



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
February 13, 2025**

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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski excited to play 'best-on-best' at 4 Nations

By Brian Hedger – February 13, 2025

Zach Werenski was just about to start his first NHL training camp with the Blue Jackets when the league last had its players compete in a best-on-best international tournament.

It was the 2016 World Cup of Hockey, which was held in Toronto and included Nationwide Arena as a pre-tournament host for the U.S. national team's camp and an exhibition against Canada. Like many top young players at the time, Werenski assumed he'd eventually get a shot to compete for the U.S. at a world cup or in the Winter Olympics, but the NHL hasn't held a World Cup since 2016 and didn't send players to the past two Olympics in 2018 and 2022.

At age 27, Werenski is finally getting a chance to represent the U.S. during a best-on-best competition at the 4 Nations Face-Off that starts Wednesday in Montreal with a game between Sweden and Canada.

"I always thought I'd get a chance to do that, and the next thing you know, there's no World Cups or Olympics or any of that," Werenski said. "It's definitely unfortunate, but I think now we're at a good place and we're getting that best-on-best schedule back, and I think it's great for the game. I'm just excited for it."

Werenski left Sunday for Montreal and started practices with the U.S. team on Monday. The U.S. will play Finland on Thursday night before facing Canada on Saturday in what's sure to be an intense game with a raucous crowd. The tournament will then shift to Boston for the final games, including a Feb. 20 championship game.

"I'm just excited to get there and play that first game against Finland," Werenski said. "Obviously, the big game is USA-Canada, but you look at the four teams now and anyone can win it. You look at their forward group on Finland, and they have some of the best players in the world. So, I'm just excited to get into that first game and see what it's all about, and then we'll worry about Canada after that."

Werenski is expected to start off skating with Boston Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy on the U.S. team's second pairing. He and McAvoy played with the U.S. National Team Development Program as teens and have remained friends.

Werenski is familiar with most players on the U.S. roster, including close friendships with Detroit Red Wings forward Dylan Larkin, Toronto Maple Leafs center Auston Matthews, Winnipeg Jets forward Kyle Connor and New Jersey Devils center Jack Hughes — all part of the offseason group he skates with in Detroit. As much as the games, Werenski is excited to go through another tournament with familiar faces, including former Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella, a U.S. assistant coach.

"It's just the anticipation of getting there and seeing the buzz of the city," Werenski said. "It's (starting) in Montreal, which is going to be sweet. It's just getting that feeling of best-on-best and putting the 'USA' jersey on. It's a great honor, so I'm just excited for it."

Werenski is putting together the best season of his career for the Blue Jackets, including a team-high 59 points and 21-game home point streak that has put his name among some of the league's all-time best defensemen, including Bobby Orr, Paul Coffey and Phil Housley.

He'd love for that success to continue for the U.S., but individual success isn't Werenski's top priority in this tournament. His focus is winning.

“I haven’t done it before,” Werenski said. “I haven’t been on a team like this, with this much skill, so I’m just going to try and do whatever I can to help the team win. You’ve got a lot of guys who are on the first power play for their teams who are going to go there and not be on the first power play, so it’s just embracing that and doing whatever you can to help the team win.”

The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Cayden Lindstrom could miss season, but his path to the NHL could be fascinating

By Aaron Portzline – February 13, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Cayden Lindstrom had a momentous day late last week in Nationwide Arena, putting on hockey gear and skating for the first time since he had back surgery in late November.

It wasn't a rigorous workout — "It's what they'd call a hot chocolate skate," agent Daren Hermiston said — but any measurable progress is good news these days for Lindstrom, the Blue Jackets' No. 4 pick in the NHL Draft last June.

Lindstrom was Don Waddell's first draft pick as the Columbus Blue Jackets' GM, and the organization remains optimistic he will bloom into an elite-level power forward, perhaps even at center, when he's fully recovered from surgery and fully up to speed.

But while some aspects of Lindstrom's situation are coming into focus, others may be more muddled than previously understood.

First, to the question that's confronted Lindstrom since he was pulled off the ice at the Blue Jackets' summer development camp in July, and two months later when he was ruled out of his first NHL training camp: Will he play a hockey game at any level this season?

Waddell hasn't completely ruled it out, but he acknowledged it's becoming increasingly unlikely.

"His recovery program was broken down into five sections," Waddell told The Athletic. "He's in the third section. He sees a doctor next week, and if everything is good, he'll start skating again."

By skating, Waddell isn't referring to the leisurely jaunt Lindstrom enjoyed last week. He means a strictly regimented routine that will slowly get his legs and lungs up to speed, provided there are no setbacks. That's the fourth stage.

"That would be three weeks with pretty much no contact," Waddell said. "That puts us in the middle of March before he's cleared (for the final stage)."

This is why Waddell made a phone call last week to Lindstrom's coach with Medicine Hat of the Western Hockey League. Waddell has known coach Willie Desjardins, one of the most respected coaches in the Canadian major junior ranks, for many years.

If you think Blue Jackets fans have been waiting for good news on Lindstrom, imagine how fans in Medicine Hat, Alberta, have been feeling. They've been hoping Lindstrom could return late this season to help the already-strong Tigers become a beast down the stretch and in the playoffs.

"I didn't want (Desjardins) to have expectations that (Lindstrom) was for sure coming back," Waddell said. "I don't want to say it's 100 percent (that he's not returning), but we've gone this far (into the season) that it might be better to let him continue to work out and train in Columbus."

Lindstrom, through the Blue Jackets' public relations staff, has declined multiple interview requests from media outlets. But you can imagine the frustration of being drafted so highly only to have your final year of junior put on hold.

It's rare for a player selected so high in the draft to miss the following season, but it's not unprecedented. Minnesota Wild forward Marco Rossi, the No. 9 selection in the 2020 draft, was forced

to miss almost the entire 2020-21 season — he played one game with a club in Switzerland — due to the effects of long COVID-19.

“Like any injured player, it’s tough,” Hermiston said. “Cayden’s 18 years old. You want to be on the ice competing every day. He’s a competitive kid, but he’s finding ways every week to improve beyond traditional development.

“He’s looking at cognitive ways to improve. I know we’ve spoken about (Washington Commanders rookie quarterback) Jayden Daniels and the (virtual reality) work he notably has been doing. So he’s been finding ways to improve, even if he’s not full-go on the ice.”

Lindstrom’s return to health is right on track according to the timeline surgeons provided following his microdiscectomy on Nov. 20 in Los Angeles. But what Lindstrom’s short-term future holds — his path toward playing his way to the pros — will be fascinating to watch.

In late November, barely a week after Lindstrom’s surgery, the NCAA changed its longstanding policy that blocked major junior players in Canada from transferring to U.S. college programs. As of Aug. 1, U.S. college programs can begin signing players, some of whom have already committed.

Lindstrom seemed likely to head back to Medicine Hat for another season before turning pro, but that’s no longer set in stone.

Multiple sources involved in the discussions confirmed to The Athletic last week that several college programs, including Ohio State, have made overtures to Lindstrom about making a move from the WHL to college hockey.

Neither Waddell nor Hermiston would comment, but there are multiple reasons both the Blue Jackets and Lindstrom’s camp might find college hockey a beneficial option, especially for a player returning to play following back surgery.

NCAA teams play exactly half as many regular-season games (34) as players in the WHL (68). That allows for less wear and tear on a healing body, but also more time for practice, workouts, etc. Further, many U.S. colleges have massive sports science and physical training staffs, well beyond the budget of most junior programs.

Put another way: Lindstrom would be in good hands.

It’s worth noting that the Blue Jackets have not signed Lindstrom to an entry-level contract. Waddell has made it clear he doesn’t want to sign the player until he’s ready to play, but there may end up being an added benefit to waiting.

If Lindstrom had signed an entry-level contract, he would not be allowed to play for a U.S. college. It’s unclear if this was an unspoken reason Waddell wanted to hold off on extending a contract, or a beneficial coincidence.

Another matter: When NHL teams draw a player out of major junior, they own their rights for two years; when they draft a college-bound player, they own their rights for four years, or until they graduate.

But, because it’s never been possible, no language in the NHL’s collective bargaining agreement settles how long an NHL club owns rights to a player who starts in Canadian juniors and switches to a U.S. college. This will almost certainly be addressed in the league’s upcoming CBA talks.

When The Athletic inquired this week about how such a matter might be handled, a league executive, who wished not to be identified, was pretty succinct: “It’s pretty black and white. The team gets four years.”

Hermiston said he and Lindstrom have tried to remain optimistic. This should be an exciting time in a young player's career, but the "pause" button has been pushed. Lindstrom has spent most of this season in Columbus, watching games from the Nationwide Arena press box with some of his future Blue Jackets teammates.

"I know one of the benefits of all of this — we try to focus on the positives, right? — has been the opportunity to be around these guys, especially with the type of season they're having," Hermiston said. "He's building connections with some of the players, and that's been really good for him.

"He's had a relationship with Kent Johnson, as (British Columbia) guys. James van Riemsdyk is somebody he's talked to quite a bit. He's been over to Erik Gudbranson's for dinner. Stuff like that means everything to a young guy. (Director of hockey operations) Rick Nash and the staff have done a great job integrating him."

[BlueJackets.com / Werenski's ready for his chance to wear the Red, White and Blue](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – February 13, 2025

Before Zach Werenski wore union blue, he wore red, white and blue.

The Blue Jackets defenseman came up through the U.S. National Team Development program, spending the 2013-14 season wearing the stars and stripes. The next two seasons, he represented Team USA at the World Junior Championship, one of the highest honors a player can have before reaching the NHL.

Under normal circumstances, it would signify the start of a long career for a player with his national team, but a funny thing happened from there. NHL players didn't take part in the Olympics in 2018 and '22, and while Werenski did represent the United States at the IIHF World Championship in 2019 and this past summer, no other best-on-best international tournaments were placed on the calendar.

That's what makes the NHL 4 Nations Face-Off so important for Werenski. The tournament – which begins tonight, with Team USA's first game tomorrow night vs. Finland – is the first since the 2016 World Cup of Hockey that will exclusively match the world's best against one another, and making the roster was one of Werenski's big goals for this season.

He's left no doubt he deserved to be chosen for the tournament with a Norris Trophy-caliber performance with the Blue Jackets, and finally, it's his time to shine in his national colors.

"Obviously playing for the U.S. program, going overseas, going to the U-17 Worlds, the World Juniors and all that stuff, you just get a feel for how important it is to represent your country and how much it means," Werenski said. "I actually came into the league the year of the World Cup ... and I always thought that I'd get a chance to do that. Then the next thing you know, there's no World Cups and no Olympics or any of that.

"It's definitely unfortunate, but I think not we're in a good place and we're getting that best-on-best schedule back. I think it's great for the game, so I'm excited."

It's clear Werenski will get a chance to play big minutes as well, brought on by an excellent season with the Blue Jackets that has him in the conversation as being the best defenseman in the world. Werenski has already set the CBJ franchise record for points by a blueliner in a season with 59 in 55 games, and he's not only leading the NHL in minutes per game (26:53), he's second among all D with 17 goals and tied for second in points.

Werenski opened Team USA's practices this week skating on what should be a big-minute pair with Boston's Charlie McAvoy as well as working the point on one of the team's two power-play units.

Of course, it doesn't matter to Werenski where or how much he'll play. He'd likely skate at forward if they asked, but it appears he'll have the chance to fill the role in his country's colors that he does with the Blue Jackets.

"It doesn't really matter," he said. "I'm just going to go there and have fun. Whatever they ask of me, I'm going to do it."

Talking 4 Nations

As we noted, it's a little bit of a new world when it comes to international play at the highest level. This is the first major tournament involving NHL players in more than eight years, and it's in the middle of a season where teams are jockeying for position for the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

In fact, it's the first time since the 2014 Olympics that international competition is taking place in the middle of the NHL season, and the intensity at the 4 Nations probably won't quite reach the level it would if a gold medal was on the line. At the same time, Werenski expects the intensity to be high simply because of how long it's been since the world's top players have all put on their country's sweaters.

"I've seen some of the highlights lately of old games and how physical it is, scrums and all that stuff," Werenski said. "I'm assuming it's the same thing. We haven't played best-on-best for a long time. I know it's been something guys have been looking forward to. With the time between it and a lot of guys' first time playing it, it's gonna be really intense."

Werenski has been steeped in the world of international competition for much of his life, including his junior days when he represented the United States at multiple international competitions. He remembers Sidney Crosby scoring the golden goal in overtime to give Canada the 2010 Olympics win on home soil over Team USA, and he watched in 2014 as T.J. Oshie became "T.J. Sochi" because of his shootout heroics against Russia.

Werenski also has an eye forward toward next year, when NHL players are slated to return to Olympic play in February 2026. The 4 Nations can be seen as a dress rehearsal for what's to come in a year's time, so this is a chance for players to start to build chemistry as international play takes a bigger role in the annual hockey calendar.

It also could be a time for Team USA to shine, as the Americans – led by such players as the tournament's top goalie, Connor Hellebuyck, high-scoring forwards Auston Matthews, Jack Hughes and Matthew Tkachuk, and defenders like Werenski – are co-favorites at the 4 Nations with Canada.

"I feel like when you put that jersey on, you always feel like you have a chance to win," Werenski said. "But I feel like it's one of those things where you don't want to get too far ahead of yourself. I know the favorites, the odds or whatever, but at the end of the day anyone can win this tournament."

"I'm just excited to get out there. I feel like everyone has the same mind-set. 4 Nations is going to be awesome, but hopefully you can build these teams for the Olympics and the next World Cup and grow together as a group. I'm just excited. The world's best-on-best schedule is back, and hopefully we can continue to build these teams and get some chemistry and win a lot moving forward here."

No matter how the tournament ends up, it will be a unique opportunity for everyone involved – one NHL fans should see more and more of as the international calendar fills up in the coming years.

"I've had an opportunity to play for my country, and I've had an opportunity now to coach," Blue Jackets head coach Dean Evason said. "There's great, great honor in pulling your flag over your head and putting it on your chest. Any opportunity anyone has to do that, I know how it feels. It's an incredible honor and anyone that gets the opportunity to – Z in particular, because he's our guy – I'm very excited for him."

A Well-Earned Honor

Claimed off waivers in November, Dante Fabbro arrived in Columbus in November and immediately was placed on a defensive pair with Werenski.

The two hadn't met before that, but you wouldn't know it by the chemistry they formed almost immediately. Werenski's production took off after being paired with Fabbro, and it didn't take the new CBJ blueliner long to realize he was skating with a special player.

"You don't realize how good he is until you're actually watching him on a day-to-day basis," Fabbro said. "He is that elite of a defenseman. I see it every single day with just the way he goes about his business"

and how he leads the team. He leads off the ice, obviously, but on the ice is a huge attribute to his hard work and his dedication to the game.

“He doesn’t cheat the game at all. He plays the right way every single game. For myself and my teammates, (his impact) doesn’t shock us at all. He’s easily one of the best defensemen in this league and he’s definitely in that Norris conversation.”

Given the level Werenski has reached this year, it’s easy to forget he was considered by many as a bubble player for the U.S. 4 Nations team when the season started. It’s not that Werenski wasn’t respected around the league – he’s a two-time All-Star, after all – but with such names as McAvoy, Quinn Hughes, Adam Fox and Brock Faber leading the charge, the team was already top-heavy with minutes-eating defensemen with skill.

But Werenski has left no doubt he belongs in the conversation among elite defensemen with his production and leadership this season, and it started in the offseason. After a couple of injury-plagued years, he dedicated himself this summer to being ready to play big minutes for a team that he thought could be on the rise after four years of missing the playoffs amid a rebuilding cycle.

Second-year CBJ forward Adam Fantilli spent much of the summer with Werenski and left with an eye-opening experience.

“I work out with him all summer and he’s a dawg in the gym,” Fantilli said. “He’s a dawg on the ice. He just works so hard. He’s the guy I want to be around in the offseason because it pushes me to work even harder. Being on the ice with him is great. I get to see a lot of things that a young player should in a veteran guy, and he’s just worked so hard and dialed in that it’s allowed him to (have the season he’s having).”

Now, Werenski gets to take that to the big stage and compete against the best players in the world. It’s just a four-game tournament in the middle of the season, but it’s something he’s been looking forward to for quite some time.

“I’m just excited to get into that first game and see what it’s all about,” Werenski said. “Just getting that feeling of playing best-on-best and putting the USA jersey on, it’s a great honor and I’m excited for it.”

The Hockey News / Grading The Columbus Blue Jackets Goalies At The Four Nations Faceoff Break

By Jason Newland – February 13, 2025

A day before the season started, not a single hockey fan expected the Columbus Blue Jackets to be one point out of a playoff spot in mid-February, but here we are. GM Don Waddell and new Head Coach Dean Evason came in and have this team playing with purpose and togetherness.

At the break, the Jackets are 26-22-8 with 61 points. Most betting apps had the over/under at 71 points for Columbus, so it's safe to say that they will blow by that one. Hope you took the over like I did.

One of the big storylines going into this season was how the goalies were going to play. So let's take a look at how they're doing.

Elvis Merzljikins - 37 Starts - 19-14-4 - .895 SV% - 2.99 GAA - 1 SO

Grade - B+ - Merzljikins has been absolutely stellar at times this season. Much like the rest of the team, he started kind of sluggish, and to be honest, no one really complained after what the team had been going through with losing Johnny Gaudreau. Since Nov. 15, Elvis is 17-9-3 with a .891 SV%. He has single-handedly kept the Jackets in games just long enough for his team to score some goals and either win or make it a good game. Merzljikins is still a firecracker, but he seems to be playing with more poise and composure this season, which is something both his coaches and fans have taken note of. Elvis now has 87 career wins, tying him with former Blue Jacket Joonas Korpisalo. His next target is Steve Mason, who has 96 career wins. If he can get hot, he could pass Mason this season. He also sits third in career shutouts with 11 and needs one more to tie Marc Denis.

Daniil Tarasov - 14 Starts - 5-7-2 - .876 SV% - 3.69 GAA - 1 SO

Grade - D - It's been a bumpy season for Tarasov. After going 3-1-1 to start the season, Tarry lost his next five games, giving up an average of FIVE goals per game. After his last loss on Dec. 5th, he wouldn't make another start until a road game in Boston on Dec. 28, where he would lose again. In between those starts, he was benched in favor of Jet Greaves and refused a conditioning assignment to the AHL. His refusal of the assignment is well within his rights to do so. On Jan. 10, he finally decided to go to the AHL, where he would make two starts. He was recalled and made a start for the Jackets on the 14th and would win the game. He has made four starts since his AHL stint, going 2-1-1 with a SV% of .930%. He also had a GAA of 2.50 and had a shutout. Is Tarasov back?

Jet Greaves - 5 Starts - 2-1-2 - .906 SV% - 2.98 GAA - 0 SO

Grade - B+ - Jet Greaves has racked up the miles on his car in the last couple of months, going back and forth from Cleveland to Columbus. He's been tossed into some tough situations but has handled it like a pro. Greaves looked very confident on the ice and the players in front of him seem to trust him. Many fans want to see Greaves in Columbus backing up Elvis every night, but that's just not the plan for this year. He'll be on a one-way contract next season, so expect to see him a lot in 25-26. Until GM Don Waddell can figure out the goalie situation, this is the scenario we all have to deal with. Despite all that, Greaves has played great when given his chance.

Overall Grade - B - 26-22-8 - .891 SV% - 3.30 GAA - 2 SO - The Blue Jackets rank 29th in save % and 25th in GAA. They rank 4th in shootout SV% at .857.

The Jackets are a minus-2 in goal differential for the season, but it can be argued that the goalies can't be blamed for everything. The Blue Jackets defense has five guys that are plus players. Dante Fabbro, Zach Werenski, Ivan Provorov, Damon Severson, and Jake Christiansen are a combined plus-31. While Denton Mateychuk, Jordan Harris, and Jack Johnson are a combined minus-14, so it's not all on the goalies. Scoring has helped the Jackets hide their deficiencies so far this season, but who is really to blame?

The Blue Jackets PK is the 26th worst in the league at 75.3%, and that is a major issue. It's never really gotten any better throughout the year either. The power play on the other hand started slow and then shot to the top 10 as recently as Jan. 7. When Sean Monahan went down to a wrist injury, the PP has suffered, and big time. Ranking as high as 8th, they have since dropped to 18th and have looked disjointed and sloppy. Monahan was the glue that held the power play together, there's no doubt.

Can the Jackets goalies continue to look good, specifically Elvis Merzljikins? They will go as far as he can take them, and with that will bring an even more confident Elvis. When he is playing well, very few teams can beat the CBJ.

What's Next: Zach Werenski will now take the ice for the United States in the Four Nations Face-Off, which kicks off this coming Thursday, as the U.S. takes on Finland. The rest of the Jackets will get some much-needed R&R before coming back home to play the Chicago Blackhawks on Feb. 22

The Hockey News / Mathieu Olivier Opens Up On How Tragedy United The Blue Jackets

By Spencer Lazary – February 13, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets forward Mathieu Olivier was a guest on the Cam & Strick Podcast this past Monday and was asked about how close the Blue Jackets are.

Olivier, being the great interviewee that he is, gave a very honest answer about what he thinks of the team.

Cam & Strick asked him about the passing of Johnny Gaudreau and whether that brought the team together.

Q: “You guys have been through an awful lot of sh*t obviously in Columbus. Has that brought the team together?”

A: “Oh, yeah, I think so. You go through something like that, and I think the message from everyone in the organization—the players—was perfect, which was, ‘We’re going to go through this as a team.’

“So, whenever the news dropped about Johnny and Matthew, everyone kind of came to the city as fast as they could and really got together so that we could, you know, process this together. And, you know, you get Sean Monahan, who’s like best buddies with Johnny, and then he comes to the team in this kind of setup.”

“He’s been doing awesome with all that. Obviously, a hard time for him. But yeah, it definitely brings everyone closer. We already had a close group, but I mean, that, regardless, brings everyone so close. If you go through some stuff like that... I don’t wish this on anyone.”

Olivier’s answer was exactly what you want to hear as a fan. In the face of tragedy, players got to Columbus as fast as possible to be with each other.

The closeness of the team has been something special. It has had a massive impact on the team this season. They are one of the biggest surprises of the season and are right in the race for the final Wild Card spot in the Eastern Conference.

The Athletic / How Canada's stars escaped Sweden in 4 Nations Face-Off overtime win: Takeaways

By Michael Russo – February 13, 2025

MONTREAL – That sure lived up to the billing.

After so much anticipation for the first best-on-best tournament featuring NHL players in nine years, after so much suspense to see what Canada could do by teaming up stars Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and legendary Sidney Crosby on the same ice surface, Sweden came oh-so-close to stunning Canada in the scintillating first game of the 4 Nations Face-Off.

After blowing a two-goal lead, Canada pulled off a 4-3 victory late in an end-to-end, exhilarating overtime when Mitch Marner whizzed the winner past Filip Gustavsson.

The round-robin tournament awards three points for a regulation win, two for an overtime win and one for an overtime loss, so Canada essentially lost a point in the standings.

It was an unfortunate ending for Gustavsson, who was simply awesome in overtime by denying MacKinnon four times and Makar, Marner and Brayden Point one time each. But after Marner's Toronto Maple Leafs teammate William Nylander lost the puck on a scoring chance on the other end, Marner took Crosby's neutral-zone drop pass, skated into the offensive zone and scored the winner. It was Crosby's third assist of the game.

"I mean, you tell the 10-year-old Mitch he scored an overtime goal, assisted by Sidney Crosby, I mean, a guy you looked up to since Day One — yeah, it's pretty crazy," Marner said. "I'm sure my family's gonna be very excited about that one."

It took 56 seconds in the first period for McDavid, Crosby and MacKinnon to team up on a gorgeous MacKinnon power-play goal, and it felt like the Swedes were in deep trouble. Sweden took 17 minutes, 16 seconds to register its first shot.

"Less than an ideal start I think for Team Sweden," said defenseman Erik Karlsson. "That was a little bit of a nutkicker."

But the Swedes came roaring back, getting goals from Jonas Brodin and Adrian Kempe before Brodin's Minnesota Wild teammate Joel Eriksson Ek tied the score midway through the third period to force OT.

Brad Marchand and Mark Stone also scored for Canada and Jordan Binnington made 23 saves. Gustavsson, who got the nod over Linus Ullmark and made a spectacular blocker save on Devon Toews in the third period to preserve the 3-3 tie, made 24 for Sweden.

"It's a lot of emotions there," Gustavsson said. "Everyone wants to beat Canada. They're supposed to be the best team in the world and everyone wants to go out there and beat them."

It was the first time Canada faced Sweden in a best-on-best tournament since the gold-medal game in Sochi 11 years ago. Canada extended its win streak in best-on-best competition to 17 games dating back to the U.S. defeating Canada in the prelims at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver.

The news wasn't all good for Canada as Vegas Golden Knights defenseman Shea Theodore hurt his right arm and was unable to return to the game.

Canada is off until Saturday night, when they face the rival United States. Sweden also plays Finland on Saturday.

The 4 Nations Face-Off continues Thursday when the United States plays Finland.

Wild buddies turn game upside down

When Canada scored 56 seconds in, it was natural for all to think a rout was in the offing.

Not so fast, said a couple of longtime pals from Karlstad, Sweden.

Eriksson Ek and Brodin, a pair of Minnesota Wild first-round picks who hail from the same small hometown in Sweden, live on the same lake in the offseason and played their Swedish Elite League hockey for their hometown Farjestad, each scored goals to give Sweden a stunning chance.

Brodin, a 2011 first-round pick and playing his off side on Sweden's top pair with Victor Hedman, snapped a shot through a screen after some hard work by Lucas Raymond to cut a 2-0 deficit in half.

Then, at 8:59 of the third after Raymond won a 50-50 puck off a faceoff, Jesper Bratt hit Eriksson Ek with a cross-crease pass for the tying goal.

Biggest fear comes to fruition in first game

The biggest concern heading into the 4 Nations Face-Off was the probability that an important player could be injured in an invented tournament before returning to his NHL team for the season's stretch drive.

After all, as Hall of Fame hockey writer Michael Farber quipped, this is a tournament with no past and no future — this is a one-off until the 2026 Olympics and the 2028 World Cup of Hockey that's expected to include eight teams.

Well, early in the second, those fears came true when Theodore hurt his right arm on an innocuous check from Kempe. Theodore went to the bench with his arm pinned to his body. After being looked at by the athletic trainer, Theodore skated to the exit and headed to the medical room.

After the game, coach Jon Cooper said Theodore is out for the rest of the tournament. Travis Sanheim will replace Theodore in Canada's lineup.

"It's heartbreaking for the kid," Cooper said. "And he was the first one there at the door high-fiving everybody when we came off. It's a tough one to swallow because you just know how much it means. I guess in hindsight he got to touch the ice and get some time in there. But for us it was tough because you talk about the speed in that game, and we had to fight through the last 50 minutes with five defensemen. That's a grind."

Added McDavid, "I thought it hurt us a lot. He's a great player, and it's tough. You guys saw the pace tonight. We felt the pace. And it's tough on those D to play five D, to defend. We defended maybe a little bit too much, but those five D grinded. They did a great job. You don't want to see anyone go down. We're thinking about him. But I thought the way those D stepped up was impressive."

'Sid the Kid' looks like Sid the Kid

Crosby may be the tournament's oldest player at age 37, but he sure looked like Sid the Kid of yesteryear.

Late to officially commit because of an upper-body injury, Crosby showed no signs of the ailment during a terrific performance. Not only did he set up MacKinnon with a beautiful pass, he skated deep into Sweden's zone in the second period and, with Gustav Forsling defending, Crosby pulled up, turned and set up Stone's one-timer for a 3-1 Canada lead.

It was a big goal at the time because Sweden had been pushing hard in the period, turning a 7-3 shot deficit into 13-12 at the time of the Stone tally. And then, of course, there was his assist on the game-winner in only his second shift of overtime.

“It’s obviously somebody that has just done everything in this game and continues to play at such a high level, even at however old he is,” McDavid said of Crosby. “He’s showing no signs of slowing down. Seems like he could do this for a really long time. It’s just fun to watch. Obviously, watched from afar, but to see him work up close and personal here this last week and the next couple days, it’s a real treat for everyone here on this team.”

Canada’s sublime power play connects immediately

It took just 12 seconds of power-play time for Canada’s top unit to strike, with MacKinnon converting a slick cross-crease backhand pass from his good friend Crosby shortly after Nylander was sent off for high-sticking.

Canada devoted a significant chunk of time to special teams work during its practices Monday and Tuesday, knowing that it could be a difference-maker in the tournament.

Fittingly, it was Crosby who led those discussions, urging teammates not to overpass or overthink things. With Makar at the point, MacKinnon and McDavid on the flanks, Sam Reinhart in the bumper and Crosby at the net-front, there’s no shortage of weapons to punish opponents with the man advantage.

“We just did something with Sid and he made a good point: ‘You’re trying to communicate as much as possible just to really get a feel for what guys like to do and then when it’s game time we’re just playing, so the talking’s over,’” MacKinnon said Tuesday. “We’re trying to just build as much chemistry as possible. I think when you do speak a lot to each other and try to really break things down there’s less guessing out there. You have a plan.”

While MacKinnon and Crosby spend plenty of time training together during the summer in Halifax, this is the first time they’ve played on the same team since winning gold for Canada at the 2015 IIHF World Championships.

The tournament-opening goal should ease the nerves of MacKinnon, the reigning Hart Trophy winner who acknowledged feeling the pressure to deliver on home ice.

“It’s an important event,” he said. “Obviously, we all take representing Canada very seriously. We know we have a ton of support. That pressure, I think it’s a good thing — it means you’re doing something important.”

Don’t hear this every day

Of the many incredible moments that happened Wednesday night, including Canada’s Mario Lemieux, Sweden’s Daniel Alfredsson, the United States’ Mike Richter and Finland’s Teemu Selanne taking part in the ceremonial faceoff, the funniest thing that may have happened was Marchand getting an exaggeratedly loud ovation inside Bell Centre.

Habs fans detest the Boston Bruins star/agitator, yet Marchand heard it from the Canadian faithful when he gave Canada a 2-0 lead on a perfect two-on-one pass from Point in the first period.

Marchand got a kick out of it on the bench with an almost, “How do you like me now, folks?” smile.

Canada is 8-0 all-time when Brad Marchand scores

Appreciation for 10-minute overtime

Marner's winner came 6:06 into overtime, which would never have happened in the NHL regular season because overtimes last five minutes before going to a shootout.

There has been lots of talk over the years about extending overtime and McDavid, who got to play a couple shifts with MacKinnon and Makar in OT, said Wednesday's extended overtime is a good example of why it should happen.

"I think it's a great kind of trial run, something that I think maybe the players liked, I think the fans liked it," McDavid said. "It felt a little bit more like it's in our hands. Don't think really anyone wants it to go to the shootout. Good thing we were able to find one."

The Athletic / Canada loses defenseman Shea Theodore to injury in 4 Nations Face-Off opener

By Arpon Basu – February 13, 2025

Team Canada is down a defenseman one game into the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Vegas Golden Knights defenseman Shea Theodore left the tournament's opening game against Sweden on Wednesday early in the second period after taking a hit from Los Angeles Kings forward Adrian Kempe.

Canada coach Jon Cooper said after the game that Theodore will miss the remainder of the tournament.

In the second period, Theodore immediately skated to the Canada bench with his right arm pinned to his body, and a trainer was working on his right arm at the bench throughout the next shift. At the next whistle, Theodore skated across the ice to the Canadian dressing room, still favoring his right arm, and was later ruled out for the rest of the game.

Theodore was playing on a pairing with Drew Doughty in his first best-on-best tournament and his first time representing Canada since the 2019 IIHF Men's World Championship.

Canada has seven defensemen on its roster, with the Philadelphia Flyers' Travis Sanheim – also a left shot who can play both sides – serving as an extra. According to tournament rules, Canada cannot add another defenseman during the event unless they fall below the minimum 18 healthy skaters or two healthy goaltenders.

Golden Knights GM Kelly McCrimmon, when Vegas had seven players in the 4 Nations before William Karlsson and Alex Pietrangelo had to pull out with injuries, talked to The Athletic last month about the risk of injuries to his players.

"It's a double-edged sword," McCrimmon said. "I equate it to when I worked in the Western League with the Brandon Wheat Kings when you'd have a player make the World Junior team. So you lose that player for a month, you run the risk of injury, all of those things are possibilities, but they come back better players. And when I look at the group we've got going to 4 Nations, we've got four Canadians, two US, one Swede and a coach, yeah, there's part of you that wishes they were getting a long rest like most of the players in league are going to, avoiding the risk of injury. But at the same time, this experience will make all of those players better.

"It's going to help Bruce Cassidy as a coach. It's going to help Jack (Eichel), Noah (Hanifin), any of these players that are involved, it's going to be a real, just a great experience for them. And it's a feather in the cap of the organization to have seven players that are going to be involved, six of them North American teams. So we're proud of that.

"And I'm not really nervous about any of that right now. Likely when the tournament starts and you see how physical the first period of the first game is, might cross your mind, but really happy for them and really looking forward to seeing those games, seeing how they do."

Canada's next game is Saturday night against the United States.

The Athletic / NHL, NHLPA turn eyes to next labor deal: What could a new CBA bring?

By Arpon Basu – February 13, 2025

MONTREAL – As Marty Walsh, the executive director of the NHLPA, was discussing how the upcoming negotiations for a new collective bargaining agreement could unfold Wednesday and evoked the possibility that the players' union will not necessarily agree with everything the NHL will propose to them, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman put on a faux frown.

And then, with the cameras pointed straight at them, Bettman threw his arm around Walsh.

"As long as he agrees with me on everything I want," Walsh said, "we'll be fine!"

And they both laughed.

The context for Bettman and Walsh speaking on the same stage for the first time since the Stanley Cup Final was to jointly announce an agreement to put on a World Cup of Hockey in 2028 and set in motion an era of international hockey where we will see a best-on-best tournament every two years, alternating between the Olympics and the World Cup.

To do that, Bettman pointed out, there would need to be joint confidence that the NHL and NHLPA will be able to coexist that long.

Hence that half hug from Bettman, triggered by the mere suggestion there might be the slightest bit of contention between the two sides.

"I think we are in a good place in terms of our collective bargaining relationship, in terms of our overall relationship," Bettman said just ahead of the opening game of the 4 Nations Face-Off. "So I remain more than optimistic that while we have some work to do, we're going to get to where we're going, and people will not even notice that we've done it."

The current CBA does not expire until the end of next season, in 2026, but more than ever, it seems labor peace beyond next season is on the horizon, and both the NHL and NHLPA want to make sure everyone knows it.

"When you look at hockey right now, you think about the excitement that's happening," Walsh said.

"Last week, the commissioner announced the increased salary cap three years in a row. This week we're doing 4 Nations, we just talked about the World Cup in 2028, we're talking about the Olympics.

"There's a lot of great things happening, and that's also taken into account to make sure that you keep the momentum moving forward for the game of hockey."

On two separate occasions, Bettman noted that formal talks on a new CBA will begin as soon as Walsh tells him he is ready, something Walsh assured will happen shortly. The NHLPA had just completed its fall tour of all 32 NHL teams when preparations for the 4 Nations took over as the main priority. The hope is that once the tournament is complete, those talks can begin.

"We want to start this off on the right foot and we want to get going right away," Walsh said. "The commissioner has, I wouldn't say an aggressive timeline, but he would like to get it done sooner than later. I think we all would love to do that."

There are a few potential issues that may impact those negotiations that both Bettman and Walsh addressed Wednesday.

The sinking Canadian dollar vs. the rising salary cap

The Canadian dollar was trading at roughly 75 cents compared to the U.S. dollar on Sept. 25, 2024, or just before the beginning of this season. It closed Wednesday at just under 70 cents, roughly a 6.7 percent drop in less than five months.

When the NHL announced salary cap estimates for the next three seasons that will send the cap skyward to an estimated \$113.5 million in 2026-27, that drop in the Canadian dollar became a more significant issue, especially for the seven Canadian franchises that make their money in Canadian dollars and pay the players in U.S. dollars.

“I would caution against tales of doom and gloom,” Bettman said. “Our system is designed so that all of our teams can be competitive. It’s all done in U.S. dollars, so the system takes into account the fluctuation in currency between Canada and the United States, and part of the system includes revenue sharing.

“One of the first things I do every morning is look at where the Canadian dollar is, so we’re very mindful of it and it will be addressed as part of the system.”

Yes, about that ...

More revenue sharing?

Neither Bettman nor Walsh was too willing to get into specifics about collective bargaining issues, but with the rising cap and the flailing Canadian dollar, they were asked about the possibility of boosting revenue sharing to help the Canadian teams — and lower-revenue clubs — keep up with the rising cap.

“I think the revenue sharing is something we will have to continue to look at, which we always do, to make sure it does what it was intended to do,” Bettman said. “The increases in the cap is really an opportunity to catch back up to the years of a flat cap, and not do it all at once. If we did it all at once, it would just skew everything in a crazy way, and frankly, it wouldn’t be fair to the players who signed contracts in the last few years. So there shouldn’t be any surprise as to where the cap is going.

“And again, it indicates that we have confidence that revenues — north and south of the 49th parallel — are going to continue to grow.”

Walsh preferred to look at a macro way of preventing a need for increased revenue sharing, and the 4 Nations was one example of how that could happen.

“It’s not just about looking at revenue sharing and helping teams that might not be making money, it’s how do we lift teams up?” Walsh said. “I think it’s very important for us collectively, with international hockey and other things we’re doing, to grow the game of hockey. That’s the answer here. It’s not about helping the poor teams, it’s about lifting all boats up.”

The Athletic / World Cup of Hockey will return in 2028 as in-season tournament, NHL and NHLPA announce

By Chris Johnston – February 13, 2025

MONTREAL — The NHL and NHL Players' Association have achieved their goal of establishing a calendar of international best-on-best events, announcing Wednesday that they've committed to reviving the World Cup of Hockey in February 2028.

That guarantees a regular cadence of best-on-best tournaments following this month's 4 Nations Face-Off and the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan next February.

The news was announced by NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and NHLPA executive director Marty Walsh before Canada's game against Sweden in the 4 Nations opener at Bell Centre.

"I think this (2028 World Cup) tournament indicates how committed we are, and how excited we and the players are about moving forward with international best on best," Bettman said.

Beyond earmarking a spot on the calendar for a 2028 World Cup, the league and union haven't determined what exactly the tournament will look like. Bids from potential host cities still need to be taken, with the possibility of splitting games between Europe and North America as they were in the 2004 World Cup under consideration, according to league sources.

"We will be asking for bids on hosting games," Bettman said. "We will have a package that's just about done in the next few weeks."

Another key detail still to be ironed out is which countries will participate.

The World Cup tournaments played in 1996, 2004 and 2016 each featured eight teams, and Bettman said Wednesday the World Cup will feature at least eight as well. Among the factors that will determine what 2028 looks like are whether Russia has been reinstated and if a deal can be reached with the International Ice Hockey Federation that would allow for a select number of European countries to hold qualifiers to gain entry to the World Cup.

Still, even with only a rough outline of the tournament sketched out, Wednesday's news was welcomed by players who have been thirsting for this kind of competition. They were denied the ability to compete at the 2018 and 2022 Olympics because of logistical hurdles and the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively, and saw the NHL and NHLPA try and fail to organize World Cup tournaments in 2020, 2021 and 2024.

"It's great, especially to have that certainty," Team Canada captain Sidney Crosby said. "I think a number of times that wasn't the case for certain reasons out of everyone's control. For guys to have an idea, and for fans to know they're going to be able to see best-on-best, I think it's great for everybody."

Because of the hiatus in top-tier international competition since the 2016 World Cup, the majority of players suiting up at the 4 Nations Face-Off are getting the chance to represent their countries on this kind of stage for the first time.

But with the NHL and NHLPA now in a period where they've demonstrated the ability to work together productively — they recently agreed on salary-cap numbers through the 2027-28 season and have started working on an extension to the collective bargaining agreement — a new era of international hockey appears to be upon us.

“It’s incredible,” Canadian forward Brad Marchand said. “As a player, we’re still fans. We really love watching (the World Cup), really love being a part of it. It’s the highest achievement you can achieve personally as a hockey player being part of one of these teams.

“To be able to know that we have this (4 Nations), we have the Olympics and another World Cup coming and it’s going to go on after that, it’ll be great for the game.”

Assistant executive director of the NHLPA Ron Hainsey said this is only the start.

“International play, if you look to soccer, they have so much international play that gets so much attention,” Hainsey said. “We’re not soccer as far as a global game, but we’re not that far behind. I think that’s the long-term goal here, is that this just becomes part of the game over the long term — where fans, players, everyone can look forward to these guys playing for their countries on a regular basis and honestly creating moments like Sid did in 2010 with the Golden Goal here in Canada that last a lifetime. I mean that’s really what we’re trying to do here over the long haul and the players are extremely supportive of it.”

The Athletic / The case of the disappearing Canadian goalie, plus the No. 1 pick in the NFL Draft

By Chris Branch – February 13, 2025

Good morning! Don't diss your teammates today.

Missing Persons: Where have all the Canadian goalies gone?

The 4 Nations Face-Off starts tonight, and there is no one under more pressure than Team Canada. The tournament begins in Montreal, home ice for the team favored by BetMGM to win the whole thing. Add in a drought of international success, and the scrutiny turns up to 11.

Something that might help? A hot goalie, which can paper over any team's troubles for a playoff run. And yet, as James Mirtle and Dan Robson illustrated in an incredible piece today, Canadian goalies are simply disappearing at the pro level.

A few layers here:

Let's start with the numbers: Canadians account for just 26 percent of goalies playing today in the NHL, down from 73 percent in 1995. A Canadian has won just one of the past eight Vezina trophies — heading into the 1993-94 season, Canadians had won 62 of 67 Vezina trophies.

But why? The short answer is training, though that in itself is complicated. Other regions of the world have poured money and coaching into goaltending, yes, but there is a massive strategy difference as well.

Europeans, Russians, Scandinavians and even Americans are catching and passing Canada in the goalie game. For most of them, there's a basic throughline: These countries allow young players to train at multiple positions, not siloing them as goalies from the onset of their youth careers.

In Canada, tradition clashes with modern insights. Cross-ice play and smaller nets for young players have proven successful for development, but officials have run into resistance among traditionalists. It has harmed their goaltending development efforts.

All this, in the country that's been at the forefront of hockey for generations. It's not like there's a lack of talent, either — the roster is absolutely stacked ... outside of the goalie spot.

I barely scratched the surface of insights here. Go read the full story for more on a fascinating issue.

Psst: Hey, who's going No. 1?

We primed you yesterday on the NFL offseason storylines, but Dane Brugler swung through with another pressing premise: It's officially NFL Draft season, and we have no idea who the top pick will be.

Just take a look at Dane's latest top 100 prospects list (not a mock draft). **Two quick questions that arose for me:**

Colorado WR/DB Travis Hunter and Penn State edge Abdul Carter rank as Nos. 1 and 2 on the list, and for good reason. Both are elite talents worthy of the top pick. Both are worth trading up for, too.

There's nary a quarterback until the No. 15 slot, where Cam Ward resides. Shedeur Sanders is 10 spots behind Ward. Do we really think either of these guys are going in the top five? Dane has Ward going No. 1 to Tennessee in his January mock, but I wonder if that changes between now and April.

The full list is here. The combine is just two weeks away. Happy draft season.

News to Know

Saints hire Moore

New Orleans officially announced it hired Eagles offensive coordinator Kellen Moore as head coach yesterday, ending weeks of speculation as Philadelphia played its way to a title. It's the first head-coaching job for Moore, who frankly inherits a mess: an old, expensive roster and a salary cap nightmare, all for a team that went 5-12 last year. At just 36, Moore has quite the resume, though, and could jolt a franchise in need of fresh blood. This Saints fan approves.

Former Panthers trash Newton

Last week, former Carolina quarterback Cam Newton called the 2010 Panthers team "losers" in an interview on "The Travis Hunter Show," which has since drawn ire from multiple former teammates. Newton referred to the team in such terms because Carolina had the No. 1 pick in 2011, which the franchise used to select him. Read comments from Steve Smith Sr., Captain Munnerlyn, Charles Johnson and Jordan Gross here.

More news

The Mavericks ejected a fan who mouthed "Fire Nico" on the Jumbotron during Monday's game, referencing the team's GM. Bad look.

Brandon Ingram agreed to a huge extension with Toronto, where he landed last week before the trade deadline.

Clayton Kershaw is returning for his 18th season with the Dodgers. That's a long time.

Jason Kelce said the Eagles' blowout Super Bowl win was "odd for (him) to watch." See his full comments here.

Things You Need to See: Good lord, Weston

The first Champions League knockout playoff phase (what a mouthful) matches began yesterday. Real Madrid eked out a win over Manchester City. Paris Saint-Germain might be better without Kylian Mbappe.

But the story of the day went to Juventus (and USMNT) midfielder Weston McKennie, whose laser strike in the first half ended up being the game winner against PSV.

The goal continues McKennie's renaissance at Juventus, where he has fallen in and out of favor.

The Champions League knockout playoff phase continues with this first-leg match, which is intriguing for more than just the apparent stakes: Feyenoord sacked manager Brian Priske just two days ago. Let's see how they respond.

The soccer stars are done with X (formerly Twitter), according to an intriguing piece from Steve Madeley.

Harlem Globetrotters week continues with a great story on "Sweet Lou," a legendary player in the 1970s who's now in his 48th year with the franchise.

[The Athletic / 4 Nations Face-Off tournament explained: Format, TV schedule, teams, rosters and more](#)

By Sean Gentile – February 13, 2025

Connor McDavid knows what you might be thinking about the 4 Nations Face-Off, the best-on-best international tournament featuring NHL players that begins on Wednesday.

“Yes, it’s not the Olympics. I understand that,” McDavid told reporters on Feb. 2. “It’s not a World Cup of Hockey, but there is still something on the line and we want to represent our country well.”

Beyond that, though, you might be wondering how all this will work. We’ve got you covered. Here’s everything you need to know about the tournament.

What is the format and what are the rules of the tournament?

It’s simple enough: NHL rules, but a modified points system. Each team will play once, round-robin style. Regulation winners will receive three points; overtime/shootout winners will receive two points; overtime/shootout losers will receive one point; regulation losers will receive zero points. At the end of the six-game round-robin schedule, the two teams with the most points will meet in the championship game.

For round-robin games, overtime will be held in a 10-minute, three-on-three sudden-death period, followed by a three-round shootout. In the final, full 20-minute, five-on-five periods will be played until a goal is scored.

Also, midway through the tournament, there will be a venue switch. Games on Feb. 12-15 will be held in Montreal; games on Feb 17-20, including the championship, will be held in Boston.

What are the key dates?

The games start on Wednesday night when Canada plays Sweden in Montreal. The U.S. opens against Finland on Thursday. Round-robin play continues until Feb. 17, with days off on Feb. 14 and Feb. 16. There are double-headers on Feb. 15 (featuring the U.S.-Canada matchup) and Feb. 17.

The top two teams will play in the championship on Thursday, Feb. 20, at 8 p.m. ET in Boston. NHL games resume on Saturday, Feb 22.

The full schedule, with TV info for each game:

Thursday, Feb. 13: U.S. vs. Finland, 8 p.m. ET | **U.S. TV: ESPN, ESPN+** | Canada TV: Sportsnet, TVA

Saturday, Feb. 15: Finland vs. Sweden, 1 p.m. ET | **U.S. TV: ABC, ESPN+** | Canada TV: Sportsnet, TVA
U.S. vs. Canada, 8 p.m. ET | **U.S. TV: ABC, ESPN+** | Canada TV: Sportsnet, TVA

Monday, Feb. 17: Canada vs. Finland, 1 p.m. ET | **U.S. TV: MAX, truTV** | Canada TV: Sportsnet, TVA
Sweden vs. U.S., 8 p.m. | **U.S. TV: MAX, truTV** | Canada TV: Sportsnet, TVAS

Thursday, Feb. 20: Championship, 8 p.m., | **U.S. TV: ABC, ESPN+** | Canada TV: Sportsnet, TVA

Why are there only four teams?

One major reason: This tournament is an NHL/NHLPA creation, designed to replace the All-Star Game and offer fans (and players) a taste of best-on-best international hockey before the 2026 Olympics.

More teams would mean more games, a longer break in the NHL schedule and extra logistical headaches. Not ideal.

Beyond that, countries like Czechia, Slovakia, Germany and Switzerland would need a fair amount of non-NHL players to fill out their rosters, and the IIHF isn't involved in any official capacity. There's no real benefit to European teams allowing their best players to go on leave for an NHL moneymaking venture.

When it comes to Russia, the NHL is taking its cues from the IIHF; the federation has banned Russian teams due to the country's ongoing war in Ukraine.

Who are the favorites?

On paper, it may well be the United States, largely based on its superior goaltending. That alone is a major change — not just from the 2014 Olympics, either. Canada starting a men's hockey tournament as an underdog is a rare occurrence. In the last five Olympic tournaments featuring NHL players (1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014), Canada won gold three times. The U.S. has made it to the gold medal game twice, losing to Canada both times.

Most major sportsbooks, though, list the North American teams as co-favorites, Sweden solidly in third place and Finland as the long shot.

What happened last time there was a best-on-best international tournament with NHL players?

We're going to count the eight-team 2016 World Cup of Hockey, even though the format was a bit wonky. In that tournament, held in Toronto over 12 days in September, Canada's over-24 team took gold, beating Team Europe (made up of German, Slovak, Swiss, Danish, Norwegian and Slovenian players) in a best-of-three final. Sidney Crosby led the tournament in scoring (10 points in six games) and was named MVP. The United States' over-24 team, meanwhile, went 0-3-0 in group play and didn't make it to the knockout round.

The tournament, though, is best remembered for Team North America, a collection of the best American and Canadian players 23 or younger. The bones of that roster — Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Auston Matthews and Connor Hellebuyck — have become the biggest names in the sport. You'll see plenty of them in the 4 Nations tournament and beyond.

Also competing were Sweden, Russia, Finland and Czechia.

What about the Olympics?

NHL players will be in Milan in 2026 and in France for the 2030 Games. Beyond that, nothing has been decided.

The IIHF has agreed to foot the bill on insurance and travel costs for players for those tournaments; that was a major issue in failed negotiations surrounding the 2018 Games. Four years later, the COVID-19 pandemic was the primary roadblock. Through it all, though, there was a clear appetite among players to get back to the Olympics, and the 4 Nations tournament is a welcome part of the process.

The plan moving forward, the NHL has said, is to rotate between the Olympics and a more robust World Cup of Hockey every two years. That makes the 4 Nations tournament, for now, a one-off; the NHL's return to the Olympics was announced in February 2024, leaving a relatively short runway.

What have the players said?

The Athletic asked more than 110 NHL players, bluntly, if they cared about the tournament — and more than 80 percent answered in the affirmative. Not a bad sign.

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

“Just because it’s a precursor to the Olympics,” said another player who voted yes. “As a fan of hockey, I’m watching it. I remember growing up, those are just such big hockey moments. For hockey in general, it’s great. It’s unfortunate we’ve missed the Olympics because it’s such a big worldwide event. I want to watch the best-on-best, too, and the best players want to play in them. It’s long overdue.”

The Athletic / Which NHL team has the best all-time roster from one country that isn't Canada?

By Sean McIndoe – February 13, 2025

Since we're all in an international hockey mood this week, let's try a roster challenge that reader Derrick sent in a while ago. His question was simple: Which NHL team could produce the best lineup of three forwards, two defensemen and one goalie from the same country, that isn't Canada?

That sounds just about perfect for a Wednesday time-killer while we wait for the return of best-on-best hockey. Let's see where this takes us.

And yes, before we start, I know what you're thinking. It's the same thought I had when I first saw Derrick's question, and he told me he had it too. It's that this is too easy, because the answer is obviously going to be the Detroit Red Wings and their Russian contingent. Start with the famed Russian Five, mix in Pavel Datsyuk, and this one is over before it starts. Except it isn't, because it turns out that the Red Wings have never had a Russian goaltender, meaning they can't ice a team for this challenge.

That tells me two things. First, today's column won't be 200 words long, and second, this might be tougher than it sounds. Let's find out.

But first, a few ground rules™: Teams get credit for whatever a player did when he was on their roster, but not before or after, so if the Habs want Ilya Kovalchuk, they get the six-goal veteran, not the Richard Trophy version. We don't care about specific positions beyond forward, defense and goalie. And we'll use birthplace as our determining factor unless we know a player represented a different country internationally.

My gut says the American rosters will be the easiest to nail down, so let's start with a few of those.

Detroit Red Wings — USA

We already realized we can't use the Wings for their Russian stars, and building something around Nicklas Lidstrom falls apart due to the franchise's lack of top-notch Swedish goalies. So let's play this one on easy level and see what we can do with American stars.

The obvious place to start is the blue line, where we don't get the very best of Chris Chelios but can claim a decade of solid play. We'll pair him with Mark Howe, who actually played for both the U.S. and Canada internationally but was born in Detroit. We can give them some solid goaltending in Jimmy Howard, whose 246 career wins are third-most among American goalies who only played for one franchise.

Unfortunately, things kind of fall apart up front, where the Wings' penchant for collecting old stars means they wouldn't get anywhere near the best years out of Mike Modano or Brett Hull. We end up using two guys off the current roster, but for an all-time squad from an Original Six team, it's not a great group.

Forwards: Dylan Larkin, Alex DeBrincat, Jimmy Carson

Defense: Mark Howe, Chris Chelios

Goalie: Jimmy Howard

Not bad, but probably not enough. I'm betting an old Norris rival can top that ...

Chicago Blackhawks — USA

Hmm, maybe not.

The good news: We get to use Chelios again, but this time it's from his prime years that include two Norris Trophies, so that's an upgrade. We can start our forward line with a pair of Hall of Famers and choose between Eddie Olczyk and Tony Amonte for the other spot. And there's competition for the other blue-line job, with names like Gary Suter and Dustin Byfuglien getting consideration before we decided on a guy from the current roster.

That's all great ... until we get to the goalies. It turns out America's team doesn't seem to like to shop local when it comes to the crease. The situation is bad enough that I found myself seriously considering a few years of Bob Mason or the very early (and very bad) Craig Anderson years. In the end, I had to settle for ... well, you'll see.

Forwards: Patrick Kane, Jeremy Roenick, Eddie Olczyk

Defense: Chris Chelios, Seth Jones

Goalie: Scott Darling

Huh. Note to self, check the goalies before you start on any of these, it's definitely the position that's going to be a stop sign for some of these teams.

Let's try one more Original Six team, preferably one where we know we won't have to worry about the net.

New York Rangers — USA

If it's true that good teams are built from the net out, the Rangers should be in great shape. They get to start with Mike Richter and his 301 wins, and then the blue line is even better, with arguably the greatest American star of all time in Brian Leetch plus an active Norris winner in his prime. But can we maintain that momentum up front?

Not really. Like the Wings, the Rangers love to collect former stars who've passed their prime, but names like Patrick Kane, Kevin Stevens, Doug Weight and Blake Wheeler don't really help us much. Instead, we're basically going with the current team.

Forwards: Chris Kreider, J.T. Miller, Vincent Trocheck

Defense: Brian Leetch, Adam Fox

Goalie: Mike Richter

By the way, if this group doesn't click up front, the next man up would be some guy named Chris Drury. Be ready, boss.

Let's try one more American squad before we head over to Europe.

Buffalo Sabres — USA

I couldn't find enough support to build a Czech team around Dominik Hasek, but we can settle for Ryan Miller in goal on the American version. That means we get two 1990s stars at their peak in Pat LaFontaine and Phil Housley. We sputter a bit after that, but for our first non-Original Six entry, this is a decent group.

Forwards: Pat LaFontaine, Kyle Okposo, Jack Eichel

Defense: Phil Housley, Mike Ramsey

Goalie: Ryan Miller

The second blue-line spot is a bit dicey, and I'll totally understand if Sabres fans want to boot Eichel off the team and replace him with someone like Drury. Still, not a bad entry.

Let's turn to the Sabres' expansion cousins for our next entry, as we up the difficulty with some European options.

Vancouver Canucks — Sweden

It's the obvious starting point, right? The Sedins feel like two excellent forwards for the price of one, and either Elias Pettersson or Markus Naslund slide right in next to them for an excellent top line. The blue line isn't amazing because the Canucks have somehow managed to have one star defenseman in over five decades of existence, but it's not awful. And the goaltending delivers seven solid seasons that peaked with a fourth-place Vezina finish. We can work with that.

Forwards: Henrik Sedin, Daniel Sedin, Markus Naslund

Defense: Alex Edler, Mattias Öhlund

Goalie: Jacob Markstrom

That's honestly in the running for our top team so far. Let's stay in Canada and try another Swedish squad.

Ottawa Senators — Sweden

We start with the two obvious franchise icons. The goaltending is a tough call; I went with current starter Linus Ullmark over Robin Lehner or pre-breakout Filip Gustavsson, but I'd be happy with any of those options. So three players in, it's a solid start.

Unfortunately, the depth is going to fail us here, as trading away a young Mika Zibanejad haunts the Senators yet again.

Forwards: Daniel Alfredsson, Andreas Dackell, Magnus Arvedson

Defense: Erik Karlsson, Erik Brännström

Goalie: Linus Ullmark

While we're in Ontario, I thought we could also try a Swedish roster with the Maple Leafs, who'd start with Mats Sundin and Borje Salming. Unfortunately, that's about as far as you can get before names like Jonas Hoglund and Carl Gunnarsson start showing up, so I bailed on that project quickly.

It's time to try a Russian team. We'll start with the obvious first option.

Washington Capitals — Russia

It's all about Ovie here, but there's just enough talent around him to make this a viable entry. We're only getting the tail end of Fedorov and the early years of Gonchar, but it's still a decent group.

Forwards: Alex Ovechkin, Evgeni Kuznetsov, Sergei Fedorov

Defense: Sergei Gonchar, Dmitry Orlov

Goalie: Semyon Varlamov

By the way, we're counting the old USSR as Russia for our purposes today, while keeping an eye on the international resume of players like Peter Bondra (who represented Slovakia) and Dmitri Khristich (who represented Ukraine).

On to another team with a strong claim to the Russian crown ...

Tampa Bay Lightning — Russia

When you can lead off with a duo that combines for two scoring titles, a Vezina, an MVP and a Conn Smythe, I'd call that a solid start. The question is whether Nikita Kucherov and Andrei Vasilevskiy have enough support from the rest of Lightning history to contend.

The answer is ... kind of. They get Mikhail Sergachev on the blue line, but that's about it. And there isn't a ton of depth of front behind Kucherov. So we're left with a top-heavy team that probably can't compete with some of the others in this post.

Forwards: Nikita Kucherov, Vladislav Namestnikov, Alexander Selivanov

Defense: Mikhail Sergachev, Nikita Nesterov

Goalie: Andrei Vasilevskiy

As someone who knows a thing or two about building a vastly superior Finnish roster, let's see what we can find there.

Dallas Stars — Finland

As tempting as it is to try to build a Predators team around Pekka Rinne and Kimmo Timonen, I think Dallas is the clear path here. We get most of the prime years from Finland's third-winningest goalie ever, three key pieces off of the current roster, plus a three-time Selke winner. While there are no Hall of Famers here for now, the third forward spot is the only real weak point. I like this group a lot.

Forwards: Roope Hintz, Jere Lehtinen, Jussi Jokinen

Defense: Miro Heiskanen, Esa Lindell

Goalie: Kari Lehtonen

Finally, let's close out with a country that used to be part of hockey's big six, and maybe still is. That would be the Czechs, and with apologies to the 1980s Nordiques and the Stastny brothers, it's not an especially tough call as to which team to look at here.

Pittsburgh Penguins — Czechia

A fun thing happened in the 1990s. Well, two fun things. First, an anthropomorphic mullet named Jaromir Jagr arrived in Pittsburgh, got weirdly friendly with some peanut butter, and became arguably the most entertaining player of his generation. Second, the Penguins enjoyed that experience so much that they tried to collect pretty much every Czech forward they could find for the next decade.

That means we're going to be all set up front, where we get not just Jagr but also a decade of Martin Straka and height-of-his-powers Petr Nedved. (The latter actually played for Canada at the 1994 Olympics but represented what was then the Czech Republic in later tournaments.)

As you might expect, things get tougher from there, as our blue line is thin enough that I thought about asking Petr Sykora to switch positions. But we're solid in net thanks to the always-underrated Tomas Vokoun, who trails only Hasek on the all-time Czech win list. Sure, he had only 13 of those wins in Pittsburgh, but those were followed by a memorable playoff run, so we're taking what we can get. We have Jagr, it will be fine.

Forwards: Jaromir Jagr, Petr Nedved, Martin Straka

Defense: Jiri Slegr, Michal Rozsival

Goalie: Tomas Vokoun

So, who you got?

I'm not sure it matters with this sort of exercise. Personally, I like the Finnish Stars, Swedish Canucks and American Rangers, although I'm not sure any of them are going to beat a team like the Canadian Canadiens, with that Rocket/Beliveau/Lafleur/Harvey/Robinson/Roy combo. Huh, look at that, a Team Canada with a goalie — I remember when we used to make those here.

Now it's over to you. Head down to the comment section and take a crack at your favorite team, favorite country, or just any combination that strikes you as interesting.

The Athletic / Canada's 'mind-boggling' goalie crisis has been a decades-long descent

By James Mirtle and Dan Robson – February 13, 2025

Their numbers have been dwindling, dramatically, almost every year now. From 73 percent of the NHL, to 51, and now down to half that in the span of less than 20 years.

While it may feel hyperbolic to call it a crisis in Canadian hockey, it's certainly a troubling notion that now regularly registers in the national consciousness — especially when their hockey teams head to a major international tournament, as they do this week at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

After owning the crease for nearly a century, the Canadian goalie is apparently becoming outmoded.

The pressing question, throughout international hockey circles, is: How did this happen? How did Canada go from the world's standard bearer — the country of Jacques Plante, Ken Dryden, Patrick Roy and Martin Brodeur — to being outclassed at the most important position in its national sport?

And how can they fix it?

The end of Canadian dominance

Historically, Canada had always excelled in goal at hockey's highest levels — even beyond its success at other positions. All of the five goalies with the most wins in NHL history, for example, are Canadian. And Sweden's Henrik Lundqvist is the only non-Canadian to crack the top 10.

In recent years, having Brodeur, Roberto Luongo or Carey Price in net at all of the major international events was a sizable advantage, and a big reason Canada won gold at the Winter Olympics (2002, 2010 and 2014) and World Cup (2016).

As recently as 2000, Canada was so overwhelmingly in control at the position that two-thirds of all games played in the NHL were by goalies from the country. Today, however, Europeans are twice as prevalent as Canadians, and the Americans are on the verge of passing Canada.

The trend has become so pronounced that it roughly equates to Canada losing a starting position in the NHL every season.

It's a shift that's especially evident among the game's elite goalies. A Canadian, for example, has won only one of the past eight Vezina trophies as the league's top goaltender. Prior to 1993-94, Canadians had won the award an incredible 62 of 67 times.

What's reignited this conversation this season is Canada's three netminders for the 4 Nations tournament, the first best-on-best event since 2016, are underwhelming names: Jordan Binnington, Adin Hill and Sam Montembeault, who rank 14th, 25th and 29th in wins in the NHL since 2021-22.

Canada's competition at the tournament is telling. The top two goalies in wins in that same time frame — Connor Hellebuyck and Jake Oettinger — are both American. Finland has Juuse Saros (sixth), and Sweden is led by Linus Ullmark (10th) and Jacob Markstrom (seventh), who will miss the event due to injury.

The remainder of the top 10 are all from Russia, a nation that won't be participating in the event due to the war in Ukraine.

Cam Talbot, at 37 years old, leads all Canadians with 92 wins with four different teams spread over the past four seasons.

“It’s kind of mind-boggling,” said Brodeur, the NHL’s all-time leader in wins, in a recent radio interview about Canada’s struggles in goal.

Why other countries are taking over

The reasons behind this trend are complex and have befuddled hockey people in Canada for more than a decade. Canada, after all, remains a dominant power at other positions, with Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar among the best players in the world.

Part of the answer is in how Canada’s competition has adapted, beginning with European nations in the 1990s.

Dominik Hasek’s success in the NHL 30 years ago was a revelation in the goalie world as the Czech with the slinky spine won six Vezinas and in 1997 became the first goalie named league MVP in the game’s modern era.

When he stole the gold medal at the 1998 Olympics in Nagano, proving unbeatable against hockey’s traditional juggernauts, it led to a goalie-development arms race, both in the NHL and among other countries.

Canada still produced the vast majority of NHL goalies during Hasek’s era of dominance. He was viewed as an outlier. The focus at the time was on the Made-in-Canada butterfly technique that relied on a prescriptive model of dropping to your knees and blocking the puck.

That style was famously employed by Roy, who won four Stanley Cups between 1986 and 2001, and adopted by other students of goalie coach Francois Allaire, who revolutionized the position in the 1980s.

A run of French Canadian goalies — led by Roy, Brodeur, Luongo, Marc-Andre Fleury, Felix Potvin, J-S Giguere and others — owned NHL creases. And they made Canada nearly unbeatable on the world stage.

But small countries like Czechia, Finland and Sweden, all with populations of 10 million or less, saw something in Hasek. The sports leaders of those nations believed getting better in goal would allow them to compete with superpowers like Canada and Russia.

So they poured resources into goalie development and coaching. And they began to win.

What NHL teams soon found was this new breed of European goalie who played differently than Canadians. An intense focus on teaching what is one of the most technical and mentally demanding positions in pro sports was paying off, especially in the Nordic countries, where resources could be pooled and disseminated to every age group through their club team system.

After a stretch of dominance from Finns and Swedes in the 2000s — led by Lundqvist’s rise from seventh-round pick to Hall of Famer — other countries began to copy those models. Today, Russia and the United States are making the biggest gains. And Canada lags behind.

Where Canada has fallen short

One issue goalie development experts point to is the intense professionalization occurring in Canadian hockey at young ages, something that doesn’t always lend itself to grassroots development.

At the elite level, winning is often the primary goal, even with kids as young as 7 or 8 years old. This leads to “super teams” where only one goalie is given most of the opportunity, limiting the number of kids playing the position. It also shows up in Canadians hewing to tradition and resisting new development strategies, like smaller nets and cross-ice play for younger children.

Hockey Canada has been trying — and it instituted cross-ice play for younger age groups in 2017 — but it is fighting an uphill battle against many parents and coaches.

“There's really no focus on goaltending development in minor hockey at all,” says Rob Gherson, a former Washington Capitals draft pick and pro goalie who has coached in Toronto’s top youth leagues for more than a decade. “That's one area we've definitely fallen behind. Other places — Sweden, the U.S., Russia — they've put money into goaltending, and they've put a focus on trying to develop goalies.

“In Canada, coaches are under a ton of pressure because the focus in minor hockey here is about winning. And it's crazy. It's essentially like these kids are becoming professionals at 8 years old.”

This does children a disservice, Gherson says, as fewer are allowed to even try the position. And the ones who do get to play often don't reach their potential.

“At the end of the day, they get a million plastic trophies or medals,” he says. “They don't get anything out of it.”

In Sweden, by contrast, players almost always play multiple positions, which allows them to become more well-rounded athletes and understand the sport from multiple perspectives. They also force a goalie rotation, so that it's not simply the most talented 9-year-olds playing every minute.

USA Hockey's development staff has been collaborating with Sweden in recent years and now focuses on getting as many kids as possible to try the position. Their aim by 2030 is to have 10 percent of all youth players be goalies.

They are also more widely adopting equipment innovations that allow players to swiftly swap out gear so kids can “share” a start. Getting a goal, assist and save in a game is their new-school version of a Gordie Howe hat trick.

“People think you have to be a full-time goalie at 5 years old when you're learning how to skate,” USA Hockey head of goalie development Steve Thompson says. “That's something we strongly resist the families to do. We want them to be a hockey player first and a goalie second and really understand the entire game.

“We've seen some of our national team goalies that didn't start (in goal) full time until they were 13 or 14 years old. The general thought is that that's wild and how on earth is that possible? But the more we're seeing it, the more we're starting to really buy into the fact that those are the best athletes: The ones that are well-rounded before they dive full in.”

Some of these approaches have met firm opposition in Canada, where parents and coaches want to teach the way they learned decades ago.

“In minor hockey at 9, 10 years old, it's a top-shelf competition,” Gherson says, using the resistance to smaller nets for children as an example. “Whatever team can shoot high the most is going to win because the goalies can't reach the crossbars.

“It's like they're playing a different position. When you're coaching with those kids, you almost have to teach them something different (than what they should be learning).”

Gherson says Canada has the kids willing to learn the position and the resources to support them, with many parents shelling out tens of thousands of dollars on camps, training and equipment every year.

But that's not working.

“(Kids) are going into the factory of the goalie school,” Gherson says, explaining that many goalie camps cost upwards of \$1,000 a week, which further limits the pool of goalies. “We spend so much money here (on goaltending). It just should be better.”

How other countries do it

When Andrei Vasilevskiy first arrived at Paul Schonfelder’s goalie clinic in Ottawa in 2010 as a 16-year-old, he skated and moved in the net differently than goalies who’d grown up being trained in Canada.

The future Vezina winner was raw in terms of efficiency and structure on the ice, Schonfelder says. But Vasilevskiy had a unique ability to read plays and was a remarkable athlete at 6-feet-4.

It was easy to see his potential, even if the Canadian goalies alongside him were more technically sound.

Looking back, Schonfelder, now goalie coach for the Carolina Hurricanes, sees the young Vasilevskiy as a prototype.

“He’d already developed a strong athletic piece in his game. And really all that needed to be added was the structure, but it was being added when he was older,” Schonfelder says. “I find in Canada it’s the opposite.”

Schonfelder, who has worked with Hockey Canada’s goaltending development program, says Canadian goalies often look exceptional at younger ages. That’s because they focus on prescribed positions and micro movements for different scenarios from a young age, often drilling the movements during long practice sessions with a dedicated coach.

“We get these kids at 17 or 18 who are extremely structured and if you asked them to do a pattern in the crease, they look like a million bucks,” Schonfelder says.

What they lack, however, is the athleticism of an elite goaltender, with an ability to get outside a technical box and problem solve in game situations. “They don’t have the ability to read the game and think on their own,” Schonfelder says.

“That’s a big part of the stagnation of goaltending,” says Thomas Magnusson, Sweden’s head of goaltending development. “Shooters don’t do the same thing over and over again. They do different things. But in a goalie practice, a lot of times you see goalie coaches doing the same thing and repeat it over and over again. That’s not how the game of hockey looks.”

The Russian goalies Schonfelder has worked with, however, don’t receive this level of coaching at younger age. Instead, they’re allowed to go in the net and play.

The most effective method, says Sasha Tyjnych — the agent who discovered Vasilevskiy — is to find a good goalie with natural talent and individualize their training.

They might be more inclined to stand up in certain situations, or butterfly in others, but ultimately the goal is to improve what already works for them. This fits with the USA Hockey’s current approach, which encourages originality.

“For me, this is why Russian goalies are better right now,” Tyjnych says.

In consulting with goalie coaches across the country, Hockey Canada’s director of player development Corey McNabb says there’s consensus that the intense focus on technique at a young age is problematic.

“If you have the athleticism and physical literacy first, the technique is easier to apply later on,” McNabb says.

But getting hockey parents and youth organizations in Canada to buy into this kind of change in mindset can be difficult.

“We’re in a rush to try to get to best-on-best instead of providing more kids with the chance to play at a higher level for a longer period of time,” says McNabb. “Unfortunately, in our system there are a lot of kids who are told they're not good enough too early. And we don't really know at 14 years old who's going to be the best.”

The all-encompassing nature of Canada’s national sport might also be a hindrance.

As youth hockey has become a year-round enterprise at the elite level — between rep teams, summer travel teams and development camps — some argue that the outcomes can be counterproductive.

Jon Elkin, director of goaltending for the Pittsburgh Penguins, has run summer goaltending schools in the Toronto area since the early 1990s. He argues that for goaltenders, specifically, hyper-focused training will eventually lead to diminishing returns. Elkin believes goalies should participate in other sports to learn different patterns of movement and reaction to improve overall athleticism.

The American and European goaltenders that attend Elkin's youth camps tend to participate in more sports than the Canadian kids, to their benefit, he says.

“It's so fast, and there are so many broken plays and guys can shoot the puck. You’ve got to be able to move, change direction, stretch. Get up and down, and have great reflexes,” Elkin says. “So anything that you can do to encourage that is important.”

Compounding Canada's overly selective approach is the size of goalies at the elite level. The average NHL netminder this season is 6-3, for example, and it’s become common for many pro netminders to be 6-5 or taller.

With fewer kids getting time to develop in Canadian youth hockey leagues, an approach focused only on winning can end up missing on kids who might be slow in growing into the right body types.

“We lose so many kids for silly reasons that could be goalies,” Gherson says. “We're just not giving them a chance.”

The junior leagues issue

Canada’s struggles extend beyond the youth level, however. As teenagers, the best Canadian goalies are often playing in mini-NHL environments in junior leagues where, at 17 or 18 years old, they might be backing up goalies two or three years their senior. Many of those backups rarely play during these pivotal development years.

The junior leagues also typically rely on goalie coaches who are part time and low-paid, some earning as little as \$7,000 for a full season’s work.

Even Canada’s best junior goalies may get only one or two seasons as a starter before they jump to the pro leagues, where winning games again trumps development.

“Our structure in some ways is hurting the potential development of young goalies,” McNabb says.

European and American goaltenders, meanwhile, are often able to play in less competitive environments for longer, either in lower-tier leagues or by going the college route.

This professionalization of the position impacts coaching, too. Many of the world’s top goalie coaches are Canadian, but they often work for NHL teams, other pro teams or their own goalie schools.

Hockey Canada has had a difficult time retaining goaltending consultants because they are so frequently recruited by NHL teams, McNabb says. And internationally, Canada is still widely viewed as a leader when it comes to goaltending instruction.

The majority of the young goalies who attend Elkin's camps each summer are now from the United States, Russia, and other European countries, he says.

But guidance from a governing body can be key. Case in point: Magnusson, who has overseen Sweden's goaltending program for many years. "He's done a really good job and it comes down to consistency to what they're teaching, how they're teaching it, why they're teaching it," McNabb says of Magnusson.

The standardization of coaching, and quality control, that has become a feature of the Finnish and Swedish approach — and something the U.S. has been rapidly adopting — is not currently the norm in Canada.

"Canada has not been able to do things on a national scale," Magnusson says. "It still looks, to me, like it did 10, 11 years ago. There's a lot of goalie coaches, yes, but they're doing different things, which means a goalie going up the system, from youth to juniors to pro ranks, gets different messages."

This means there's rarely a consensus about how to teach at the lower levels.

"With all the private companies, private goalie coaches — and also the competition for (NHL) jobs in the professional goalie coach market — they need to have their own way of doing things," Magnusson says. "They have to promote themselves. 'This is my way. This is my terminology.' Which mixes things up for goalies."

Hockey Canada acknowledged this reality close to a decade ago, says McNabb. Upon witnessing Canada's decline in goalie dominance, the organization set out to find a fix.

In 2019, Hockey Canada implemented a policy that urged youth teams to avoid having a full-time goalie before the age of 10. But it's not an enforceable policy.

For ages 10 and older, Hockey Canada encourages goalies to alternate games, and to play forward or defense rather than sit on the bench when it's not their turn to play in net. Again, it's not a widely adopted concept.

A work group of goalie coaches from across the country helped Hockey Canada develop a three-tiered process to train goalie coaches. The first level focuses on grassroots basics, meant for teams that don't have a dedicated goalie coach. The second level is intended for a more advanced perspective on skillsets, tactics and game play.

In the past two years, close to 2,500 coaches from across Canada have attended the level one and level two clinics, McNabb says.

A third level of training allows coaches to receive goalie coach certification. Around two dozen coaches are selected to attend a camp in Calgary each year. So far, 120 coaches have received that certification.

"We can't be complacent in this area," McNabb says. "We need to continue to get better and push the pace and try to get more goaltenders to the highest level."

Can Canada turn the tide?

Amid Canada's declining dominance in goal, there are reasons for optimism. Seven of the past 10 Stanley Cup-winning teams have had a Canadian goalie.

And this season, some of the top save percentages in the NHL have been put up by Canadians, like Mackenzie Blackwood, Logan Thompson and Darcy Kuemper.

The past two seasons, Canadian goalies have actually posted a save percentage slightly higher than the NHL average.

“It’s not the end of the world here,” says Elkin. “It’s not as bleak as I think it’s made out to be.”

There is a cyclical nature to this reality, he argues: “There’s no reason why we can’t dominate again.”

McNabb believes Canada might be on the verge of reversing the trend, pointing to a pipeline of young goalies coming through Hockey Canada’s system.

“I think right now at the high-performance level, it’s looking really good for the future,” McNabb says.

According to The Athletic’s latest ranking, however, only four of the top 20 23-and-under goalie prospects are Canadian.

And they’re up against USA Hockey’s increasingly aggressive approach, including its goal of having 50 percent of NHL minutes played by Americans in the near future.

Several of Canada’s current starters like Talbot, Kuemper and Fleury are about to age out of the league, and whether they’ll be replaced by countrymen — or more Europeans and Americans — is an open question.

“Canada will always produce goalies,” Magnusson says. “It’s just a matter of how many.”

The Athletic / Sweden's minor hockey model offers an alternative to high-stress development: 'Have fun'

By Fluto Shinzawa – February 13, 2025

MONTREAL — Imagine life as Connor McDavid growing up in the greater Toronto area, progressing under the following blueprint:

- Starting his under-6 adventure with a Toronto Maple Leafs minor hockey program.
- Playing junior for the Leafs.
- Pulling on the blue and white as an 18-year-old NHLer.

Fiction for McDavid was reality for Victor Hedman.

Hedman is from Örnsköldsvik. He started playing organized hockey when he was 5 years old. He played his first pro season when he was 17.

Hedman, the No. 2 pick in 2009, did all this while playing for one club: MoDo, the former team of fellow Örnsköldsvik natives Peter Forsberg, Markus Naslund, Henrik Sedin and Daniel Sedin.

In comparison, consider the path of Noah Hanifin, the No. 5 pick in 2015. The Team USA defenseman, who is from Norwood, Mass., started youth hockey with the South Shore Kings. He also played for Boston Advantage and Junior Valley Warriors, similar club teams as the Kings. In eighth, ninth and 10th grades, Hanifin played varsity hockey at St. Sebastian's School. He went to the U.S. National Team Development Program in Ann Arbor, Mich. He arrived at Boston College as a 17-year-old freshman.

Hanifin played for six teams in the time Hedman played for one.

"When I grew up, I didn't dream about the NHL. I dreamt about playing for MoDo," Hedman says. "To go from age 5 to when I was 18 with the same organization was ... yeah. People over here don't really believe that. But that's how it's been back home."

The teammates Hedman grew up playing with are friends for life. Others on Sweden's 4 Nations roster had the same experience. Friendships cannot help but tighten when players progress through minor, junior and professional tiers without ever changing addresses.

"I'm not saying better or worse or right or wrong. Just culturally different," Team Sweden coach Sam Hallam said of his federation's approach. "Victor Hedman grew up playing for a youth team that also was the professional team in his town. I think he still sees himself as a MoDo player. I think you build a lot of passion and heart and soul for that."

One club, one culture

The way it works in Sweden, most players join their hometown club. They are free to stay there throughout their minor hockey careers. Some progress to junior and pro hockey with the same club. Others move to bigger programs.

At early ages, Swedish players are not as familiar with structure as their North American counterparts. They are encouraged to learn the game through trial and error, sometimes against bigger and stronger players. Families are not required to purchase equipment for new players.

Take Elias Lindholm, for example. Lindholm was born in 1994 and raised in Boden, which does not have as many players as other towns. Lindholm regularly played up, with and against 1992- and 1993-born

players. The Boston Bruins center had no choice but to think the game at a higher level against bigger, stronger and more experienced players.

“We played a lot of games growing up,” Lindholm says. “For me, that was a good thing. You develop well during games. Sometimes you play three, four games during the weekend.”

It was not uncommon for Lindholm to play 100 games per season. In his mind, it all blends together — actual games and informal fresh-air gatherings with his friends.

“Every time you had an opportunity to go outdoors, we had those times where there was no games — you just play with your buddies,” Lindholm says. “Nobody had a practice. You just go out there and have fun.”

Comfort is one reason the one-club model can promote steady development. Players become familiar with each other. There is little peer pressure, especially among parents, to chase greener grass elsewhere.

“You don’t have to leave your town,” said the Bruins’ Hampus Lindholm. “You travel a little bit when you get older. But it’s not like here where you have to be in travel teams. You have to switch a lot of teams. You don’t have to necessarily worry that much about switching teams and having new teammates all the time. You can be more comfortable being around the same guys. There’s both good and bad with that. But I learned the most when I was young.”

Sweden’s youth emphasis is on recreation. Skill, structure and development follow.

The way Mattias Ekholm remembers it, earning a living in hockey was never front of mind when he first stepped onto the ice for IFK Ore. Ekholm pulled on skates to play a game and enjoy the company of his friends. They were among the happiest times of Ekholm’s life, to say nothing of his career.

“Up until I was 15, it was all about having fun,” Ekholm recalls. “The biggest memories is you go on these weekend tournaments with your friends. You stay away, play games and hang out with your friends. Those are probably some of the better, if not the best, moments of the hockey part so far. The NHL is great. I’m not saying that. But the level of fun you had growing up and just playing, it’s a different kind of fun.”

Having a good time does not rule out hard work. When he was 16 years old, David Pastrnak decided to move from Czechia to play juniors for Södertälje. It was nothing like his Czech experience.

“The skill level as a kid and young players was pretty much the same. It was mostly everything off the ice,” Pastrnak recalls. “It was the work ethic. The way they were working out, preparing for the games, eating. Work ethic off the ice.”

The pressure of fragmentation

Ekholm has heard the stories of players bouncing between AAA clubs, schools, summer camps and showcase tournaments of North American minor hockey. He doesn’t like them. Ekholm believes stress at young ages can produce burnout.

“We have to focus more on having fun early on,” Ekholm says. “Maybe we’re doing all these camps, selections, select teams and all this stuff too early. For some, it works. But I think for the whole mass, it’s not to lose players but also fans at an early age. So if you have a bad experience, it’s like, ‘I’m not going to be a fan later on in life.’”

Sweden offers multiple divisions of competition within the same organization. There is not as much on the line in terms of chasing goals such as being drafted by a CHL team, making the U.S. NTDP or earning a college scholarship.

Former NHLer Fabian Brunnstrom, for example, played low-level Division 2 for Helsingborgs, his hometown club. He was a late bloomer. Brunnstrom progressed through Division 1 and the Elitserien. The undrafted Brunnstrom signed with the Dallas Stars in 2008 after widespread NHL interest.

“There’s so much pressure for a kid going to college and paying for school,” Hampus Lindholm says. “I feel like the pressure on you being successful, from the parents’ side of things, isn’t as big as over here.”

It is not easy for Sweden’s top players to transition to North American hockey. The ice is smaller. There is more pounding within the tightness of 85 feet. Life away from the rink is different. Family is an ocean away.

But the 23 Swedes participating in the 4 Nations Face-Off have found instant familiarity in Montreal. It is not just that they are speaking the same language on the ice. When a player like Hedman has played with the same friends for more than a dozen years, there is nowhere he’d rather be than at the rink.

“Everyone loved the game so much,” Elias Lindholm says. “Every opportunity you had to step on the ice, even if it was outdoors or wherever, everyone had fun doing it.”

ESPN / Grades, top players from Canada's win in 4 Nations Face-Off

By Ryan S. Clark, Greg Wyshynski – February 13, 2025

Reactions

The opening game of the 2025 4 Nations Face-Off was quite a bit closer than the Canadian fans in Montreal might have liked, but their side earned a victory over Sweden, 4-3 in overtime.

A victorious Canada earned two points for its OT win, while Sweden got one. Sweden's next matchup is against Finland on Saturday (1 p.m. ET, ABC/ESPN+), and Canada will next play Saturday against the United States (8 p.m., ABC/ESPN+/Disney+).

But before closing the books on this game, let's grade both teams, identify our biggest takeaways, and look ahead to the key players to watch and biggest questions for each team's next game.

Grading the teams

Canada: B

It's hard to give Canada anything less than a 'B' grade here, even if they might have earned something lower. Squandering a 2-0 first-period lead and a 3-1 third-period lead to wind up in overtime meant Canada couldn't earn a three-point regulation win over Sweden. But they did earn two points for an overtime win thanks to Mitch Marner's efforts at 6:06 of a frantic extra session -- cashing in on Sidney Crosby's third primary assist of the game.

So it's a 'B' on a curve. They won the game. They did so playing five defensemen for over two periods, thanks to an injury to Shea Theodore. At times they looked like an unstoppable hockey machine that could score at will and limit an opponent's chances to nil. At other times, they looked like a group of star players who had limited practice time together and occasionally tried to do too much on their own.

But victory was theirs, heading into Saturday night's showdown with the U.S. The sweetest part: that Crosby, whose status for the tournament was uncertain after sitting out the Pittsburgh Penguins' past two games, was the best player on the ice. (With Mario Lemieux in the house watching, no less.) -- Greg Wyshynski

Sweden: B-

Was the takeaway from Sweden's first game the fact it fell behind by two goals before the first period ended? Or is it more about the fact that it overcame a two-goal deficit to send the game to overtime -- and nearly won it on a few chances?

The first-period deficit was somewhat rectified by a far more cohesive second period that saw Sweden cut the lead to 2-1. But that's when Sweden relied on its collective. There was Rasmus Dahlin clearing the puck out of the crease. Victor Hedman was among those actively using their sticks in the passing lane, while others such as Viktor Arvidsson were delivering checks. Joel Eriksson Ek was nearly the hero, scoring the tying goal while drawing Sweden's first penalty.

It was the sort of overall performance that reinforces why Sweden could be a problem in this tournament. But falling behind early also spoke to how Sweden's opening game could have been different if those problems could have been avoided. -- Ryan S. Clark

What we learned

Canada's PP1 is the scariest thing in hockey

While the 4 Nations Face-Off replaced the NHL All-Star Game this season, Canada's top power-play unit is a suitable stand-in for superstars making magic together.

Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar, Sam Reinhart ... that's like a human cheat code. They were as unstoppable as advertised in the first minute of the tournament, after William Nylander took a high-sticking penalty at 44 seconds. Makar kept the puck at the blue line, leading to McDavid and Crosby briefly playing catch near the boards. Crosby sent a blistering backhand pass through the crease to an open MacKinnon who buried his chance for the 1-0 lead.

When asked how he'd stop that quintet, Brad Marchand joked: "I would probably put three goalies in the net and just let them try to do the job." Even that might not have prevented the goal. -- Wyshynski

What if Sweden didn't have a slow start?

Instead of losing in overtime, perhaps Sweden is the one walking away winning its opening game. Either way, it's one of the questions that the Tre kronor will be left ruminating about entering its Saturday showdown against Finland.

But think back to how this game started: It's one thing to take a penalty within the first minute. But surrendering a goal within the first 20 seconds of the power play -- then giving up a second goal before you even record your first shot? And not getting off your first shot until 4:45 remained in the first period? This was far from the start Sweden sought. In fact, Canada had a 60% shot share in the first period, reinforcing how much it controlled possession.

Falling into that two-goal deficit also underscored why Sweden needed to rely on its collective, which it did. Sweden had three goal scorers, while Filip Gustavsson kept extending the game until Marner's overtime winner. But there were still challenges -- such as how Sweden had a hard time consistently generating high-danger scoring chances, or how it didn't draw a penalty until the third period.

Sweden showed it can come back after falling behind. But how will that work if it falls into another early hole Saturday against Finland? Can it find a breakthrough against Juuse Saros? And what would that look like against the United States on Monday knowing Sweden would be trying to find an opening against reigning Vezina Trophy winner Connor Hellebuyck? -- Clark

Is there a Canadian goalie controversy?

Canada coach Jon Cooper anointed St. Louis Blues goalie Jordan Binnington as his opening game starter over Adin Hill (Vegas) and Sam Montembeault (Montreal), and watched him give up three goals on 23 shots with varying degrees of fault.

Sweden's first goal wasn't completely on Binnington, as Jonas Brodin scored on a moving screen by Rickard Rakell. Adrian Kempe's goal was a manageable shot from the slot. Eriksson Ek's goal was the product of a great Jesper Bratt pass, but Binnington did him a favor by swimming in his crease. Binnington's best period was overtime, with a couple of game-saving stops before Marner's goal.

"This kid has played in some huge moments, some big games, he's a competitor," Cooper said when he named Binnington the starter. "These other guys will be ready to go if anything happens."

So did enough happen against Sweden for Cooper to give the crease to Hill -- a Stanley Cup winner for the Golden Knights -- or Montembeault on Saturday night against Team USA? That's a mystery. What's clear is that concerns about goaltending being the formidable Team Canada's Achilles' heel have not been assuaged. -- Wyshynski

Sweden's third goal could unlock something

Getting a tying goal was clearly crucial. But the way Lucas Raymond and Bratt combined to set up Eriksson Ek's goal in the third period was unlike any other goal that Sweden scored to that point.

Canada's defensive structure was predicated on forcing Sweden into taking longer-distance shots as a way to make it easier for Binnington to track the puck. And while Sweden scored two goals from distance thanks to Brodin and Kempe, it struggled to find high-danger scoring chances at the net front that Canada created at various points throughout the game.

Eriksson Ek won the faceoff in Canada's zone and then had the wherewithal to get to the net front that allowed him a chance to either screen Binnington or have what would be one of the easier scoring chances of the game. He found the latter and it gave Sweden a path toward finding more of those opportunities. This tactic could prove useful over the next several days. -- Clark

Players to watch

Connor McDavid

C, Canada

The most talented player in the world had a secondary assist on MacKinnon's power-play goal, but nothing else to speak of against Sweden. He had one shot on goal and didn't generate any in overtime, where MacKinnon (four shots) seemed to do what McDavid usually does.

Since entering the NHL, McDavid is tied with Crosby for the third-most 3-on-3 overtime goals during that span. Canada obviously won't mind if McDavid needed a game to get his bearings before unleashing the fury on Team USA. Maybe he was like the rest of us and was too mesmerized by a 37-year-old Crosby dominating the game to focus on himself. -- Wyshynski

Filip Gustavsson

G, Sweden

There's an argument to be had for Eriksson Ek considering he scored the tying goal and drew Sweden's lone penalty. But what Gustavsson did in regulation allowed Sweden to survive giving up high-danger scoring chances at a rate of 2-to-1, according to Natural Stat Trick.

But where it became even more evident was how the Minnesota Wild goaltender repeatedly stopped shots from some of the game's most dangerous players -- such as MacKinnon on multiple occasions in overtime -- before Marner's winning goal. -- Clark

Big questions for the next game

What will Canada do without Shea Theodore?

Becoming well-versed in 4 Nations injury replacement policy was the last thing Canadian fans wanted to do during the tournament opener. But now they know there's no reinforcements other than who's already on the roster with Theodore out for the rest of the event, according to Cooper.

The Vegas Golden Knights defender injured his hand while bracing himself on a hit by Kempe. He left during the second period and did not return for the third. Philadelphia Flyers defenseman Travis Sanheim is the only blue-line reserve for Team Canada.

Tournament rules state that a team has to fall below 18 healthy skaters to bring in one not currently on the roster as a replacement. So it'll be Sanheim on Saturday night vs. Team USA. And if they lose another defenseman ... well, you snubbed Canadians might want to keep the phone near you on the beach. -- Wyshynski

Which version of Sweden will show up against Finland?

Will we see the version of Sweden that fell into an early deficit and had to slowly piece its way back into tying the score? Or the version that found ways to control possession and score goals despite playing against a defensive structure that was designed to force shots from distance?

Take away Mark Stone's goal, and the way Sweden performed in that middle period provides insight into why this is an intriguing team. Relying on its two-way ability to support Gustavsson -- with the premise it could lead to goals -- played into the strategy on how Sweden could win games.

Overcoming a two-goal deficit and forcing overtime against what's considered to be the tournament favorite further proves that Sweden is dangerous. But that's only if Sweden can find a way to replicate what it did from the second period on against two teams in Finland and the U.S. who have two of the premier goalies in the world. -- Clark

ESPN / Predicting every game of the 4 Nations Face-Off

By Greg Wyshynski – February 13, 2025

Jack Eichel has been starving. The 4 Nations Face-Off is his sustenance.

The Vegas Golden Knights center said he has waited years for another "best-on-best" hockey tournament for himself and his peers. "The generation of the players that are currently in the NHL haven't had that opportunity to all play together," he told ESPN.

The NHL's 4 Nations Face-Off brings together four hockey powers -- the U.S., Canada, Sweden and Finland -- in a midseason tournament played in Montreal and Boston. Now Eichel gets to wear the red, white and blue with Auston Matthews and Jack Hughes. Connor McDavid gets to wear the maple leaf next to Nathan MacKinnon and Sidney Crosby. William Nylander shares a Swedish locker room with Victor Hedman and Erik Karlsson. Aleksander Barkov can sling passes to Mikko Rantanen and Patrik Laine.

The players acknowledge the 4 Nations Face-Off is more borne out of necessity -- a combination of compressed scheduling and the conundrum of Russian participation -- than an ideal best-on-best event.

"Obviously it's not exactly what we want in terms of ... we're missing some great teams. I think of the Germany or Switzerland or the Czechs, so many different teams," McDavid told ESPN. "But it's just exciting to have best-on-best again. You know, four great teams. It'll be a pretty fun competition and a prelude to the Olympics."

How will the 4 Nations Face-Off play out, starting tonight with Canada vs. Sweden at Bell Centre?

Spoiler warning: It'll play out exactly like what I've written below. Or maybe it won't. Either way, enjoy 4 Nations!

Wednesday: Canada 4, Sweden 3 (OT)

There isn't a more slept-on group in the 4 Nations Face-Off than the Swedish defense corps.

Gustav Forsling gives Rasmus Dahlin the best defense partner he has had in his career. Victor Hedman still has the ability to carry any partner, but Jonas Brodin on Team Sweden is a step up from J.J. Moser and Darren Raddysh with the Tampa Bay Lightning. Then there's Mattias Ekholm and Erik Karlsson, in a quintessential pairing that includes one man who knows how to keep the house in order while his partner is freestyling down the ice.

Whatever success the Swedes have in this tournament likely begins on the blue line, with a defense that will have to play well in its own end and help its forwards win a possession battle against the more offensively potent Canadians. Frankly, everything else is a wild card based on regular-season results.

Linus Ullmark is a very good goaltender. He has also given up seven goals in two games since returning from injury for Ottawa and doesn't exactly have the best reputation as a big-game netminder (.887 save percentage in 20 Stanley Cup playoff games). Filip Gustavsson has been the better goalie lately, going 4-1-0 in his past five starts for Minnesota, but is he "steal a game from Canada" good?

Where have you gone, Henrik Lundqvist?

The forward group is also a wild card. Key players like Elias Pettersson, Mika Zibanejad and Elias Lindholm have been off their offensive marks this season. But if they get going, there's a lot of goal-

scoring potential here with players like William Nylander, Jesper Bratt and Lucas Raymond reenergizing the Swedish attack.

All of this is to say that I think the Swedes give the Canadians a game in the tournament opener. They're not ones to be overwhelmed by hostile environs. But the Canadians will have to work out the kinks in front of a raucous Montreal crowd with high expectations. That's when sticks are gripped a little tighter and a pass or two is attempted when they shouldn't.

So here's saying the Swedes put a scare into Canada with a third-period lead, only to have the home team knot things up to send the game to overtime. It's not exactly a bold prediction to say that Connor McDavid ends things there, but we'll predict it anyway. Canada loses a chance at a three-point game, but exhales a bit before its showdown with the Americans.

Thursday: USA 5, Finland 2

Under different circumstances, this is the trap game of all trap games for the United States -- trying to get up for a tournament opener against Finland, with Canada looming in 48 hours. But this isn't a typical American men's hockey team, nor is it the usual squad for Finland.

You'd have to go back to the 1996 World Cup of Hockey to find a U.S. roster filled with this kind of offensive talent. Back then it was Pat LaFontaine, Brett Hull, Mike Modano and Keith Tkachuk. Now it's Eichel, Auston Matthews, Jack Hughes and double the Tkachuks, with Keith's boys Brady and Matthew. That's not even discussing the offense coming from the back end with players like Adam Fox and Zach Werenski -- although the loss of the injured Quinn Hughes certainly brings that down a notch.

Of course, Finland isn't shedding a tear about someone else's injured defenseman. No other team in the tournament has suffered the injury losses of the Finnish defense corps. They're without Miro Heiskanen of the Dallas Stars, easily their No. 1 defenseman, as well as Rasmus Ristolainen of the Philadelphia Flyers and Jani Hakanpaa of the Toronto Maple Leafs. What was already a pretty thin group now has Urho Vaakanainen (15:26 of ice time per game for the Rangers) and Nikolas Matinpalo (12:00 per game with the Senators) as defensive options in front of either Juuse Saros or Kevin Lankinen in goal.

The Finns still have their share of offense stars (Aleksander Barkov, Sebastian Aho and Mikko Rantanen) and tenacious forwards who could give the Americans some trouble. They never go quietly, despite the talent disparity.

However, this has to be a statement game for Team USA, one in which they respond to tenacity with tenacity from down the lineup while flexing their offensive muscles. If this is anything other than a launch pad toward their showdown with Canada and a three-point standings win, some doubts will start creeping in.

Saturday: Sweden 5, Finland 3

Let's be real: There's a certain amount of "this tournament was created to guarantee USA vs. Canada on a Saturday night at Bell Centre" inherent in the 4 Nations Face-Off. The fans feel it. Those players feel it. And the Swedes and Finns feel it -- and are frankly OK with it.

"If they want to put us in the shade a little bit, I don't mind that at all," Sweden's Filip Forsberg said about being in the shadow of that battle of the titans. "It's exciting just getting best-on-best again. It's been way too long since we had that."

While North American hockey fans are focused on USA vs. Canada on Saturday night, the afternoon affair between Sweden and Finland is the main attraction across the globe. While their other games are

at odd times back home, this matchup is in prime time. The players know the fans will be watching. Bragging rights in this storied rivalry are very much on the line.

"Yeah, I think it's big. I'm expecting it's going to be big because since 2016 this is the first best-on-best tournament event," Rantanen told ESPN. "It's a smaller version, but still, I think Finnish people are excited."

Rantanen said that Finland "might be the underdog in the tournament for sure" compared to the other three teams. "I think Finland will usually be an underdog behind U.S. and Canada," he said, "and maybe more even with Sweden."

So Finland knows this is likely its best shot at a W in the tournament and will play accordingly. The Finns won't be an easy out. But the Swedes have a bit more going for them offensively and a lot more going for them on the blue line. Given what's in net for both, this isn't going to be the goaltending nail-biter like the one the teams had in the 2016 World Cup, when Lundqvist outdueled Tuukka Rask. Instead, it'll be a wild afternoon affair that'll delight the fans back home. Well, mostly the ones in Sweden.

Saturday: Canada 3, USA 2

Since 2000, the U.S. and Canada have faced each other 47 times in the IIHF world junior championships, the IIHF world championships, the World Cup of Hockey and the Winter Olympics. The Americans are 16-31 in those games, including two losses in the World Cup and a 2-2-1 record in the Olympics.

Even as the U.S. has upped its talent level at every position and holds a distinct advantage in goal, this is still Canada. Still the most impressive assemblage of superstar talent in hockey. Its first power-play unit is McDavid, Crosby, MacKinnon, Cale Makar and Sam Reinhart. How do you even attempt to stop that?

"I would probably put three goalies in the net and just let them try to do the job," Team Canada's Brad Marchand said this week.

The Americans will rely on one: Connor Hellebuyck, the best goaltender in the world two seasons running, and the reason the U.S. is running roughly even with the Canadians as far as being favorites in the tournament. Like Ryan Miller and Jonathan Quick before him, Hellebuyck has a chance to enhance an already sterling reputation with success on the international stage. He won't be the reason the Americans lose to Canada. But they will lose to Canada.

The Americans can stand toe-to-toe with their archrivals for the first time in 30 years when it comes to forward depth. Even their grunts are accomplished scorers, like Brock Nelson and Vincent Trocheck. They can score with Canada and skate with Canada. If Canada wants to deploy the likes of Marchand and Travis Konecny to pester Team USA's skill players, well, the U.S. has some Tkachuks for that.

Losing Quinn Hughes hurts. That's a defender competing at an MVP level, one who could skate the Americans out of trouble when the Canadian forecheckers start arriving in waves. But overall, the American blue line is deeper than the Canadian one (especially with Alex Pietrangelo deciding to rest up for the remainder of the NHL season instead).

The biggest advantage for the U.S. is the Hellebuyck vs. Jordan Binnington matchup in goal, but I'm a little more bullish on Binnington than most. They just need one good game from him, in back of an All-Star team. He gives the St. Louis Blues a quality start around 53% of the time. Canada just needs him to not be a liability.

The unpredictable factor here is the environment. Montreal, Bell Centre, 20,000 fans waving little Canadian flags and likely booing the U.S. national anthem if recent precedent in other Canadian NHL

cities holds. Does an environment like this turbocharge the Canadians, or create palpable nerves if there's a bad start? Does it cause a young Team USA to crack, or does the hostility coalesce them?

There's a lot of conjecture about the quality of play in this midseason tournament and how much effort the players will give in an exhibition. I can't speak for the rest of the games, but both contests on Saturday night will feature Pavlovian responses to the jerseys on the other end of the ice. It will be a great day of hockey and for hockey.

And it'll be Canada's night. That's not the end of the tournament -- or the world -- for the Americans. In fact, I'd wager it's a great life experience on the road to a much more important tournament in Italy next winter.

The Canadian leg of the 4 Nations Face-Off ends with Canada earning five points, Sweden earning four points, the U.S. earning three points and Finland with a goose egg.

Monday: Canada 6, Finland 2

Finland comes to Boston knowing that the math ain't mathing for a spot in the championship final, unable to catch either Canada or Sweden in the round-robin portion.

Canada rolls into this one with a spot in the championship in reach, and doesn't waste the chance. The Canadians jump on the Finns early, using their enormous depth advantage at forward and on defense to establish a multigoal lead in the first period.

McDavid has a three-point game and Marchand scores, to the thrill of the Boston fans. Canada advances to the final for the fifth time in six best-on-best tournament appearances, with Torino 2006 as its only stumble.

Monday: USA 4, Sweden 2

The U.S. enters this game needing a win of any kind against Sweden to advance to the championship. Obviously, a regulation win would put it ahead of the Swedes in points (6-4). An overtime/shootout win would tie them with five points, but the first tiebreaker in the 4 Nations Face-Off is "the head-to-head result between those two tied teams," and hence the Americans would advance.

Which, in fact, they will.

The scene in Boston is the inverse of that in Montreal, as American patriotism oozes from every corner of TD Garden. The home-ice advantage fuels the U.S. attack. Matthews and Eichel have their best games of the tournament against Ullmark, who becomes even more acquainted with losing big games on Boston ice.

Charlie McAvoy pops the Bruins fans with a thunderous open-ice check on a Swedish forward. Matthew Tkachuk confuses Bruins fans with a goal and an assist, as they cheer their most loathed antagonist. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief that the Americans not only rise to the occasion in a must-win game, but do so in regulation to set up what everyone wants to see.

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

The first Olympics I ever covered as a journalist was the 2010 Vancouver Games, which was as close to a hockey utopia as I've experienced.

Waking up every day to hit the rink for morning group play games, surrounded by Latvian fans that were, ahem, already in the right mindset. Watching Jaromir Jagr play, at what was thought to be his advanced age, and then watching Alex Ovechkin obliterate him with a check. Norway had a player named Tore Vikingstad, which still feels a little too on the nose.

But mostly I remember two moments. On Feb. 21, Ryan Kesler scored an empty-net goal with 45 seconds remaining to give the U.S. a 5-3 win over Canada in group play, to the shock and dismay of the home crowd. I remember clandestine fist bumps between American writers as we made our way to the postgame interviews, as international hockey tournaments remain safe havens for rooting interests.

The other moment was on Feb. 28, when Sidney Crosby converted a Jarome Iginla pass in overtime for what would be known as the Golden Goal, defeating the U.S. in the championship game in a storybook ending for Canada. It was, to this day, the best and worst day of my life as an American hockey fan.

The worst because this preeminent chance to finally get one over on Canada was squandered. The best because on my long, sullen walk back to my housing, I saw so many Canadian fans celebrating in the streets, euphoric and filled with pride. It made me happy for them. It meant so much more to them than it did me.

As Eichel said, the 4 Nations Face-Off "is not an Olympics ... but I just think it's a great event, not only for the players but for the fans and for the game."

The U.S. defeating Canada for a newly forged trophy and a gold medal celebration doesn't balance the scales between the hockey powers. But it does provide a moment of elation, pride and, most of all, growth for USA Hockey ahead of 2026.

The Americans hung with Canada in Montreal, enough to gain confidence. Their chemistry developed in each game. Modano once told me the difference between the Americans and the Canadians in these best-on-best tournaments is the ability of Canadian stars to check their egos and accept their roles. After three games, I'd expect coach Mike Sullivan's staff to have inherently defined those roles and the American players to have adapted to them.

Naturally, the final battle between the two titans of the tournament once again goes to extra time, where the Americans stake their claim to "best in the world in best-on-best" with a definitive win over the Canadians.

While a goal by Jake Guentzel would be delightfully ironic after his former linemate Crosby's heroics in 2010, the tournament-clinching goal could only come from the stick of Matthew Tkachuk -- to the surprise of no one in Boston.

The 4 Nations Face-Off ends with the "Star-Spangled Banner" being played -- and getting a much different reaction than in Montreal -- as U.S. players start to legitimately dream about another gold medal in the offering next year.

[Sportsnet.ca / Canada Player Ratings: Captain Crosby leads way](#)

By Ryan Dixon – February 13, 2025

It was going to be so easy.

The hockey world waited nine years for best-on-best hockey to return and, when it did, the Canadian squad that had won three consecutive big-boy international tournaments came out and scored 56 seconds into the 4 Nations Face-Off to get the jump on Sweden.

If it already felt like Canada would roll to victory — when Nathan MacKinnon popped a power-play goal assisted by fellow megastars Sidney Crosby and Connor McDavid — it seemed like it might be a complete laugh when the Canadians went up 2-0 just over 13 minutes into the first period before Sweden had even registered a shot on goal.

Sweden erased a pair of two-goal deficits to force overtime and caused everyone in Canada far more anxiety than most expected when their team was surging early on. Mitch Marner rescued Canada with an extra-time winner, though, providing his team with an important — if imperfect — 4-3 victory to begin the tournament.

Let's grade each Canadian player's performance, giving a little grace to the defencemen who all had to scramble a bit when blue-liner Shea Theodore went down with a tournament-ending injury.

Sidney Crosby: 9/10

Crosby, named player of the game, collected three primary assists, including on the winning goal by Mitch Marner in OT. His blind, backhand feed to Nathan MacKinnon on the game-opening goal was a thing of beauty and he did great work protecting the puck before pivoting and finding a streaking Mark Stone for Canada's second marker. "The Kid" still has it.

Nathan MacKinnon: 8.5/10

MacKinnon drew a penalty 44 seconds into the game, scored on the ensuing power play and was flying all night. Before Marner tallied, he had multiple dashes in overtime where it appeared he might win it. He had a team-high six shots on goal, three more than anybody else wearing red.

Mark Stone: 7.5/10

Stone was placed on a line with MacKinnon and Crosby for his smarts. He made no mistake on the second-period feed from Crosby that put Canada up 3-1.

Connor McDavid: 8/10

Though he didn't register a point beyond the second assist on MacKinnon's power-play tally, McDavid still looked a half-step quicker than everyone on the ice — even at a best-on-best tourney. McDavid also won 12 of the 14 face-offs he took and played more (21:26) than any Canadian forward.

Mitch Marner: 8/10

When you score the winning goal, it's a good night. Marner also made a couple of nice dishes in the first period; one that sprung Devon Toews for a partial break and another that gave McDavid a good look from in close. His moment, though, was taking Crosby's drop pass at centre ice, swooping in over the blue line and beating Filip Gustavsson to the stick side from the top of the circle.

Sam Reinhart: 7/10

On a team loaded with talent, Sam Reinhart is one of the most defensively conscious forwards. He made a wonderful play to break up a two-on-one in front of Jordan Binnington by intercepting a Jesper Bratt pass that was bound for Mattias Ekholm's stick on the lip of the crease.

Brayden Point: 6.5/10

Point made a nice dish through Swedish defender Jonas Brodin to Brad Marchand for the goal that put Canada up 2-0 in the first period.

Brad Marchand: 7/10

Marchand, the second-oldest player on Team Canada after Crosby, netted a goal and was the first person to get in Erik Karlsson's face when the Swede put a puck toward the Canadian goal after the siren had sounded to end the opening period.

[Sportsnet.ca / Sweden Player Ratings: Kempe stands out with aggressive play](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva – February 13, 2025

One minute into the 4 Nations Face-Off's opening foray, the Swedes looked all but cooked. Half a period later, things didn't seem much better, Canada having tallied twice, the crowd raining down cheers upon them, and the host nation's big dogs already stocking the highlight reel early.

But anyone who'd had a glance at the elite, all-world talent dispersed among the Tre Kronor's roster could've told you it wasn't going to be so simple for the red-and-white. And in the end, it took an overtime clincher to end the nail-biter, Sweden having picked themselves off the mat halfway through this tilt, before coming back swinging.

Fresh off a tournament-opening thriller that saw Canada outlast Sweden 4-3 in the extra frame — leaving Sweden with one point and Canada with a pair — here's a closer look at how each member of the Swedish squad fared Wednesday night.

William Nylander: 4 / 10

Perhaps Sweden's most dynamic forward up front coming into the tournament, and the one who logged the most ice-time Wednesday night, the Toronto Maple Leafs winger provided little offensively, outside of a handful of chances. Nylander did come up with a key stick-lift on Brad Marchand to prevent a grade-A chance from the slot late in the game, but the opening-minute penalty that let Canada get its touches early — and opened the door for the Connor McDavid-Sidney Crosby-Nathan MacKinnon goal that got the crowd on its feet — was egregious.

Mika Zibanejad: 5 / 10

The talented New York Rangers pivot logged the second-most minutes among Sweden's forwards after Nylander — the pair of linemates were the only two to top 20 minutes on the night — and similarly offered little in the way of an offensive spark over the course of the game, aside from a dangerous one-time chance in overtime that was turned aside.

Rickard Rakell: 8 / 10

Rakell's quality 2024-25 campaign continued into the first game of this tournament — the Pittsburgh Penguins winger was quietly solid all night, forechecking well, looking calm and collected with the puck on his stick, and coming up with some quality defensive plays, too. He finished the night tied for the second-most shots and hits among Sweden's forwards.

Adrian Kempe: 10 / 10

Sweden's best player on the night was the one who put the squad's second goal on the board. After his coaches and teammates alike came into the tilt harping on the need to be aggressive, Kempe personified that approach best — he was a hound on the puck all night long, and by far Sweden's best forechecker. He finished with a team-leading five shots, a team-leading four hits, and a beautiful goal sniped home from the slot.

Elias Pettersson: 7 / 10

For all the talk of Pettersson's tumultuous season, the Vancouver Canucks centreman looked solid in this one, by and large. He could've offered more offensively, given the depth of his elite skill set, but Pettersson came up with some key defensive plays to stymie a few chances from the host nation, had a couple looks on net, and forechecked hard for much of the night.

Filip Forsberg: 5 / 10

Another key name for the Swedes who had a lot more to offer than what he showed in this one, Forsberg had a handful of decent sequences, but overall did little to stand out among the pack for the Tre Kronor.

Jesper Bratt: 8 / 10

The highest-scoring Swede in the NHL this season, Bratt started the night somewhat shakily, though to be fair, much of the rest of his squad did, too. He came alive as the game wore on, though, and stepped up with a key play, his creativity and poise on display, to set up the goal that pulled Sweden level late in the third.

Joel Eriksson Ek: 9 / 10

He might not have earned as much chatter as some of his better-known teammates in the lead-up to this tournament opener, but Eriksson Ek was quietly key in this one. The Minnesota Wild pivot came up with plenty of solid defensive plays to disrupt Canada's attack, took contact to make a smart play on more than one occasion, and continued to forecheck hard all night. Most importantly, he came up with a clutch sequence when his club needed it most — winning an offensive-zone face-off midway through the third period, posting up in front of Canada's cage, and eventually finishing off a setup from Bratt to score Sweden's tying goal.

Lucas Raymond: 8 / 10

One of the youngest members of the Swedish squad, Raymond enters the tournament as the nation's second-highest scorer in the NHL this season. He showed the depth of his skill set on Wednesday night, picking up steam as the game went on. In the end, the 22-year-old came up with key contributions on two of Sweden's goals — winning a crucial battle behind Canada's net before the puck eventually made its way to the point for Jonas Brodin's goal, and showing poise late in the game to set up the sequence that saw Bratt and Eriksson Ek combine for the game-tying tally.

Gustav Nyquist: 6 / 10

The Nashville Predators veteran logged the fewest minutes of anyone in a Tre Kronor uniform, and little was expected of him. He did, however, manage a decent chance on net in the third when Sweden was hunting for a tying goal.

Elias Lindholm: 6 / 10

Lindholm similarly got limited opportunity on Wednesday night, logging the fewest minutes of Sweden's centremen, and the second-fewest among the forwards overall. Still, he did step up with some solid forechecking pressure early in the tilt when the rest of the squad was floundering.

Viktor Arvidsson: 6 / 10

The third member of Sweden's least-used line, Arvidsson managed a couple quality plays on both ends of the sheet, most notably a quality one-time chance on net midway through the game.

Victor Hedman: 8 / 10

The squad's veteran captain looked every bit the two-time champion he is — he was calm and collected all game, and did crucial work in calming his group down early when it seemed the Canadians were going to run right over them. Hedman did get burned on Canada's second goal, pinching and leaving his partner exposed for a two-on-one that finished as a Marchand tally, but the Tampa Bay Lightning vet

also set up his club's first goal of the night a period later and stifled dangerous Canadian chances more than a few times over the course of the evening.

Jonas Brodin: 8 / 10

It was a wobbly one for Brodin to start — the Minnesota Wild defender left much to be desired on Canada's second goal, as he was caught defending Brayden Point and Marchand on a two-on-one and did little to disrupt either one of them. Still, it was Brodin who breathed some life into Sweden's night with a straight snipe past Jordan Binnington midway through the second period, and the veteran rearguard picked up his game from there, coming up with some solid plays on both ends of the sheet over the rest of the tilt.

Mattias Ekholm: 7 / 10

The steady Edmonton Oilers veteran was largely solid in this one, doing what he does best to break up chances and chip in with an offensive spark here and there — most notably, a wraparound chance that wound up as one of Sweden's best looks in overtime. He was beaten on Canada's first goal of the night, but it's tough to blame him for not fully nullifying a spinning, no-look, backhand dish from Sidney Crosby, with Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon buzzing nearby, too.

Erik Karlsson: 9 / 10

The three-time Norris Trophy winner turned back the clock for his countrymen in this one. Starting out as shaky as the rest of his squad in the first period, Karlsson came out in the second and showed out — the Pittsburgh Penguins rearguard was dancing around red jerseys, making smart reads on both ends of the ice, and continually putting his teammates in position to get quality looks on the cage. In the end, he came up with two of the most important plays of the game — a solid defensive sequence that he turned into a setup for Kempe's goal early in the third, and another quality defensive play a period earlier, breaking up a cross-crease pass from Point to Marchand as they tried to recreate their first-period tally.

Rasmus Dahlin: 7 / 10

It was an up-and-down showing for the young Swedish phenom. There were more than a few instances of Dahlin whiffing on shots and overskating pucks, and there's certainly more for the young Buffalo Sabres blue-liner to offer offensively, given his immense talent. That aside, he singlehandedly saved a sure goal by pulling the puck off the goal-line in the second period, a crucial play that prevented Canada from running up the score early and perhaps nullifying the comeback that eventually earned Sweden an overtime point, and Dahlin came up with a few more clutch defensive plays after that one, too.

Gustav Forsling: 6 / 10

The reigning Stanley Cup champ was mostly steady, and logged the second-most minutes of any Swedish defender in this one. Still, he was bested on Canada's third goal of the night — overpowered by Crosby as the Penguins captain cut by him, stopped up, turned and fed Mark Stone for the goal — and nearly gifted Canada another by hopping over the boards on a bad change that forced Raymond and Ekholm into cleanup duty.

Filip Gustavsson: 7 / 10

It was never going to be an easy night for the Swedish netminder tasked with facing down a star-studded Canadian offence in Game 1 of this tournament, and on the opponent's home turf no less. The penalty that allowed Canada's big dogs to get on the board with a dazzling tally early didn't help matters. But it's tough to lay too much blame on Gustavsson's shoulders, given the nature of the three regulation goals — a beautiful passing play from three of the best players in the world on the first; a

two-on-one for the second; and a dominant play from Crosby on the third. The game winner is a tougher one to swallow — a straight shot from Mitch Marner as he flew into the zone. Still, the Swedish netminder came up with plenty of quality saves to keep his club in it throughout the night, including what was arguably the save of the game — a diving display late in the third that stymied a Marner-McDavid-Devon Toews tic-tac-toe attempt, keeping the game tied and ultimately earning his side a point.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL's World Cup announcement signals return of consistent international play](#)

By Luke Fox – February 13, 2025

MONTREAL — Hockey cities, sharpen your pencils.

The National Hockey League and its Players' Association will soon be taking bids from prospective host cities for the 2028 World Cup of Hockey.

Commissioner Gary Bettman and PA chief Marty Walsh's joint announcement of the tournament — which will build upon the momentum of the 2025 4 Nations Face-Off and 2026 Olympic Winter Games in Milano Cortina — was made side by side, amid laughs and friendly arm wraps, Wednesday in Montreal.

That the league and its union are on the same page is a wonderful development for the future of international best-on-best hockey. A generation of fans has been deprived.

But the plan is to roll out a robust every-other-February calendar of gimmick-free competition, starting with the '26 Games.

Gone will be the one-off teaser tourney that is this week's 4 Nations and the slapdash Europe and North America teams that were included in the most recent World Cup (2016).

European cities are equally welcome to bid on the privilege to host in 2028, as the NHL is willing to shutter regular-season operations for approximately 10 to 14 days in an Olympic-like break.

A minimum of eight countries will participate, with the league open to a play-in format.

The 2028 World Cup will be played on NHL-sized rinks using NHL rules and officiated by NHL officials. Other competition details will be determined in the coming months, as will the bidding process.

As for Russia's inclusion in the tournament, the NHL is adopting a wait-and-see approach, taking its cues from the International Olympic Committee and the International Ice Hockey Federation — the governing bodies that soon must decide on Team Russia's participation in the 2026 Winter Games.

"It's bigger than hockey," Walsh said. "I'd love to see our Russian players playing in these tournaments again. They're incredible hockey players.

"It's the world politics that we have to get through. And I'm hoping that as we get closer to the Olympics, as we get closer to the World Cup, we will start seeing the Russian athletes back in the competition."

The announcement of the 2028 World Cup marks another step in the long-term goal to bake international competition into the hockey schedule.

It's been way too long, but the decision-makers are finally giving hockey fans what they deserve.

"This just becomes a part of the game over the long term, where fans, players, everyone can look forward to these guys playing for their countries on a regular basis," said NHLPA assistant executive director Ron Hainsey. "And, honestly, creating moments like Sid did in 2010 with the golden goal here in Canada, that last a lifetime."

One-Timers

- The NHL has paid close attention to the trend of the U.S. anthem getting booed at recent sporting events in Canada but is hopeful that won't be the case in Montreal when Team USA plays Thursday and Saturday.

"Hockey represents an opportunity to bring people together," Bettman said. "In this building, initially, there was some booing a couple of games ago, and the club made an announcement asking people to stop and show respect for two great countries. And it stopped. And that's what we expect."

- When Walsh is ready to open negotiations on the next collective bargaining agreement, the league is ready to dive in.

Those talks should commence shortly after the tournament wraps, and both sides were overt in expressing their desire and confidence to bang out a new agreement without fear of labour stoppage.

"We're going to get to where we're going," Bettman assured, "and people won't even notice that we've done it."

- While the players have yet to sign its 2026 Olympic participation agreement, Walsh says it's simply a matter of crossing Ts and dotting I's. "We're going to the Olympics," he insists.
- As was the case with all-star games, NHL players will receive an appearance fee for participation in the 4 Nations Face-Off, and there is an additional prize pool for winners.

"This is for love of country much more than it is for money," Daly said.

"Because what they get in terms of an appearance fee and a prize fee pales in comparison to what a normal NHL player gets, and they're giving up vacation time to do this tells you how much they love the competition."

- So... does a 72-year-old commissioner have a succession plan? Is he thinking of hanging up the dress shoes?

"Why do I get that question? Am I looking elderly or something? Maybe I am," Bettman smiled. "I love what I do. I don't have any plans immediately or even that I've focused on for the foreseeable future to do anything else."

[TSN.CA / Marner, Nylander put friendship on hold as Canada and Sweden open 4 Nations Face-Off](#)

By Mark Masters – February 13, 2025

Team Canada, Team USA, and Team Sweden practised at the Bell Centre on Tuesday ahead of the 4 Nations Face-Off.

The last time Mitch Marner and William Nylander faced off, it ended in heartbreak for Team Canada.

Marner's final shootout attempt in the gold-medal game at the 2017 World Championship was stopped by Henrik Lundqvist, who was bowled over by an exuberant Nylander in the Swedish celebration that followed.

"Thanks for bringing that up," Marner said with a grin and a grimace when asked about the previous showdown with his Toronto Maple Leafs teammate.

Nylander's memory wasn't quite as clear.

"Was that the time we won?" asked Nylander, who was named the tournament MVP. "Yeah, so, it was obviously a lot of fun playing against him. We won that one, so hopefully we win again."

Nylander believes the gold medal is hanging somewhere in his apartment back home in Stockholm.

Is Marner looking for a bit of payback on Wednesday when Canada takes on Sweden in the opening game of the 4 Nations Face-Off?

"Maybe," the 27-year-old winger said. "The Worlds are a little different. Some guys can't be there, obviously. That's why this tournament is really exciting. It's best on best."

Just like in 2017 in Cologne, Germany, Marner and Nylander will be playing in prominent roles in Montreal this week.

Marner, who leads the Leafs with 71 points, is slotting in beside Connor McDavid and Sam Reinhart on Canada's top line. Nylander can't pinpoint just one area for his new Swedish teammates to focus on when it comes to slowing down Marner.

"It's just so hard to say that he does one in particular thing all the time," Nylander noted. "He's very, very shifty and hard to read."

Nylander, who leads the Leafs with 33 goals, will start on Sweden's second line with Mika Zibanejad and Rickard Rakell. Marner's advice to teammates when it comes to stopping Nylander?

"Try not to watch the puck," Marner warned. "He likes to make people look silly. He's very, very skilled out there. Easy, smooth with the puck, and makes a lot of things happen where it doesn't look like something should be there."

This is a big moment and one Marner and Nylander have waited years to experience. The atmosphere will be electric.

"It will be nice to be on their side for once," Marner said of the Bell Centre crowd. "It will be nicer to be cheered for than booed and yelled at."

Nylander is expecting a similar sensation to when the Leafs play here.

"You're buzzing going into the game," Nylander said.

Considering the anticipation for the return of best-on-best hockey, the energy could even go up a notch from an NHL game.

"If it goes up a notch from that Saturday Montreal-Toronto game we had here [on Jan. 18], it's going to be bananas," Marner said. "This crowd's always great. It's always a pretty crazy game when we come here with the atmosphere."

The moment also brings a lot of pressure.

"I just look at this as a super fun opportunity," said Nylander, who will have father Michael Nylander, a former NHL player, on hand to support him. "I'm playing against the best players in the world on Team Canada, like, obviously you're feeling some kind of excited, a little nervous, of course, I mean that's just natural, but that's how it is. I like feeling like that. It's good."

Marner's wife and parents are flying in and will be in attendance on Wednesday night.

"It's just about enjoying the moment," Marner said, "staying in the moment and being ready when your name's called."

ContentId(1.2250974): Canada preparing for Sweden's skill: 'They're deep all the way through their lineup'

Don't be surprised if Marner and Nylander share a few words on the ice on Wednesday.

"It's always great to play against your teammates," Marner said. "There's always a little bit of chirping going on. It's always going to be a fun one."

For many NHL teammates, the chirping has already started.

Sweden captain Victor Hedman reached out to his Tampa Bay Lightning teammates Anthony Cirelli, Brandon Hagel, and Brayden Point after Canada's first practice.

"We texted a little bit," Hedman said with a smile. "I wondered why they weren't on the first power-play unit."

That's a fun line.

There have been no similar quips shared between the trio of Leafs here, though. In fact, there hasn't been any communication at all between Marner, Nylander and Team USA captain Auston Matthews.

"We flew in together," said Marner. "We said, 'Goodbye.' We said, 'Good luck. We'll see you at the end of it.'"

"Of course we're buddies," Nylander said. "It's just you got a full gig going with your Swedish buddies and hanging out with them. So, I mean, we're with each other every day for most of the year, but for now it's focusing on the team that we're with."

There's not a lot of time to build chemistry at this event, so all the focus and energy is on the national team right now.

"You're just trying to get to know everyone on your own team and try to get accommodated with them," Marner said.

"You're pretty focused on the team and the guys in your room right now," Matthews said. "You can be friends after the tournament."

Marner is grateful that he got a chance to skate with some of the top Canadian players during the summer, which allowed him to arrive with some pre-existing chemistry.

"Just trying to be myself," he said. "I knew a couple guys that I worked out with. Just trying to get accommodated and trying just to be yourself. A lot of people know me, I'm loud and crazy, so just trying to stick to that and enjoying it and having laughs."

Marner will face Matthews on Saturday in the final game in Montreal before the event shifts to Boston. Matthews and Nylander will share the ice next Monday in the final round-robin game at TD Garden.

"It will be a little bit weird playing against guys, teammates, close friends of mine that I've playing with the last nine years," Matthews said. "It will be interesting but, in the end, I think we're all competitive. Everyone wants to win."

But will Matthews hesitate at all to lay a hit on Marner or Nylander should the situation call for it?

"I don't think so," the 27-year-old centre said. "I think we all understand we're not on the same team right now. We're competitive, there's a lot of pride playing for your country, so it doesn't really matter who you're going up against, you got to compete and try to outwork the other guy and physicality is a part of the game."

Earlier this season, Matthews praised Nylander for his ability to generate breakaways. So, how can Team USA stop Nylander from getting loose?

"I mean nobody has been successful this year," Matthews said with a grin. "I'll definitely let the guys know, if the puck turns over you'll know where to find him."

Nylander's breakaway ability has developed over time. He may be leaning for offence, but he's not necessarily cheating for offence. At least not anymore.

"Somehow he reads and sniffs out those breakaways and sometimes that can be good, but sometimes you can also lose a guy in the defensive zone," said Swedish defenceman Mattias Ekholm. "I think he's getting better at that. I don't watch Toronto every day but what I see is his evaluation of the situation has become more solid and you see it in the numbers."

Nylander is second in the Rocket Richard Trophy race behind only German Oilers forward Leon Draisaitl, who has 40 goals, but is not at the 4 Nations event.

Ekholm played with Nylander during that 2019 World Championship.

"It was years ago, so he's grown a lot," Ekholm noted. "I think he's maturing in a great way and becoming a leader."

"We haven't even played a game yet, but you can tell he's vocal," said Hedman. "He talks to everyone. Just a tremendous guy and he deserves to wear a letter."

Nylander will serve as an alternate captain on Team Sweden. It's a sign the team wants and needs him to lead the way.

"He's a difference maker," said Hedman. "He's one of those guys who can win a game by himself. Willy's a game changer for us. It's been fun to see him here in practice for two days and what he can do with the puck and the way he communicates."

Nylander doesn't wear a letter with the Leafs, but has grown into a supporting leadership role with Toronto over the years.

"I am the way that I am," Nylander said, "and try to lead on the ice and talk a little bit in the locker room and just be myself."

"He doesn't get enough credit for it," Ekholm said of Nylander's leadership. "He's a player that he leads by example. He plays hard out there. He scores a lot of big goals. He wants to be the guy on our team and in Toronto as well."

Marner played against McDavid while growing up in the Greater Toronto Hockey League.

"What he is now is what he was before too," Marner said. "It was hard to keep him to three points back in the day, realistically. And it was always a lot of fun to play against him because you knew what you were getting. You knew you were getting the best player and I wasn't surprised to see what he's doing now."

Marner still remembers clearly what it was like to face McDavid in the Ontario Minor Hockey Association when the future first-overall pick played for the York Simcoe Express.

"We had a finals against each other and he got the better of it," said Marner, who played for the Whitby Wildcats. "It was a tough one. He's always had that speed. He's always had that skillset. He's just gotten better and better with it."

Marner won't have to worry about defending McDavid for at least a couple weeks. That's now a problem for Ekholm and Team Sweden. Does the Oilers blueliner have a better idea how to slow down No. 97 because he practises against him in Edmonton?

"No, not really," Ekholm admits. "He's so good at taking what you give him so there's no real script of how do you play defence against him. He's so good, so dynamic, so explosive, you just have to make sure you're on your toes and try not get into foot races with him. That's usually not going to end well."

U.S. general manager Bill Guerin invited Guy Gaudreau, the father of Johnny Gaudreau and Matthew Gaudreau, to the team's dinner on Monday night. The brothers died on Aug. 29, 2024 when they were struck by an alleged drunk driver. Johnny was 31 years old. Matthew was 29.

Guy Gaudreau joined the group on the ice at Tuesday's practice and was part of the team picture.

"I thought it was important that he was there," Guerin said. "Johnny and Matthew were a big part of USA Hockey and a tremendous loss. They're with us in spirit. I just think it was important that Guy was there. The coaches wanted him out for practice, and the players wanted him in the picture. He's an amazing guy. We love having him around."

Johnny's No. 13 national team sweater will hang in the American dressing room throughout the event. The team has special decals on their helmets honouring the brothers.

"It means a lot," said Matthews. "The tragedy that happened just a couple months ago still weighs heavy on all of us. It's nice to have him here. We have Johnny's jersey hanging in the room and making sure he's here with us in spirit."

Matthews played with Johnny Gaudreau on Team North America at the 2016 World Cup in Toronto, which was the last best-on-best event.