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February 14, 2025**

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[Columbus Dispatch / Zach Werenski's three assists help U.S. rout Finland to open play in 4 Nations Face-Off](#)

By Brian Hedger – February 14, 2025

It might've sounded like an afterthought on the TV broadcast, but Zach Werenski played a key role in helping the United States open the 4 Nations Face-Off with a 6-1 rout over Finland on Thursday night at Bell Centre in Montreal.

Werenski, a defenseman who leads the Blue Jackets in scoring, finished with three points on three assists and led the U.S. in ice time with 21:45 on 27 shifts. He also broke up a potential scoring chance against Mikko Rantanen before it fully developed — denying one of the world's top power forwards a path to the net with the game tied 1-1 in the second period.

Werenski also sparked a stagnant U.S. power play that started out with New York Rangers defenseman Adam Fox quarterbacking the top unit. Werenski took over for Fox to start the third and the U.S. promptly generated two goals by Matthew Tkachuk in a four-goal period.

In other words, Werenski did for USA Hockey what he's done for the Blue Jackets during a career-best breakout effort that has him poised to contend for the Norris Trophy, which goes to the NHL's top defenseman.

It was quite a start to Werenski's first experience playing in an NHL "best-on-best" international tournament. Tkachuk and his younger brother, Brady Tkachuk, each scored two goals to lead a U.S. attack that broke open a tight game in the third.

Werenski assisted on Brady Tkachuk's first goal, which tied it 1-1 in the first period, before assisting on both of Matthew Tkachuk's power-play goals in the third. Those were primary assists after Werenski got the puck to Tkachuk with a pass high in Finland's zone for the first one, and then a shot attempt to create a rebound for the second.

Werenski also played sound defensively, including a fantastic breakup of a developing scoring chance for Rantanen to keep it tied 1-1 in the second. Rantanen pounced on a pass in the U.S. zone, ripped the puck from Boston Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy — Werenski's partner — and was stopped cold by the Blue Jackets' top defenseman before he could drag it to the net.

Not long afterward, Matt Boldy put the U.S. up, 2-1, late in the second.

The only thing that went wrong for Werenski was a tripping penalty that sent him to the penalty box early in the third, but even that worked out for him. The U.S. got through the Finnish power play, Werenski stepped back onto the ice and his teammates just barely missed springing him for a breakaway.

It couldn't have gone much better for the Blue Jackets' lone player in the four-team tournament, which continues Saturday with rivalry games pitting Sweden and Finland in the afternoon and Canada against the U.S. at night.

Each team in the tournament plays three games during a round-robin format, which will determine the top two teams for a championship game next week in Boston. Regulation victories award three points, OT wins are worth two points, overtime losses are worth one point and regulation losses net zero points.

After the first two games, the U.S. leads the field with three points followed by Canada with two, Sweden with one and Finland at zero.

[Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets prospect Cayden Lindstrom is maturing through resilience](#)

By Brian Hedger – February 14, 2025

Cayden Lindstrom's size, strength, snarl and skill formed an enticing package the Blue Jackets couldn't pass up last summer at the NHL draft.

They selected Lindstrom fourth overall as a power forward who can play center despite a back injury that forced him to miss much of his draft-eligible season with the Medicine Hat Tigers of the Western Hockey League.

It wasn't until after the draft that Lindstrom and the Blue Jackets discovered another of Lindstrom's skills as a top prospect. He's resilient, which has helped the 19-year old forward grind through a frustrating season in Columbus working on his back instead of playing hockey. The door is slightly ajar for Lindstrom's return to Medicine Hat this season, but it doesn't seem likely as he works through the third level of a five-stage recovery process from having a microdiscectomy Nov. 20 in Los Angeles.

"I think resilience is a skill, just as much as shooting a puck and skating and being physically dominant are all skills," said agent Daren Hermiston, who represent Lindstrom. "Cayden and I have talked a lot, and he's read a lot about doing his best to understand that. I don't know if you can build much more resilience than what he's been through the last year or so."

Other than experiencing the thrill of being picked in the top five last summer, Lindstrom's personal grit has been tested for the past seven months. He's lived in Columbus, has spent more time off the ice training at Nationwide Arena than on it and has needed a lot of patience to ward off the frustration of not playing.

The Blue Jackets also limited his participation at their NHL development camp in July and again at training camp in September, opting to focus on rehab work with the hope of avoiding a surgery that turned out to be necessary. After his peers in the Jackets' prospect pipeline returned to their junior teams, Lindstrom stayed behind to go through rehab work and watch Blue Jackets games from the press box at Nationwide Arena.

He has not signed to an entry-level contract yet and is learning what it means to be a pro away from the rink while observing and interacting with Blue Jackets players and the team's training staff. Lindstrom has declined interview requests through the Blue Jackets' PR department, but his actions during a challenging start to his NHL career have impressed all who have watched him handle it.

"It's a difficult thing to go through," Hermiston said. "I think the skill of resilience for him has been tested time and time again, and it's something I think will really benefit him when he's a full-time NHLer and he's going through other ups and downs, down the road."

Hermiston isn't alone in that assessment.

"His attitude has been unbelievable, just how positive he's been," Blue Jackets forward Kent Johnson said. "Just seeing him at the rink every day, he just always seems happy, which is great in his situation. I really respect it and that can go a long way for him."

Johnson, like Lindstrom, is from British Columbia in Western Canada. Jake Christiansen, a young defenseman for the Jackets, is from there, too. The three have gone out to dinners and gotten to know each other while Lindstrom's been in Columbus. Lindstrom has also attended dinners hosted by veterans

Erik Gudbranson and James van Riemsdyk, has gotten to know Cole Sillinger better — a former Medicine Hat forward — and is sharing an apartment with rookie defenseman Denton Mateychuk.

“It’s a tough circumstance and situation for him, but on the positive side he’s around us and he’s with us,” Sillinger said. “Obviously, the only thing he wants to do is just get healthy and play hockey, but the positive right now is just to break the ice with us, so that when he does make the jump here it’s just that much more natural.”

Lindstrom is growing in other ways, too. Despite staying off skates most of this season, he’s used virtual reality to improve hockey skills such as peripheral vision. Lindstrom has also taken up reading as a hobby, including books about finances and building good habits.

“He does his 9 to 2 at the rink every day, and then he’s got to find things to do,” Hermiston said. “I think there’s been a lot of maturity there for him. He’s reading various books on habits and finances and has just really grown as an individual. He’s had to find ways to keep busy.”

No matter when or where he returns to action — Medicine Hat for another season of junior or potentially an NCAA program — that’s a valuable skill he’s gleaned during a frustrating stretch of time. It could pay big dividends later.

“You feel for him, because you know he just wants to be on the ice,” Mateychuk said. “We all know how tough it is when you can’t go on the ice. It’s very disappointing for him, but he’s going to come back and he’s going to be great.”

[The Hockey News / Olivier Shares His Opinion On Who The Toughest Player In The NHL Is](#)

By Spencer Lazary – February 14, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets forward Mathieu Olivier was on the Cam & Strick Podcast on Monday. One of the questions he was asked was who he felt was the toughest guy in the NHL.

Andy Strickland surprisingly asked rather than former NHL enforcer Cam Jansen. However, Olivier did give himself some props but still had a list of players he felt were tough.

Q: “Are you the toughest guy in the league?”

A: "I'm up there. I still think that there are some guys in the league that are really, really tough. I think [Nicolas] Deslauriers is up there. I think [Ryan] Reaves has still got it. Obviously, he's been doing it for a while and is still there. [Arber] Xhekaj is a tough kid. Ross Johnston, for me, doesn't get enough credit for how tough he is. I'm sure I'm forgetting a few. Marcus Foligno—those are guys that are really tough."

"So whenever you can hang with those guys, then yeah, I think you're a tough guy. But those guys are still there."

Olivier did mention five names, but one player stands out the most: Ryan Reaves.

Reaves and Olivier had what many consider to be the fight of the year back on Jan. 22, 2025, when their respective teams met.

If you asked around the NHL, many fans would list Olivier as a top-three toughest player in the league, hands down.

[The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Werenski Suits Up For USA Tonight Against Finland](#)

By Spencer Lazary – February 14, 2025

Tonight, the 4-Nations Face-Off continues with Team USA and Finland squaring off at 8:00 p.m. at the Bell Centre.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski is preparing to play a huge role for Team USA following Quinn Hughes' withdrawal from the tournament.

Werenski will be paired with Boston Bruins' Charlie McAvoy, who will likely be the team's top pairing, logging the biggest minutes.

New York Rangers' Adam Fox is quarterbacking the team's top power-play unit, with Werenski leading the second unit.

The USA and Canada are the two co-favorites in the 4-Nations tournament. While Canada may have the better odds on the betting lines, the USA boasts a stronger goalie trio, which will make them tough to beat.

Werenski met with Jeff Svoboda of NHL.com and delivered an all-time quote:

“I feel like when you put that jersey on, you always feel like you have a chance to win.”

This shows that Team USA is heading into its first game against Finland with a ton of confidence.

It should be a great game to watch—if last night's Canada-Sweden matchup was any indication.

[The Hockey News / Team USA Is Honoring Johnny Gaudreau At 4-Nations Tournament](#)

By Spencer Lazary – February 14, 2025

Team USA is honoring the late Johnny Gaudreau in their locker room at the 4-Nations Tournament.

The team has hung a Team USA jersey with his name and number 13 in their locker room as a reminder that they want to win this tournament in his honor.

Johnny and his brother, Matthew, died on Aug. 29, 2024, after a tragic accident while riding their bikes.

Since their passing, the hockey community has found ways to honor him. The U.S. World Junior team hung his jersey in their locker room and went on to win gold.

The Columbus Blue Jackets and Calgary Flames, the two NHL franchises he played for, honored him when they played this season.

The Blue Jackets and Florida Panthers wore Gaudreau #13 jerseys in the pre-game warm up in their first meeting of the year.

Now, Team USA at the 4-Nations tournament is doing the same. They not only want to honor him but also win the tournament for him.

Gaudreau's former teammate, Zach Werenski, spoke with Dan Rosen of NHL.com about Johnny:

"He's a guy that went to a ton of World Championships, scored big goals, big goals in the World Juniors," Werenski said. "He was a USA Hockey legend. He's a guy that probably would have been on this team. It definitely gives us some extra motivation."

USA's GM, Bill Guerin, took it one step further and invited Guy Gaudreau, the father of both Johnny and Matthew, to the team dinner.

Guy spoke with Rosen to share his excitement about the invitation:

"I called my wife, I said, 'This is crazy. They wanted me in the team picture,'" Guy said. "I was just honored that my son was that good that they respected him enough to say, put his dad in the picture."

After the dinner, the team surprised Guy by inviting him out to practice the next day.

Guy truly enjoyed his time with Team USA and wrapped up by sharing some thoughts about his sons, Johnny and Matthew:

"He was a good person," Guy said of Johnny. "He loved the game. He loved his teammates, loved being with his teammates. Matt in the same way. He didn't reach quite the levels that John did, but he played semipro for a little while. They were good boys, and I miss them a lot."

Regardless of what team or country you are cheering for, the USA 4-Nations team honoring Johnny is why we love the game of hockey.

[The Hockey News / Zach Werenski And Patrik Laine To Faceoff Against One Another At Four Nations; Werenski Comments On Laine](#)

By Jason Newland – February 14, 2025

Zach Werenski and Team USA will play Finland tonight at the Four Nations Tournament inside Bell Centre in Montreal.

Two players will be facing off against one another that was sure to garner some attention - Zach Werenski and Patrik Laine.

Laine's comments from December are still being talked about. Just the other day, Mathieu Olivier talked about it on a popular podcast and said, "We just kind of felt like, man we been through this grind with you, and now people are going to think that's us, and that's not OK. Right? So, I haven't talked to Patty much since then, probably will someday down the road. But that's pretty much all I got to say on it. It's a delicate thing to talk publicly."

Olivier also said Laine reached out to a few players and apologized for it.

But now it's Werenski's turn to address it publicly. Back when it first happened he had this to say after the game, "It's bulls**t that he comes to Columbus and says things like that. I didn't like it, and neither did anyone else on our team."

At the Four Nations tournament, he was again questioned about it.

Zach was asked if there was anything between himself and Laine, and he responded "I don't really want to comment on it any further. It's not Columbus and Montreal, it's the USA and Finland. Now it's about different teams."

"I have nothing against Patty. I like him. He's a great person. I just didn't like his comments and the way they were presented, so I responded to them the way I had to respond. I wanted to defend the team, my teammates, and the organization, Werenski said."

He continued, "There's no rift between us. Patty's not a bad person at all. He was a good teammate in Columbus, and I wish him all the best here in Montreal."

Per the Finnish article, he was also asked what Laine's reputation is in Columbus. Werenski said, "I alluded to this a little earlier. We haven't really talked about (Laine) since that incident. We won't play against Montreal again this season, and the players on our team are still on good terms with him."

He goes on to say "Now it wasn't that he said anything particularly crazy. What he said just didn't sit well with us. Like I said, the guys wish him nothing but the best. Honestly, there's no point in this anymore. We haven't thought about those comments since."

It's highly doubtful that the two have any issues on the ice. Neither player will go out of their way to hit each, as neither player plays an overly physical game.

This story seems to just live on as players keep getting asked about it. Hopefully, this is the end of it. Zach handled these questions very well.

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 Writers / Blue Jackets' Zach Werenski Finally Gets to Showcase Talent on Big Stage](#)

By Mark Scheig – February 14, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets have been one of the biggest stories in the NHL this season. As the 4-Nations Faceoff is getting into high gear, one of their brightest stars will play a key role for his country.

Zach Werenski and Team USA will play their 4-Nations opener on Thursday night against Team Finland at Montreal's Bell Centre. As expected, he will have an important role for his team similar to the role he has on the Blue Jackets.

For Werenski, he finally gets a chance to showcase just how good he's been on the big stage. The big stage is something that hasn't been with the Blue Jackets in recent years.

Lack of National Exposure

The Blue Jackets sit just one point out of a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. A big reason for that is the season Werenski has put together.

At the 4-Nations break, Werenski is in the conversation for both the Norris and Hart trophies. He has a career-high 59 points in 55 games and could challenge for both 30 goals and 90 points should he keep up the pace the rest of the season.

However, none of the Blue Jackets' games have been on national TV in the United States. Before the start of the 2024-25 season, the major TV rightsholders in ESPN & TNT announced their national schedules.

The Blue Jackets only had one game on those schedules, the upcoming Stadium Series game against the Detroit Red Wings which will be on ESPN.

But that's it. Every Blue Jackets' game has been aired on their local FanDuel Sports Network. That means unless someone is either in market and has that channel or is out of market and has ESPN+, they were unable to watch the Blue Jackets.

The reason for this is pretty simple. The last couple of seasons have not gone the way they hoped it would. Towards the end of the season, planned exclusive games were switched out.

Because not much was expected from the Blue Jackets in 2024-25, the networks elected to shy away from them despite the talent they did have. Not only has the nation at large missed out on Werenski's season, they've missed out on other great performances too including those of Sean Monahan, Kirill Marchenko and Adam Fantilli just to name a few.

Werenski in the Spotlight

By being selected to the 4-Nations, Werenski finally gets his chance to show everyone how good he's been on the big stage and on national TV. With no Quinn Hughes for Team USA, the top pair will consist of Werenski and good friend Charlie McAvoy of the Boston Bruins.

Werenski will also get to quarterback the second power-play unit at least for the first game with Adam Fox running the top unit. Considering this is the greatest collection of talent at one time for Team USA, having him in this role signals not only how good he is, but how much he's trusted in key situations.

Werenski leads all NHL defenseman in average TOI per game with 26:53 which is over 2:30 more than last season. He drives the play on offense and on the power play. He kills penalties. He's seen a dramatic improvement defensively since his early days with the Blue Jackets.

Werenski also has a current 21-game home points streak which is tied for the fourth-longest in NHL history for a defenseman. He usually draws the toughest matchups and is still having a dominant season. If the Blue Jackets eventually make the playoffs, he has as compelling a case as anyone to get MVP votes.

For now, the 4-Nations gives Werenski the opportunity to showcase to everyone what he's already showcased to Blue Jackets' fans. His season deserves a lot more attention than it's gotten despite him rather wanting to talk about his team. It's historic on some levels. If Team USA eventually wins gold, there's a good chance he's heavily involved in making that happen.

Need for Increased Exposure

The Blue Jackets are not the Blue Jackets of the past. There is new leadership in the front office and behind the bench. With Werenski and the rest of their core leading the charge, they're in the fight for a playoff spot.

This should hopefully lead to some more exposure for their games down the stretch.

The networks can elect to make changes to the schedule based on circumstances. If a particular matchup is no longer appealing, they can opt to switch to a better matchup. The longer the Blue Jackets stay in the race, the better the chances of something like this happening.

The Blue Jackets will have their chance to shine on ESPN on March 1 at Ohio Stadium. After that, they've made the case that they deserve more attention given the lack of respect shown to them at the start of the season. Should they make the playoffs, it will be one of the best stories in all of sports in recent memory.

It's safe to say many around the country are cheering on the Blue Jackets given how the offseason ended. Having a couple more of their games available nationally would be a welcomed change from the usual. Then the nation can see just how incredible their season has been firsthand.

Having Werenski at the 4-Nations could be the start of some momentum towards more respect for the Blue Jackets in the future. He's eager to show everyone what he can do to first help his team win this 4-Nations Faceoff and then help his Blue Jackets get back to the playoffs this season.

Werenski being on the national stage was long overdue.

[1st Ohio Battery / Since getting his chance to center Blue Jackets top line, Adam Fantilli has thrived](#)

By Ed Francis – February 14, 2025

Are there still those concerned with Adam Fantilli?

The Columbus Blue Jackets have positioned themselves well heading into the Four Nations Face-Off break. They are one point out of a playoff spot as they prepare to play their marquee matchup against the Detroit Red Wings at Ohio Stadium on Mar. 1.

No one could have predicted Columbus to be doing what they are. And that's assuming everything and then some went right for the club, headed by incoming president and general manager Don Waddell and guided by new head coach Dean Evason.

It's been a seamless transition from just a year ago, where everything that could have gone wrong often did.

We've heard about the Blue Jackets' deep prospect pool for the last few seasons, but what needed to happen next was for those individual talents to accelerate and take the next step.

Fantilli, the third overall pick in the 2023 NHL draft, showed promise last season until a mid-season injury cut his rookie campaign short with a calf laceration.

As he plays out his second season, and first full NHL season, Fantilli has continued his development as he plays under a veteran head coach who has worked with several highly skilled talents such as Kirill Kaprizov in Minnesota and future Hall of Famer Alex Ovechkin.

A Hobey Baker winner at the University of Michigan, Fantilli has dazzled on the ice and shown what he is capable of from an offensive perspective. He might have been frustrated when he wasn't finding the back of the net at the start of the season but Evason eradicated any concerns about the counting stats like goals and assists.

"I think the dam is broken," Evason said in October regarding Fantilli's offensive ability and when the points will come.

"I'm not worried about points. All we were talking to him about was playing hard every night. Playing really strong defensively. He has such an offensive instinct and he drives our offense.

"He's been everything that people have told me personally about him with his skill set. But what I'm most impressed with is his work ethic and his team-first mentality is fantastic."

Since top center Sean Monahan went down with a wrist injury that required surgery, sidelining him until March, Fantilli has been thrust into the top center spot, and with that, the goals and assists have come.

During this season, he has 32 points, 15 goals, and 17 assists, all career highs and counting.

Including Jan. 7, the game Monahan went down, Fantilli's seven goals co-lead the team with Kent Johnson. He's tied for second with eight assists, trailing Zach Werenski's nine, and he leads the Jackets with 15 points.

"I think a lot of people don't realize he's stepped up all year," Evason said following Fantilli's first career hat trick in a 5-1 win over the Maple Leafs last month.

"He's had a lot of learning experiences this year with figuring out the defensive game. You have to keep the puck out of the net and if he's not committed to do that, he doesn't get looks like he's getting."

It really feels like Fantilli's confidence is growing along with his game and though it's never ideal to lose a productive two-way player in the form of Sean Monahan, this has been a great test for Fantilli to get his skates wet as a top-line center.

[The Athletic / Team USA reacts to Montreal crowd booing anthem at 4 Nations Face-Off](#)

By Chris Johnston – February 14, 2025

MONTREAL — Team USA heard “The Star-Spangled Banner” booed inside Bell Centre before its opening game at the 4 Nations Face-Off, raising tensions ahead of a matchup against the host Canadians on Saturday night.

“I didn’t like it,” American forward Matthew Tkachuk said after Thursday’s 6-1 win over Finland. “And that’s all I’ve got.”

The NHL knew this was a possibility after the American anthem was booed here before a Devils-Canadiens game last week, but hoped that the climate had been turned down when U.S. President Donald Trump issued a 30-day reprieve on his plans to institute a 25 percent tariff on Canadian goods.

However, Trump has also mused about the possibility of making Canada the 51st state and earlier this week ordered a 25 percent tariff on all imports of steel and aluminum into the U.S. from all countries.

“It’s unfortunate, obviously, and we wish it wasn’t the case,” NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly told reporters Wednesday. “But from time to time things happen and people have strong feelings about it. Obviously, we’re aware of what’s been happening here.”

Before the Americans faced Finland on Thursday night, Bell Centre public address announcer Michel Lacroix urged fans to be respectful of the national anthems to uphold the spirit of the competition.

Still, a significant number of fans audibly booed — cameras showed Matthew Tkachuk fuming at the end of his team’s bench while it happened — before some others in the crowd attempted to drown them out with cheers.

“These guys are hockey players, and they’re here to play hockey,” said American coach Mike Sullivan. “They’re also proud Americans and it’s a privilege to represent your nation, and all of us that have the opportunity to participate and be part of this U.S. team. It means a lot to all of us. ...

“We just want to play hockey. We want to compete. We want to represent our nation in the right way.”

The negative reaction from the crowd stirred a range of emotions in the American players.

J.T. Miller thought it was something that could be used as added motivation.

“I think we like it,” he said. “Not politically, but maybe just as a sense of, we know where we’re at in Canada and I think that fires us up more than anything. So it’s great.”

“Everyone has their own views on things,” said teammate Brock Faber. “I’m honored to wear the red, white and blue. For us, we’re just focused on winning games. Obviously the fans here are going to be against us. And, you know, it’s going to be the same thing when it’s USA-Canada, or whoever, USA-Sweden back home in Boston, right?”

“So, fans are passionate.”

The harsh reception should only fuel the anticipation ahead of Saturday’s Canada-USA showdown. Matthew Tkachuk told Sportsnet that he’d been dreaming about that game for nine years, while his brother Brady said it was going to be the biggest game of his life.

It's worth noting that some of the Canadian players here, including Brad Marchand, have urged the home fans not to boo the American anthem.

"They might just be booing us because we're the U.S. team here," said American defenseman Zach Werenski. "Obviously, I'm a proud American and I love playing for the USA and being an American. I don't want to get into the political side of it, but it is what it is.

"I like to just view it as they want us to lose because we're the U.S. team."

[The Athletic / How Team USA blew out Finland in 4 Nations Face-Off win: Takeaways](#)

By Fluto Shinzawa – February 14, 2025

MONTREAL — Team Finland was in good shape. The Finns started Thursday’s third period down 2-1.

But Team USA promptly turned a one-goal game into a 6-1 rout.

Fifteen seconds into the third, during a power play that carried over from the previous period because of an Olli Määttä hooking penalty, Matthew Tkachuk put the Americans up 3-1. His long-distance shot skimmed off the stick of Niko Mikkola and fluttered past Juuse Saros.

Eleven seconds later, Saros, perhaps rattled by Tkachuk’s goal, opened up his five-hole enough to let Jake Guentzel sneak in a shot off the rush.

The Americans continued the offensive flurry with Brady Tkachuk scoring his second goal at 3:00 to make it a 5-1 game. Matthew Tkachuk added a power-play goal.

“I wouldn’t want to play against those guys,” Jake Guentzel said of the Tkachuk brothers playing together on the No. 2 line, a move coach Mike Sullivan made in the second period. “Big bodies coming at you. They’re going to hit you hard.”

The Finns play Sweden at 1 p.m. on Saturday. The Americans play Canada on Saturday at 8 p.m.

“That’s a huge game,” Matt Boldy said of USA-Canada. “Huge rivalry.”

Kyle Connor, who opened the game as the No. 2 left wing, had a quiet start against Finland. Mike Sullivan, like all three coaches, has to ride the line of letting linemates settle in or change them up in search of improvement. In the second period, the Team USA coach went for the latter, dropping Connor to the third line in favor of Brady Tkachuk to ride with brother Matthew Tkachuk and Jack Eichel.

“It was good,” Eichel said of the switch. “The two of them obviously work very hard and make a lot of plays. They’re great on the wall. They get to the net. Great hands.”

Before the tournament, Sullivan and his assistants debated whether to put the brothers together. They opted not to at the beginning. But Sullivan thought the Americans needed their combined energy in the second period.

“Not only are they great players, they’re great teammates,” Sullivan said. “I also think it’s pretty cool that when you have an opportunity to play with your brother, it can be added motivation and added inspiration to want to play.”

The move worked. After robust wall work by Connor and third-line mates J.T. Miller and Matt Boldy, Brock Faber settled the puck at the right point. As Boldy went in front, Faber sent a sifter on net. Boldy gained net-front position on Nikolas Matinpalo, stretched his stick across his body and got a piece of his Minnesota Wild teammate’s shot to deflect it past Saros, giving the U.S. a 2-1 lead.

“We started to simplify a little,” Boldy said of the new third line. “Got pucks in. We were winning battles. We just got rewarded. It was big for the confidence.”

It wasn’t the Americans’ only adjustment. Sullivan also changed his second and third defense pairs. He moved Faber up with Jacob Slavin and dropped Adam Fox to the No. 3 pairing with Noah Hanifin.

Saros struggles

Saros has struggled for the Nashville Predators lately, but Finland coach Antti Pennanen put his faith in his ace regardless. His track record made him the logical choice. But Saros was not the difference-maker Finland needed him to be. He also had no margin for error. But Team USA's opening goal from Brady Tkachuk was banked in off Saros from below the goal line. The Guentzel goal that made it 4-1 was one Saros had to have.

Kevin Lankinen could be Finland's choice against Sweden.

"Tough day for Juice," Pennanen said. "Really good first 40 minutes. We need to analyze this game. Let's make those decisions tomorrow, Saturday."

Hellebuyck opens shaky

Eichel and Matthew Tkachuk were caught deep in the offensive zone. Connor was late to seal off Eetu Luostarinen on the right-side boards. All of this allowed the Finns to trigger a three-on-two rush against a poorly gapped Hanifin and Faber.

A fast-moving Mikael Granlund gave Henri Jokiharju a slot-line pass that forced Connor Hellebuyck to move from right to left. But Hellebuyck had plenty of time to shuffle across his crease, set his feet and get square to Jokiharju.

Hellebuyck, however, began to drop into reverse vertical-horizontal to seal off the strong-side post. He didn't really need to. Jokiharju shot the puck from outside the right faceoff dot, which is a stoppable shot for an ace like Hellebuyck. Perhaps because of his early transition into RVH, Hellebuyck let the puck go under his right arm for Finland's first goal.

Finns want to counterattack

Finland knows it does not have the Americans' offensive firepower. So the Finns are looking to play off USA's aggressiveness and counterattack off the rush.

It backfired in the first. When Zach Werenski intercepted Granlund's clearing attempt up the wall at the right point, the Finns were already blowing the zone. This let the Americans go back on the attack, leading to Brady Tkachuk's tying goal.

Canada's start catches Americans' attention

It was not lost on Eichel that Team Canada nearly blew Sweden's doors off in the first period of their opener. Nathan MacKinnon scored 12 seconds into a power play. Brad Marchand made it 2-0 later in the first.

It reminded the Americans that a good start was critical. After Jokiharju's goal, the Americans punched back when Brady Tkachuk put a down-low follow-up shot through Saros, tying the game at 1-1.

"I don't think you lose a tournament in the first period of a game," Eichel said. "It's our goal to start well, come out and impose our game on the Finns tonight and feel good about ourselves after 20 minutes. At the same time, it's going to be important for us to be resilient and understand not every period, not every shift, not every game is going to be a perfect depiction of what we want."

Americans', Finns' healthy scratches

Jake Sanderson, a late addition following Quinn Hughes' injury before the start of the tournament, was the healthy scratch on defense. Up front, Chris Kreider was out of uniform. With Jake Oettinger dressed as Hellebuyck's backup, Jeremy Swayman was the No. 3 goalie.

Kaapo Kakko and Juuso Valimaki were Finland's healthy scratches. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was Finland's third goalie.

[The Athletic / Revisiting one emo or punk song for every NHL team: How accurate was our angst?](#)

By Arthur Staple – February 14, 2025

With a nice, long break in the NHL schedule and your favorite team pretty firmly on track to make you either fully emo (nervous, excited, scream until you cry) or fully punk (full of vinegar, in someone's face, scream until you puke), it seemed like a great time to revisit our emo/punk season preview.

We ranked the teams in reverse order, from most emo (hopeless) to most punk (ready to fight and win). There are a few hits and many more misses. Mostly, it's just enjoyable to get this playlist in circulation again.

Complete with season recaps and an Emo(ji) Accuracy-meter (warning: may be wildly inaccurate), let's take a spin.

Anaheim Ducks

'California' by Wax

"Why did I move to Southern California?"

Smog isn't blue, someone shoulda warned you"

The Ducks aren't quite as emo as we thought they'd be, and bonus points for taking on Jacob Trouba, who left a very angsty situation in New York and ended up in Southern California. Maybe he was playing this track when he got there. Who knows? The Ducks are on target for a solid 11th to 14th finish in the West. That's more "meh" than anything extreme.

Calgary Flames

'Expendables' by Fake Names

"We're nothing but expendables"

Way, way off here. Don't know what music Dustin Wolf listens to — I'm betting it's not anything on our playlist because he's only 23 — but he's been a rock in net for the Flames, who are surprisingly (to us, anyway) in the hunt for a wild-card spot. Kind of like how a song will start out melodic and veer into harder territory, the Flames started out headed for the bottom but have gone full screamo.

Chicago Blackhawks

'October' by Knuckle Puck

"Would you save me as we slide into October?"

Our first five-star (or five screaming-crying face) pick! We said the Hawks would be irrelevant before the season's first month was over. Now, four months later, we've got hot Connor Bedard takes about his overall game and a team that traded one of its best unrestricted free-agent assets for a third-round pick while also eating \$4.6 million in dead cap space. And they're probably just good enough to not get the No. 1 pick. It's getting awfully emo up in the Near West Side.

San Jose Sharks

'Salvation' by Rancid

"Come on baby won't you show me what you got

"I want your salvation"

Macklin Celebrini has indeed shown us he could be the savior in SJ, but the improvement that was supposed to come from the many vets GM Mike Grier brought in hasn't materialized. The Sharks have already started selling and they're sitting in the basement of the league once again. So they could add another high-end talent to their group, but when does the losing end?

Montreal Canadiens

'I'd Do Anything' by Simple Plan

"This could be the one last chance to make you understand"

Accuracy: 🙄🙄🙄🙄

The sentiment is still on target, and we're not that far off on where the Habs would land this season. They were on the fringes of the East playoff race but are now fading. Lots of good kids but not much around them. Headed toward another lottery. Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

Pittsburgh Penguins

'Alone at St. Luke's' by Aaron West and The Roaring Twenties

"We've been thinking

As long as we're still here

We might as well be drinking"

Sidney Crosby is still here. Same for Evgeni Malkin. Kris Letang is still here, too. Pittsburgh's big three is headed back to the draft lottery, this time likely with a bit more certainty than the last couple seasons. What that brings for Kyle Dubas in the offseason is a lot of headaches — whether to keep Mike Sullivan behind the bench, whether Crosby might want to play out the last two years of his deal on a contender — and not much to be excited about.

Seattle Kraken

'In Circles' by Sunny Day Real Estate

"In circles (I'm running down)"

Another bullseye. The Kraken have a new coach, a couple new players, a new No. 1 goalie and the same problems they had last year. What exactly is this team? Not good enough to contend, not bad enough to snag a No. 1 pick (at least at the moment), not loaded with tradable assets. Kaapo Kakko's been good. So there's something.

On a nice little roll here — the Flyers flirted with being a decent team this season but are now flirting with last in the East thanks to some truly awful goaltending and a bit of confusion about who exactly they want to be. They traded away a pair of under-25 forwards for more cap flexibility, but are they really landing a big free agent with that in-between roster and ugly goaltending?

They've been good! In spite of the cap crunch, in spite of a lengthy Kirill Kaprizov absence, in spite of being in the toughest division in the league, the Wild are hanging in. The buyout pain ends after this season, though, and Minny needs to show Kaprizov it's a good place to be, so this summer should be, uh, wild.

We got nothing to say here. Worse than even we thought and not much hope. The ultimate long-term emo team, not just in the NHL.

In fairness, did anyone see this coming? Alex Ovechkin breaks his leg and might still catch Wayne Gretzky ... oh yeah, the Caps are also the best team in the league when most everyone thought they'd be fighting for a wild card. Spencer Carbery should already be clearing space on his mantle for the Jack Adams Trophy. There's still some anxiety over whether this team has the fortitude to go four playoff rounds, but for now, it's a good time in the pit.

We've been waiting for the Wings to get in the game here, and they are, sitting in a wild-card spot at the break. It's not exactly a secure spot, with four teams within four points of them, but new coach Todd McLellan has energized this group. I'm still not sold, but we'll call this one accurate enough.

Things were looking up for a good stretch there. The Sens were flirting with a genuine playoff spot in the Atlantic, pushing up against the top two teams before a three-game slide into the break. Adam Gaudette embodies the spirit of this track — 16 goals while playing fourth-line minutes qualifies as a breakout to us.

Our call on the Blues as the most mid team in hockey stands up pretty well at the break. They made a big change behind the bench, shuffled some of the roster around, and ... they're kinda worse than they were last season. Rumors of a sell-off before the deadline abound. Not sure trading Brayden Schenn or Jordan Kyrou is going to make this better.

Well, at least the HC isn't still in Glendale. Utah had a solid start this season, but the former Coyotes are still stuck in neutral, on the fringe of the West playoff race. Also, UHC stinks at home — we thought the new fan base would energize them. At least the team won't be going back to Arizona.

The Kings have defied our low-ish expectations — credit to Jim Hiller and the vets on the team for managing to stay afloat while watching every part of the Pierre-Luc Dubois trade thrive in Winnipeg and Washington. If that's the Cup Final, this song may hit a lot harder in June.

It's not quite all downhill, but the Lightning might be on a steep slope. The post-Stamkos era hasn't been an issue on this side, and the Tampa organization's ability to get the most out of guys you won't remember were ever in the NHL in a few years is simply remarkable. Not sure this team has a real playoff run in it though.

Here we go again ... again ... again with the Islanders. They have gotten old — Mathew Barzal always seems like the new kid on the block but he turns 28 this year, plus he's getting injured as often as the Isles' over-30 guys. Selling? Lou Lamoriello scoffs at your common-sense ideas. It makes sense that Long Island has such a robust emo/hardcore scene because these guys could stay emo forever.

The Knights aren't just surviving, they're thriving. And we all know GM Kelly McCrimmon is going to surprise us before the deadline hits. Vegas may not be better than the Oilers, but the Knights will keep trying to get there. It's fun to be a Knights fan, where the team never thinks beyond the coming postseason.

At least we had the Jets in the top 16. Connor Hellebuyck is a shoo-in for the Vezina and might get some Hart love, but the rest of this team is also humming along pretty well. Three guys on pace for 40-plus goals! Cap space as far as the eye can see! This is a punk team. The Jets have left emo way behind.

Nashville Predators

'For A Pessimist, I'm Pretty Optimistic' by Paramore

"I never wanted to say this

You never wanted to stay

I put my faith in you, so much faith

And then you just threw it away”

Accuracy: 😞😞😞

Hear us out: The lyrics to this track never quite matched the optimism around the Preds after the summer spending spree, but we hand-waved that aside because a) the track title fits and b) we were never picking anyone other than Hayley Williams to rep Tennessee emo. Now, though, it fits! Good grief are the Predators a mess, and we all bought in so hard back in July. They’d better fix this or we’re actually going to mean what we say next season.

The Canes have made a lot of moves, letting longtime guys walk in the summer, adding some decent lower-cost buys, then exploding onto the scene a couple weeks ago with the Mikko Rantanen deal and ... it still feels like the same old Canes. Same goalies that have let them down year after year, a soon-to-be 40-year-old playing over 21 minutes a night and the same playing style that hasn’t worked well enough in the playoffs. And what if Rantanen doesn’t sign before March 7?

The Devils have turned it around with some new additions to beef up their depth behind the cool kids (Hughes brothers, Jesper Bratt). It’s not all the way there, but they sure look better than the mess they put on the ice last season. It’ll be interesting to see what they do at the deadline and whether that’s enough to dent the Caps’ incredible run.

Pretty sure their fate is sealed. Even if the Bruins sneak into the playoffs, changes are coming. They bring back Brad Marchand out of loyalty and they’re probably stuck in the mediocre spin cycle for a while. Amazing to think they were setting regular-season records two years ago.

The most emo storyline of the season unfolded in Vancouver with the J.T. Miller-Elias Pettersson feud infecting every corner of the room until the Canucks moved Miller to the Rangers. Are there more moves coming? Will Quinn Hughes want to stick around beyond 2027? Will Thatcher Demko ever be healthy? Emo bands of British Columbia, you’ve got a lot of fodder for songs here.

Everyone moved on awfully quick from that Stan Bowman hiring, didn’t they? It’s almost like having a Stanley Cup contender pushes the issues to the side. Which is what we were getting at with this track.

Toronto Maple Leafs

‘The Barbed Wire Fence Around Happiness’ by Chastity

“Held in the fringes of happiness”

We still don’t know how well this will hold up because the true test of Leafs happiness comes in April and May. If they don’t get to May, we’ll know it’s spot on.

New York Rangers

‘Something Higher’ by Taking Meds

“There’s something higher but I don’t know what it is

I know it’s there ’cause I can taste it”

Turns out the most emo team in the league (sports world maybe) this year is the Rangers, who blew up their roster six weeks into the season and made everyone miserable while doing so. It got so dark at MSG in December we were surprised guys didn’t show up wearing black eyeliner.

The Panthers are still formidable, and a repeat as champs could be in the cards. I still like them best out of anyone in the East, provided Sergei Bobrovsky can hold up. This team also can play rougher than the pit at a This Is Hell show, so you have to like its chances of going far in the spring.

Colorado Avalanche

'So Stoked' by Teenage Bottlerocket

"Woke up this morning to a great day without hassle

I was so happy I was grinning like an a—

It seems like everything is going as expected

And now for once I feel like all my s—'s collected"

The Avs made an awfully punk-rock move, trading away Rantanen when they figured out they weren't going to pay him what he wanted. But it's working out so far — Martin Necas is fitting well with Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar's going to score 30, and their goaltending, which completely changed this season, might be good enough. The fact the Avalanche are still sitting in a wild-card spot is a surprise, but we wouldn't want to play them in the playoffs.

[The Athletic / Has U.S. hockey caught Canada? Why the Americans are no longer the underdog](#)

By Sean Gentile and James Mirtle – February 14, 2025

Few in the sport have experienced the rapid evolution of American hockey as up close and personally as Mike Modano.

Growing up just outside Detroit, Modano was a minor hockey star. He spent his junior years in the WHL in Prince Albert, Sask., which was at that time the highest level available to American teenagers.

Picked first in the 1988 NHL Draft, Modano played four years with the Minnesota North Stars before relocation in 1993-94 led him to Dallas. There, he led the Stars to the first-ever Stanley Cup title for a team from the U.S. Sunbelt.

Modano saw how hockey quickly exploded in Texas from that 1999 championship on and how it spread into other non-traditional markets after the NHL expanded across the country throughout the decade.

Twenty-five years later, more American kids are playing hockey than ever. More Americans are playing in the NHL than ever, too.

It's all built up to this: Team USA, with a captain in Auston Matthews from Scottsdale, Ariz., enters the 4 Nations Face-Off — the sport's first best-on-best event in nine years — as the favorite.

Modano, 54, retired in 2011 as the NHL's all-time leading scorer among U.S.-born players. He won gold at the 1996 World Cup and silver at the 2002 Olympics but admits it feels different watching this next generation of Team USA compete internationally.

The Americans are no longer the underdogs, as was often the case throughout his career.

He credits not only the rapid increase in talent from new sources but also the development work in the trenches by USA Hockey over the last two decades for getting them there.

Americans aren't going to the Canadian junior leagues anymore to excel. They stay close to home and they're better than ever.

"You just have so much to select from," Modano said of the breadth of talent available to the Americans at the 4 Nations event, where the U.S. opens play against Finland on Thursday in Montreal. "Now there's a little bit of pressure and expectation level, which is nice for the players to have.

"There's a little stress going into it before these tournaments. It's not 'We hope to do OK, but we're not up to Canada's or Russia's speed.' Now (we're) mentioned in the same breath as these top teams."

When Modano won the Stanley Cup in Texas in 1999, the number of Americans in the NHL was actually on the decline. European players had begun to flood the league, to the point that Americans only played 17 percent of the NHL's games that season.

Canada, long the sport's dominant power, led the way at 54 percent.

By this season, however, the U.S. had nearly doubled its NHL participation to 30 percent, an all-time high. It has gained considerable ground on the Canadians the past 20 years.

The previously farfetched notion that the Americans could surpass Canada — both internationally and in representation in the world's top league — has become a very real possibility.

Based on recent trends, it could happen in a little more than a decade.

“Throughout the lineup, man alive, they’ve got great puck-moving defensemen,” Modano said of Team USA’s 4 Nations roster. “They’ve got great goaltending. Up front, there’s some high-end skill.

“If anything, they’re just going to keep getting better. You have this changing of the guard, with Canada, that’s slowly kind of tilting the needle the other way a little bit.”

What follows is a breakdown of the four biggest reasons the U.S. may soon take over as the top hockey power in the world — if it hasn’t already.

The NTDP model

By the middle of the 1990s, USA Hockey knew it had a problem — at least as it related to high-end talent with the men's national team.

Sure, there were Hall of Famers at the top of the list; Modano, Brian Leetch, Brett Hull, Chris Chelios, Phil Housley and Jeremy Roenick were, to varying degrees, still in their primes. Beyond those guys and a few others, such as Keith Tkachuk and Tony Amonte, the player pool for international tournaments got shallow very quickly.

Example A: The 1994 World Championships in Italy, where the U.S. was smoked 8-0 by Finland in the semifinals, then lost to Sweden in the bronze-medal game. Craig Janney, a productive, play-making center who never made an NHL All-Star team, led that group in scoring with seven points. Behind him in scoring were Tim Sweeney, who played 291 NHL games over eight seasons, and Bill Lindsay, a solid bottom-sixer for the Florida Panthers.

Canada’s top scorers? Paul Kariya, Brendan Shanahan, Joe Sakic and Luc Robitaille, all Hall of Famers.

After another quarterfinal loss at the 1995 Worlds (to Canada), the U.S. was ready for a change.

“We weren't winning internationally. We weren't producing enough NHL players and elite level NHL players as we thought we could, based on the volume of players in our country,” USA Hockey executive director Pat Kelleher said. “So we did something different and something better.”

USA Hockey's first step was hiring Jeff Jackson, a two-time NCAA championship-winning coach at Lake Superior State, and Bob Mancini, the head coach at Michigan Tech, and giving them carte blanche. Literally. The two sat down with a pad of paper, filling it with their ideas on what the best American players needed in order to develop into world-beaters, and how best to get it to them.

Thus, in 1996, the U.S. National Team Development Program was born. USA Hockey would build two teams — an under-18 team and an under-17 one — out of the best players in their birth years, house them in Ann Arbor, Mich., centralize their training and solve the country's foremost hockey problem.

The plan was to create, as Kelleher called it, “a finishing school for those high-end kids.” Jackson was the head coach of the U18 team and senior director; Mancini led the U17 team and acted as director of player personnel. Both teams started playing games in the fall of 1997 against squads from the NCAA, USHL and NAHL, a Tier II junior hockey league.

Jackson and Mancini had the support of their big bosses, but not every important stakeholder was initially on board. The prospect of USA Hockey swooping in and picking off a region's best players, as one would expect, did not go over well with the locals.

“(Concerns about taking players) got right down to the grassroots,” Mancini said. “I was physically accosted in a rink. I was chased out of rinks by coaches and people who couldn't see the benefit of what USA Hockey was trying to do.”

There were, of course, less dramatic forces at play. In some cases, parents needed to be convinced that shipping their sons off to Michigan, away from their homes and relatively proven pathways to college and pro hockey, was the right move — and some couldn't be swayed. In Year 1, Mancini said, about 70 percent of the players the USNTDP recruited wound up signing.

"We were losing really, really good players who were choosing other pathways," Mancini said, "Those weren't just legitimate concerns. They were legitimate reasons."

At the start, there was no set schedule or completed facilities. Players who did join would need to be placed with billet families and enroll in high-school classes. Mancini compared the job to "building the plane and flying it at the same time."

By Year 2, though, the number was closer to 80 percent. By Year 3, it was close to 90. "All of a sudden," Mancini said, "you were fielding calls from parents and agents saying, 'Hey, you need to watch my kid. You need to come here.'"

By 2000, the program had produced a No. 1 NHL pick, goalie Rick DiPietro. Since, it has produced four more: Erik Johnson in 2006, Patrick Kane in 2007, Matthews in 2016 and Jack Hughes in 2019. In all, 99 NTDP alums have gone on to become first-round picks. That's elite talent.

In 2004, with a roster built primarily from NTDP players, the U.S. won its first-ever gold medal at the World Junior Championships. It has won six more, including in 2024 and 2025, and the program's presence on the roster has only grown. That's high-end international success.

"It used to be we (hoped) to compete for a gold medal in events. Now the expectations are there," Kelleher said. "That's a great thing."

And now, at the first international best-on-best competition featuring NHL players since 2016, the U.S. roster will feature 15 NTDP alums, including the captain (Matthews) and alternate captains (Matthew Tkachuk and Charlie McAvoy).

"It was everything I needed," said Matt Boldy, a winger for the Minnesota Wild, member of the 4 Nations team and part of the program from 2017-19. "Skates, skill work, everything. Strength, conditioning, the whole thing. So going there at 16, it meant everything."

Rapid growth from outside traditional hubs

You don't need to look much further than the 4 Nations roster for proof the Americans can now draw from throughout the country better than in the past.

While Team USA's best-on-best clubs have traditionally been made up exclusively of players from the Three M states — Michigan, Minnesota and Massachusetts — this year's team features players born all over the country: Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Missouri, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

That's the result of a demographic shift that includes 100,000 more players in the U.S. in the years between 2000 and 2015, including more than 50 percent growth in states as widespread as California, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington.

In many states, having an NHL team has been a key factor — especially with teams in those regions winning the Stanley Cup in nine of the last 20 seasons (2004, 2006, 2007, 2012, 2014, 2018, 2020, 2021 and 2024).

"The NHL clubs and the NHL itself, their support and their focus and the way they dig in with their communities has been a tremendous benefit for us," Kelleher said.

“Collectively, there’s just been more access to the game for these kids,” Modano added. “You have a deeper talent pool as the years have gone on, more kids have progressed in the game, and now you’re seeing a lot of high-end skill and major players in the NHL and junior and college. It’s amazing to see now that those numbers have gone up dramatically.”

In the last three years alone, Mancini said, USA Hockey has added 36 spots at national player development camps, bringing the total to 216, “because we looked around and we realized, ‘My gosh, we’re leaving players in their districts (who need this opportunity).’”

That next wave of talent is only just beginning to make inroads into the highest levels, too. Some of the NHL’s newest rising stars are coming from these next-gen U.S. markets, such as Flames rookie of the year candidate Dustin Wolf (from California), Maple Leafs power forward Matthew Knies (Arizona), and Senators defenseman Jake Sanderson (Montana).

USA Hockey’s other development paths

In 2009, with the NTDP cooking as a pipeline for turning elite 16-year-olds into elite NHL players, USA Hockey launched what it called “the American Development Model (ADM),” a framework for helping players reach their full potential, whatever it might be, starting with “learn to skate” programs for children under 6.

It boils down to age-appropriate training for players and ongoing, research-based education for USA Hockey’s 60,000 registered coaches. Some of the principles, Kelleher said, were developed at the NTDP.

“We said, ‘Hey, now let’s have a better system of development across the country that everyone can point to as the best way to do this,’” Kelleher said. “And at the same time, let’s make sure we bring more kids into the system that can be exposed to our game, to have an opportunity to be developed — (whether as) a rec league player, a high school player, a Division-I college player or Olympic or Paralympic athletes.”

The goal isn’t specifically to build out a group of rank-and-file American NHL players — but that is something of a byproduct. What has been created, to use a favored USA Hockey term, are “multiple player pathways.”

Making the NTDP might be the straightest line to the NHL. It’s certainly not the only one.

On any given day this NHL season, Mancini said, there are close to 300 American players in the NHL. Of those, about 100 came through the NTDP. Two hundred, in other words, did not — they played for NCAA teams, or in the USHL, or at prep schools or at Minnesota high schools.

“The depth of our player pool at the elite level,” Kelleher said, “is due to the fact that we have a number of different options and number of different places for players to go to be developed.”

The 4 Nations roster is a testament to that; of the 23 players on the initial roster, eight took an alternate route, including Jets winger Kyle Connor. He was cut from the U17 team and played three seasons in the USHL. As an 18-year-old, after leading that league in scoring, he committed to the University of Michigan, where he spent one season before Winnipeg drafted him 15th. He was with the Jets by the time he was 19.

Eight years later, he leads the league in goals among American players.

“Kyle Connor didn’t necessarily come through the front door,” Kelleher said, “and now he’s a superstar in the NHL.”

The impact of the ADM as it relates to the national teams is clear during tryouts, said Mancini, now USA Hockey's assistant executive director of hockey development. In the earliest days of the NTDP, he said, there might have only been 20 players good enough for him, Jackson, and the rest of the staff to target.

"Now you go to the NTDP tryout camp, they're bringing 40 players," Mancini said, "and after the first few, where we all say, 'These kids (are locks),' it's hard to choose because that's how many good players we have.

"We're not just producing more players. We're producing better players."

The other main improvement that has helped make the Americans favorites entering the 4 Nations is the talent they have in net.

With Russia not taking part in international events and the Canadians continuing to struggle to develop stars in the crease, the U.S. has a clear advantage on paper when it comes to stopping pucks.

It's a group led by Hellebuyck, a Hart Trophy candidate with the Jets and the consensus best goaltender in the world right now. The Americans also have top netminders Jake Oettinger of the Stars and Jeremy Swayman of the Bruins on the roster.

Those three rank first, second and 13th in NHL wins, respectively, over the past four seasons.

The U.S. also left a deep bench at home, with a group of goaltenders that would have been in the running for roles on any other country's roster: Wolf, Thatcher Demko, Joey Daccord, Joseph Woll, Anthony Stolarz, John Gibson, Jonathan Quick and Spencer Knight.

The U.S. has historically produced some quality netminders — led by Ryan Miller, Mike Richter, Tom Barrasso, Tim Thomas and John Vanbiesbrouck — but never with this level of depth in a single generation.

The Americans have experienced a sharp rise at the position the past five years, in particular, an improvement at least partly due to the NTDP and an increased focus on goalie development at younger ages.

Like some European nations, USA Hockey has made increasing the number of goalie coaches in minor hockey a central focus. It also has set an internal goal to have more than 10 percent of all players be goaltenders by 2030 and getting more kids trying the position instead of specializing young.

Their most ambitious goal is for American goalies to play 50 percent of the minutes in the NHL in the not-so-distant future. (They're at 23 percent this season.)

According to USA Hockey's director of goalie development Steve Thompson, having an improved minor hockey and junior system that feeds into the NCAA has worked wonders, giving their goalies additional time in the crease before turning pro.

All three of the U.S.'s goalies at the 4 Nations came through the U.S. junior system before playing two or three years in college. Canada's three goalies, in contrast, all went directly from junior to pro at a younger age.

"Just having that extra three years that the college game has provided has given some of our goalies a little bit longer to work on their game," Thompson said. "And then when they do get to pro hockey, they're a little bit more mature, they're a little bit stronger, they've been through the wringer a little bit longer to be maybe a little bit mentally stronger. I think that's been a real big success story for our American goaltenders."

And it's given them a sizable advantage on hockey's biggest stage with the 4 Nations here and the next Winter Olympics only 12 months away.

"It'll be fun to watch," Modano said.

[ESPN / Grades, top players from a dominant U.S. win over Finland](#)

By Ryan S. Clark, Greg Wyshynski – February 14, 2025

The opening game of the 4 Nations Face-Off was a close one -- a 4-3 overtime win for Canada over Sweden. The second contest was also close ... for 37 minutes.

Finland and the United States were tied 1-1 until 17:04 of the second, but then the U.S. hit the afterburners -- and cranked up "Free Bird" on the Bell Centre sound system on repeat -- en route to a 6-1 rout.

Before those games, let's digest the U.S. victory over Finland. Here are grades for both teams, our biggest takeaways, key players to watch for the next game as well as lingering questions.

Grading the teams

United States: A

Anything less than a regulation win against shorthanded Finland would be embarrassing for Team USA, especially after Canada left a point on the table against Sweden last night in an overtime win. For a while, that looked like a possibility: Finland was doing as Finland does against elite opponents -- grinding down the tempo and taking an early lead. One of the best signs for the Americans in this win: zero panic and plenty of poise for a team that doesn't have anything close to the "best on best" or NHL championship experience of a team like Canada.

Team USA found its swagger in the last 23 minutes, from Matt Boldy's expert deflection on Minnesota Wild teammate Brock Faber's point shot to make it 3-1, through their three goals in three minutes to open the third period and put away the game.

Some might say the final score doesn't tell the whole story because the U.S. scored four goals in the final period, but I think it does. The Americans were plus-15 in scoring chances and had an expected goals percentage of 72.5% at 5-on-5. Even when the game was close, it was inevitable. When there were breakdowns, Connor Hellebuyck (20 saves) was there. This was the statement the U.S. needed before facing Canada, in direct response to what its future foe did in its opener.

Finland: D

Everything was going so well until the first 26 seconds of the third period. Finland had limited its mistakes. One of the goals it had given up was off a deflection. But even with that, Finland was working to take away space. But, Olli Maatta's late second-period hooking penalty led to the U.S. scoring on another deflection just 15 seconds into the third period ... before Jake Guentzel scored nine seconds later.

And just like that, the defensively responsible performance Finland deployed to be within a goal to start the third became a three-goal deficit less than a minute into the final period, all but ending its chances for a win. That became even more clear when Brady Tkachuk cut through the heart of Finland's zone for his team's third goal on its first four shots of the period for a 5-1 lead, and brother Matthew capped it off with another tally to make it 6-1. -- Ryan S. Clark

What we learned

The Tkachuks drive the bus

Coach Mike Sullivan finally gave the people what they wanted late in the second period when he flanked Jack Eichel with brothers Matthew and Brady Tkachuk. Sullivan had previously split the brothers in his lineup to give two lines their particular brand of whimsy. But as the Americans searched for more 5-on-5 offense, it was time to break glass on the Brothers Tkachuk -- and it paid off.

That line landed the knockout blow against Finland, combining for the third American goal in the first three minutes of the third period. Matthew fed Eichel, who threaded a pass to Brady for a point-blank goal.

Even when they weren't together, the Tkachuks drove the bus all night for Team USA. Brady evened the score at 10:21 of the first period after Henri Jokiharju gave Finland a surprising early lead, sneaking behind three defenders before scoring past Juuse Saros. Then it was Matthew scoring a critical power-play goal 15 seconds into the third period to give the Americans a 3-1 lead, firing a long-range shot that deflected off the stick of his Panthers teammate Niko Mikkola's stick.

It was Matthew again on the power play to make it 6-1, knocking down a Zach Werenski point shot and then cashing in his own rebound. Eichel picked up a secondary assist.

Between the Auston Matthews line with Guentzel and Jack Hughes and this Two Chuks and a Jack line, Team USA leaves the tournament opener with two potent scoring lines established.

Finland needs its top two lines to produce, and fast

Having Aleksander Barkov center a line with Artturi Lehkonen and Mikko Rantanen was supposed to give Finland a top line that had facilitators who could all score just as well as they distribute. Plus, it's a top-line trio that's experienced when it comes to finding success in tight spaces given all three are Stanley Cup winners.

Creating a second line with Sebastian Aho, Roope Hintz and Patrik Laine was a combination that would see two of the game's steadfast two-way forwards partner with a winger who possesses one of the game's most impressive shots. All together, this was supposed to be one of the bedrocks of Finland's identity.

Those six players combined for 10 shots. But ... nine of those shots belonged to Barkov (five) and Lehkonen (four). It amounted to Finland's top two lines -- which featured a 50-goal scorer (Rantanen), a 40-goal scorer (Laine), three 30-goal scorers (Aho, Barkov and Hintz) along with a 20-goal scorer on pace for his first 30-goal campaign (Lehkonen) -- scoring no goals.

Or to view it this way: Finland received no goals from four players (Aho, Barkov, Laine and Rantanen) who are all in the top 10 of NHL goals scored all time by Finnish players.

Play "Free Bird"

As teased by USA Hockey before the tournament, the Americans have made "Free Bird" their official goal song of the 4 Nations Face-Off. While the 1973 rock anthem by Lynyrd Skynyrd is a staple of American classic rock, it also has become an unexpected hockey anthem for Team USA.

In the 2025 IIHF World Juniors Hockey Championship, the U.S. made "Free Bird" its signature goal song. University of Denver defenseman Zeev Buium suggested the option. "The first five or six minutes of that song are super mellow and not much going on. So we knew [the raucous guitar solo] was the part of the song we were going with," he said.

It paid off well for the U.S. at world juniors, as they won their second straight championship. The Americans are hoping it will help them fly high at 4 Nations.

But the song might also serve a more nefarious purpose: It's a Kendrick Lamar-level troll job, reminding Canadians of Team USA's world juniors glory at a time when their once-heralded team couldn't advance out of the quarterfinals. Say, Drake ...

Here's where it gets complicated for Finland. Those opening two periods prove that Finland does have the personnel and the structure capable of frustrating an opponent, while initially providing Saros with a manageable workload -- compared to what he faces on a nightly basis with the Nashville Predators.

But the three-goal barrage on the U.S.'s first four shots in the third period reignited the questions about whether Finland can navigate the 4 Nations tournament without All-Star Miro Heiskanen, Jani Hakanpaa and Rasmus Ristolainen, who are sitting out the event because of injuries.

It raises one major question for Finland before it faces Sweden. What is the more accurate representation? The first two periods against what is perhaps the most talented team in the tournament? Or the third period that doomed them?

Finland matched up Barkov, the best defensive center in the NHL, against Matthews throughout the game, which is one reason why the Toronto Maple Leafs star didn't score a goal. The fact is that it can take Matthews a little time to get cooking as a goal scorer in tournaments: In nine career Stanley Cup playoff series, Matthews scored a goal in the opening game of a series only once.

Though he didn't score himself, Matthews created Guentzel's goal scored just 11 seconds after Matthew Tkachuk's goal to open the third -- intercepting the puck at his blue line and then dishing to Guentzel after attracting Finland's defenders to the slot. Matthews' line with Guentzel and Hughes was consistently good all game for the U.S., combining for 14 shot attempts.

Saturday night against Canada is an opportunity for Matthews to lead his nation to an epic win -- and stifle critics who grumble about his performance in pressure situations.

Mikko Rantanen

RW, Finland

Entering the tournament, there were already questions about how Rantanen would perform given he has only two points in six games since being traded to the Carolina Hurricanes. Of course, Rantanen is one of the most gifted players Finland has ever produced: He's fourth among Finns in NHL goals, 10th in assists and seventh in points. He's a two-time 100-point scorer who could possibly get his third 100-point season this season.

But against the U.S., he had no shots while logging 19 minutes, 21 seconds of ice time, which was the second most of any forward behind Barkov. That can't continue if Finland is going to have any chance.

Big questions for the next game

Was this enough proof of concept to confidently take on Canada?

Let's be honest: If the Americans defeated Finland in a tepid 3-1 squeaker buoyed by a late empty-netter, it would have meant three points in the standings but wouldn't have exactly put wind in their sails before facing Canada. Not after the latter's thrilling OT win over Sweden, in which Canada flexed its offensive depth, all-world talent and blazing speed despite an inconsistent effort.

But this was a resounding victory over the Finns, where patience was a virtue until the offense (and the power play) came to life in the third. The Americans played with physicality and swagger, and Hellebuyck was a model of serenity in the net.

Saturday night is going to be a different experience. Much different. The boos will be louder and the home ice will be a distinct advantage for Canada. Their lineup is filled with game-changers who will take advantage of American miscues in a way Finland couldn't. They have Sidney Crosby. They have Connor McDavid. They have them both on a power play that looked like the most unstoppable quintet in the history of hockey in the brief few seconds they needed before scoring on their only opportunity.

But now the Americans have a win. They have proof of concept. They enter the showdown against their archrivals with a different comportment than many previous "best on best" U.S. teams have against Canada. The U.S. won't be in awe. The players won't genuflect to their medals and Stanley Cup rings. They know they entered this tournament as co-favorites. And now they have all the confidence in the world, or at least among 4 Nations. -- Wyshynski

What changes must Finland make ahead of Saturday against Sweden?

Anytime a team gives up six goals, there's going to be a conversation about what went wrong and what must be done to avoid a similar result. That's the position Finland finds itself in with the idea that the next 48 hours could be extremely crucial when it comes to whether it can recover against Sweden or fall into a deeper hole.

There's two items Finland must look to solve. How it can score more goals while also trying to prevent more of them from being scored. Does Finland coach Antti Pennanen keep his top two lines together? Or does he shuffle them given how the group failed to produce? Especially when half of Finland's top six failed to even muster a shot on goal?

But then there's the defensive conversation. Does it behoove Finland to shuffle its defense pairings or does it concentrate more on how it found consistency through the first two periods and use that as a framework? And while not all six of the U.S. goals can be pinned on Saros, it does raise questions about if Finland will turn to Kevin Lankinen or continue to stick with one of the game's most reliable goalies in Saros.

[Sportsnet.ca / U.S. Player Ratings: Tkachuk brothers steal the show](#)

By Emily Sadler – February 14, 2025

When you enter a tournament with very little time to practice alongside your new teammates, chemistry can be hard to come by.

It helps if you're brothers.

Matthew and Brady Tkachuk stole the show Thursday night — separately, at first, with older brother Matthew packing a punch on the top line while the younger Brady opened scoring on the third and brought his signature physical edge. But when USA head coach Mike Sullivan made a mid-game adjustment to bring the two together up top? Well, that changed this story completely.

Through the first 40 minutes of Thursday's matchup against Finland, the Finns won the puck battle, giving their foes in stars and stripes very little room to play. They were the first to light the lamp, too, surprising USA with an early marker in the first frame. But once the Americans finally started scoring, there was no questioning the outcome of this game.

Sparked by a pair of goals just 11 seconds apart early in the third period, USA defeated Finland 6-1 in what was a physical affair.

The Americans entered this tournament as favourites, the assembly of players the deepest U.S. roster the nation has ever put together. Considering how the evening unfolded against Finland, it's easy to see why. Here's a look at the star-studded U.S. squad, and how each player performed Thursday night.

Jack Eichel: 9/10

Eichel started the game alongside one Tkachuk and finished it sandwiched between the two as the perfect setup man for the top-line brothers. His speedy zone entries and sharp set-up abilities were on full display all night — he set up both brothers in the third period — and that chemistry should continue against Canada on Saturday.

Kyle Connor: 6.5/10

Connor's quiet night came as a bit of a surprise, considering he entered the tournament as the top-scoring American in the NHL and started Thursday's game suiting up on the team's top line alongside Eichel and Matthew Tkachuk. His demotion to the third line late in the second period reflects that slow start, but once there, Connor was quick to contribute with his new linemates — his helper on Matt Boldy's game-winning goal soon after being bumped reflects his versatility in this star-studded lineup.

Matthew Tkachuk: 10/10

The heart and soul of the Stanley Cup champs down in Florida brought that same grit and goal-scoring to the top line of the American squad, leading the club with two goals and an assist — including one to help set up brother Brady's third-period marker — and was named the game's top player for his efforts. Watching him play alongside his younger brother was a joy.

Brady Tkachuk: 10/10

From a gritty first goal to get the Americans on the board to a pretty backhander to help close things out in a statement game, Brady Tkachuk's night read like a storybook. After earning a promotion mid-game from the third line to the first, Brady brought the checking-line energy to the top trio, finishing the matchup with a team-leading eight hits to go with his pair of goals.

Jake Guentzel: 8/10

Thursday marked Guentzel's first game representing his nation at any level, and he made the most of the opportunity, hitting his stride — along with the rest of his squad — in the third period. Just 11 seconds after assisting on Matthew Tkachuk's power-play marker to open the third frame, Guentzel got a goal of his own with a five-hole shot to give the Americans a solid 4-1 lead.

Auston Matthews: 8/10

The chemistry and style of the Brothers Tkachuk made for the biggest story of the game, but Matthews' instant chemistry with linemate Jack Hughes looked pretty natural, too — not to mention, really fun. The boos that rained down early on from the Montreal crowd cooled down, but his game heated up — and while he wasn't prolific on the stat sheet, tallying just one assist, Matthews' team-leading ice time among USA forwards tells us just how happy head coach Mike Sullivan is with his captain's tournament-opening efforts.

Jack Hughes: 8/10

With three shots on net but none that lit the lamp, Hughes' strong play alongside his captain and Guentzel wasn't really reflected on the scoresheet, but considering his quick chemistry with his captain, Mat Hughes — can we call them that? — seems due for a breakthrough soon.

J.T. Miller: 7/10

The early theme for Team USA in this tournament? Physicality. Miller, known for being a vocal teammate and a physical presence, wasted no time sending that message and setting the tone with a net-front scuffle in Finland's zone in the first minute of the game. He may have also made the save of the matchup, blocking a shot from Teuvo Teravainen that would've seen the Finns regain their first-period lead.

Matthew Boldy: 8/10

After setting up Brady Tkachuk's goal to tie things up 1-1 in the first period, Boldy scored one of his own in the second when he smartly tipped a shot from Wild teammate Brock Faber that ultimately served as the game-winner. During a post-game interview, Matthew Tkachuk credited Boldy's marker with giving the team a much-needed jolt of energy in what had been a tight game through much of the first 40 minutes.

Vincent Trocheck: 7/10

Known for his solid faceoff percentage in league play, Trocheck once again provided a reliable presence on the dot. He delivered a few well-timed hits early and came up clutch with some blocked shots, too.

Brock Nelson: 6/10

Nelson pounced on a puck early in the first frame and caught Saros by surprise with a sharp shot that beat him — but not the crossbar — in what was an otherwise uneventful night for the depth forward, whose 9:42 of ice time ranked lowest on the team.

Dylan Larkin: 7/10

It's hard to stand out when you're playing on the fourth line of a star-studded club, but Larkin's role on this squad is well-defined, and he played it accordingly. Larkin, who played just 11:14 Thursday night, was held off the scoresheet but still made an impact with some solid PK play and a trio of hits in what was a physical game.

Zach Werenski: 9/10

With Quinn Hughes unable to play due to injury, all eyes were fixed on whether Werenski — who co-owns the league lead in scoring among defencemen alongside Hughes — could pick up the slack. The answer was a resounding yes — No. 8 was great Thursday night, contributing a team-high three assists while logging major minutes with a team-leading 21:45.

Charlie McAvoy: 7/10

Like Matthews, McAvoy didn't exactly get the warmest reception in Montreal. His game took a little while to heat up, too. Suiting up alongside Werenski, McAvoy didn't stand out and, in fact, led USA defenders in giveaways, with three.

Jacob Slavin: 7/10

Sullivan turned to Slavin early and often in this matchup, the Hurricanes defenceman logging the second-most minutes on the squad. He came up with two blocked shots in what was otherwise a quietly solid effort for the veteran rearguard.

Adam Fox: 7/10

He wasn't the best defender on the ice Thursday night, but let's consider this one a chemistry-builder. Having Fox stride alongside another smooth skater in Slavin is an enticing duo, and it showed.

Noah Hanifin: 6/10

The only USA defenceman with a minus rating and ice time below 15 minutes, Hanifin's night was fairly forgettable, save for a breakaway scoring chance that saw him sprung from the penalty box but stumped by Saros.

Brock Faber: 8/10

Faber's heads-up play from the blue line late in the second period, which saw him fire a puck on net for Wild teammate Matt Boldy to tip, was a beautiful sight for those watching in The State of Hockey. The youngest player on USA's squad fit right in on the club's loaded blue line, getting plenty of opportunity in the wake of Quinn Hughes' absence.

Connor Hellebuyck: 8/10

The NHL's top goaltender in just about every stat that matters, Hellebuyck didn't exactly steal the show on Thursday night — but he didn't have to. Aside from a knuckle-puck that fooled him stick-side early in the first frame, giving the Finns the game-opening score, Hellebuyck held strong with a 20-save performance.

[Sportsnet.ca / Finland Player Ratings: Jokiharju the lone scorer](#)

By Kristina Rutherford – February 14, 2025

For a time, it looked really promising for the underdog Finns, right up until the third period when the Americans went on a scoring spree led by the Tkachuk brothers, who combined for four goals on the night and helped blow the game wide open.

And so, in the end, this Suomi-USA matchup in the 4 Nations Face-Off ended the way many figured it would: The favourites crushed the underdogs by a score of 6-1.

But let's not forget that on Thursday night in Montreal, for a stretch of nearly three minutes in the first period, Finland had the lead in this one, thanks to defender Henri Jokiharju, who contributed his team's lone goal. It was a heck of a way to start the tournament for the team that's been decimated by injuries to their D corps, with Rasmus Ristolainen, Miro Heiskanen, and Jani Hakanpaa all out. That's the very reason Jokiharju is in.

Finland couldn't weather the American storm, though. Late in the second, Matt Boldy beat Finnish netminder Juse Saros on a tip, and then the wheels fell off in the third: Matthew Tkachuk on the power play, Jake Guentzel 11 seconds later, Brady Tkachuk with his second of the game, and then Matthew with his, and it was over.

But let's take a look at how Finland did, keeping in mind that this team from a nation of fewer than 6 million people (America has more than 330 million) battled hard — and it truly showed for forty minutes.

Aleksander Barkov, 7/10

The captain won some key faceoffs, led Finnish forwards in ice time, and his best chance came in the third period, off a quick shot on a four-on-three power play. Barkov led his team with five shots on net.

Artturi Lehkonen, 7/10

The former Canadiens forward got the loudest cheer from fans during introductions as he stood on the ice to start the game. Among his four shots on net was a deflection that nearly converted, and could've really changed the trajectory of this game.

Mikko Rantanen, 5/10

Despite his incredible skill, back-to-back 100-point seasons in the NHL, and his 19 minutes of ice time on Thursday, Rantanen wasn't noticeable. Jake Guentzel blocked one of his shots, and he didn't register a single one on Connor Hellebuyck. It wasn't an encouraging start from one of Finland's star forwards.

Patrik Laine, 7/10

Laine was buzzing and noticeable at times, and he had a few good looks, including a couple of one-timers on power plays. His best chance went high and wide. Laine got lots of love from the Montreal crowd.

Sebastian Aho, 6/10

Aho looked fast out there, but he was most noticeable on a couple of forced passes. On a two-on-one late in the second, he forced one over to Roope Hintz, and they didn't register a shot. Neither did Aho, all game long.

Roope Hintz, 6/10

He saw 16:42 of ice time — third among Finnish forwards — but overall, his line with Laine and Aho didn't get too much cooking, and Hintz also didn't get any rubber on net. The good news: All three of Aho, Laine and Hintz were even in the plus-minus category.

Eetu Luostarinen, 6/10

His best shift came in the first period, when he fired a snap shot on net and then laid a hit on American defender Charlie McAvoy.

Anton Lundell, 8/10

Lundell was stellar on the penalty kill in the first two periods, even generating a partial breakaway at the end of a shift and getting a shot off with one hand. He worked hard deep in the American zone to generate chances.

Mikael Granlund, 9/10

Granlund was on a three-on-two with a pair of defenders in the first period, and had the presence of mind to feed Jokiharju with a nice feed that led to Finland's first goal. He also blocked a pair of shots.

Joel Armia, 8/10

He had a really good chance from the high slot but just missed the net. Armia worked hard to create offensive chances, and he won a lot of battles.

Teuvo Teräväinen, 7/10

He had a little more than 10 minutes of ice time, but Teräväinen looked good on an early power play in the first period, running point and generating a couple of early chances on net.

Erik Haula, 8/10

He blocked a shot on an American power play, and was key on the penalty kill in shutting down weapons like captain Auston Matthews and Jack Hughes. Haula also had a breakaway in the second period when it was 1-1, but Hellebuyck made the shoulder save, his biggest of the game. Haula also laid down a team-leading three hits (Finland doesn't hit much).

Henri Jokiharju, 10/10

A late addition to this team due to injuries, he made quite an impact. Jokiharju scored the opener in this game on a three-on-two with a knuckle puck wrister that beat Hellebuyck over the shoulder, less than halfway through the first period. And with that, Jokiharju matches his goal total this year with the Buffalo Sabres.

Niko Mikkola, 9/10

Against a potent and physical American offence, Mikkola logged a lot of hard minutes, absorbed a lot of Tkachuk hits, and was solid defensively. He routinely battled to break the puck out and keep Finland out of trouble, especially in the first two periods. Only Esa Lindell played more in Thursday's loss.

Esa Lindell, 9/10

It's Lindell who paced all Finnish players with 24:31 of ice time. Leading this defensive unit that's been ravaged by injury isn't easy, and Lindell put in hard work on Thursday, for no reward.

Nikolas Matinpalo, 6/10

He had a pair of shots on net, and was also minus-2 on the night. Truly a tough assignment for a guy added to the roster five days ago in place of an injured Ristolainen.

Urho Vaakanainen, 6/10

He was also added to Finland's roster earlier this month due to injury, and saw the least ice of any Finnish defender. Again, a very tough assignment, and he was minus-2 with one blocked shot.

Olli Maatta, 9/10

He picked up an assist on Finland's first goal, and kick-started the play with a quick breakout pass before jumping into the rush to create a three-on-two (featuring a pair of Finnish defenders). Maatta then drove through the middle to the net, creating chaos in front to help get his team on the board first.

Juuse Saros, 7/10

Saros gave up six goals, but he still earns a pretty high mark here because he certainly gave his team a chance. Stealing a game against this potent American offence was a tall order, and for nearly two periods, Saros was doing just that. He made some great saves early on Matthews' line (his crossbar also gets some credit). Matthew Tkachuk's first goal — a point shot on the power-play — looked like it surprised Saros, and after that, the onslaught followed. The Finnish netminder faced 32 shots.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL's World Cup announcement signals return of consistent international play](https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/world-cup-announcement-signals-return-of-consistent-international-play)

By Luke Fox – February 14, 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 NHLPA 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).

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.”