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## **Columbus Dispatch / NHL to host free fan festival/tailgate prior to Columbus Blue Jackets' outdoor game**

**By Brian Hedger – February 20, 2025**

The NHL's ice truck is in Columbus, an outdoor rink is under construction at Ohio Stadium and the league has announced plans for a game day fan event to coincide with the 2025 Navy Federal Credit Union NHL Stadium Series matchup March 1 between the Blue Jackets and Detroit Red Wings.

Running from Noon to 5 p.m., fans can celebrate the arrival of outdoor NHL hockey in Columbus by attending the Honda NHL PreGame, the league's official fan festival and tailgate, which is free to the public.

The event will be located along West Lane Ave., on either side of Perry St., in the parking lots of The O on Lane pizzeria and Riverwatch Tower. Attractions include family-friendly interactive hockey games and attractions, special appearances and the opportunity to get pictures with the Stanley Cup, the iconic trophy awarded to the NHL's championship team each season.

Game tickets for the outdoor matchup aren't required for admittance to the fan festival/tailgate, which will take place across the street from the NHL Stadium Series Pep Rally at St. John Arena. Headlining the pep rally will be rock band O.A.R. with a free pregame concert at 2:30 p.m., a nod to Ohio State's pregame "Skull Session" rallies for football games. Seating for the concert is first come, first served, while the tailgate/festival will remain open until 5 p.m., an hour before the puck is scheduled to drop for the Blue Jackets and Red Wings.

Seventeen NHL partners are scheduled to participate in the Honda NHL PreGame tailgate, including multiple booths allowing fans to show off their hockey skills and contests for prizes. Local radio station 97.1 The Fan, the main hub for Blue Jackets broadcasts, will also broadcast live on-site from noon to 4 p.m.

### **Per the NHL, the entry regulations are as follows:**

"All fans will be required to go through metal detectors prior to entry into the Honda NHL PreGame. Small bags, no larger than 5 inches by 8 inches by 1 inch, will be permitted. Guests with medical, dietary or childcare needs will be permitted to carry one bag, no larger than 14 inches by 14 inches by 4 inches, into the Honda NHL PreGame after security screening of the bag. No other bags will be permitted."

Tickets for the Stadium Series matchup are still available and can be purchased through Ticketmaster.

## [BlueJackets.com / Fantilli has stepped up in an expanded role](#)

**By Jeff Svoboda – February 19, 2025**

As Mike Todd's voice started to echo throughout Nationwide Arena during a recent Blue Jackets game, Adam Fantilli was on the bench trying to catch the eye of head coach Dean Evason.

It was the Feb. 6 game against Utah, and Fantilli had just made a play with the puck he knew should have been better. When he got back to the bench and the game went to a media timeout, Fantilli looked to make amends with his head coach as the broadcast cut to commercials.

"He threw a puck in the middle of the ice and came back to the bench and there was a timeout, and he's looking directly at me," Evason said. "And I knew he was, so I was kind of avoiding him. And then I looked him and he just went, 'My bad.' I said, 'Yep.' That's it.

"There's been a lot of video teaching to Adam Fantilli by every single coach in there. Which is fantastic and a credit to the coaching staff, but for him to buy into it is even more exciting."

So goes the continued learning experience for perhaps the biggest piece of the puzzle for a CBJ team with a bright future. The No. 3 overall pick in the 2023 draft, Fantilli is thought by many to be a star in the making, a dynamic first-line center who can grow into taking the organization to new heights.

Of course, in the moment, he's a 20-year-old, second-year forward still learning the tricks of the trade that will help take him to those lofty laurels at the NHL level. The good thing is he's a willing pupil, understanding that every day is an opportunity to add to his knowledge bank and keep getting better.

It's fair to say things are going pretty well, and it's not just because Fantilli is a key part of a surprising Blue Jackets team that is in the mix of the postseason race two-thirds of the way into the season.

Sean Monahan's injury Jan. 7 at Pittsburgh changed things for Fantilli, bumping the pivot into a top-line role. It could have been a spot where things maybe got a bit rich for the youngster, but all he's done since then in 15 games plus a period of action is produce at a nearly point-per-game clip – seven goals and eight assists for 15 points – and notch his first career hat trick Jan. 22 in his hometown of Toronto.

"He's playing the best hockey he's played in his career, so it's just really good to see and it's good for the team," Kent Johnson said of his friend and linemate.

But it's not all just about getting on the scoresheet for the young centerman. Evason has preached throughout the season that everything Fantilli wants – scoring production, ice time and a bigger impact all around – will come if he keeps playing the right way.

It was clear before the 4 Nations Face-Off break that the head coach's trust in Fantilli was growing in spades. Before Monahan's injury, Fantilli had topped 20 minutes in ice time just once in the first 40 games. He's been over the 20-minute mark nine times since, including a career-high 26:59 in the team's last game Feb. 8 vs. the New York Rangers.

In the eyes of Evason, it's earned ice time, as not only has Fantilli contributed offensively, he's become more and more responsible on the defensive end, including being on the ice for a 12-7 edge in goals for the Blue Jackets at 5-on-5 the last 15 games.

"If you would have said to us two months ago that Mo would be playing 24(-plus) minutes at this point, I would have thought you were crazy," Evason said. "But I think it's credit to him and what he has done and the work that he has put in – not as a skilled hockey player, but as a pro – to be able to play in all situations.

“It is exciting for us as an organization? Absolutely. To have somebody like that step up in the absence of a Monahan or a Boone Jenner or someone that is in that position, yeah, it’s fantastic.”

As Evason noted, perhaps the most encouraging aspect of Fantilli’s growth is how much the player himself has put into it. He was ready to step into Monahan’s role because he said he’s watched how the veteran center has played all season, learning things like how to slow down to read plays, specific faceoff moves and skills in the bumper position on the power play simply by paying attention throughout the season.

He also has perspective on where he is and where he’s going, noting that his recent time as the team’s No. 1 center will continue to pay off down the road.

“I’m excited to be given the opportunity,” Fantilli said. “It’s a great experience. At the end of the day, it’s where I want to be. To be the type of player I want to be for this team, whether it comes this season, next season, two seasons from now, whatever it is, I want to work toward being that guy, and this is a great experience for that.”

## **BlueJackets.com / Preparations under way for NHL Stadium Series in Columbus**

**By Jeff Svoboda – February 20, 2025**

Ohio Stadium has never looked quite like this.

The venerable Horseshoe has seen a lot in its more than 100 years of life, from spirited Ohio State football games vs. Big Ten rivals to annual commencement ceremonies to concerts like Taylor Swift and The Rolling Stones.

But there's never been an NHL ice rink at the 50-yard line – until this week. Preparations are now under way in Ohio Stadium for the NHL Stadium Series game March 1 that will feature the Blue Jackets hosting the Detroit Red Wings.

It's the first outdoor contest in Blue Jackets history and the first such game to take place in Ohio Stadium, and there are sure to be scenes that will last a lifetime in the iconic venue.

The NHL began work early this week on setting up the rink as well as the concert stage that will be in use during the event, and those involved in that work can't help but look around with wonder at the more than 100,000-seat venue.

"It's pretty awe-inspiring when you come in here, just the history of the building and the volume of people that are going to be in here," said Mike Craig, senior director of hockey operations and facilities operations for the NHL. "You kind of look ahead a little bit to that atmosphere, and we're very excited to be a part of that."

Craig and fellow senior director of hockey operations and facilities operation Derek King met with the media Tuesday to show off work that's taken place so far, and to discuss what's to come. Around 100 people will be involved to get the venue ready for the game next Saturday night, with work taking place each day to get everything where it needs to be.

On Tuesday afternoon, workers were installing the decking on the stadium playing surface that will serve as the base layer for the rink and accompanying field design. Over the next two days, more infrastructure work will take place, including running the piping from the NHL's Mobile Refrigeration Units outside the stadium to the ice surface that will keep it cold and ready.

Then, on Friday, things will really start to take shape with the ice surface, including the installation of the dasher boards and the start of the ice-making process. That will continue over the weekend; on Monday, the ice will be painted white, with rink lines and logos set to be places Tuesday. By next Friday, when the teams get to take the ice for practice, everything should be ready to go and the crew will use that time to fine-tune any changes that need to be made.

"Practice day for the teams is practice day for us," King said.

Considering this is the 43rd outdoor game staged by the league since the Heritage Classic on Nov. 22, 2003 in Edmonton, the NHL has honed its methods over the past two decades.

"Since we started in 2003 and then 2008 (with the first Winter Classic), it's progressed a long way," Craig said. "Just like anything, we learn as we go, and we've learned and grown as a crew and are open to all different ideas. There's always room for improvement, whether it's a different addition to the truck or within our system of how we control things. We touched on the weather and how we adapt to all that. We learn from those lessons, and I think we're in a really good spot and are really comfortable with where we are."

Ahh, yes, the weather – the one thing crews can't control when it comes to an outdoor hockey game. The good news is the NHL has encountered just about every situation you might expect over the years, but the general rule of thumb is that rain and sun are the biggest enemies. When asked what ideal conditions are for gameday, Craig said cloud cover and around 32 degrees.

For right now, the cold is no bother, other than maybe having to put a couple extra layers on for the workers on site. It's too early to tell what the conditions will be for next Saturday – online forecasts currently vary quite a bit when it comes to both temperature and precipitation – but the good news is the 6 p.m. start should mitigate any issues with sun. As for rain, there are contingency plans in place for that, as well.

"Right now, I think we're in really good shape for gameday," King said. "We've seen a lot over the last few years. We'll be ready for anything that comes our way, and we'll adapt as we need to."

When it's all said and done, the NHL could have a spectacle unlike any other given the size and historic nature of the event, plus the accompanying fan fest, pregame pep rally and more.

"It's exciting to be a part of this," Craig said. "There's some excitement around this game. I know we're excited to be in the middle of an event like this and with this many people. I think there was quite a buzz as we came in today."

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

**By Jeff Svoboda – February 20, 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."



## The Hockey News / Zach Werenski Records An Assist And Leads The Team In Shots As The Undermanned Americans Lose To Sweden

**By Jason Newland – February 19, 2025**

The United States were missing a lot of their great players on Monday night and lost Brady Tkachuk in the first period to injury.

Zach Werenski was arguably the best player on the ice for the U.S. on Monday and did everything but score a goal.

The Blue Jackets defenseman helped get the United States on the board just 35 seconds into the first period with his 5th assist of the tournament. Werenski drove the net and somehow got a shot off on goalie Samuel Ersson while falling down. Ersson gave up a juicy rebound that Chris Kreider buried to give the Americans the lead.

Werenski continues to shine in front of a huge international audience. Werenski's name must've been said by Kenny Albert and Eddie Olczyk at least 8 times in the first five or six minutes.

### **Take a look at Zach Werenski's final stats:**

- **1 Assist** - It's his 5th assist of the tournament. He is now tied with Sidney Crosby for the tournament lead in points with 5 and leads all skaters with 5 assists.
- **6 Shots** - His six shots were a game-high for either team. His 9 shots for the tournament are the third most for all players.
- **24:08 TOI** - Led all American players.

Werenski was also named the third star of the game.

Judging by social media posts, the world is finally taking notice of Zach Werenski.

## The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Top Prospect At Risk Of Missing Entire 2024-25 Season

**By Spencer Lazary – February 20, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets' top prospect could be at risk of missing the entire 2024-25 season.

Cayden Lindstrom was the organization's first-round draft pick last season and has yet to play in a game this season in the WHL.

Lindstrom is recovering from offseason back surgery that has kept him out of action for the Medicine Hat Tigers.

Unfortunately, both the Tigers and Blue Jackets have set out a five-stage plan for him before he can return to action.

Currently, he is in stage 3, and with the WHL season winding down, it doesn't look promising.

When Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell met with Aaron Portzline of The Athletic, he mentioned that Lindstrom may not be cleared to play in a full-contact game until late March or early April. He also said that Lindstrom will continue skating with Columbus' coaches rather than returning to Medicine Hat.

Last season, Lindstrom had 27 goals and 19 assists for 46 points in 32 games. He also had 66 penalty minutes.

The hope for the 19-year-old is that he returns to a clean bill of health and can be a major part of the Blue Jackets' success in the future. Until then, his focus will be on getting back to full health.

**What's Next:** Zach Werenski and Team USA will take on Canada in the Championship game of the 4-Nations Face-Off on Thursday. The rest of the CBJ return on Saturday to play the Chicago Blackhawks.

## The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets Injury Update

By Jason Newland – February 20, 2025

Head Coach Dean Evason gave a post-practice injury update today. The CBJ, minus Zach Werenski who is with Team USA, returned to practice today.

Kirill Marchenko, Dante Fabbro, and Boone Jenner were all on the ice today for practice. That's a very good sign for the CBJ. At this time, it's unclear if any of them will play on Saturday, but it's looking like at least some of them will return.

Boone Jenner says, "I feel great. I feel like I'm ready to go."

Kevin Labanc is out with an upper-body injury, and Yegor Chinakhov still isn't skating, according to Evason.

The injury list below could start getting a lot shorter as soon as this Saturday.

### **Injuries**

- **Boone Jenner** (shoulder) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 7; (55 Games)
- **Erik Gudbranson** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 16; (52 Games)
- **Yegor Chinakhov** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve (34 Games)
- **Sean Monahan** (upper body); is on Injured Reserve retroactive to Jan. 7 (12 Games)
- **Kirill Marchenko** (jaw); is on Injured Reserve on Feb. 3 (2 Games)
- **Dante Fabbro** (upper body) unknown return date (2 Games)

**What's Next:** Zach Werenski and Team USA will take on Canada in the Championship game of the 4-Nations Face-Off on Thursday. The rest of the CBJ return on Saturday to play the Chicago Blackhawks.

## **The Hockey Writers / NHL Stadium Series Has Begun to Take Over Ohio Stadium**

**By Mark Scheig – February 20, 2025**

The wait is almost over. The Detroit Red Wings and Columbus Blue Jackets will be playing an important hockey game on March 1 at Ohio Stadium for the 2025 NHL Stadium Series. On Tuesday, we got our first glimpse inside the stadium as the league has started their preparations for the game.

A group of around 100 people will be working around the clock to make sure everything is in order down to the finest details. They will be working from a detailed production schedule and with multiple departments to ensure the ice is ready to go for the big game.

On Tuesday afternoon, Derek King and Mike Craig both met with the media to talk about where things stand as they begin the setup inside Ohio Stadium. They both have the same position as NHL Senior Director, facilities operations.

Among the discussion points, they laid out what this week's schedule will look like. They also talked about what their ideal conditions will be come gameday and more.

### **The Upcoming Schedule**

Both King and Craig spoke about the importance of being ahead of schedule. This allows them to make sure things are done timely while accounting for possible unforeseen circumstances should they arise.

The ice as you can imagine is the biggest thing. It has to be NHL caliber. It also has to be ready in time for when practices take place.

"It's going to be a lot of time and really paying attention to the finer details," King said. "The next few days until Friday, we'll be putting all the piping together, putting down the floor, putting down dasher boards. Slots will go in. Then we'll start making ice Friday night. That's kind of a seven day build for us and we'd like to be ahead of schedule. Practice day for the team is practice day for us. It's paying attention to those finer details for us."

Before they can start making the ice, they have to finish the floor. When we arrived on Tuesday afternoon, a lot of the floor inside Ohio Stadium was in place. Here's what they'll do between now and Friday.

"Until Thursday evening, we should be finishing our build with the floor. Friday, we'll have the dasherboards going up, and then if we're on schedule, we'll be making ice Friday evening. That'll take us up to a big day for us will be the 24th, 25th where we'll paint the floor white. All the hockey markings, lines and logos will go on on the 25th, and then we get ready for the 27th, 28th for the first skate."

### **Ideal Conditions**

Very early indications of the weather forecast for March 1 suggest the daytime temperature will be in the low-mid 40s. With the game slated to start after 6 P.M. Columbus time, the sun will have set. It will just be a matter of if other weather conditions play a role in the game.

Advertisement: 0:24

King and Craig were asked what their idea weather conditions would be. They have encountered several less than ideal instances over the course of time when preparing for previous outdoor games. They are confident they will be ready no matter what Ohio tries to throw at them.

“We’ve seen a lot over the last few years. We just wake up in the morning and we see what mother nature has for us. When we’re building ice, if we have sun during the day, we’ll obviously cover the sheet. Then we’ve got a lot of other things that we can work on during the day. And then once the sun’s off the field, we’ll uncover it and build overnight. If we do get rain, we’ll freeze the rain that we can freeze. That helps us to build ice. If it snows, we’ll remove the snow, and we just adapt with what we get.”

Ideally, having a temperature around freezing is the most ideal scenario for the NHL.

“A lot of cloud cover throughout the day and sitting at about 32 degrees, it’s great for us. We can control whatever we need to out there. It’s very comfortable for the fans that come and just make it a great experience. We’ll be ready for anything that comes our way.”

Two refrigeration trucks have arrived at Ohio Stadium. They are located on the east side of the stadium. They will be responsible for making sure the ice is ready to go no matter what weather comes their way.

### **Setup is Unique**

King and Craig said that building in Ohio Stadium is unique. The main reason for that is the number of fans expected to attend the game.

Accounting for staging and blocking off some seats as a result, it’s not out of the question to see over 80,000 fans for the game. This will impact how the setup is built.

“The setup’s a little bit different just as far as the access to the field. But what’s different is the volume of seats. What doesn’t get old with these events is being a part of something unique like this and being just in front of all these many people and getting to be a part of that. That’s the one of the unique things about the building for sure.”

In about a week’s time, most of the setup will be completed. A lot is going to happen over these next 10 days to make sure that this Stadium Series game is one that will be remembered for a long time.

## **Sports Illustrated / USA Relying on Blue Jackets Defenseman at 4 Nations Final**

**By Jacob Punturi – February 20, 2025**

The United States is turning to a Columbus Blue Jackets for their gold medal game at the 4 Nations Face-Off. Facing Canada in a highly anticipated rematch, Team USA's defensive group took a massive hit with the injury to Boston Bruins puck-mover Charlie McAvoy. An upper-body injury forced him to miss the final round-robin game, and he was recently ruled out for the finals.

Down another player, Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski, becomes the most important defender for Team USA. Werenski is having a career-best campaign for Columbus, and he's carried that impressive play into this international tournament.

The initial plan for the United States was to have a deep and spread-out offensive attack from the blue line. But then Quinn Hughes of the Vancouver Canucks withdrew due to injury just before the tournament began. With the extra injury, Hughes is now available as an injury replacement for the team, but he's still not permitted to play unless another injury occurs. Now, McAvoy is out as well. That leaves Werenski as the main option to run their first power-play and log 20+ minutes in all situations.

Thankfully for the United States, their new number-one defenseman is thriving at the 4 Nations. Werensk is already in the middle of a career-best NHL campaign for Columbus, and he's carried that impressive play into this international tournament without delay. In 55 NHL games in 2024-2025, he has 17 goals and 42 assists for 59 points. He's currently tied for second among all NHL defenders this season.

Through the first three games of the 4 Nations, he has five assists and nine shot attempts, averaging 19:53 minutes of ice time. His point total leads all United States skaters entering the gold medal game.

With one more game to play, Team USA is relying heavily on Werenski. In order to defeat Canada for a second time, they'll need another elite performance from the Blue Jackets defenseman.

## [BlueJackets.com / Dumais getting his legs back after making pro debut](#)

**By Garrison McDaniel – February 20, 2025**

After more than a year of surgeries and recovery, Jordan Dumais returned to the ice and made his professional debut Jan. 31.

Dumais, who has been a prolific scorer his entire career, has already started to make an impact at the AHL level. Known most notably as the Halifax Mooseheads' all-time leader in goals (tied), assists and points, he has recorded four points (one goal, three assists) in six games played as a member of the Cleveland Monsters.

The 20-year-old's focus has now shifted to getting back to game speed after multiple injuries have sidelined him from taking part in league play since Dec. 8, 2023.

"I think everything kind of worked well together, and now I'm just really trying to get used to the game and just playing with the guys," Dumais said.

It's been quite a journey for Dumais to get back to the ice, as he hadn't played a competitive game since suiting up for Team Canada at the 2024 World Junior Championships last winter.

Reaching that team was a goal for the Montreal-area native, but it was also the moment when he decided something had to be done about nagging hip and groin injuries that had dogged him for years. He had surgery last January, then didn't return to the ice the rest of the season for the Mooseheads, skating some at the Blue Jackets' development camp this summer before continuing rehab.

It was a major setback for one of the most intriguing prospects in junior hockey, as Dumais put up historic production with Halifax. The Blue Jackets took him in the third round of the 2022 draft after a 39-goal, 109-point season with the Mooseheads, then he finished second in scoring in all of Canadian junior hockey to No. 1 overall pick Connor Bedard a year later with 54 goals and 140 points in 64 games.

He was producing at a similar rate last season with a 16-31-47 line in his first 21 games with the Mooseheads before his season was cut short. The scoring touch is still there in the pros; in his first game back with Cleveland, Dumais notched an assist. In his second game on the ice, Dumais broke a 2-2 tie with a goal 3:33 into the third period, and his tally would stand up as the game-winning goal that pushed the Monsters past the Providence Bruins.

"I haven't had that feeling in a while, haven't played in so long, but it was good to get on the board fast and to help the team win," he said.

Dumais' return to the ice could not have come at a better time for the Monsters as the Blue Jackets have had to recall Luca Del Bel Belluz to Columbus to fill in for an injured Sean Monahan. Del Bel Belluz, who was named to the AHL All-Star Classic, had 37 points in 34 games before being called up and was leading the league in points.

"At the end of day, it is an unfortunate way to come into the season, but everything worked out fine, and I'm grateful to just be out here," Dumais said.

The QMJHL MVP of the 2022-23 season has some lofty expectations on him because of the production he's posted in the past. However, his focus is on how to translate his style of hockey into wins for the Monsters.

“I know I've proven to myself in the past that I can do it against whoever,” he said. “I think it's a matter of just trying to see what the game's like here, and just transitioning my game into a game that I could use over here.”



## The Athletic / How expensive are tickets for the 4 Nations final? Try Stanley Cup Final Game 7 expensive.

**By Alex Andrejev – February 19, 2025**

In an atmosphere that could rival any Game 7, the United States and Canada are set for a rematch to crown the winner of the 4 Nations Face-Off on Thursday.

The championship game — scheduled for 8 p.m. ET at TD Garden in Boston — will conclude the four-nation, best-on-best tournament the NHL is staging this year in lieu of its All-Star Game. With the finalists determined after Canada beat Finland 5-3 on Monday and the U.S. secured its spot with a 3-1 win over Canada on Saturday, there is plenty of hype, both among star players and eager fans, heading into the battle between the North American foes.

That buildup has only skyrocketed the demand for snagging one of TD Garden's 17,850 seats in the days ahead of the final.

Ticket prices for the finale have climbed substantially throughout the tournament, two ticket resellers said Tuesday. That's after the Saturday game between the U.S. and Canada featured pregame boos as the U.S. national anthem played at Bell Centre in Montreal, followed by three on-ice fights in the first nine seconds of action.

According to one of the resellers, TickPick, the cheapest single ticket available on the site before the tournament began on Feb. 12 was \$237 (listed at the all-in price, meaning without added fees). That cheapest single ticket price jumped to \$1,222 as of Tuesday afternoon — a 415 percent increase. For comparison, that price was only slightly less than the cheapest single ticket on the site for Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final in Sunrise, Fla., two days before puck drop, listed at \$1,235, per TickPick.

Additionally, the upcoming 4 Nations final would also rank in the top 10 most expensive NHL games on record for TickPick based on average purchase price, with those records dating back to 2011, the company said.

As of Tuesday evening, the cheapest single tickets were listed at \$1,043 (without fees) on TickPick, \$791 (\$1,071 with fees) on StubHub, and \$945 (\$1,129 with fees) on Ticketmaster.

According to StubHub, the average price of tickets sold on their site has also seen a significant jump — from \$464 for the first USA-Canada game to \$766 for the championship, as of Tuesday evening. The average price of tickets on StubHub for the full tournament is as follows:

**Championship — USA vs. Canada (Feb. 20 in Boston): \$766**

**USA vs. Canada (Feb. 15 in Montreal): \$464**

**Sweden vs. USA (Feb. 17 in Boston): \$293**

**Canada vs. Finland (Feb. 17 in Boston): \$200**

**Canada vs. Sweden (Feb. 12 in Montreal): \$195**

**Finland vs. Sweden (Feb. 15 in Montreal): \$102**

**USA vs. Finland (Feb. 13 in Montreal): \$96**

The company also noted that the 4 Nations championship is its best-selling NHL game of the season so far, outselling two games of the 2024 Stanley Cup Final between the Florida Panthers and Edmonton

Oilers: Game 2 in Sunrise, Fla. by 22 percent and Game 3 in Edmonton by 16 percent. It's also outselling the prior two games in the 4 Nations tournament (Sweden-USA and Canada-Finland) combined, by nearly 50 percent, according to StubHub, which did not provide specific sales figures.

"All eyes are on the USA-Canada showdown in the 4 Nations Face-Off Championship, a game that's predicted to be emotional, heated and exciting," Adam Budelli, a spokesperson for StubHub said in a statement Tuesday evening. "Fans from both countries are vying for a seat in TD Arena — it's the best-selling NHL game of the season and has surpassed sales for the reigning NBA Champion Celtics home opener against the Knicks by nearly 50 percent."

StubHub also said its ticket buyers for the 4 Nations final are coming from 28 countries, with a majority (66 percent) coming from the United States and 32 percent coming from Canada.

Not only is ticketing demand looking strong, but viewership for the tournament has outpaced expectations. The opening Canada-Sweden game had a North American audience of 4.1 million while the U.S. versus Finland matchup delivered a North American audience of 3.4 million — more than double the total viewership the league anticipated before the tournament, league sources told The Athletic's Chris Johnston.

Then came the highly charged USA-Canada game Saturday, which averaged a whopping 4.4 million viewers, with viewership peaking at 5.2 million, per ESPN. It was the most-watched NHL game in the U.S. since Game 7 of last season's Stanley Cup Final, which drew 7.67 million viewers.

The USA-Canada encore in the 4 Nations final will air in prime time on ESPN, ESPN+, ESPN Deportes, Disney+, SN and TVAS.

## The Athletic / Canada, U.S. ready for 'dream scenario' rematch in 4 Nations final: 'A great celebration of hockey'

**By Arpon Basu and Michael Russo – February 19, 2025**

BOSTON — There are only three players taking part in Thursday's Canada-U.S. championship game at the 4 Nations Face-Off who can say it might not be the biggest international game of their lives.

Sidney Crosby and Drew Doughty have won two Olympic gold medals, including in 2010 when Crosby scored the "Golden Goal" in overtime against the United States. Brad Marchand played in the World Cup of Hockey final the last time we had best-on-best competition nine years ago and scored the championship-winning goal.

For everyone else, this is the big one.

And so it was telling how Crosby responded when he was asked to reminisce about that tournament in 2010, when Canada lost to the United States in the preliminaries only to come back and beat them in the gold-medal game.

The same thing could happen again, but Crosby would have none of it. He is singularly focused on this game, this tournament, right now. Not 15 years ago.

"It's been a long time since 2010," Crosby said after Canada clinched its spot in the final Monday. "My mind hasn't gone there, to be honest with you. My mind hasn't gone there at all. Just understanding the challenge, trying to learn from the last game we played against the U.S., knowing what we're up against.

"It's an opportunity."

It's not only an opportunity for Crosby, Team Canada and Team USA but also for the growth of the game.

The Canada-U.S. appetizer we got Saturday at Bell Centre — the anthem booing, the three fights in the first nine seconds, the drama — has drawn eyeballs to Thursday's game that never would've considered watching the sport.

In the United States, it's the opportunity of a lifetime to grow the sport. And the Americans don't want a repeat of 2010 when the preliminary win was the highlight.

"It's the dream scenario," said 23-year-old Matt Boldy, who starred for the U.S. when the Americans beat Canada to win gold at the 2021 World Juniors on Canadian soil. "It's the biggest game that I think I've ever played in my whole life. That's the matchup you want. For us. For them. I'm sure, for TV. For everything. It's the most exciting game."

Boldy was just shy of his ninth birthday when Crosby scored the "Golden Goal" in Vancouver.

Even a Canadian who plays in Boston can appreciate how big the game is from a macro perspective. Television ratings for the first matchup Saturday were through the roof, and no one will be able to get into TD Garden on Thursday for less than \$1,000, with some tickets reaching five figures on the secondary market as of late Monday night.

"There's been obviously a lot of buzz from the last game there, and everybody will be very excited for the rematch," said Marchand, who will be playing in his home NHL rink as the villain Thursday. "That's ultimately part of what this is: to grow the game, continue to showcase how incredible the sport is and,

for the players, an opportunity to play best-on-best — something we've been looking forward to for a long time.

"So it's great we're getting it."

Team USA coach Mike Sullivan also appreciates the unique importance of the moment, and it almost seemed as though he was speaking directly to the potential viewing audience when describing what the final would be like.

"I think it's a great celebration of hockey," Sullivan said. "It really is. I mean, there's some of the generational talents on both sides. It's so awesome from my standpoint. You know, I feel like I get the best seat in the house, being behind the bench and being up close to it. To watch what these guys do on the ice, at the pace that they're able to do it — sometimes we just marvel at what goes on out there with some of these guys."

Make no mistake: The United States may be the betting favorite after being the underdog Saturday night, but Canada will be ready to play.

"I don't care who's favored, who's not — we come in here to win this," Canada coach Jon Cooper said. "I'm really looking forward to the game. This is why we came here."

Canada has three of the best players in the world in superstars Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar, along with Crosby, the three-time Stanley Cup winner who has always led his country to victory in a best-on-best contest.

Even effectively playing with one arm in the first game of this tournament, Crosby was the best player on the ice in Canada's overtime win against Sweden, assisting on three goals.

Canada is a team full of proven winners. Fifteen players on its roster have won at least one Stanley Cup.

The United States has two players who have won a Cup: Jack Eichel and Matthew Tkachuk the past two seasons.

"It's a Game 7, right?" Eichel said. "Like, it's for everything. You're going to see desperate hockey. You're going to see everything you saw in the first game and more, I imagine."

"I expect their best, and they should expect ours as well."

Brady Tkachuk has done so much losing in Ottawa, he called Saturday's preliminary victory the biggest game of his career.

And Dylan Larkin, the Detroit Red Wings captain, has missed the playoffs in eight consecutive seasons.

"I was talking to my wife today; it's been a long time since I've won something," Larkin said Monday. "There's some guys in here that are in the same boat. Especially after how Saturday unfolded, there's a lot on the line, and I expect it to be a great hockey game."

For all the star power on Canada and the U.S., the first meeting between the two was very tightly played. Aside from the opening minutes and the very end when Canada pushed to tie the score, there was little room on the ice to operate.

"You see all the skill and talent," Crosby said, "and you realize pretty quickly that you've got to fight for all the space you can get out there."

Puck management was at a premium and mistakes were rare, but for Canada, those mistakes were costly. A Crosby turnover in the offensive zone to Boldy turned into Larkin's game-winning goal at the other end of the ice.

"A lot of this game's about puck management, and sometimes it's not as fun to watch," Cooper said Monday after lauding how his stars dumped pucks and played solid defensively in beating Finland. "There's a lot of hard work, because much of the game you might be working without the puck. But when you put it in places and you get it back, you can lean on teams. I think we didn't do that very well against the U.S. in the first game. We made some adjustments tonight and it worked in our favor."

Though tactics, coaching and discipline will all be important, this game is about more than all of that. It is not simply a game, but a moment, and it is about rising to it and making sure you can look back on the biggest game of your life with fondness, not bitter disappointment.

"That game in Montreal was pretty special," Team USA forward Jack Hughes said. "To get the chance to do that again, that'll be pretty cool and something everybody in this room will look back on and say we were glad to be a part of that game."

## [The Athletic / U.S. and Canada set for a rematch, plus a troubling tennis story](#)

By Chris Branch – February 19, 2025

Good morning! The poll results are in.

### **2 Nations Left: Cancel your Thursday plans**

The U.S. lost to Sweden last night, 2-1, but the result didn't matter much. The Americans had already clinched a spot on the 4 Nations final heading into the game.

You know who did win last night, though? Hockey, which took a victory lap on the NBA's All-Star festivities (more on that in a bit). The U.S. is set for a rematch with Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off title game, which will be must-watch TV. Here is a game even star players are calling bigger than the Stanley Cup. Pretty remarkable for a mid-season tourney.

### **Two things:**

In the early game, Canada outpaced Finland 5-3 to reach said title rematch against the Americans. The Canadians sprinted out to a 4-0 lead, though the Finns closed that to 4-3 within the final minute of play. Sidney Crosby redeemed himself after a bad game against the Americans on Saturday.

One thing to worry about for the U.S.: injuries. Brady Tkachuk left last night's game after a hard slide into the net. His brother Matthew sat out the game with a lower-body injury suffered in the first game against Canada. Either would be hugely missed in the championship contest.

It sets up what should be a fantastic final Thursday (8 p.m. ET). We'll have more. I can't wait. Let's keep going:

### **Feedback Loop: Woof, ASG**

There is solemn solace in being right about a bad thing. The results from yesterday's poll confirm that, as most of you were not even interested in the All-Star Game. It's a sad thing, really.

### **We're not alone in this, either:**

Warriors star/firebrand/podcaster Draymond Green thinks the new All-Star Game format "sucks." I wouldn't use such harsh terms, but he's not wrong. Changing the tenor of this game feels like flailing at this point.

The Athletic's David Aldridge was a little nicer, arguing the game was better than last year — but major issues remain. Players don't want to get injured in an exhibition game. It makes sense.

I will root for a USA vs. The World best-on-best format going forward. Give everyone else a week off and profit.

Thank you, as always, for voting.

### **News to Know**

#### **Lawrence nixes Pittsburgh**

Jaguars quarterback Trevor Lawrence said he will not be heading to the Steelers in a trade, despite a rumor to the contrary last week. Lawrence has a no-trade clause in his contract and said he has no interest in leaving Jacksonville, especially with new coach Liam Coen coming in. See his full comments [here](#).

### **Trout's position swap**

Mike Trout, the wildly talented yet oft-injured three-time MVP, is moving from center field to right field, he announced yesterday. "I'm trying to preserve the legs," Trout said, and I fully support the notion. He's played more than 100 games once in the last four seasons. Any baseball fan should want to see Trout, 33, healthy again for an entire season before his prime wanes. Read more here.

In tennis, there may be no relationship more sacred than the one between player and coach. Anyone can teach mechanics, but these coaches travel with players. Know their ticks. Know when to push and when to pull back. They have to know the player better than most, if not all.

Elena Rybakina is one of the world's best women's tennis players, yet her fraught relationship with her on-and-off-again coach, Stefano Vukov, is testing the limits of what is appropriate or even healthy when it comes to this special bond.

Anyone who follows Rybakina, 25, on social media knows Vukov has been in and out of her circle, but according to an intense investigation from The Athletic, the issues go much deeper.

### **Two things that struck me:**

Multiple people have noticed the concerning way Vukov allegedly treats Rybakina, the world No. 4 player who represents Kazakhstan. Among multiple incidents detailed in the story, Vukov allegedly insulted Rybakina's intelligence, threw balls at her, and said she would be "picking potatoes" in her native Russia without him. Yikes.

Rybakina at one point fired Vukov and had to rebuff his repeated attempts to regain her trust in the last two years. Friends and colleagues worried about her in the interim period. Then, suddenly, Vukov was back in the fold ... and apparently involved with Rybakina romantically.

According to a WTA ruling, Vukov is serving a one-year ban from the sport over his "mental abuse" of Rybakina, who has repeatedly defended Vukov's actions since reuniting with him.

I urge you to read the full investigation for more on a very messy, but nuanced situation. It has the potential to affect how the sport of tennis polices itself.

Sparty remains one of the best teams in the Big Ten but is on somewhat of a cold streak right now, and Tom Izzo is riding the high of topping Bobby Knight's record over the weekend.

### **Pulse Picks**

The Luka Dončić trade still boggles most, but if you talk to people close to Mavericks general manager Nico Harrison, it wasn't that shocking. Super interesting insights in this exclusive report from yesterday.

Big Ten and SEC leaders are meeting this week to "move forward with a full-on takeover of the College Football Playoff." It is arrogant and pointless, as Stewart Mandel writes.

How did the Red Sox finally land Alex Bregman? Jen McCaffrey has the definitive story of their successful pursuit. He looks weird in a Sox uniform, and I mean that nicely.

**Speaking of:** Ken Rosenthal wrote earlier about the Cubs' flailing offseason, which includes missing out on Bregman. Tough.

Rose Zhang, rising women's golf superstar, sounded off to Gabby Herzig about her TGL involvement and the slow-play issue everyone's talking about. Read her interview.

## The Athletic / What does Sweden's 4 Nations Face-Off performance mean for the Olympics?

**By Fluto Shinzawa – February 19, 2025**

BOSTON — Team Sweden did not lose in regulation during the 4 Nations Face-Off. The Swedes beat Team USA on Monday, albeit in a zero-meaning game for both teams, by a 2-1 score. Samuel Ersson, who did not make the initial roster, stopped 31 of 32 shots to give Sweden some swagger heading into the 2026 Olympics.

Sweden, in other words, was not far off.

“Overall, we’re OK with our performance this tournament,” said coach Sam Hallam. “The Canada game, we grew into it and showed we can play really good hockey against a tough team in a tough building to play against a whole nation. We’re disappointed with our game against Finland. Full credit to them — the way they battled and played that game. They were smart tactically. They deserved to win it in the end. Which put us into this game. Three games, no losses in regulation. But still, we’re in third place. The general feeling is that we like a lot of what we do. We want to be a bit better.”

The Swedes showed they should be in good shape come next year. They have foundational players in the sweet spots of their careers. They have kids like 20-year-old Leo Carlsson, who made his tournament debut on Monday, pushing veterans.

But Sweden will be built again around Victor Hedman, their ageless captain. The 34-year-old led the team by averaging 25:19 of ice time per game. Hedman is doing a fine job of succeeding Nicklas Lidstrom, Sweden’s previous peerless do-it-all defenseman. Even one year later, Hedman projects to be a minutes-munching shutdown presence who should push the pace and help on the No. 2 power-play unit.

As for his future surroundings, Hedman likes what he sees.

“To end with a win against the U.S. on U.S. soil is a big boost for us and is a building block for us,” said the Swedish captain. “There’s a lot of players on this team that’s going to be on that team in Milano next year. For us to get together, get to know each other, (and) get to know the coaching staff a little bit more was huge for us. It was a great experience.”

Sweden’s back-end issue is how Hedman has graybeard company. Mattias Ekholm is also 34. Unlike Hedman, Ekholm averaged only 15:05 of ice time per game. He was the extra defenseman in the Monday morning skate. Only illnesses holding out Mika Zibanejad and Rickard Rakell put Ekholm back in uniform as the No. 7 defenseman. Ekholm played just 9:42 against the U.S. and did not look like he was comfortable with the tournament’s pace.

Erik Karlsson, another 34-year-old, has more juice in his legs than Ekholm. But Karlsson’s most dynamic days are behind him. He will have to rely even more on his processing power to keep up with Olympic opponents.

“It’s a good experience for everyone in here to have a game like that,” Karlsson said. “Hopefully next time we play them, it’s going to be in a do-or-die situation and we can rely on this experience we had today and hopefully be a little more comfortable out there.”

While his defense could be in transition, Hallam will have go-to players up front. Joel Eriksson Ek does not play a highlight-style game. But he proved to be the type of center coaches love: reliable in every



situation, hard on pucks, dependable defensively, and able to adapt his game to whoever is on his wing. Eriksson Ek had one goal and one assist while averaging 19:44 of ice time per game. The 28-year-old will be a go-to player in the Olympics.

“He’s a workhorse,” Hallam said. “He drives the game offensively too, winning a lot of pucks. Game like this, I don’t know how many faceoffs he ended up taking in the defensive zone, how many defensive-zone starts. But you just rely on him. You can put him out there in any situation, pair him up with any kind of wings and he always brings it. His line is always going.”

Jesper Bratt and Adrian Kempe also proved to be credible two-way wings. Bratt scored the winning goal against the Americans by cutting into high-danger ice and roofing a shot over Jake Oettinger. Bratt, 26, uses his agility to create scoring chances while Kempe, 28, is more of a straight-line rush player.

But the Swedes will have to get more from William Nylander, Elias Pettersson and Filip Forsberg next year. Nylander is Sweden’s only forward with the game-breaking ability of peers such as Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon. He had some looks in the tournament. But not enough.

Pettersson finished with zero points in three games. He moved to left wing against the USA. It didn’t help. Pettersson played just 9:54 and was nothing close to the player he’s been in previous seasons with the Vancouver Canucks.

Sweden’s high-end players have something to prove in the Olympics.

“The Three Crowns has a lot to look forward to,” Hedman said. “World Championships at home. Olympics, World Cups moving forward.”

## The Athletic / U.S. suddenly banged up heading into 4 Nations title showdown with Canada

**By Michael Russo – February 19, 2025**

BOSTON — Brady Tkachuk has spent his life following his older brother's lead.

He has taken that to the extreme in this 4 Nations Face-Off.

Matthew Tkachuk scored two goals in the tournament opener against Finland, so Brady scored two of his own. Matthew fought off the opening draw in the second game against Canada, so Brady dropped the gloves following the ensuing faceoff. And eerily, after Matthew missed the final 12:36 of the Canada game, Brady got hurt with 12:23 left in the first period Monday night in a 2-1 loss to Sweden after losing an edge and colliding with the goal post.

Brady spent the next seven minutes in the United States dressing room before returning. But he played only one more shift totaling 14 seconds, spent the rest of the first period opening and closing the bench door for his teammates and didn't return to the game at the start of the second period.

Since the game was meaningless with the U.S. already destined to face Canada, which beat Finland earlier in the day, in Thursday's final, coach Mike Sullivan said the decision to hold out Brady Tkachuk was out of precaution and he doesn't anticipate Tkachuk missing Thursday's title clash against the rival from the North.

Brother Matthew also missed Monday's game out of precaution with the lower-body injury sustained in the third period against Canada two nights earlier. It would seem unimaginable that either Tkachuk would allow himself to miss Thursday's game after how much they've invested in leading the United States in this tournament.

But the worry heading into the big game is how banged up the United States actually is.

Defenseman Charlie McAvoy missed Monday's game with an upper-body injury and infection that required hospitalization. Jake Sanderson replaced him in the lineup. McAvoy isn't expected to be out long-term but will be out Thursday, the Bruins announced Tuesday.

And when Auston Matthews was unable to play with an upper-body injury, the United States had to play a forward short with no other healthy players on the roster with extra Chris Kreider already being inserted for Matthew Tkachuk.

"We start the game with 11 forwards, and then you lose another guy and a key player on our team," center Jack Eichel said. "It's never easy. You don't want to see anyone go out. I give the guys credit. We put a lot on (the) 10 forwards, and it's tough. Sully's trying to find combinations. We had chances, but we just weren't able to bury."

The good news is the United States will have two days to rest some of these banged-up bodies before Thursday's rematch with Canada.

"It's nice, especially when down a handful of guys," forward J.T. Miller said. "We need the extra time. Everybody's going to be itching to get back in Thursday."

Sullivan anticipates getting "some of these guys back," but the United States may have to make contingency plans Tuesday by putting a player or two who did not make the initial American roster on call in case an emergency addition is needed Thursday.

NHL teams resume practicing Thursday, so general manager Bill Guerin won't need to summon a player away from Cabo the way Canada did earlier this tournament with Thomas Harley. He changed his in-season vacation when Shea Theodore was lost for the tournament with an upper-body injury and was thrust into action Saturday night when Canada needed a defenseman with Cale Makar sick.

Harley didn't play against Finland on Monday because Makar was healthy enough to return.

"I would anticipate we would (get players back Thursday)," Sullivan said. "We'll have to wait and see how things play out here over the next day or so, but obviously there will be contingency planning in the event that we need people."

Sullivan didn't have much of an update on Matthews. He said he expects he'll have more information Tuesday.

But without Matthews, McAvoy and Matthew Tkachuk, the loss of Brady Tkachuk on Monday made things more difficult for the United States, which had oodles of scoring chances but couldn't beat Sam Ersson more than an early Kreider goal for a 1-0 lead.

Ersson, who made 32 saves, got the call for Sweden with Linus Ullmark and Filip Gustavsson both under the weather.

"It sucks (losing Brady)," said goalie Jake Oettinger, who got the start so Connor Hellebuyck could rest for Thursday. "He's been like the heartbeat of this team pretty much. So I know he'll be good to go for Thursday. He's such a big piece for this whole thing."

To Oettinger's point, in a meaningless game, it was obvious Tkachuk came to play against Sweden. In just 1 minute, 55 seconds of ice time and an average shift length of 23 seconds, Tkachuk had three shots, another attempted and three hits.

"It's not easy," Sullivan said. "We lose a guy that early in the game. We're already down one. We tried to spread the minutes around a little bit so nobody got an extensive workload. But when you're down two guys that early in the game, it is what it is. I thought the guys competed hard."

Oettinger made 21 saves but couldn't get any goal support. The former Boston University goalie had a dozen family members travel to Boston for the start and was so proud to wear a Team USA jersey in front of them.

"I think I've never been more nervous for a game than I was today, like I wanted to win this game so bad," Oettinger said.

Even if the Tkachuks and Matthews can play Thursday, Kreider may have earned another game. After being scratched for the first two games of the tournament, the former Boston College star and Boxford, Mass., native scored 35 seconds into his debut and was solid throughout.

"He's a big, strong kid that can play a physical game, and I would anticipate that it will be a physical game (against Canada)," Sullivan said. "Both teams play a similar style, both north-south teams that play with a ton of speed and a ton of physicality. I think Kreids, his game, without a doubt suits that."

## [Sportsnet.ca / Canada's keys to solving Hellebuyck, USA in 4 Nations Face-Off final](#)

**By Eric Engels – February 19, 2025**

BOSTON — Behind all the pomp, pugnacity, skill and scoring that's placed Team USA in the deciding game of the 4 Nations Face-Off has been Connor Hellebuyck standing as tall as his six-foot-four frame has allowed him to.

The goaltender has been sensational through two starts, blocking 45 of 47 shots he's faced for a tournament-leading .957 save percentage.

"Blocking" is the optimal word, however, because Hellebuyck certainly hasn't been absorbing all the shots that have hit them since making his first start against Finland last Wednesday. Far from it, in fact.

Checking with Sportlogiq, the 31-year-old allowed 15 rebounds on the 21 shots the Finns landed in USA's opening game, and he then allowed another 18 on 26 shots Canada had in USA's 3-1 win last Saturday.

Sam Bennett saw them, but the net (and chaos) driver said the Canadians didn't do enough to get to them.

"That's how we're going to generate more chances," Bennett said. "We definitely let (Hellebuyck) off the hook and made it too easy for him the last time we played him, so I think that's going to be a key for us on Thursday."

Another will be Canada's ability to hit the second wave of offence on the rush and then stack the middle of the offensive zone to create traffic for their point-men to shoot through.

Josh Morrissey, who's one of those point men, knows how effective that strategy can be. Especially against Hellebuyck.

Morrissey has played in front of Hellebuyck for his whole career with the Winnipeg Jets, and he was standing right in front of him for many of the 24 goals the Colorado Avalanche got by him using those exact tactics in their five-game playoff series last spring.

Across from Morrissey then was Cale Makar, who was doing most of the shooting to help Colorado advance.

Makar wasn't there for Canada last Saturday against USA. But after returning from illness against Finland, Morrissey believes Makar can make a huge difference in Thursday's championship game in the same way he did against the Jets in the playoffs.

"I was talking about it after the (Finland) game last night: His ability to walk the line and get shots through is probably the best in the NHL," said Morrissey. "His wrist shot, snap shot, however you want to call it, is so lethal. We see it a lot obviously when we play him and see it a lot in the summer skating with him. It's definitely a special talent, and I think all the other D-men try to learn from him on that. But he's lethal with that. Every time he gets up there five-on-five or on the power play, he's a real threat and he can score from distance, which is hard to do in the NHL."

Makar has yet to score for Canada in this tournament, but everything Morrissey said about him is reflected in him having five more goals (22) than any other defenceman in the league this season. And only Columbus Blue Jackets defenceman Zach Werenski has landed more shots (203) than Makar's 175 on net.

Meanwhile, for Team USA, Werenski, who's tied with Canada's Sidney Crosby for the tournament lead in points (five), is a big part of the reason the Canadians and Finns had so much trouble getting to those rebounds Hellebuyck gave out last week.

He'll be without partner Charlie McAvoy, who was lauded by replacement Jake Sanderson as the main reason USA made the final before losing to Team Sweden in a meaningless game Monday. But even with McAvoy nursing an infection from an upper-body injury, the Americans have a group that has swept away the rebounds and kept Hellebuyck's sightlines clear to great effect.

Noah Hanifin said those are just two of several things USA's defence has done well.

As for what they did best, specifically against Canada, Hanifin said, "I think for us, it was mostly just the rushes against."

"They have a lot of speed and skill that comes through the middle of the ice," Hanifin expanded. "You saw it on (Connor) McDavid's goal there — how dangerous they can be if let up for one second. I thought we did a good job limiting that and trying to frustrate them, staying on top of them and checking well, and it's something we'll have to do again because you know they're going to bring it."

Canada's must do exactly that.

So long as Hellebuyck is blocking most the pucks instead of absorbing them, their best chance of winning the tournament depends on it.

### **Brandon Hagel for flag, not cameras**

Brandon Hagel said there was no way he was backing down from a fight with Matthew Tkachuk to open Saturday's mayhem between Canada and USA, and just like he punched then, he had the retort of the tournament on Tuesday.

When asked if Team Canada should initiate the physicality against this banged-up American team, Hagel said no plans were being orchestrated like the ones J.T. Miller and the Tkachuk brothers cooked up ahead of last Saturday's game.

"I think we're out there playing for the flag, not the cameras," Hagel said. "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 then giving it everything and doing it for our country. We don't need to initiate everything. We're just going to play as hard as we can and do it for the flag on the chest."

It should be noted he leads Canadian forwards with 11 hits through three games, while the Tkachuks and Miller, who planned those game-opening fights against Canada Saturday, have combined for 37 of the 86 hits the Americans have thrown in the tournament.

Bennett, who has eight hits through the two games he played, will be key for Canada in that department.

The Florida Panthers superpest also relishes the opportunity to be the target of boos from the Boston faithful at the arena on Thursday.

"I've definitely been the villain in a lot of buildings, and definitely in this building before, so I enjoy that role," he said. "But I'm sure the atmosphere is going to be just as intense as it was [in Montreal] and I can't wait for Thursday."

## The Athletic / Quinn Hughes will not join U.S. for 4 Nations final vs. Canada after all

**By Michael Russo – February 20, 2025**

BOSTON — The United States is not adding Quinn Hughes to its 4 Nations Face-Off roster in advance of Thursday night's championship game against Canada, Hughes' agent confirmed to The Athletic.

The reigning Norris Trophy winner has not been medically cleared, agent Pat Brisson said.

The news was a big turn in the wake of a bombshell dropped by U.S. coach Mike Sullivan on Tuesday. Sullivan said that Hughes was on his way to joining the team after defenseman Charlie McAvoy was ruled out for Thursday's title game because of an infection stemming from an upper-body injury.

Sullivan did add, though, that he did not know if Hughes would be able to play Thursday night, and NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly told The Athletic that Hughes couldn't play unless the team didn't have enough defensemen to play against Canada.

"We're going to take each day as it comes," Sullivan said. "We'll see what we have available to us. We'll make decisions accordingly. I wish I could offer more on that. I can't."

Hughes was one of the first six players named to the U.S. roster in June, but he had to bow out of the tournament before it started with a reported oblique injury. He was replaced by Ottawa Senators youngster Jake Sanderson, who played in place of McAvoy on Monday night in a 2-1 loss to Sweden.

Similarly, last week Team Canada rushed Dallas Stars defenseman Thomas Harley to Montreal to be on call when Shea Theodore was lost for the tournament with an upper-body injury. Harley was not allowed to practice or play unless the Canadians went below six defensemen. When Cale Makar was unable to play Saturday night against the United States due to illness, Harley debuted and then was officially put on Canada's roster.

So the same rules would apply with Hughes, Daly said. Unless one of Sanderson, Zach Werenski, Adam Fox, Brock Faber, Jacob Slavin or Noah Hanifin can't play Thursday, Hughes isn't permitted to play. But the Americans wanted to make sure somebody was ready to be inserted, especially considering several players have been struck by illness during the tournament.

As for McAvoy, it's unfortunate for the Bruins defenseman who was so good and so physical in last Saturday's game against Canada. The 27-year-old also played at Boston University, so a title game in his home rink was going to be a dream come true.

It's unclear when McAvoy sustained the injury that caused him to be hospitalized Monday night. Sullivan indicated it wasn't necessarily in the game against Canada.

"He's obviously disappointed that he won't have the ability to participate in the championship game," said Sullivan, who's also McAvoy's father-in-law. "This tournament means a lot to him. He's a very competitive guy. Obviously, there's a personal note with respect to my relationship with him, and I'm disappointed for him because first and foremost he's a great kid and he's a terrific hockey player, and I know this meant a lot to him.

"So under all the circumstances, he's in good spirits. I know he's disappointed. He wanted the opportunity to compete in the championship game."

Added Sanderson, "Really unfortunate. I'm not sure how that happens, but he came into this tournament, gave everything he had, and that's why we're in the finals. It's because of him."

On the other hand, the respect for Hughes from both sides of the matchup was notable.

"He's a great player, obviously, having an amazing season," Josh Morrissey said. "I'm sure all the fine details will get ironed out, but he's an amazing player. If he does play, it throws a wrinkle into things and we'll have to prepare for that."

Canada coach Jon Cooper said having Cale Makar and Hughes both in the final after neither played Saturday would be "good for the game."

"No doubt about that," Cooper said. "Quinn Hughes is a special player. But I don't know all the rules. Is he allowed to play?"

When told it's not clear, Cooper laughed.

"It was unfortunate he was hurt to begin with. I don't know if you get any better than those two guys."

## The Athletic / How Jon Cooper helped shape Canada for 4 Nations: Dodging the U.S. call and dive-bar coaching

**By Pierre LeBrun – February 20, 2025**

BOSTON — Truth be told, Jon Cooper could just as well have ended up coaching Team USA at this level at some point in his career.

After all, he was an assistant coach on USA Hockey's under-18 team at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup tournament many moons ago in 2008 when working his way up the coaching ranks.

But Hockey Canada reached out first at this level.

That was back in 2017. The Tampa Bay Lightning had a rare non-playoff season, and the IIHF Men's World Championship beckoned.

One year earlier, former Team USA Olympic general manager Brian Burke got wind that Cooper was a dual citizen and advised USA Hockey to stay on the coach.

"I went to USA Hockey the year before Coop started coaching with Hockey Canada and said, 'We need to get this guy in the program before Canada gets him,'" Burke recalled to The Athletic on Tuesday. "The late Jim Johansson (legendary USA Hockey executive) and I spoke to him the next year, and at the time, Coop said he was flattered but he said his first choice would be Canada.

"We came that close to getting him for USA Hockey. We almost pulled it off."

Cooper had already gotten word earlier that season from Steve Yzerman, his GM with the Lightning at the time, that Hockey Canada would be calling about coaching at the worlds. But Cooper still had to wait for that actual call from Hockey Canada.

As it turned out, rather amazingly, Hockey Canada and USA Hockey called Cooper about 10 minutes apart that day in 2017. Hockey Canada was first.

Cooper's mother was from San Francisco, but he's a native of Prince George, B.C., and has lived in the U.S. since attending Hofstra University. He also was part of the coaching staff for Team North America at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey, which in many ways was fitting.

But eventually he had to fall into an international lane, and picking the country he was born in made the most sense. He's a proud Canadian through and through.

There's a framed picture in Cooper's office in Tampa of his silver medal from that 2017 IIHF World Championship.

And from that moment, he has longed to lead a best-on-best squad.

He was crushed when the NHL pulled out of the 2022 Winter Games because of COVID-19 concerns.

"To be honest, it was devastating," Cooper told me three years ago in the wake of the NHL pulling out of the Beijing Olympics. "I would be remiss if I didn't use such a strong word. I look at the sport of hockey, the country of Canada and the marriage the two have and the passion the country has for it; the thrill of being named to that position. It didn't sit lightly with me.

"I was genuinely humbled and honored to have that opportunity. And then to have it swept out from under you, it ... it just leaves you empty."

Would he get another crack, he wondered?



Finally, the 4 Nations came together. Followed by an NHL commitment to the Olympics in February 2026.

Canada decided it would only name a coach for 4 Nations and use the extra time to decide on the Olympics, but eventually changed course, with Olympic GM Doug Armstrong naming Cooper coach for both.

No-brainer.

“Jon Cooper is one of the best coaches that ever lived,” Wayne Gretzky told The Athletic via text message. “Glen Sather, Scotty Bowman, he is right up there with those guys.”

He’s a two-time Stanley Cup champion coach who hopes to add 4 Nations and especially an Olympic gold medal to his mantle.

It’s been fascinating at practice to watch Cooper interact with captain Sidney Crosby and his other top players, as well as his star-studded coaching staff: coach Pete DeBoer from the Dallas Stars, Bruce Cassidy from the Vegas Golden Knights and reigning Jack Adams Award winner Rick Tocchet from the Vancouver Canucks.

That’s a lot of coaching IQ for one bench. How has it all worked under Cooper?

“It has been a fantastic experience,” DeBoer told The Athletic. “It’s been easy to check the ego at the door because — I believe I speak for all of us — we are all walking out better coaches for the experience. Not just X’s and O’s. How you handle situations, an example coming off the U.S. loss. What you prioritize. This only works if the head coach is inclusive and empowers his staff to run their areas while still being collaborative with the other great coaches in the room.”

Added Cassidy: “Coop has been amazing to work with and be around. Very collaborative for sure. It really has been a great experience all around.”

Tocchet says he’s been friends with Cooper for years and watched him work from afar.

“And then now to be able to be on the staff and working with those coaches — just the way Coop can delegate, you know, there’s a lot of moving parts,” Tocchet said. “I feel like he gives the coaches a lot of autonomy on certain things. You know what I like about it? He’ll digest all our opinions — he kind of walks away, and it’s almost like he’s thinking and then he walks back with a decision. I like that. It’s something that I really like. He’s very decisive, but he does ask for a lot of opinions and everybody’s information and he goes from there.”

Just like players have to come together in short order to form chemistry, the coaches have done the same, and it helps that Cooper is such a social person.

“It’s been a lot of fun,” DeBoer said. “Coop is a social guy, and a few beers at a local dive bar is also a big part of it.”

Tocchet laughed in response to that.

“Well, that’s one of the prerequisites,” he said. “And you know what? That’s where some of those decisions are made, whether it’s a dive bar or a restaurant where we have meals together. Whatever it is, he’s very sociable. After a loss, he’s not sitting in his hotel room. He’s getting us together, and I like that.

“It’s a new-day attitude.”

That positivity also has helped Cooper foster the kind of culture around the Lightning that makes it fun to come to work most days.

“Jon has had success at every level he’s been,” Yzerman, his former boss and now Detroit Red Wings GM, said. “He has a great ability to relate to his players and has his teams play a very enjoyable style of hockey, which they really appreciate.”

Rick Bowness was the veteran associate coach on Cooper’s staff when Cooper got the promotion from AHL Syracuse to the Lightning 12 years ago. Bowness used his experience to give the rookie NHL coach guidance.

“Any young coach who hasn’t had any previous NHL experience, not as a player or assistant coach, no exposure to the league, you have to learn how to get along with the players at this level,” Bowness told The Athletic. “It’s a different animal. Guys in the minors are all trying to get up. Guys in the NHL are all pretty secure and make a lot of money. So you have to learn how to deal with them. Coop has done a really good job of that, of adapting and getting along with players.

“The other job is managing the schedule in the NHL — when to practice, when to give a day off, when to push them. It’s all trial and error, but he adapted to the NHL really well. The hockey knowledge was always there.

“He’s earned this. He’s worked hard for it. He’s elite.”

Cooper wasn’t just along for the ride in the lead-up to 4 Nations. He was very much involved with management, including with roster selection.

“I appreciate what they’re giving me as an opportunity to help pick this team and not have a team just placed in front of me and say, ‘Go coach it,’” Cooper told The Athletic earlier this season. “Because I do think there is identity. How is the team going to play? What kind of identity? Are they going to take the identity of the coach? Or are you going to be coaching somebody that you don’t feel is comfortable in how you do things?

“The one thing is, everybody was aligned.”

One more win, and that vision for the roster will have been proven right.

Win or lose Thursday night, the bigger prize is on the line in 12 months. So much of what Cooper learns from 4 Nations will be put to use then.

But he has maintained all along that he saw 4 Nations as important on its own, not a mere stepping stone for Italy.

Pulling off the double wins this week and next February would be unbelievable, of course.

There’s a framed silver medal that needs replacing in his office in Tampa after all.

## The Athletic / 4 Nations Face-Off championship predictions: Picks for Canada vs. USA, MVP and more

By Sean Gentile, Shayna Goldman, James Mirtle, Mark Lazerus and The Athletic NHL Staff

The 4 Nations Face-Off, regardless of what happens in Thursday's championship game, has already been an unfettered success for the NHL. Still, every great fireworks show deserves a grand finale, and that's what we're expecting when the United States and Canada drop the puck at TD Garden.

What are the best moments and biggest surprises of the tournament thus far? Who has the inside track for MVP? How might the big game unfold? The Athletic surveyed its NHL staff for predictions on that and more. Providing commentary on the results are senior writers Sean Gentile, James Mirtle and Mark Lazerus and analytics know-it-all Shayna Goldman.

You can find our 4 Nations Face-Off pre-tournament predictions [here](#).

**Lazerus:** OK, I'm pretty sure more than 52 percent of our staff is American, so we need to root out the traitors. It speaks volumes about how scary the Canadian forward group is when the results are this close despite Connor Hellebuyck being in one net and Jordan Binnington being in the other. Though I do wonder what these results would look like if we could ensure another American defenseman comes down with some sort of mystery illness in the next two days and Quinn Hughes steps in, Willis Reed-style. We saw Monday just how different the Canadian team looked with Cale Makar out there for nearly half the game. Hughes would have a similar effect on the Americans.

**Gentile:** I went with the option least likely to trigger an IRS audit.

**Mirtle:** I picked the U.S. So there's one traitor for you. But I'm finding it hard to go with Binnington over Hellebuyck given the talent level on these rosters is fairly similar otherwise, assuming injuries aren't a factor. And the Americans played so well defensively in the first matchup.

**Goldman:** Team USA is so deep and may get reinforcements for their injuries in the form of Hughes, who is one of the most valuable defensemen in the league. Two sets of brothers for two wins over Canada? The one thing that is making me question my USA vote (and almost 52 percent of the staff here) is that I can't see Team Canada losing twice to the same team in one tournament — remember what happened at the 2010 Olympics?

**Lazerus:** If the Americans win, Hellebuyck should be unanimous. He enters the final with a .957 save percentage in his two starts. Binnington is at .892, Filip Gustavsson was at .813 and Kevin Lankinen was at .811. There's been a lot of hand-wringing about the goaltending disparity between the United States and everyone else, and hey, turns out we were all correct for once.

**Gentile:** Is it too late to write in Quinn Hughes?

**Mirtle:** I went with the goalie, but boy, wouldn't it be fun to see Crosby do it again, at this level, at age 37? Talk about a Team Canada GOAT.

**Goldman:** I think the narratives around Hellebuyck strengthen his case because here he is absolutely thriving in a high-pressure environment. And if the USA is going to beat Canada again, he will have to be the difference (again). Connor McDavid has been the standout for Canada over the last couple of games, but Crosby is the pick here.

**Lazerus:** I'm not surprised to see Elias Pettersson top the list here, and he's a worthy choice, for sure. But I went with Juuse Saros. A year ago, he was considered one of the top goaltenders in the world and

signed an eight-year contract extension with the Predators. Now he's giving up six goals in his one game and getting replaced by Kevin Lankinen. That nobody even batted an eyelash when Finland stuck with Lankinen over Saros for a do-or-die game against Canada on Monday says it all.

**Gentile:** Yep, I also went with Saros. He came into the tournament a little wobbly, but I wasn't expecting him to face-plant in his first game, either.

**Mirtle:** Unfortunately, this is what Pettersson has been for a while now, as Vancouver fans can attest. It's hard to watch. This was actually a tough category to pick — many of the players you'd expect to deliver in this thing have done so.

**Goldman:** Auston Matthews' two-way game has been solid, but I get why he's on this list — his best weapon, his shot, isn't shining enough. But I went with Pettersson here because a change in environment and teammates hasn't been enough to re-energize him.

**Gentile:** The "Should Erik Karlsson have made Team Sweden" storyline seemed silly, but I also wasn't expecting him to be one of the few best defensemen in the tournament. Nothing Dylan Larkin has done surprised me.

**Lazerus:** It's hard to say anybody "surprised" me because everyone in this tournament is quite good at hockey. But I went with Crosby, just because I expected him to be more limited than this. I didn't think he'd be a glorified mascot or anything, but I didn't expect him to be the top playmaker on the team, either. It seems ridiculous to say, but we really do sometimes take Crosby for granted, and this week has been a good reminder of just how fortunate we are to see him play.

**Mirtle:** There was some angst up here in Canada over the Drew Doughty selection, but that's looked dead wrong. He's been excellent, at 35 years old and coming off a serious injury. But Mikael Granlund getting some love is nice to see; he's always felt a bit underappreciated.

**Goldman:** I like that some of the older players are on this list. We all know Crosby is still elite, but it would have made some sense if McDavid or Nathan MacKinnon overshadowed him a bit more at this point in his career — especially with his injury situation in mind. The same goes for Doughty, after only playing six NHL games this season heading into the tournament.

**Lazerus:** Legit madness that anyone picked Mario Lemieux showing up over the start to U.S. vs. Canada. Though we do have a rather robust Pittsburgh bureau.

**Gentile:** Wasn't me, though I did think about writing in Crosby's empty net goal against Finland.

**Mirtle:** I think the right answer is probably the entire lead-up and first period of U.S. vs. Canada. Closest it's felt to an Olympics in more than a decade.

**Goldman:** The expanded overtime between Sweden and Canada absolutely slapped, but it's hard to pick anything besides the opening to U.S. vs. Canada. Expectations were high and the game delivered.

**Lazerus:** Feels strange to call Zach Werenski a breakout star nine years into his excellent NHL career, but he's been a monster for Columbus this year and he's been a monster for the United States this tournament. Quinn Hughes and Makar probably run away with most of the Norris votes, but Werenski's performance in the 4 Nations should raise his profile even higher. A big Olympics next year could put him into that same rarefied air.

**Gentile:** I, along with a grand total of one other person, voted for Lucas Raymond. He was one of Sweden's best forwards and he's leveled up in each of the last two seasons. Lots of meat left on that bone.

**Mirtle:** I wanted to pick Thomas Harley, but he played only one game and Canada is so deep at left defense that it'll be a challenge to crack the Olympic roster. But what a showing in a difficult situation for a kid no one talked about even being here. Matt Boldy has been really noticeable in limited minutes at 23 years old, so that bodes well for Milano Cortina 2026. The Americans' depth is visibly on another level at every position in this tournament.

**Goldman:** In hindsight, I wish I had put Brandon Hagel here because he's gaining a lot of national attention at this tournament, which should help build some momentum into Milano Cortina. But I went with Larkin for two reasons — he only has so much experience in this type of environment (just five NHL postseason games) and other star centers sometimes overshadow him a bit. Just look at where he was originally slotted to open this tournament, and how he forced himself into a more meaningful role.

## ESPN / 4 Nations Face-Off player ratings: Stars, slouches, final preview

**By Rachel Doerrie – February 20, 2025**

For a tournament that had its fair share of skeptics, the 4 Nations Face-Off has been a smashing success. The viewership has been sky-high, including many who are new to hockey. And for the first time in a long time, the NHL was compared favorably to the NBA by many sports media members on the backdrop of an underwhelming NBA All-Star Weekend.

Part of the reason is that the NHL and the International Olympic Committee have not been able to come to an agreement to let the league's players participate in the Olympics since 2014, robbing fans of more than a decade of best-on-best hockey. Given the performances of Canada's three-headed monster, the emotional games between European rivals and the donnybrook that broke out in Canada-United States game, everyone can agree that best on best really is best for the sport. That trend will continue with the Olympics in 2026 and a return of the World Cup of Hockey in 2028.

The stars showed out in this tournament, and the rematch of Saturday's fight-filled, Mach speed U.S.-Canada game awaits. Social media was wild on Saturday night, and one can only imagine what the temperature will be on Thursday (8 p.m. ET, ESPN/ESPN+/Disney+), when it isn't a round-robin game, or what the temperature might be at the Olympics when the game really matters.

Here's a look at the players who stood out the most -- for good or bad reasons -- from all four teams in the round-robin, using a combination of game score and scouting. We lead off with that aforementioned three-headed monster for Canada:

### **The standouts**

A major reason for the tournament's success is the sport's best players have put on a show. Canada's Connor McDavid, Sidney Crosby and Nathan MacKinnon have been the tourney's best players alongside Zach Werenski and Connor Hellebuyck from the United States. Sweden's Erik Karlsson deserves some recognition for his play. And it is no surprise those players led the way in game score.

On the eve of the tournament, it was unclear whether Crosby would play. But with a 1.24 average game score, he has turned back the clock, leading the competition in scoring with five points, including an assist on the overtime game-winning goal against Sweden. Perhaps the most "Crosby" moment of them all was against Finland, when Canada was on its heels in the dying stages of the third period. At 4-3, it was Crosby who laid the hit at center ice, popped up and calmly fired the puck into the empty net. The golden goal scorer in 2010 -- beating the U.S. in overtime in the gold medal match during the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia -- continues to be an enormous presence for Canada in moments where they need him most.

McDavid and MacKinnon have had eye-popping moments of brilliance. MacKinnon's power-play goal scored in the first minute of tournament play is one hockey fans will remember. McDavid's dazzling move to open the scoring on Saturday against the United States was typical McDavid magic (1.19 average game score). MacKinnon (1.14) has looked every part an impactful menace from start to finish. This is the first time hockey fans got a glimpse of the three playing together, and they did not disappoint. More of that, please.

Those three will grab the headlines, but Drew Doughty (0.52) has been excellent for Canada on defense, especially after Shea Theodore went down with injury in the first game. When Cale Makar missed Saturday's game due to illness, Doughty was Canada's best player as well as the best player overall player by game score. Doughty's ability to move the puck, play physical and make the simple plays that

endear him to coaches has been on full display. For a player who missed 90% of this season with injury -- and made this roster as an injury replacement for Alex Pietrangelo -- Doughty has been Canada's most important defenseman.

Werenski (1.47) and Hellebuyck have been tremendous for the United States. As has the pair of Brock Faber (0.04) and Jacob Slavin (-0.04), keeping the opponents' best players off the scoresheet. Their game scores might not show it, but the United States gave up almost nothing with those two on the ice.

Werenski is tied for the tournament lead in points, stepping up in the absence of Quinn Hughes, who has been recalled as a potential injury replacement should he be needed Thursday night. Werenski has driven play from the back end and created numerous scoring opportunities while playing defensively sound hockey. Outside of Hellebuyck, Werenski has been the MVP for the United States with his play at both ends of the ice.

Matthew Tkachuk (0.58) and Brady Tkachuk (0.70) put on an absolute masterclass in the first two games of the tournament. (Matthew missed Monday's loss to Sweden, while Brady left after a few shifts in the first period.) They dictated physical play and owned the net front, and their impact was felt from start to finish. The Finns had no answer for either of them, and both were a handful to deal with against Canada. The Tkachuks have been fun to watch, and they appear ready to return for the final.

The gap between Hellebuyck and every other goalie at this tournament is akin to the Grand Canyon. Each goalie in this tournament has had moments that make coaches wonder if they made the right call and deplete the confidence of their teammates -- all except Hellebuyck, that is. He clearly has cemented himself as the best goaltender in the world over the past few seasons. With a win on Thursday, he should quash the narrative he is unable to perform in big games. This has been an MVP-caliber performance from the American goaltender and a strong message that even if Canada has more skater depth, the gap in goaltending is seismic.

It should come as no surprise that Karlsson (1.18) and Victor Hedman (0.46) have been excellent for the Swedes. The two stalwarts of the Swedish blue line were excellent in the tournament.

A lot has been made of Karlsson's defensive faults in recent NHL seasons, but that was not the case in this tournament. Karlsson had a positive defensive rating and plus-4 goal differential while driving play and putting up points (one goal, two assists).

Hedman didn't have a loud tournament; he had an effective one, showcasing his strong defensive play in every game. The Swedish captain shouldered the most ice time and the toughest matchups, and he ranked as the third most valuable defenseman by game score in the round-robin.

Coach Mike Sullivan explains why the USA-Canada matchup in the 4 Nations Face-Off is so special for the sport of hockey.

### **The disappointments**

In an international tournament with superstars on every team, you're hoping you get the best of the best from every player. While we are grading only on the round-robin -- and a few of these players have the chance to change the narrative in the championship game -- it is hard to escape the reality that some did not perform up to their capabilities.

Mikko Rantanen (-0.01) had little to no impact on the tournament. He finished with one goal and was hardly noticeable in major moments. Outscored by the likes of Mikael Granlund (0.06), Patrik Laine (-0.03) and a few of the Finnish defensemen, it was a tournament to forget for the typically high-scoring Rantanen. He struggled to get the inside and generate scoring opportunities and was ineffective on the

power play. Finland needed him to be a star in the absence of their best defensemen (Miro Heiskanen and Rasmus Ristolainen), and he ghosted the team.

Joining him in that category is Teuvo Teravainen (-0.38). He had a net negative in every game and was Finland's worst forward in the tournament, leading to a scratch in the final game against Canada. Teravainen was unable to create anything offensively and was poor defensively. Perhaps pairing him with Sebastian Aho might have made a difference given their previous chemistry with the Carolina Hurricanes; but ultimately, the coaches decided Teravainen wasn't a fit in the lineup, and you can't blame them.

Outside of his overtime winner, which was a beauty, Mitch Marner (0.03) was very quiet through the round-robin. Along the same lines as his playoff performances for the Toronto Maple Leafs, Marner has been excellent defensively but has struggled to have any meaningful offensive impact. His penalty killing has been a plus for the Canadians, but a player of his caliber being reduced to a checking role is all too familiar for fans who have watched him fail to produce when the stakes are the highest. His Maple Leafs teammates Auston Matthews (0.05) and William Nylander (0.13) also struggled to produce through the round-robin. Matthews missed the Americans' final game against Sweden with injury. But all three are unlikely to be pleased with their performance, barring significant impact in the championship game for Marner or Matthews. Nylander and Sweden won't get a chance for impact in the championship game.

Sweden's Elias Pettersson (-0.08) and Filip Forsberg (0.05) can't be pleased with their tournament play, either, especially given Pettersson saw the least ice time among forwards in the final game. On the other hand, Forsberg played a premier role for Sweden throughout and was held pointless through the tournament. Forsberg generated more opportunities than Pettersson but was unable to capitalize. Adrian Kempe (0.03) was a net negative in the two games following a decent performance against Canada. Ultimately, Sweden needed all three to be much better in the pivotal game against Finland. Pettersson will stand out because of his ice time, but Kempe, Forsberg and Nylander performed well below expectations.

The United States left some significant talent off the roster, and while their gritty, role-playing style might yet pay off, J.T. Miller (0.02), Vincent Trocheck (-0.22) and Brock Nelson (-0.13) have struggled to impact this tournament in any meaningful way. Zero points and six shots combined falls below the expectations, and the only noteworthy moment any of them had was when Miller punched himself in the face while fighting Colton Parayko. Sure, it's a viral moment -- but not exactly the one you want. They had an opportunity to step up in the absence of Matthews and the Tkachuks against Sweden on Monday, and Miller, Trocheck and Nelson were the worst forwards by game score, outside of Kyle Connor, who inexplicably is not getting a bigger opportunity despite having the most goals by any American in the NHL this season.

### **What to expect in the final**

Thursday night's 4 Nations Face-Off final between Canada and the United States will be supercharged after Saturday's matchup. The players care, the coaches care, the fans care -- and for better or worse, the politicians care. Part of the reason is the United States has not beaten Canada in a best-on-best final since the turn of the millennium. (The Americans' previous win was at the 1996 World Cup of Hockey.)

If Canada prevails, it will feel like the 2010 Olympics, when the Americans beat Canada in the round-robin only to lose to Canada in the gold medal game. No one remembers the round-robin victory when you lose the final. If Canada wins the rematch, the only thing anyone will recollect about Saturday's game will be how the game started.



The Americans would have some well-earned swagger heading into the 2026 Olympics if they best Canada on Thursday night. They clearly have the edge in goal, but injuries to the Tkachuk brothers, Matthews and Charlie McAvoy are concerning; McAvoy already has been declared out.

Regardless of who plays and who doesn't, bragging rights are on the line, and we might be in for a barn burner. If we're being intellectually honest, the gold medals that everyone wants are the ones in Italy next year. This is the appetizer, but it's a Michelin star appetizer given the attention.

## [Sportsnet.ca / Five storylines to watch in Canada, United States 4 Nations Face-Off final](#)

By Rory Boylen – February 20, 2025

The 4 Nations Face-Off has exceeded expectations and Thursday's final, a rematch between Canada and the United States, is setting a high bar for an exciting finish.

The first match between these two was as heated and hard-fought as a playoff game and the final now adds another layer. A chance at a championship, bragging rights, and hockey supremacy for a year.

So as we celebrate the closing of the return of a best-on-best tournament and look forward to what should be another thrilling game, here's a look at five storylines that will play out in Canada-USA Part 2.

### **FIGHT NIGHT 2.0?**

The start of the first Canada-USA matchup in this tournament was as entertaining as you could have asked for. An arena charged up from Mario Lemieux's appearance at centre ice and the impassioned booing of one anthem and singing of the other led to three fights over the game's first nine seconds. Sometimes games like these don't live up to the hype, but Part 1 of this rivalry instantly did.

So... Round 2?

The chatter has already begun. After the Tkachuks let it out that Saturday's antics began in a group chat that discussed starting the game with such flare, Canada's Brandon Hagel — one of the fighters — shot back with the insinuation that their side didn't need to create passion.

"What happened the other night, I think I did it for the flag and not for the cameras," Hagel said. "We don't have any group chats going on. We're going out there playing and then giving it everything."

Matthew Tkachuk came back on Friday: "Maybe their team doesn't like each other then if they don't have group chats."

"We care about one thing in this room and we have millions of people watching us and supporting us around this country and we're very prideful of playing for them and the guys in this room," Tkachuk said.

More is on the line this time, as the tournament ends with a one-game championship. The setting is different, now in Boston. So how differently will the teams come out of the gate? Will tensions boil over as quickly this time, or possibly at other points in the game? Or will this be more focused on the task at hand: getting out of this event with bragging rights until next year's Olympics?

### **WHO'S PLAYING AND HOW HEALTHY ARE THEY?**

Cale Makar missed the first game between these rivals but returned against Finland and will be in Thursday's lineup. That's a huge addition for Canada.

Team USA, meantime, has some concerns.

We know they'll be without Charlie McAvoy, who has been hospitalized with a "significant injury" to his right shoulder and won't immediately return to Boston's lineup after the 4 Nations. That means Jake Sanderson will be in for a second game after he logged 17:08 in a 2-1 loss to Sweden.

Matthew Tkachuk and Auston Matthews didn't play in the game against Sweden either, but both were at practice Wednesday.

"I'm feeling a lot better," Matthews said. "Just woke up Monday in a lot of discomfort, skating didn't feel good. So I just made a decision with the staff to hold me out of that game and just focus on feeling better."

Matthew Tkachuk also said he was ready to go for the final.

However, Brady Tkachuk wasn't feeling well and did not practice with the Americans on Wednesday, though both his brother and head coach Mike Sullivan said they anticipated he'd be ready to go.

For a brief time, there was a Quinn Hughes question. A confusing bit of communication began Tuesday with Sullivan suggesting that Hughes was on his way to Boston, which opened up speculation and opinion as to his eligibility to play in the game. Hughes decided to sit out the tournament with an injury, but was of course on the Americans' initial roster.

In the end, the long-distance travel without knowing if he'd play was too much and Hughes won't be in Boston after all. However, Frank Seravalli of Daily Faceoff reported the Americans did invite Brett Pesce and Tage Thompson — located in New Jersey and Buffalo — to Boston for insurance. Neither player would be eligible to play or practice with Team USA unless they fell a player short at their positions and while it doesn't seem like that will be the case now, we don't know the full extent of what's going on behind the scenes.

Even if all of these players are well enough to play, eyes will be fixated on them because they're all important to the success of their teams. How effective will they be? Are they battling through an injury or sickness to play in the big game? And how will that change the flavour of this one?

## **THE GOALIE BATTLE**

Connor Hellebuyck has stepped up to the moment and been the best goalie at the 4 Nations Face-Off, with a .957 save percentage and 1.00 goals-against average in two games. Take any goalie in this event for a one-game showdown and most everyone you'd ask would pick Team USA's stopper.

But while Jordan Binnington's save percentage has been a much less shiny .892, he's been up to the task for Canada. His play in OT against Sweden is what got Canada out of there with two points and earned him the No. 1 job the rest of the way. He only allowed two goals against the Americans and only one against Finland until the final two minutes of that 5-3 win.

On the flip side of perception, Binnington allowed the Swedes back into the tournament opener after Canada held leads of 2-0 and 3-1. He let Finland off the mat and gave them a glimmer of hope late in Monday's game. And the weak Jake Guentzel goal he allowed against the Americans was a back-breaker.

Hellebuyck, meanwhile, has allowed the first goal of the game in both of his starts but closed the door afterwards. Adam Vingan wrote about a subtle weakness Canada may be able to exploit in Hellebuyck's game when it comes to second chance opportunities. Hellebuyck's rebound control hasn't been as strong in the small sample size of the 4 Nations Face-Off, but it's enough to know that if it creeps into Thursday's game, it could be the difference in another tight checking, low-scoring game.

Binnington has won a Stanley Cup and indeed won Game 7 of the final in Boston back in 2019. Hellebuyck, meanwhile, has more often shrivelled in the biggest moments and has two wins in his past 10 playoff games. Thursday's final will either continue these narratives for the two goalies or open up new ones.

## **WHO CAN PRODUCE DOWN THE LINEUP?**

Nathan MacKinnon, Connor McDavid and Sidney Crosby have been the stars producing for Canada to this point and will again be in focus when the puck drops on Thursday's final. But if this next match-up is

anything like the last one — hard to get to the prime scoring areas, few goals to come by — then the difference could be found in the margins.

Despite scoring the three-on-three winner in OT against Sweden, Mitch Marner has had a pretty quiet tournament for Canada, averaging 17:47 a game but a minus-2. Sam Bennett has been to and through the hard areas but doesn't have a point to show for it yet. Sam Reinhart has become one of the better goal-scorers in NHL action but has been shut out at the 4 Nations. Seth Jarvis has quietly been one of the more disappointing players for the Canadians and may not even play in the final. Even Brad Marchand — playing in front of his home NHL crowd on Thursday — has been moved down the lineup and played just 8:23 in the first meeting with the Americans.

And yet, would anyone be surprised if any of these players delivered in the big moment?

Likewise, the Tkachuks have been getting all the attention and most of the production for the Americans, while Zach Werenski is tied for the tournament-scoring lead with Crosby.

But Auston Matthews hasn't scored yet, and neither has Kyle Connor, one of six snipers with at least 30 goals this NHL season. J.T. Miller hasn't recorded a point yet and neither has trade candidate Brock Nelson.

These are the players we're looking at to deliver in the final, capable of making a world of difference.

### **SETTING THE TONE FOR ITALY**

When Canada lost the first game, there was of course a lot of reaction in this country.

- "That game showed why Tom Wilson should have been on this team!"
- "Canada could have used Mark Scheifele's offence!"
- "We need bigger wingers to contend with the Americans!"
- "The goaltending disadvantage is too great!"

Of course, last Saturday was just one game, decided by just one goal plus an empty-netter. A different result this time will leave us with entirely different takeaways, and views on what we should learn about Canada's roster construction and how it should inform the Milano Cortina Olympic team next winter.

More than any other before it, Thursday's game is what will set the tone for the Olympics. Will Canada arrive as the champion of the most recent head-to-head? Will anyone who hasn't stepped up yet come through with such a clutch performance they all but lock in a roster spot in 2026?

What really are Canada's weaknesses and strengths as a hockey nation right now?

This is the game that will give us the most important lessons about where Canada is at and what Canada needs before the Olympic tournament. A win and suddenly all of the negativity from Saturday is gone. A loss in similar fashion, however, will leave behind some hard questions with a year until the next best-on-best event.

## [Sportsnet.ca / Three ways Canada can beat USA in 4 Nations Face-Off final](#)

By Adam Vingan – February 20, 2025

Canada did not mess around Monday, overpowering Finland from the jump to set up a rematch against the United States on Thursday in the 4 Nations Face-Off final.

The Canadians will enter a hostile environment in Boston looking for revenge.

“Regardless (whether) other people out there say we’re the underdogs,” Canada coach Jon Cooper told reporters, “everybody in (our) room thinks we have a really good chance to win.”

**Here is how Canada can pull it off:**

### **1. Makar rises to the occasion**

Canada missed its No. 1 defenceman last Saturday. Cale Makar was too ill to play, and his absence was felt against the United States. He returned Monday against Finland and led Canada in several important categories — time on ice (23:57), shot attempts (eight), possession time (1:52) and loose-puck recoveries (25), among others.

Makar and long-time defence partner Devon Toews were on the ice for 20:11 at even strength. Canada generated 68.1 per cent of the expected goals and outscored Finland 2-1 during those minutes.

Only one NHL player (Quinn Hughes) has possessed the puck more than Makar (155:25) this season. Cooper described Makar as a “one-man breakout,” and his presence Thursday could prove pivotal, especially if Hughes finds his way into the U.S. lineup.

“The U.S. is such a skilled team,” Makar told reporters. “In that game especially, they supported each other so well on the ice and then kind of broke us down in the neutral zone and then were able to get odd-man rushes a couple times. Those are just little things that we’ve got to maybe clean up.”

### **2. Leverage a Hellebuyck weakness**

Connor Hellebuyck was sensational in the Americans’ win against the Canadians last weekend. The Vezina Trophy frontrunner saved 2.84 goals above expected, stopping 13 of 14 slot shots on net (10 of 11 from the inner slot).

If Hellebuyck has a weakness, it might be his reaction to second-chance scoring opportunities. His .797 save percentage on rebound chances this season ranks 25th out of 67 goaltenders who have played at least 10 games.

Hellebuyck faced five rebound chances in the first matchup against Canada, all of which required him to make a save. In total, he is 6-for-6 in the tournament on rebound chances that have hit the net.

Although it is a much smaller sample of games, Hellebuyck’s rebound control has not been as sharp in the 4 Nations Face-Off compared to the regular season. He has allowed a rebound on 71.4 per cent of the shots he has faced in two starts — up from 62.5 per cent with the Winnipeg Jets this season.

The Canadians must ratchet up the pressure on Hellebuyck in the championship game and take advantage of any second-chance opportunities they create.

### **3. A role player steps up**

Most of Canada’s offence has been generated by its big guns. Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon have combined to score six of the team’s 10 goals.

In fact, the Canadians have scored only one goal in the tournament that has not involved at least one of those players: Brad Marchand's goal against Sweden in the opener (assisted by Brayden Point and Seth Jarvis).

### **So who could be Canada's unsung hero on Thursday?**

Mitch Marner, who scored the overtime winner against Sweden, started the tournament on a line with McDavid and Sam Reinhart, but Cooper moved him to the third line alongside Brandon Hagel and Anthony Cirelli. They meshed well, recording a 71.7 XGF% at even strength in 9:19 of ice time against Finland.

All three are capable of making a game-changing play, but Marner surely would love to spoil the Americans' party in Boston, where the Toronto Maple Leafs forward is loathed.

And there is Marchand, who is experiencing what it feels like to be on the wrong side in Boston for the first time in his 16-year career. The Bruins captain has averaged just 11:19 per game in the tournament. However, his track record in winner-take-all games (seven points in 12 career Game 7s) could come in handy.

"There's some guys in here we've probably got to get in a little bit more," Cooper told reporters. "But this is what you find out in the two games. You've got to learn from this. We'll see what happens and who plays where, but we've learned a lot."

## **Sportsnet.ca / 10 things to keep an eye on in Canada-USA 4 Nations Final**

**By Justin Bourne – February 20, 2025**

TORONTO — Hockey is a low-scoring game, so it's not always easy to tell who's got the upper hand. Plus, with the way momentum works in hockey, that "upper hand" can flip in an instant.

But if you watch enough of these big games, there are patterns. And given that I expect Canada-USA, Part Deux, to be another low-scoring affair, I thought I'd give viewers a few things to keep an eye on to get a sense for how the game is going.

Below are thoughts on some of the big names, and big scenarios, that will decide the first (and only) 4 Nations Face-Off champion.

You can watch the game live Thursday on Sportsnet and Sportsnet+, with coverage beginning at 7:30 p.m. ET / 4:30 p.m. PT.

### **Keep an eye out for the spacing on Canada's two best forwards**

I think you have to start here. Losing Charlie McAvoy hurts the U.S., as it's suddenly not a very physical back-end. Jacob Slavin has an exceptional stick but has a Lady Byng Trophy for a reason. Jake Sanderson, Adam Fox and Zach Werenski are not bruisers. If Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon feel comfortable repeatedly dashing into the slot, it's going to open up a lot of room for their linemates.

### **Keep an eye on Cale Makar**

In Game 1 against the U.S., the Canadians had trouble getting pucks to the inside and through to Connor Hellebuyck. But if you watch that last game back, plenty of forwards got to the net, they just couldn't get the puck there with them. So, how are Makar's legs early? Does he have jump? He's deceptive enough to make fakes at the blue line, to walk the line and pump shots, and to create lanes. If Makar looks good, bet on him getting a puck through in a big spot for Canada.

### **Keep an eye on Brady Tkachuk**

In a draft of players around the league I'd start a team with, I have Brady Tkachuk way higher than most. But my criticism of his game is that it's immature. He gets caught up in the chest-puffing machismo of the game, when you'd rather see him play the dangerous brand of hard hockey he showed against Finland. Is he running around after guys and being a sideshow? Or is he concentrating on playing? For a player who's always engaged, it's not terrible for Canada if he's engaged in the wrong stuff.

### **Keep an eye out for a tight whistle, which would help Canada**

First off, let's take a second to appreciate the officiating in this tournament. We only notice it when it's bad and, well, it's been great. Outside the fighting majors, Canada has taken three minor penalties in three games (and is three-for-three on kills). The Canadians have been on the power play for a whopping four minutes and 12 seconds (one-for-three). I expect this to get tested a bit more in the final. There's going to be desperation, which leads to last-second grabs and holds. And combine that with the refs being on high alert for "fireworks," and I expect more special teams.

If it's a game where the officials use their whistles, it'll be a slight advantage for Canada, who has the world's three best players in McDavid, MacKinnon and Makar.

### **Keep an eye out for goalie nerves**

Hellebuyck is the best goalie in the world, Jordan Binnington is not. Binnington has a reputation as a big-game goalie, while Hellebuyck does not. Calm and composed goalies don't over-push past shots. They control rebounds, catch pucks and don't seem frantic. So, let's keep an eye out early for how these two react to the initial frenzies around them. It might give us a clue into how they're feeling and, in turn, what to expect in the biggest moments.

### **Keep an eye on Auston Matthews**

His first game against Canada was more like Jordan Staal than Auston Matthews, in that he blocked shots and backchecked and defended like hell for the U.S., but wasn't an offensive threat. He's needed time off this year for what's believed to be a sore back. He missed a game this week for what is apparently a different issue. If he's fresh and feeling better, has he got more jump? If he's barreling through the neutral zone early, that's a sign he'll be dangerous all night, and the U.S. team will need him to answer the top Canadian forwards.

### **Keep an eye on how heavily the stars are used**

It has to be exceedingly tempting for Canadian coach Jon Cooper to put McDavid or MacKinnon on the ice for every second of the hockey game. And, with so much talent on the roster, they've not played massive minutes in this event. Plus, they're coming off a few days' worth of rest, so they could handle a bigger workload.

But if the game is close, you don't want them to have been leaned on too heavily. In the final, overtime will be five-on-five until somebody scores, and this game has the potential to go long. How much gas will Cooper and the Canadian coaches make sure is left in the tanks of their top threats?

### **Keep an eye out for the next layer of scorers**

The U.S. put the boots to Finland, but it scored just twice against Canada (plus an empty-netter), and once against Sweden. Beyond the Tkachuks, who are gobbling up the headlines, the Americans' top offensive players aren't exactly physical players, just mostly slick — think Jack Hughes, Jack Eichel, Jake Guentzel and Kyle Connor. Those guys can get bogged down in a game where nobody wants to make a mistake, so they err on the side of heavy defence. But the guys who go park around the nets tend to find greasy goals. Think Chris Kreider, Brock Nelson, Matt Boldy. It's the blue-paint guys who can sneak up on you.

### **Keep an eye out for Canadian experience**

The Canadian roster has won a combined 20 Stanley Cups to the Americans' three. They've played in the big moments, felt the pressure and persevered. Sidney Crosby is tied for the tournament lead in points, and has the ability to calm the troops and not get lost in the moments when they come (as we saw when he iced the Finland game). If there are big mistakes in the final game, Canada's experience factor makes it feel less likely it'll come from their side.

### **And, finally ...**

### **Keep an eye on that start**

Obviously. In Canada, it felt like their opponents had to weather the storm before playing their way back into it (which both Sweden and the U.S. accomplished). Do the players still prioritize having a punch-off, or will they skip sending the messages in favour of trying to score goals?

We won't see three fights in nine seconds, but I'm still unsure how the teams are prioritizing that aspect of the game at this point. Either way, Thursday's 4 Nations Face-Off final is going to be must-see TV.



## [Sportsnet.ca / Hagel, Tkachuk fight spills into chirp war before heated 4 Nations final](#)

**By Luke Fox – February 20, 2025**

BOSTON — Brandon Hagel still hasn't had time to respond to the barrage of text messages that swarmed his phone once he fought Matthew Tkachuk off the opening draw the first time Canada met the U.S.

But Hagel has made time to rewatch that surprise punchfest that began Saturday's epic hockey game in Montreal.

"Of course," he chuckled.

How many times?

"Five hundred."

Tkachuk, naturally, was the instigator, but no way was Hagel, a proud Lightning and prouder Canadian, backing down from Tkachuk, a proud Panther and prouder American.

"I didn't have a group chat going, so I didn't know it was coming until the start of the draw. It was one of those things that was just in the moment," Hagel says.

"I don't even know if I heard the crowd, to be honest, I was kind of blacked out in that sense."

The bad blood between the two has been curdling for four days, as Hagel said post-game that Tkachuk got more than bargained for and doubled down on the chirps Tuesday in Boston.

"We're out there playing for the flag, not the cameras," Hagel said. "We don't need to initiate anything. We don't have any group chats going on."

The "group chat" shot is a direct response to Tkachuk's revealing that he, brother Brady, and J.T. Miller — who all picked fights with Canadians in the first nine seconds Saturday — had premeditated the rough stuff via text.

"Well, I mean, maybe their team doesn't like each other if they don't have group chats," Matthew Tkachuk fired back Wednesday.

"I think that's just a player enjoying his opportunity," Tkachuk went on. "Our team does not care about anything that they say, and 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 in playing for them and the guys in the room. It's an opportunity of a lifetime for us."

And opportunity for Hagel — a sixth-round draft pick and bottom-six grinder — too.

"Before the tournament, everyone thought it was gonna be an all-star game in a sense," Hagel said.

"I remember I was thinking to myself, lying in bed the night before the game: If this is gonna be an all-star type of thing, then I'm gonna be so out of place. Because I'm putting my head through a wall tomorrow.

"The feeling of just getting up and playing for your country, there's no better feeling."

Is it Thursday yet?