck away just a split second before Crosby could get his stick on it. Crosby may not have been a huge factor in the final game, but he was still strong and dependable.

**Sam Reinhart 7.5/10** Reinhart played his usual, unglamorous, effective game. He provided a good screen on MacKinnon's tally and saw more ice time (20:01) than every Canadian forward other than McDavid and MacKinnon.

**Sam Bennett 10/10** You could tell from the jump Bennett was going to be a huge factor in the final. He had a great chance to score in the first when he took the puck hard to the net, but couldn't stuff it past Hellebuyck. When he got his chance late in the second, he made no mistake, roofing a shot to tie the game. Bennett's six shots on goal were the most by anybody in the game.

**Mark Stone 6.5/10** Stone was moved off McDavid's line when the trio just wasn't producing enough chances. He never hurts you out there, but he had to play more of a support role in the final

**Brandon Hagel 7.5/10** Hagel wound up playing 15:23, most of any bottom-six skater in Canada's forward crew.

**Anthony Cirelli 7.5** Cirelli won 75 per cent of his draws, the best mark in the game for any player who took five face-offs (he was 6-for-8). The final was his best game of the 4 Nations.

**Brad Marchand 6.5/10** It had to be sweet for the Bruins captain winning this one at "home," even if he played the least (12:23) of any Canadian player.

**Seth Jarvis 7/10** It was a mild surprise to see Jarvis inserted into the lineup for Travis Konecny, but the speedy winger had his share of chances and could easily have bagged a goal in the final.

## DEFENCE

**Cale Makar 9.5/10** In another world, we might have been talking about Makar as the hero, but his floater from the blue line — when the game was tied 2-2 near the halfway point of the third — clanked off the post. Regardless, he played more than any Canadian skater (28:17) and, as always, created so much on the ice.

**Devon Toews 9/10** Toews was right behind Makar in terms of ice (27:27). He was handed a huge amount of responsibility and handled it well.

**Thomas Harley 8.5/10** Once again, Harley got the tap to come into the lineup (this time it was for an ill Josh Morrissey) and, just like when he replaced Makar in the round-robin matchup with the Americans, the 23-year-old looked right at home playing with and against the best players in the world. Only Makar and Toews skated more than Harley, who will surely be a full-time player for Canada in one year's time.

**Drew Doughty 8.5/10** The cagey vet saved his best game for last. Doughty was consistently taking hits to make plays in the defensive zone and looked as steady as ever back there.

**Colton Parayko 7.5/10** Parayko used his big body well against a tough American forecheck and had a great chance to be the hero in the third period when he ripped a point shot that Hellebuyck just got a blocker on.

**Travis Sanheim 7/10** Sanheim and Parayko were on the ice for the second U.S. goal, but by and large Canada's third pair did its job.

## GOALIE

**Jordan Binnington 10/10** Binnington made big saves throughout the first 60 minutes of the game, but destroyed all the doubters in overtime with his game-saving play. He made a circus-level save off Auston Matthews with his right pad on a one-timer and stole another from Brady Tkachuk at the side of the net with his glove. He more than vindicated the Canadian staff's faith in him and could easily have been named MVP of the final game.

## [Sportsnet.ca / U.S. Player Ratings: Slavin's defensive brilliance on display](#)

**By Emily Sadler – February 21, 2025**

Another classic battle between Canada and the USA is in the books, and this one wasn't easy on the nerves.

As Canada celebrates its golden 4 Nations Face-Off victory, the 3-2 overtime outcome concluding a tournament that reignited this rivalry — and, ultimately, represented far more than the game on the ice — the Americans are left to contend with the many what-ifs.

The roster will be studied, obvious weak spots on the fourth line subject to scrutiny about whether this was, in fact, the best group of forwards U.S. brass could've assembled. We know the blue line was missing a few key pieces in Quinn Hughes, who was forced to sit out the tournament due to injury, and Charlie McAvoy, whose own ailment held him out of the final. The team felt both losses throughout this tournament, but it was particularly obvious against Canada's best.

With all that in mind, here's a look at how every U.S. player fared in Thursday night's championship loss to Canada.

### **Jake Guentzel: 8/10**

A consistent scoring presence not just in this gold medal final but in the tournament overall — especially in Team USA's first meeting with Canada on Saturday, when he scored twice. While he didn't get on the board in this one, his trio of shots and five hits made him one of the most productive players at generating chances.

### **Auston Matthews: 8/10**

His positioning on McDavid's overtime game-winner will draw criticism, and that's fair — but overall, Matthews was excellent all night, including defensively with three blocked shots and really strong two-way play. He assisted on both American goals, finding instant chemistry with the Tkachuks after head coach Mike Sullivan swapped his top two centremen, and caused Canadians coast-to-coast more than a little anxiety in overtime with scoring chances that seriously tested Jordan Binnington.

### **Jack Hughes: 5/10**

Hughes' creativity was on display with early opportunities, setting up both Matthews and Guentzel in his first shift, but he became less and less impactful as the game went on and too easy to knock off the puck. Defensively, he wasn't up to the task, and Canada took advantage.

### **Brady Tkachuk: 9/10**

The heart and soul of Team USA was also the squad's grit, muscle, and energy — not just Thursday night, but throughout the tournament. His game-tying goal late in the first period got USA on the board, and his team-leading four shots and five hits helped keep this matchup a close one from wire to wire.

### **Jack Eichel: 8/10**

Eichel's a wizard to watch with the puck, but we already knew that — what this tournament put on full display was his elite defensive game, too. A clutch shot block on the penalty kill — one of five blocked shots, tied for most on the team Thursday night — showcased just one of the many ways he can impact a game.

### **Matthew Tkachuk: Incomplete**

The elder Tkachuk brother called this matchup the biggest game of his career — and that's saying something, considering we watched him suit up in Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final last spring. Unfortunately, the matchup was cut short for him due to an undisclosed injury, which saw him play just 6:47 on the night.

**J.T. Miller: 7/10**

This was a game of highs and lows for Miller, who was impactful at both ends of the ice — but perhaps never more than within the final 30 seconds of regulation, when he swooped in and swept the puck away from the side of the net before Connor McDavid could pounce. His role in a messy neutral-zone turnover, which led to Canada's game-tying goal in the second period, should be noted, though.

**Dylan Larkin: 8/10**

Larkin's ascension from the fourth line to the first is now complete, with the Red Wings captain capping what's been a really solid tournament with one of his best efforts. While he was held off the scoresheet Thursday night, his speed up and down the wing to generate scoring chances — and a close call in the first, that almost saw him tie things up after breaking free and picking up his own rebound — helped the U.S. match Canada's pace, and his penalty kill prowess came up clutch, too.

**Matt Boldy: 7/10**

Sullivan's line juggling saw him turn to Boldy often as one of the club's most versatile forwards. He led all U.S. forwards in ice time, and while his offence wasn't felt as much as in previous games, he's clearly earned Sullivan's trust throughout this process.

**Brock Nelson: 4/10**

Errors contributed to Canada's second-period goal — Nelson was caught on his heels and didn't have the speed to get back to his man on Sam Bennett's ensuing marker — and his ill-advised icing preceded the U.S.-zone faceoff that led to McDavid's overtime game-winner (and Nelson's minus-2 rating).

**Vincent Trocheck: 5/10**

Trocheck's lucky his team has such a strong penalty kill — he took an undisciplined and poorly timed tripping minor soon after the Americans took the lead, which could've swung the momentum in the wrong direction.

**Chris Kreider: 4/10**

Kreider's performance Monday night was enough to sway head coach Mike Sullivan to dress him again Thursday in place of a healthy-scratched Kyle Connor — a decision that raised a few eyebrows pre-game and now looks pretty regrettable. Despite being short a forward after Tkachuk was unable to finish the game, Sullivan rarely turned to Kreider, whose 6:25 of playing time ranks last on the team.

**Zach Werenski: 8/10**

The Americans were without Charlie McAvoy, and it showed. Werenski was forced to play on his opposite side, and while he still found opportunities to jump into the offensive zone to spark a scoring chance, his overall play wasn't as smooth as we're used to. His helper on Jake Sanderson's second-period goal completed his streak of at least one point in all four tournament games and gave him the lead in points across the 4 Nations Face-Off. Impressive.

**Jake Sanderson: 8/10**

McAvoy's absence opened the door for Sanderson to suit up in his second game with the American squad, and he more than lived up to expectations. Three blocked shots in the first period kept the

Canadians from capitalizing on more opportunities, and his goal in the second period gave the Americans the lead.

**Jacob Slavin: 10/10**

The clutch clearance on the second-period penalty kill. The sweeping of his stick to keep Crosby from cashing in during net-front chaos. The full-body sliding block to break up a Canadian rush in the third. Any one of those plays would earn him high praise, but put them all together, and you've got one of the best defensive performances the game has seen in a long time.

**Brock Faber: 7/10**

It's easy to be overshadowed when your defence partner is doing his best impression of Superman every shift, but Faber had himself a solid game, too. He led the team in ice time with 28:50 and recorded a takeaway in the sound defensive effort.

**Noah Hanifin: 7/10**

Hanifin's had an up-and-down tournament, and this final game kind of encompassed that. Offensively, he made a smart play to fire the puck along the boards and out of Binnington's reach after previous dump-ins towards the crease were corralled by the netminder, which led to the Matthews-Brady goal. But defensively, he struggled at times and was on the ice for McDavid's game-winner.

**Adam Fox: 5/10**

A bad giveaway in the second period, which saw him fire the puck towards the benches where a Canadian stick scooped it up, cost his team a goal, and his minus-2 rating was the lowest of the blue liners, as was his 17:05 ice time.

**Connor Hellebuyck: 8/10**

You can't save what you can't see, and the Canadians did a great job of screening Hellebuyck on MacKinnon's game-opening goal. The Jets netminder was praised heartily by his teammates post-game, and rightly so — he stumped Canada on several occasions Thursday night, staying calm and cool while collecting 24 saves. It took the game's best player to best him in the end.

## Sportsnet.ca / From the boardroom to the ice: Inside the mad scramble that brought 4 Nations to life

**By Eric Engels – February 21, 2025**

BOSTON — Leave it to a couple of hockey's biggest power brokers to spread the credit around and take none for themselves on the birth of the best idea the sport has seen in decades.

We shouldn't have expected any differently when speaking with NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly and NHLPA director of international growth and strategy Rob Zepp about the 4 Nations Face-Off just hours before its grand finale at TD Garden. They're hockey lifers, born and raised in a sport that frowns on self-aggrandizing behaviour.

Still, what we learned from them was that this tournament was conceived in boardroom meetings 18 months ago, with tight timelines and extraordinary obstacles to bring best-on-best competition back for the first time since the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

"We were trying to plan and execute a World Cup of Hockey and we were focused on eight teams, and that would've been national teams as opposed to mixed teams, and then a whole host of things prevented us from doing that," Daly said.

"Originally, it was going to be in February of 2024. We had resistance from the IIHF, we had resistance from the European leagues, some clubs, and we were trying to work through that resistance. The resistance was understandable because we were working on a very short timeline. ... We went through the period where we were supposed to be in the Beijing Olympics, but Covid was still in the world and it forced us to miss that. And Russia invaded the Ukraine, so all of a sudden Russia became a non-possibility, so we had to shift on the fly to what can we do, and we really wanted to do something.

"We needed to plan a tournament that we had total control over, where all the players in it were NHL players. The only way we could've constructed that tournament was by going with these four teams, because otherwise we're dealing with players that might not be playing in the NHL. So it became a logical conclusion."

Another decision that fell into place, according to both Daly and Zepp, was to have it play out in Montreal and Boston.

Without enough time to accept formal bids from prospective markets, like they will for the 2028 World Cup of Hockey, these locations were thought to be perfect for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

"We knew we wanted to host in multiple cities, preferably to bring this action both north and south of the border," Zepp said. "(Montreal and Boston) are two incredibly iconic hockey cities, they're sports cities with passionate fanbases, they're attractive destinations for people who would want to come in and witness these games in person. ... Given their close proximity to one another, they checked a whole bunch of different boxes for us."

What followed was a perfect storm: a display of unparalleled skill shook up through the snow-globe environments in which the game was meant to be played.

We don't know if NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, Daly, David Proper (senior executive vice president of media and international strategy), Lynn White (SVP of international strategy), and NHLPA executive director Marty Walsh, assistant executive director Ron Hainsey, Zepp and Michelle Stajan-Strike (senior manager of international strategy and operations) — the people who conceived of this event — see it as

the greatest marketing of the game in its history, but every participant with whom we've spoken, in one capacity or another, has called it exactly that.

Former GMs Ken Holland and Jarmo Kekalainen, former NHL and international superstars like Mark Messier, current coaches Jon Cooper and Mike Sullivan, and players Brad Marchand and Noah Hanifin have all suggested that this event has surpassed their incredibly high expectations and put hockey on the global radar in an unprecedented way.

"It's almost overwhelming, in a sense, to see not only the reaction from the hockey community, but we know the big benefit and the power of hosting these competitions is the ability to attract a wider audience and cast a wider net," added the 43-year-old Zepp, who appeared in 10 NHL games with the Philadelphia Flyers to end a career of goaltending in Germany and Finland.

"To see hockey being talked about across all sorts of major channels, with athletes and pop culture, it's something in my time that I haven't seen, and to be in that position now is incredibly profound. ... I know all of us who are really close to this sport, who have played it — no matter what the level — can speak to how amazing the game is and how much we love it, but to see that spilling over into broader community and fan groups is super exciting. It's hard to put into words to be honest."

Daly is 60 years old. He started watching hockey at in 1971 and became hooked on it a year later during the 1972 Summit Series between Canada and the former Soviet Union. He's been with the NHL for 28 years and has overseen and witnessed so many moments of growth for the sport.

But this one has been different.

"I think a lot of times we feel in our sport that we don't get the attention that our game deserves," Daly said. "We strongly feel it's the best game in all of sports and sometimes we lack the attention that that should generate, and what's been great about this is it's really caught the imagination of not only hockey fans around the world and in both countries but non-hockey fans. I think what we saw on Saturday night is hockey can translate beyond the pure fans or those who are just casually interested or who just love sport and love pure sport. Obviously want to maintain that."

The NHL and NHLPA have virtually guaranteed it, with a return to the Winter Olympics in 2026 and the rebirth of the World Cup of Hockey securing best-on-best competition every two years.

The impact these games have had likely goes well beyond the numbers, even if the data offers some tangible measure of it. Consider that at least 1.5 million of Finland's 5.5 million people watched Sweden and Finland square off last Saturday.

"And we're talking about a mid-season international tournament that does it," said Daly.

It's a tournament being played for medals, cash prizes and a trophy no one has ever won before or will ever win again.

But that hasn't stopped players from playing like their lives are on the line.

"Being Canadian, I live and die by playing hockey, watching hockey, representing my country, watching my country play hockey," said forward Mark Stone.

His teammates — and the competition — has treated it that way, giving us something that's gone beyond what we've been pining for over the last eight-and-a-half years.

"These best-on-best tournaments I think bring out the best of the best," said Sullivan. "The commitment, the investment that all of these teams have displayed every night, in my mind, has been an unbelievable celebration of hockey. Just from a hockey purist or a hockey fan in general, it's hard not to get excited about what we're witnessing. I would envision tonight would be the pinnacle of that, with

Team USA and Canada competing for the championship. Both teams are terrific teams, there's no weaknesses on either side, and it means an awful lot to both sides.

"These are the very best players in the game. These are the savants that when they bring their creativity and their brilliance to what they do out there, that's how the game evolves. That's what we're seeing, that's what we're witnessing first-hand. ...It's been competitive, it's been emotional, it's all of the things we hope for in sports, and that's why we love it."

Cooper said these games are getting the attention around the globe they "richly deserve."

They were put on by two traditionally opposed factions that have come together for the betterment of the sport.

Perhaps no image better captured that than the one we saw before the first game in Montreal: at the 2028 World Cup announcement, where Bettman wrapped his arm around Walsh as the latter talked about the NHL and NHLPA not having much to disagree about in negotiations for a new collective bargaining agreement. Barring completely unforeseen circumstances, according to both parties, the CBA could potentially be signed and ratified well before the current one expires in September 2026.

Their teams, led by Daly, Hainsey, Zepp, Proper, White and Stajan-Strike, initialized and spearheaded the sport's most important initiative in recent memory.

"I think the cooperation between the NHL and NHLPA is much better and easier and more comfortable than it was in 2016," said Daly. "We've been in lockstep and perfectly aligned from Day 1 of agreeing to do this and through the execution. I'm not even sure I could come up with a single example of where we had a significant disagreement. It's been a really good collaboration."

It paved the way for the players to come here and do what they do best, and the players have delivered. They feel they've been a part of something that's forever changed hockey.

Even ahead of the championship game, which has the potential to be better than any game we've seen at this event and any that's come before it, Hanifin said the sport has won most here.

"It's almost bigger than the final itself now," the U.S. defenceman started. "You have so many people just watching and supporting hockey, and it's opened so many eyes to the game. I think this is just the best thing that's happened for the game in quite a long time. It's a great opportunity for us as players to be a part of it."

It's the first page in a new, exhilarating chapter of international hockey, and it's got everyone eager to get to the next one.

"You could never script it, and who knows how it would've played out if one or two of the games had gone in different directions," said Daly. "But luckily for us they didn't, and we find ourselves where (we) find ourselves and hopefully it's going to be a great night of hockey."