



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • February 11, 2026

The News & Observer

Carolina Hurricanes star Sebastian Aho looks to help Finland defend Olympic gold

By: Anna Laible

Sebastian Aho, right, of the Carolina Hurricanes and Team Finland, chats with Oliver Kapanen during training at the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics at Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena on Feb. 9, 2026 in Milan, Italy.

Milan, Italy

Heavyweight hockey favorites Canada and the United States missed the gold medal at the last Winter Olympics Games, taken down by another top world contender, Finland.

Now, after an unexpected win at the Beijing Olympics in 2022, the Finns are out to defend their title, with a load of NHL-based reinforcements that include Carolina Hurricanes star Sebastian Aho.

Aho's path to his Olympic debut hasn't been linear, but it has been worth it.

Born in Rauma, Finland, Aho began playing in his home country, making his professional debut with Oulun Kärpät in the Finnish SM-liiga, during the 2013–14 season. He was then selected by the Hurricanes in the second round (No. 35) of the 2015 NHL Draft.

A three-time NHL All-Star, the 28-year-old Aho has already made his fair share of NHL history: He was the third player in NHL history to start a season (2018-19) with at least one assist in 12 straight games, along with Wayne Gretzky (Edmonton, 1982-83) and Ken Linseman (Boston, 1985-86).

Currently in his 10th NHL season, Aho is hoping to help the Hurricanes get over the championship hump and help the franchise secure its first Stanley Cup since 2006. But before he looks to help them make a deep playoff run, his focus has shifted to the Olympic Games.

Carolina Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho (20) reacts after scoring on Florida Panthers goalie Sergei Bobrovsky (72) to take a 2-0 lead in the first period during Game 5 to take a 2-0 of their Stanley Cup series on May 28, 2025 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Carolina Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho (20) reacts after scoring on Florida Panthers goalie Sergei Bobrovsky (72) to take a 2-0 lead in the first period during Game 5 to take a 2-0

of their Stanley Cup series on May 28, 2025 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett Raleigh

'Dream come true' for Aho

In the Olympic lead-up, Aho was one six initial players named to the Finnish roster. The excitement for these games has been growing for Aho since that moment last June.

It still might not have set in yet for Aho that he is an Olympian representing his home country.

"It's unreal," Aho said. "It's a dream come true for sure. I mean those are probably some of my favorite memories as a hockey fan watching Team Finland play in the Olympics."

After watching so many Olympic Games, Aho is finally competing in one. He knows the power these games have for country pride.

"Especially back home," Aho said, "I feel like (the Olympics) unites the whole country and everyone's rooting for the same team and I think it's so cool."

Family time amid the competition

Outside of competing, Aho is looking forward to the food in Italy and making memories. He is now a father, too, with an eight-month-old daughter, so he is playing for more than just himself.

Thousands of fans will be watching from back home, but Aho will have people supporting him in Italy too.

"Just experiencing the whole Olympics," he said. "My family will be there, which is awesome so (hope to) hang out, go watch some sporting events with them, and just have a good time. Hopefully play great hockey and bring home a gold medal."

Finland will begin its gold medal defense Wednesday against Slovakia, and will face Scandinavian rival Sweden on Friday in Group B preliminary round games.

After dreaming of this moment for years, the time is finally here for Aho.

Anna Laible is a student with UNC Media Hub, a program with the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media, reporting from the Winter Olympics in Milan, Italy.



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The Athletic

Which NHL players are at the 2026 Winter Olympics? A guide for every fan base

By: The Athletic NHL Staff

The wait is finally over.

After 12 years and multiple hurdles, NHL players are set to return to the ice at the Winter Olympics in Milan today.

Nearly 150 total players from all 32 NHL teams will be taking part. Who are the most interesting names to watch? What are the biggest storylines for each team's fan base at the Games?

The Athletic asked the NHL staff, and here's what they said.

Please note: Players who were not on the NHL roster for their team's final game before the Olympic break were not included in this list.

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Anaheim Ducks

Lukáš Dostál, G (CZE)

Mikael Granlund, F (FIN)

Radko Gudas, D (CZE)

Jackson LaCombe, D (USA)

It will be interesting to see if LaCombe manages to crack a talented United States blue line after making the roster as an injury replacement for Seth Jones. But while the experienced Granlund and Gudas will play important minutes for their countries, the eyes should be on Dostál, as he could be the key to medal hopes for the Czech Republic, also known as Czechia. When the 25-year-old goalie is at his best, he has the ability to steal a game. In international play, Dostál is coming off winning gold in the 2025 World Championship. — Eric Stephens

Boston Bruins

Henri Jokiharju, D (FIN)

Joonas Korpišalo, G (FIN)

Elias Lindholm, F (SWE)

Hampus Lindholm, D (SWE)

Charlie McAvoy, D (USA)

David Pastrnak, F (CZE)

Jeremy Swayman, G (USA)

Could Swayman be the starting goalie for Team USA? He was the No. 3 at the 4 Nations Face-Off last February, behind Connor Hellebuyck and Jake Oettinger, but he is leading both

of his Olympic teammates in goals saved above expectation this season. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres

Rasmus Dahlin, D (SWE)

Tage Thompson, F (USA)

Thompson is making his first trip to the Olympics and was one of the players who cracked Team USA after getting left off the 4 Nations roster. His gold medal goal at the World Championship likely helped his case. These will be the biggest games of Thompson's career, and it should be valuable experience for when he returns to Buffalo for the Sabres' playoff push after the break. — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames

Martin Pospisil, F (SVK)

After battling a concussion for much of the year, seeing Pospisil represent Slovakia at the Games will be a win in itself. When he's healthy, he can play physically and contribute offense. He'll be leaned upon for that for an underdog Slovakian team that will rub shoulders with giants at this tournament. In an alternate world, Calgary would have two Swedes at the Games. But captain Mikael Backlund was snubbed and Rasmus Andersson is now a member of the Vegas Golden Knights. — Julian McKenzie

Carolina Hurricanes

Sebastian Aho, F (FIN)

Frederik Andersen, G (DEN)

Nikolaj Ehlers, F (DEN)

Seth Jarvis, F (CAN)

Jacob Slavin, D (USA)

The Hurricanes have five players in the Olympic tournament, and while Denmark's top two players (Andersen and Ehlers) are both on loan from Carolina, it's the other three who will draw the most attention. Team USA's Slavin, Finland's Aho and Canada's Jarvis should all be in medal contention. Both Slavin and Aho will play key roles for their teams, and Jarvis' late addition adds two-way acumen to Canada's bottom six. — Cory Lavalette

Chicago Blackhawks

Teuvo Teräväinen, F (FIN)

Teräväinen is the lone Blackhawks player representative at the Olympics. Although now in his 30s, Teräväinen remains one of Finland's premier playmakers. He is expected to be



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utilized in a top-six role and on the power play. His vision and passing ability are still at a high level. With Finland, he'll have a chance to be reunited with his former Carolina Hurricanes teammate Sebastian Aho. As with the Blackhawks, Finland will probably want Teräväinen to shoot more than he does. — Scott Powers

Colorado Avalanche

Joel Kiviranta, F (FIN)

Gabriel Landeskog, F (SWE)

Artturi Lehkonen, F (FIN)

Nathan MacKinnon, F (CAN)

Cale Makar, D (CAN)

Martin Necas, F (CZE)

Brock Nelson, F (USA)

Devon Toews, D (CAN)

There are plenty of great storylines surrounding the players Colorado is sending to the Olympics, but my favorite is the underdog potential of the Czechs, and the role Necas would need to play for it to come to fruition. Czechia doesn't have the depth of Canada and the U.S., but they have high-end scoring talent and excellent goaltending, both of which can turn the tide in a short tournament like this. If Necas shines, the Czechs will be dangerous. — Jesse Granger

Columbus Blue Jackets

Elvis Merzlikins, G (LAT)

Zach Werenski, D (USA)

Werenski's status soared after last season's 4 Nations Face-Off, and that type of international exposure helped him finish second in Norris Trophy voting. This is an even bigger stage for Team USA's 28-year-old, who currently ranks second among NHL defensemen in goals (20) and points (62). It will be interesting to see what role Merzlikins carves out with Latvia, as Pittsburgh's Artūrs Šilovs is also on the roster. — Aaron Portline

Dallas Stars

Radek Faksa, F (CZE)

Thomas Harley, D (CAN)

Miro Heiskanen, D (FIN)

Roope Hintz, F (FIN)

Esa Lindell, D (FIN)

Jake Oettinger, G (USA)

Mikko Rantanen, F (FIN)

Faksa is one of the few Czechs who weren't on the 2024 World Championship gold medalist team. Faksa will be a valuable penalty killer and defensive forward for a team with real medal aspirations. Harley earned Canada's trust as a late injury replacement at 4 Nations and will be part of a dynamic back end for the gold favorites. Heiskanen is one of the best all-around defensemen in the league and will log heavy minutes in Finland's suffocating defensive system. With Aleksander Barkov out, Hintz could be Finland's No. 1 center.

Lindell is yet another member of Dallas' so-called Finnish Mafia; he could pair with Heiskanen on the top pairing. It's Connor Hellebuyck's job to lose in net, but Oettinger is as good a backup as there is in this tournament, capable of stepping in at any time. — Mark Lazerus

Detroit Red Wings

Dylan Larkin, F (USA)

Lucas Raymond, F (SWE)

Moritz Seider, D (GER)

Larkin was one of the breakout stories at the 4 Nations. He was a difference-maker for the U.S. against Canada, and they will need him to be again. But while his role on a top-level contender will put him perhaps most in the spotlight for American viewers, Raymond and Seider will play perhaps even larger roles for their teams, with Raymond one of Sweden's most important offensive creators and Seider expected to shoulder a massive workload for Germany. — Max Bultman

Edmonton Oilers

Leon Draisaitl, F (GER)

Connor McDavid, F (CAN)

Josh Samanski, F (GER)

For Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, the 2026 Olympic Games offer a unique opportunity to add to their career accomplishments. The NHL's 12-year hiatus from the games had a major impact on the generation of talents who entered the NHL after 2014. Both men have competed for their countries internationally, but nothing close to Olympic level. Both will build on substantial legacies. Draisaitl will be Germany's flag bearer for the games, and will be joined by Oilers rookie Josh Samanski. — Allan Mitchell

Florida Panthers

Uvis Balinskis, D (LAT)

Sam Bennett, F (CAN)

Gustav Forsling, D (SWE)

Anton Lundell, F, (FIN)

Eetu Luostarinen, F (FIN)

Niko Mikkola, D (FIN)

Brad Marchand, F (CAN)

Sam Reinhart, F (CAN)

Matthew Tkachuk, F (USA)

Sandis Vilmanis, F (LAT)

With 10 players, the two-time defending Cup champs have the NHL's largest Olympic contingent now that Bennett has been added for Team Canada. Florida has a ton of representation among the medal favorites, too, with three star Canadian forwards wearing the Maple Leaf, Matthew Tkachuk as a top threat for Team USA and Gustav Forsling logging huge minutes on Sweden's blue line. Add in three Finns and two Latvians, and the Panthers boast a veritable United Nations of players at the Games. — James Mirtle



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Los Angeles Kings

Joel Armia, F (FIN)

Drew Doughty, D (CAN)

Kevin Fiala, F (SUI)

Adrian Kempe, F (SWE)

Darcy Kuemper, G (CAN)

With Kuemper getting his first Olympic shot and Doughty in his final shot, those are nice stories for fans following the aging veterans, but it's unlikely that both will play a significant role. Armia and Fiala should be integral pieces to their teams' efforts. But if we're looking at someone who could be a featured performer on a gold medal contender, it's Kempe. A great skater with a terrific shot that can play two-way hockey, Kempe showed in last year's 4 Nations that he can be a factor for Sweden. — Eric Stephens

Minnesota Wild

Matt Boldy, F (USA)

Joel Eriksson Ek, F (SWE)

Brock Faber, D (USA)

Filip Gustavsson, G (SWE)

Quinn Hughes, D (USA)

Marcus Johansson, F (SWE)

Nico Sturm, F (GER)

Jesper Wallstedt, G (SWE)

Boldy has been a major driver for the Wild this season, forming a dynamic duo with Kirill Kaprizov. And he's coming into the Olympics hot, having racked up a hat trick against Nashville in the Wild's last game before the break. His 32 goals are tied with Kaprizov and three other players for third in the NHL at the break. He has also been an X-factor on the penalty kill, which is a bonus. — Joe Smith

Montreal Canadiens

Oliver Kapanen, F (FIN)

Juraj Slafkovský, F (SVK)

Nick Suzuki, F (CAN)

Alexandre Texier, F (FRA)

Most eyes will be on Canada's Suzuki, but the Canadiens' player to watch is Slafkovský for Slovakia. He is one of his country's most famous athletes — alongside Olympic slalom ski champion Petra Vlhová — and Slovak hockey fans have anticipated this moment since Slafkovský was 15. His MVP performance at the 2022 Beijing Olympics vaulted him to the No. 1 pick in the 2022 NHL Draft. Where might this performance vault him next? — Arpon Basu

Nashville Predators

Filip Forsberg, F (SWE)

Erik Haula, F (FIN)

Roman Josi, D (SUI)

Juuse Saros, G (FIN)

Josi is the lone Pred making his second Olympic appearance, while the other three are debuting. The greatest Swiss player of all time, Josi will be critical to his team's chances of surprising. Finland is hoping Saros goes on a heater and plays better than he has this season in Nashville, while Haula will contribute. Forsberg will be central to Sweden's offensive attack. — Joe Rexrode

New Jersey Devils

Jesper Bratt, F (SWE)

Nico Hischier, F (SUI)

Jack Hughes, F (USA)

Jacob Markström, G (SWE)

Timo Meier, F (SUI)

Šimon Nemeč, D (SVK)

Jonas Siegenthaler, D (SUI)

The Devils' Swiss players have had success at the world championships — each has a pair of silvers on their resume — and will now have a chance to threaten for a medal on the Olympic stage. Hughes should be good to go for the Olympics after dealing with a lower-body injury. Bratt and Markström should contend for the podium with Sweden. Nemeč has an Olympic bronze from 2022, but the Slovaks have a harder path with NHL players back at the tournament. — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders

Bo Horvat, F (CAN)

Ondrej Palat, F (CZE)

The Islanders are sending two players to the Olympics: Horvat and Palat. Horvat getting named to Team Canada sparked some conversation because there were some noteworthy center snubs, such as Mark Scheifele and Connor Bedard. But his excellent start to the season, play-driving and versatility earned him a spot here. Palat, on the other hand, has the chance to show he still has those playoff chops that earned him hype in Tampa Bay for Czechia. — Shayna Goldman

New York Rangers

J.T. Miller, F (USA)

Vincent Trocheck, F (USA)

Mika Zibanejad, F (SWE)

Miller and Trocheck are likely to assume bottom-six roles with Team USA. It's not a guarantee they'll both be in the lineup every night. Trocheck could be a scratch at points, though his ability to win faceoffs and play on the penalty kill might lead to Mike Sullivan playing him. Zibanejad, meanwhile, will be a mainstay in the Swedish lineup, barring injury. Though the Rangers have disappointed, he's had a strong season and will look to continue that in Milan. — Peter Baugh

Ottawa Senators

Lars Eller, F (DEN)

Nikolas Matinpalo, D (FIN)

Jake Sanderson, D (USA)

Mads Søgaard, G (DEN)



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Tim Stützle, F (GER)

Brady Tkachuk, F (USA)

Eller and Sogaard for Denmark and Matinpalo for Finland could be nice stories. Tim Stützle teaming up with friend Leon Draisaitl will also be noteworthy. But the spotlight will shine brightest on Team USA with Brady Tkachuk and Sanderson at the forefront. Tkachuk has craved high-level games, while Sanderson continues to impress and improve at every level he plays. If the U.S. wins gold, both players figure to be part of the reason why. — Julian McKenzie

Philadelphia Flyers

Rasmus Ristolainen, D (FIN)

Travis Sanheim, D (CAN)

Dan Vladar, G (CZE)

Sanheim made a nice account of himself at the 4 Nations, steadily working his way up the lineup. Ristolainen — lately Sanheim's partner on the Flyers' top defense pair — missed the first two months of the season and has been injury-plagued the last few years, so the Flyers may simply be hoping he makes it out of the tournament in one piece. It's uncertain whether Vladar will be the starter for Czechia — Dostál was one of their first players named, but Vladar has better numbers. — Kevin Kurz

Pittsburgh Penguins

Sidney Crosby, F (CAN)

Erik Karlsson, D (SWE)

Rickard Rakell, F (SWE)

Artūrs Šilovs, G (LAT)

Karlsson and Rakell will represent Team Sweden, and Šilovs will be a goaltender for Team Latvia. One member of the Penguins, however, will be in the spotlight more than perhaps anyone else in the tournament. Captain Crosby has also been the captain of Team Canada for more than 12 years. There is pressure and attention on him, which is nothing new. — Josh Yohe

San Jose Sharks

Macklin Celebrini, F (CAN)

Philipp Kurashev, F (SUI)

Pavol Regenda, F (SVK)

Alexander Wennberg, F (SWE)

After a rookie season good enough for a third-place Calder Trophy finish, Celebrini has taken off like a rocket in Year 2. At only 19, the North Vancouver native has carried the Sharks and forced his way onto a stacked Canada roster with a monster season. Can you imagine if he has a pivotal game-changing moment on this massive Olympic stage? Tracking his role as the tournament progresses and how he does with the minutes he gets will be one of the storylines in Milan that's worth watching. — Eric Stephens

Seattle Kraken

Oscar Fisker Molgaard, F (DEN)

Philipp Grubauer, G (GER)

Kaapo Kakko, F (FIN)

Eeli Tolvanen, F (FIN)

Grubauer has enjoyed a huge bounce-back for the Kraken this season, and has an opportunity to keep it going for a spoiler Germany team that has a shot to pull off a significant upset (or two) at this tournament. Kakko and Tolvanen should play depth roles for a Finnish team that, even if they're dealing with some key injuries, is always a significant medal threat at the Olympic tournament. — Thomas Drance

St. Louis Blues

Jordan Binnington, G (CAN)

Philip Broberg, D (SWE)

Dalibor Dvorsky, F (SVK)

Colton Parayko, D (CAN)

Pius Suter, F (SUI)

The Blues have five players at the Olympics and one — Jordan Binnington — is undoubtedly a hot topic. He made some eye-popping, game-saving stops for Canada in last February's 4 Nations Face-Off. But with an 8-17-6 record and a career-low .864 save percentage for the Blues this season, the country's hockey fans aren't excited about Binnington being in the crease again for the Canadians. So he'll be out to prove himself again. — Jeremy Rutherford

Tampa Bay Lightning

Oliver Bjorkstrand, F (DEN)

Erik Cernak, D (SVK)

Zemgus Girgensons, F (LAT)

Jake Guentzel, F (USA)

Brandon Hagel, F (CAN)

Victor Hedman, D (SWE)

Pontus Holmberg, F (SWE)

J.J. Moser, D (SUI)

The Lightning originally had a league-high 10 reps going to the Olympics, but injuries will hold both Anthony Cirelli and Brayden Point out of action. Brandon Hagel will be the lone Team Canada skater for Tampa, and he could make a stronger name for himself internationally after his 4 Nations play. Victor Hedman's always one to watch for Sweden. Jake Guentzel is too for USA as his offense will be key for a team that snubbed so many high-octane scorers. — Shayna Goldman

Each of 32 NHL teams has at least one representative for the Milan Cortina Games. Gregory Shamus / Getty Images

Toronto Maple Leafs

Oliver Ekman-Larsson, D (SWE)

William Nylander, F (SWE)

Auston Matthews, F (USA)

The Leafs have two players expected to lead their team to a medal. They have different experiences doing so: William Nylander constantly hits a high gear for Sweden, winning MVP



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and a gold medal at the 2017 worlds. Auston Matthews, however, has never won a gold for USA or been consistently dominant after the Under-18 level. Matthews is captain and can be one of the world's best goal scorers. Doing so internationally will bolster his resume. Oliver Ekman-Larsson also joins Sweden in a depth role. — Joshua Kloke

Utah Mammoth

Clayton Keller, F (USA)

Olli Maatta, D (FIN)

JJ Peterka, F (GER)

Karel Vejmelka, G (CZE)

Keller and Tage Thompson were the only new forwards the USA added to its roster compared to the 4 Nations tournament. Keller was phenomenal for the Americans at the World Championships last summer, scoring 10 points in 10 games and captaining his country to gold for the first time in 92 years. It will be fascinating to see whether he can earn top-six minutes. — Harman Dayal

Vancouver Canucks

Teddy Blueger, F (LAT)

Filip Hronek, D (CZE)

David Kämpf, F (CZE)

Kevin Lankinen, G (FIN)

Elias Pettersson, F (SWE)

The Canucks will have five players at the Olympics, with some rich storylines for a fan base that hasn't had much opportunity to watch meaningful (or even especially competitive) hockey. Can Elias Pettersson keep up with the pace of best-of-best this year, after struggling at the 4 Nations? Can Filip Hronek lead a dark-horse Czechia side to a medal (or even to gold)? Can pending UFAs Teddy Blueger and David Kämpf avoid injury and enhance their trade value? — Thomas Drance

Vegas Golden Knights

Rasmus Andersson, D (SWE)

Jack Eichel, F (USA)

Noah Hanifin, D (USA)

Tomas Hertl, F (CZE)

Mitch Marner, F (CAN)

Akira Schmid, G (SUI)

Mark Stone, F (CAN)

Shea Theodore, D (CAN)

The Golden Knights are sending more than a third of their roster to the Olympics, and the battle between the Canadians and Americans should be particularly dramatic. Vegas has major pieces on both sides of the rivalry. Coach Bruce Cassidy said he used his gold medal from the 4 Nations Face-Off as a golf ball marker on the green to taunt Jack Eichel last summer after he, Stone, Marner and Theodore came out on top last February. Eichel and Noah Hanifin will be seeking redemption. — Jesse Granger

Washington Capitals

Martin Fehervary, D (SVK)

Logan Thompson, G (CAN)

Tom Wilson, F (CAN)

Fehervary's presence is a good excuse to watch Slovakia's games. Thompson could be Canada's starter before you know it. Wilson, though, might be one of the most compelling players in the tournament. Nobody else has his skill set, and nobody knows quite how he'll be deployed by Jon Cooper and the Canadian staff. — Sean Gentile

Winnipeg Jets

Kyle Connor, F (USA)

Connor Hellebuyck, G (USA)

Josh Morrissey, D (CAN)

Nino Niederreiter, F (SUI)

Will Connor still play a prominent role for the U.S. after last year's disappointing 4 Nations, which saw him scratched for the final against Canada? There's no denying that he's one of their most talented forwards, but it wasn't easy for him to build chemistry with new linemates and the coaching staff had him on a pretty short leash. Hellebuyck, meanwhile, is still the USA's projected starter. — Harman Dayal



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Five Canes players ready to suit up for the Winter Olympics

By: Chris Lea

Playing hockey in Raleigh at Lenovo center is pretty sweet, but!

"This is the Olympics so I think it'll be that much better," Jaccou Slavin said.

Nothing beats playing for your home country in the Olympics... with your fellow countrymen.

"Every time you see those guys you share a special bond," Sebastian Aho said.

It's a chance to go for the gold, and platform your home country.

"I'm always proud to put on the Danish national team jersey and represent Denmark," Nikolaj Ehlers said.

Five Carolina Hurricanes players will have the honor and the privilege to suit up for their country's as hockey is set to begin in the 2026 Winter Olympics. THE USA, Canada, Finland... and Denmark are all represented.

Hurricanes Defenseman Jacob Slavin gets to represent the USA and is looking forward to the high level of competition.

"High skill, high pace, anyone can make a play," Slavin said. "So you just have to be prepared for that, but as a defenseman you can have fun with that too."

Finland is a small country of just 5.6 Million people or about half the size of north Carolina

So Canes center Sebastian Aho grew up with many of his Finnish teammates.

"Being able to represent Finland in the Olympics it's an unbelievable honor and to put that jersey on I feel like the whole country united behind us," Aho said. "It's a big part of Finnish culture."

And what's better than one Dane? Two Danes! The Canes Great Danes Nikolaj Ehlers and Freddie Andersen will be familiar faces for one another. as they represent Denmark.

"I know most of those guys and were like a family," Ehlers said.

"A lot of great players went before us to get Denmark to where it's at right now," Andersen said.

Canadian player Brayden Point is dealing with a lower body injury. So on February 5th Canada announced his replacement: Seth Jarvis. Oh, Canada, why'd you take so long to include Jarvy?!

Either way there are five Canes playing for four different countries. All looking to medal.

Let's go canes!



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Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026: Group C preview

By: Nicholas J. Cotsonika

Team USA looks to win gold for 1st time since 1980; Germany arrives with 'high expectations'

MILAN -- The Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026 men's hockey tournament begins Wednesday when the 12 nations compete in three groups.

Group A consists of Canada, Czechia, France and Switzerland. Finland, Italy, Sweden and Slovakia will play in Group B. Group C features Denmark, Germany, Latvia and the United States.

The games will be televised on NBC's family of networks in the U.S. and on CBC in Canada.

Each team will play the other teams in its group in round-robin play. The three teams that finish first, along with the highest-placed second-place team, advance to the quarterfinals.

Each of the other eight teams will be seeded by order of finish in pool play and play each other to determine the other four quarterfinalists.

The qualification playoffs are Feb. 17, followed by the quarterfinals the next day. The semifinals are Feb. 20, and the bronze medal game is Feb. 21. The gold medal game is Feb. 22, the last day of Olympic competition.

Here's a look at each Group C team, in predicted order of finish:

UNITED STATES

Coach: Mike Sullivan

Most recent medal: Silver, 2010

Gold medals: 1960, 1980

Schedule: Feb. 12, Latvia (3:10 p.m. ET); Feb. 14, Denmark (3:10 p.m. ET); Feb. 15, Germany (3:10 p.m. ET)

Outlook: The Americans are trying to win an Olympic gold medal in men's hockey for the first time since 1980, when they upset the Soviet Union in the "Miracle on Ice" and defeated Finland to clinch the gold at Lake Placid. They're also trying to win a best-on-best tournament for the first time since the 1996 World Cup of Hockey. The U.S. won Olympic silver in Salt Lake City in 2002 and Vancouver in 2010, and the U.S. went to the championship game of the 4 Nations Face-Off last season. Each time -- the last two times in overtime -- it lost to Canada. That's why, in TV ads ahead of Milan, Vegas Golden Knights center Jack Eichel said the Americans are hoping for

"Canadian tears." General manager Bill Guerin and his staff liked the chemistry the U.S. had at 4 Nations and kept most of the roster intact. Of the 25 players on the Olympic roster, 21 played at 4 Nations, and that doesn't include Minnesota Wild defenseman Quinn Hughes, who missed the tournament because of injury. The U.S. is one of three teams comprised entirely of NHL players, along with Canada and Sweden. Three of the top four American goal-scorers in the NHL this season are not on this roster: Montreal Canadiens forward Cole Caufield (32 goals), Dallas Stars forward Jason Robertson (32) and Detroit Red Wings forward Alex DeBrincat (30). Still, there is a lot of firepower, and this team has defense and grit. Although none of the goalies has been at his best lately, goaltending should be a strength. Expectations could not be higher. It's gold or bust. "Really believe in our team, really believe in the build, the makeup," Ottawa Senators captain Brady Tkachuk said. "I think experiencing what we did in 4 Nations, it just created that much more fire to win gold."

GERMANY

Coach: Harold Kreis

Most recent medal: Silver, 2018

Gold medals: None

Schedule: Feb. 12, Denmark (3:10 p.m. ET); Feb. 14, Latvia (6:10 a.m. ET); Feb. 15, United States (12:10 p.m. ET)

Outlook: Edmonton Oilers forward Leon Draisaitl carried the flag for Germany at the opening ceremony Friday. Draisaitl is one of the best players in the world, fifth in the NHL with 80 points (29 goals, 51 assists) in 55 games this season. He's the best NHL player in German history with 1,036 points (428 goals, 608 assists) in 845 games. That's more than double the next closest player, forward Marco Sturm, who had 487 points (242 goals, 245 assists) in 938 NHL games from 1997-2012 and is now coach of the Boston Bruins. Germany has six other NHL players on its roster -- forwards Tim Stutzle (Senators), JJ Peterka (Utah Mammoth), Josh Samanski (Oilers) and Nico Sturm (Wild). Moritz Seider (Red Wings) -- whom Marco Sturm has called "our Leon Draisaitl, just on 'D'" -- anchors the defense. Philipp Grubauer (Seattle Kraken) is in goal. The Germans won silver in PyeongChang in 2018, when NHL players didn't participate. That was their first Olympic medal in men's hockey since bronze in Innsbruck in 1976. Three players on this roster were on that team, including forward Dominik Kahun, who played 186 NHL games from 2018-21. Peterka, Seider and Nico Sturm helped Germany win silver at the 2023 IIHF World Championship, its first medal in that



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tournament since silver in 1953. "I do think there are high expectations, because there's been a lot of talk that this is the best German team that we've ever sent to a tournament," Nico Sturm said. "But obviously, all the other teams are also sending their best, and so I think that maybe people that don't know hockey as well don't sometimes grasp the impact having NHL players at the Games has."

DENMARK

Coach: Mikael Gath

Most recent medal: None

Gold medals: None

Schedule: Feb. 12, Germany (3:10 p.m. ET); Feb. 14, United States (3:10 p.m. ET); Feb. 15, Latvia (6:10 a.m. ET)

Outlook: Denmark has 6,110 players and 29 indoor rinks, according to the International Ice Hockey Federation. The country has had only 19 players appear in the NHL. Six are on this roster, forwards Oliver Bjorkstrand (Tampa Bay Lightning), Nikolaj Ehlers (Carolina Hurricanes), Lars Eller (Senators), Oscar Fisker Molgaard (Kraken), and goalies Frederik Andersen (Hurricanes) and Mads Sogaard (Senators). Jonas Rondbjerg (Golden Knights) would have made seven, but the forward was ruled out Sunday because of injury. Ehlers is Denmark's all-time NHL leader with 563 points (239 goals, 324 assists) in 731 games. After forward Frans Nielsen, who had had 473 points (167 goals, 306 assists) in 925 games from 2006-21, Eller is next with 433 points (190 goals, 243 assists) in 1,159 games. Bjorkstrand ranks fourth with 411 points (182 goals, 229 assists) in 679 games. Andersen and Sogaard are the only Danish goalies who have played in the NHL. Andersen has 315 wins in 539 games; Sogaard has 12 in 31. This is the Danes' second appearance in an Olympic men's hockey tournament; their first was Beijing in 2022, when NHL players did not participate. In the preliminary round, Denmark defeated the Czech Republic 2-1 and Switzerland 5-3, but lost 2-0 to Russia. It defeated Latvia 3-2 in the qualification round before losing 3-1 to Russia in the quarterfinals. Fourteen players from Beijing are back, giving Denmark more players with Olympic experience than any other in this tournament. That includes defenseman Jesper Jensen Aabo, a flag-bearer in the opening ceremony. "We have Latvia, we have Germany (in our group)," Andersen said. "I think we have a chance against

them. Obviously, the U.S. is a big hockey nation, so it will be a little tougher against them. ... We're a proud nation. We're a small country. A lot of great players went before us to get Denmark to where it is now."

LATVIA

Coach: Harijs Vitolins

Most recent medal: None

Gold medals: None

Schedule: Feb. 12, United States (3:10 p.m. ET); Feb. 14, Germany (6:10 a.m. ET); Feb. 15, Denmark (6:10 a.m.)

Outlook: Latvia has 7,864 players and 22 indoor rinks, according to the IIHF. The country has had only 30 players appear in the NHL. Six on are this roster -- forwards Zemgus Girgensons (Lightning), Teddy Blueger (Vancouver Canucks) and Sandis Vilmanis (Florida Panthers); defenseman. Uvis Balinskis (Panthers); and goalies Elvis Merzlikins (Columbus Blue Jackets) and Arturs Silovs (Pittsburgh Penguins). Girgensons ranks third among Latvians in NHL history with 208 points (98 goals, 110 assists) in 818 games. Blueger is fourth with 160 points (54 goals, 106 assists) in 428 games. Merzlikins ranks second in wins among Latvian goalies in NHL history with 105; Arturs Irbe had 218 from 1991-2004. Don't overlook Latvia, though; in Sochi in 2014, the previous Olympics with NHL players, the Latvians lost all three of their preliminary round games. Then they defeated Switzerland 3-1 in the qualification round and gave Canada a scare in the quarterfinals. Kristers Gudlevskis made 55 saves in a 2-1 loss. It was a 1-1 game from late in the first period until late in the third, when Canada defenseman Shea Weber broke through on the power play. The goalie would go on to play three games for the Lightning, one that season, one in 2015-16 and one in 2016-17. Latvia won bronze at the 2023 IIHF World Championship, its first medal in that tournament, and has 13 players with Olympic experience. That includes forward Kaspars Daugavins, who played 91 NHL games from 2009-13 and was a flag-bearer in the opening ceremony. "When you wear that jersey, it's something special, especially for our amazing fans," Merzlikins said. "It's a privilege, especially with the guys who you grew up with. There are many guys who I started with when I was 15, and now we are all grown. We went through a lot, a long road together."



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Olympic 2026 men's hockey preview: Players, teams, favorites

By: Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton

The 2026 Olympic men's hockey tournament is finally here!

Teams representing 12 countries will compete beginning Wednesday, with most of the countries featuring NHL players for the first time since the 2014 Games in Sochi.

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Can Team USA win the gold medal for the first time since 1980? Or will the 2026 Games be the 10th golden victory for Canada? And which of the other nations are most likely to earn a spot on the medal stand?

ESPN reporters Ryan S. Clark and Kristen Shilton break down the strengths and weaknesses of each team, while analyst Sean Allen identifies two best bets for the tourney.

Jump to a team:

CAN | CZE | DEN | FIN

FRA | GER | ITA | LVA

SVK | SWE | SWI | USA

Note: Odds by DraftKings Sportsbook, subject to change.

Canada

Gold medals: 1920, 1924, 1928, 1932, 1948, 1952, 2002, 2010, 2014

Gold medal odds: +120

Roster

Forwards: Macklin Celebrini (San Jose Sharks), Anthony Cirelli (Tampa Bay Lightning)*, Sam Bennett (Florida Panthers)*, Sidney Crosby (Pittsburgh Penguins), Brandon Hagel (Tampa Bay Lightning), Bo Horvat (New York Islanders), Seth Jarvis (Carolina Hurricanes)**, Nathan MacKinnon (Colorado Avalanche), Brad Marchand (Florida Panthers), Mitch Marner (Vegas Golden Knights), Connor McDavid (Edmonton Oilers), Brayden Point (Tampa Bay Lightning)**, Sam Reinhart (Florida Panthers), Mark Stone (Vegas Golden Knights), Nick Suzuki (Montreal Canadiens), Tom Wilson (Washington Capitals)

Defense: Drew Doughty (Los Angeles Kings), Thomas Harley (Dallas Stars), Cale Makar (Colorado Avalanche), Josh Morrissey (Winnipeg Jets), Colton Parayko (St. Louis Blues), Travis Sanheim (Philadelphia Flyers), Shea Theodore (Vegas Golden Knights), Devon Toews (Colorado Avalanche)

Goaltenders: Jordan Binnington (St. Louis Blues), Darcy Kuemper (Los Angeles Kings), Logan Thompson (Washington Capitals)

* Bennett replaced the injured Cirelli; ** Jarvis replaced the injured Point

Prelim schedule (ET): Thursday vs. Czechia, 10:40 a.m. | Friday vs. Switzerland, 3:10 p.m. | Sunday vs. France, 10:40 a.m.

Expectations for the Games: Gold or bust

Strengths: Canada has a formidable forward group populated by the game's top goal scorers. It's the type of star power no other country can match: Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Sidney Crosby, Macklin Celebrini ... it'll be pick your poison for the opposition on how to shut down the Canadian top six.

And it's not just those big names either -- Canada has depth too, with Tom Wilson joining Sam Bennett to give the Canadians added punch (and scoring). There is championship pedigree with veterans like Mark Stone and Brad Marchand filling out the roster.

Canada's back end is well-balanced as well, with a mix of elite talents (like Cale Makar) and utility skaters like Travis Sanheim. The Canadians should, in theory, be able to do it all.

Weaknesses: There have been questions raised about how Canada's goaltending will stack up against the competition. Jordan Binnington was bound to get the Olympic call after he backstopped the Canadians to a gold medal at 4 Nations, but his .856 save percentage this season isn't exactly inspiring confidence. Darcy Kuemper and Logan Thompson -- neither of whom made the 4 Nations roster -- will be jockeying with Binnington for playing time and there's no clear sense yet how it will shake out.

Thompson has had the best season of those three (holding a .912 SV%) but Kuemper, like Binnington, has won championships before. Will that factor in? That Canadians feel the least locked in at this all-important position and that could come back to bite them. -- Shilton

Czechia

Gold medals: 1998

Gold medal odds: 25-1

Roster

Forwards: Roman Cervenka, Filip Chlapik*, Radek Faksa (Dallas Stars), Jakub Flek, Lukas Sedlak, Tomas Hertl (Vegas Golden Knights), David Kampf (Vancouver Canucks), Ondrej Kase, Dominik Kubalik, Martin Necas (Colorado Avalanche), Ondrej Palat (New Jersey Devils), David Pastrnak (Boston Bruins), Matej Stransky, David Tomasek, Pavel Zacha (Boston Bruins)*

Defense: Radko Gudas (Anaheim Ducks), Filip Hronek (Vancouver Canucks), Michal Kempny, Tomas Kundratek, Jan Rutta, Radim Simek, David Spacek (Minnesota Wild), Jiri Tichacek



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Goaltenders: Lukas Dostal (Anaheim Ducks), Karel Vejmelka (Utah Mammoth), Dan Vladar (Philadelphia Flyers)

* Chlapik replaced the injured Zacha

Prelim schedule (ET): Thursday vs. Canada, 10:40 a.m. | Friday vs. France, 10:40 a.m. | Sunday vs. Switzerland, 6:10 a.m.

Expectations for the Games: Ambitious underdogs -- and most likely to surprise

Strengths: Czechia is bringing the heat to Milan, by way of an elite forward group that will challenge all comers in the tournament. Led by talents like David Pastrnak, Tomas Hertl and Martin Necas, there is an embarrassment of riches for coach Radim Rulík to sift through as he narrows down these line combinations.

That should also translate to excellent special teams. Czechia's power play can include its top snipers and complementary players like Radek Faska, Filip Hronek or Ondrej Palat all bringing unique elements to the table. This country's goaltending is also intriguing; veteran Dan Vladar (who is having an excellent season with the Philadelphia Flyers) will support rising stars Lukas Dostal and Karel Vejmelka. Any one of them could excel in the crease -- and that's a good thing.

Weaknesses: The loss of Pavel Zacha to injury right before the Games was a tough blow for Czechia's overall depth. The projected top-six skater was replaced by Filip Chlapik from Sparta Prague in the Czech league, who has just 57 NHL games on his résumé from 2017-2021 with the Senators.

Czechia is also not as sturdy on the back end as it is up front. After Hronek and Radko Gudas, there aren't many standout names patrolling the blue line. Aside from David Spacek, a 22-year-old who just made his NHL debut, the rest of Czechia's D corps has been playing overseas.

The potential instability on its back end might be Czechia's undoing if the team is stymied at all offensively. This is a country that has made noise internationally of late though, winning gold at the 2024 men's world championship. Is there enough of that know-how -- and capability -- outside of its star skaters? -- Shilton

Denmark

Gold medals: None

Gold medal odds: 250-1

Roster

Forwards: Mikkel Aagaard, Mathias Bau, Joachim Blichfeld, Oliver Bjorkstrand (Tampa Bay Lightning), Nikolaj Ehlers (Carolina Hurricanes), Lars Eller (Ottawa Senators), Oscar Fisker Molgaard (Seattle Kraken), Nicklas Jensen, Nick Olesen, Morten Poulsen, Jonas Røndbjerg (Vegas Golden Knights), Patrick Russell, Frederik Storm, Alexander True, Christian Wejse

Defensemen: Phillip Bruggisser, Nicholas B. Jensen, Jesper Jensen Aabo, Anders Koch, Matias Lassen, Markus Lauridsen, Oliver Lauridsen

Goaltenders: Frederik Andersen (Carolina Hurricanes), Frederik Dichow, Mads Sogaard (Ottawa Senators)

Prelim schedule (ET): Thursday vs. Germany, 3:10 p.m. | Saturday vs. USA, 3:10 p.m. | Sunday vs. Latvia, 3:10 p.m.

Expectations for the Games: Potential spoiler alert

Strengths: The Danes have two elite forwards in Nikolaj Ehlers and Lars Eller who are dangerous all over the ice and carry plenty of international experience to share with their club. They should be balanced by a decent depth of skaters up front with a mix of veteran shooters (like Nick Olesen, who had five goals and 12 points in 10 games at the 2025 world championship) and up-and-coming faces.

Denmark's one-two punch in net should serve it well, too; veteran Frederik Andersen has struggled this season in the NHL but was superb for the Danes at the 2024 Olympic qualifier. Mads Sogaard has proved himself to be a capable backup, and can step in if needed (assuming Andersen does take the reins as Denmark's No. 1). The Danes' projected by-committee approach across the board could serve them well in unseating an unexpected opponent or two.

Weaknesses: There is no easy road to gold. Being slotted into Group C -- with the USA, Germany and Latvia -- makes that especially true for Denmark. The Americans will be formidable no matter what, and the Danes' defense corps must be up to the challenge. There are no current NHLers in that mix, which is headlined by 34-year-old blueliners Jesper Jensen Aabo and Philip Bruggisser. Denmark will require a full-team buy-in on the defensive side if it hopes to capitalize on its top talents being able to light the lamp.

There's almost too much unknown about how Denmark -- with ample international experience in its ranks, at least -- will match up against rosters filled with NHL skaters. -- Shilton

Finland

Gold medals: 2022

Gold medal odds: 10-1

Roster

Forwards: Sebastian Aho (Carolina Hurricanes), Joel Armia (Los Angeles Kings), Mikael Granlund (Anaheim Ducks), Erik Haula (Nashville Predators), Roope Hintz (Dallas Stars), Kaapo Kakko (Seattle Kraken), Oliver Kapanen (Montreal Canadiens), Joel Kiviranta (Colorado Avalanche), Artturi Lehkonen (Colorado Avalanche), Anton Lundell (Florida Panthers), Eetu Luostarinen (Florida Panthers), Mikko Rantanen (Dallas Stars), Teuvo Teravainen (Chicago Blackhawks), Eeli Tolvanen (Seattle Kraken)

Defensemen: Miro Heiskanen (Dallas Stars), Henri Jokiharju (Boston Bruins), Mikko Lehtonen, Esa Lindell (Dallas Stars), Olli Maatta (Utah Mammoth), Nikolas Matinpalo (Ottawa Senators), Niko Mikkola (Florida Panthers), Rasmus Ristolainen (Philadelphia Flyers)

Goaltenders: Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (Buffalo Sabres)*, Joonas Korpisalo (Boston Bruins)*, Kevin Lankinen (Vancouver Canucks), Juuse Saros (Nashville Predators)

* Korpisalo replaced the injured Luukkonen

Prelim schedule (ET): Wednesday vs. Slovakia, 10:40 a.m. | Friday vs. Sweden, 6:10 a.m. | Saturday vs. Italy, 10:40 a.m.

Expectations for the Games: Competitive medal contenders



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Strengths: Finland might have the best chance in this tournament to prove the credo that defense wins championships. The Finns' back end is stacked; Miro Heiskanen will be their anchor, Esa Lindell is calm under pressure, and Olli Maatta, Niko Mikkola and Rasmus Ristolainen all bring size, experience and maturity to their roles.

Finland can also tap into more everyday familiarity than most clubs given four of its best players -- Heiskanen, Lindell, Mikko Rantanen and Roope Hintz -- all suit up for the Dallas Stars. Rantanen will be a focal point of the Finnish offense along with Sebastian Aho, but the real heavy lifting will be done on Finland's blue line and by projected starter Juuse Saros in the crease.

Weaknesses: The Finns did not show well at the 4 Nations Face-Off, finishing last with no regulation wins. That roster did not include Heiskanen, Jani Hakanpaa or Ristolainen, though.

Finland did have Aleksander Barkov at 4 Nations, but the country's projected captain has been sidelined all season with a torn ACL. That puts substantial pressure on the rest of Finland's lineup to make up for his absence. Even if the Finns' strong defense can help keep pucks out of the net, they'll need Rantanen, Aho and Hintz especially to be excellent every shift. It's also fair to wonder how Saros -- with an .895 save percentage this season for the middling Nashville Predators - will hold up against an onslaught. -- Shilton

France

Gold medals: None

Gold medal odds: 800-1

Roster

Forwards: Justin Addamo, Pierre-Edouard Bellemare, Charles Bertrand, Louis Boudon, Kevin Bozon, Stephane Da Costa, Aurelien Dair, Flordan Douay, Dylan Fabre, Jordann Perret, Anthony Rech, Nicolas Ritz, Alexandre Texier (Montreal Canadiens), Sacha Treille

Defensemen: Yohann Auvitu, Jules Boscq, Enzo Cantagallo, Florian Chakiachvili, Pierre Crinon, Hugo Gallet, Enzo Gueby, Thomas Thiry

Goaltenders: Julian Junca, Martin Neckar, Antoine Keller

Prelim schedule (ET): Thursday vs. Switzerland, 6:10 a.m. | Friday vs. Czechia, 10:40 a.m. | Sunday vs. Canada, 10:40 a.m.

Expectations for the Games: Turn a head or two

Strengths: France has an element of surprise few countries can claim -- there is just one current NHL skater (Montreal Canadiens forward Alexandre Texier) on the roster, and only one defenseman (Yohann Auvitu) boasts any time in the league. That will make Texier a prominent part of France's overall success, but he'll be supported by Pierre-Edouard Bellemare, who was a commendable bottom-six skater throughout a 10-year NHL career.

The French will have a capable veteran in Julian Junca protecting the twine as he has done throughout successful tenures playing in France and Slovakia (this season alone Junca holds a .925 save percentage backstopping HK Dukla Trencin).

Weaknesses: The best France can hope for in Milan is to keep games tight and make the other countries in Group A -- Canada and Czechia, specifically -- work hard for their victories.

That's not to say France doesn't have some genuine talents. The team simply lacks the superstars present for most of their competition. The French blue line is made up of players almost entirely unknown in North America, and while that could give France an edge in terms of less prescouting, it will make it hard to keep pace with the teams favored to go far. -- Shilton

Germany

Gold medals: None

Gold medal odds: 65-1

Roster

Forwards: Leon Draisaitl (Edmonton Oilers), Alexander Ehl, Dominik Kahun, Marc Michaelis, JJ Peterka (Utah Mammoth), Lukas Reichel (Vancouver Canucks), Tobias Rieder, Joshua Samanski (Edmonton Oilers), Justin Schutz, Wojciech Stachowiak (Tampa Bay Lightning), Nico Sturm (Minnesota Wild), Tim Stutzle (Ottawa Senators), Frederik Tiffels, Parker Tuomie

Defensemen: Leon Gawanke, Korbinian Geibel, Lukas Kalble, Jonas Muller, Moritz Muller, Moritz Seider (Detroit Red Wings), Fabio Wagner, Kai Wissmann

Goaltenders: Maximilian Franzreb, Philipp Grubauer (Seattle Kraken), Mathias Neiderberger

Prelim schedule (ET): Thursday vs. Denmark, 3:10 p.m. | Saturday vs. Latvia, 6:10 a.m. | Sunday vs. USA, 3:10 p.m.

Expectations for the Games: Challenging for a medal finish

Strengths: Any team that has Leon Draisaitl at 1C (or anywhere else, really) is going to be dangerous. He's a one-man wrecking ball and is superb defensively, letting him go end-to-end with a single game-changing shift. Those early-tournament games can be a free-for-all as countries settle in, and Germany could use its potency up front to advantage.

Tim Stutzle and JJ Peterka have both had strong seasons, and are capable of scoring the timely goals that can make a difference for Germany.

The Germans' goaltending has strong potential too; Maximilian Franzreb guided Germany to a silver medal at the 2023 world championship, and Phillip Grubauer has been a stalwart in net for Germany since his World Junior days, with five world championship appearances to date.

Weaknesses: Germany's defense corps has only one NHL skater (but it's a good one): Detroit's Moritz Seider. He's another five-time player for Germany at the worlds, winning silver in 2023, and it will fall on the 2022 Calder Trophy winner to power his country's back end.

Kai Wissmann -- who signed a one-year, entry-level deal with Boston in 2022 but never appeared in the NHL -- was an interesting name for Germany's blue line, but he suffered an Achilles injury in the offseason and his status for Milan remains TBD. It is hard to say the Germans have enough depth to be highly competitive on that side of the puck.



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Given the competition in Group C, it will be Germany's offense making or breaking its chances of advancing. But how will its back end handle the heat against other country's game breakers? -- Shilton

Italy

Gold medals: None

Gold medal odds: 1000-1

Roster

Forwards: Matthew Bradley, Tomaso De Luca, Cristiano DiGiacinto, Luca Frigo, Mikael Frycklund, Dustin Gazley, Diego Kostner, Daniel Mantenuto, Giovanni Morini, Alexander Petan, Tommy Purdeller, Nick Saracino, Alessandro Segafredo, Marco Zanetti

Defenseemen: Dylan Di Perna, Gregory Di Tomaso, Daniel Glira, Thomas Larkin, Phil Pietroniro, Jason Seed, Alex Trivellato, Luca Zanatta

Goaltenders: Damian Clara, Davide Fadani, Gianluca Vallini

Prelim schedule (ET): Wednesday vs. Sweden, 3:10 p.m. | Friday vs. Slovakia, 6:10 a.m. | Saturday vs. Finland, 10:40 a.m.

Expectations for the Games: Trying to punch above its weight

Strengths: Playing on home ice will be the most notable advantage for Italy in a tournament that is expected to see the team struggle for points. This is the first time in 20 years that the Italians will have a team in the men's hockey bracket. The last time it happened was in 2006 when it hosted the Torino games.

It's possible that having its home crowd could play a role in Italy improving upon its two most recent Olympic appearances that led to the Azzurri finishing 12th in 1998 and 11th in 2006.

Weaknesses: Italy might have the most concerns of any team in the men's field. The Italians are the lowest ranked men's team in the IIHF rankings that's playing in the Olympics. It's a nation that hasn't finished greater than 10th place at a major tournament since the 1997 IIHF Men's World Championship.

And of course there's the lack of NHL players. Not that having a roster filled with NHL players is a guarantee for success, but the Azzurri are the only team that doesn't have a single player in the NHL. Not only that, there isn't a single player on Italy's roster that has ever played a game in the NHL. -- Clark

Latvia

Gold medals: None

Gold medal odds: 500-1

Roster

Forwards: Rodrigo Abols (Philadelphia Flyers)*, Rudolfo Balcers, Oskars Batna, Teddy Blueger (Vancouver Canucks), Rihards Bukarts*, Roberts Bukarts, Kaspars Daugavins, Martins Dzierkals, Haralds Egle, Zemgus Girgensons (Tampa Bay Lightning), Renars Krastenbergs, Dans Locmelis, Eriks Mateiko**, Anri Ravinskis**, Eduards Tralmaks, Sandis Vilmanis

Defenseemen: Uvis Balinskis (Florida Panthers), Oskars Cibulskis, Ralfs Freibergs, Janis Jaks, Roberts Mamchits, Kristians Rubins, Alberts Smits, Kristaps Zile

Goaltenders: Kristers Gudlevskis, Elvis Merzlikins (Columbus Blue Jackets), Arturs Silovs (Pittsburgh Penguins)

* Rihards Bukarts replaced the injured Abols; ** Ravinskis replaced the injured Mateiko

Prelim schedule (ET): Thursday vs. USA, 3:10 p.m. | Saturday vs. Germany, 6:10 a.m. | Sunday vs. Denmark, 3:10 p.m.

Expectations for the Games: Potential spoiler

Strengths: Latvia has a fairly recent history of exceeding expectations at an international tournament. The nation had its highest finish at a major tournament when it won the bronze medal at the 2023 IIHF Men's World Championship.

However, it was a victory that came with a pair of caveats. The first is that Latvia was a joint host with Finland, and the second being that the rosters at the Olympics are much stronger compared to what the nation encountered at the worlds.

Weaknesses: Only France and Italy will enter the Olympics with lower IIHF rankings than the Latvians to start the Olympics. Latvia does have five NHL players on its roster, in a contingent that's led by Teddy Blueger, Zemgus Girgensons and Elvis Merzlikins while having three more in the AHL.

The concern for Latvia will be how its supporting cast compares to other sleeper/spoiler nations that are in the contest to challenge the odds-on favorites for a spot on the medal stand. -- Clark

Slovakia

Gold medals: None

Gold medal odds: 65-1

Roster

Forwards: Peter Cehlarik, Lukas Cingel*, Dalibor Dvorsky (St. Louis Blues), Marek Hrivik*, Libor Hudacek, Milos Kelemen, Adam Liska, Oliver Okuliar, Martin Pospisil (Calgary Flames), Pavol Regenda (San Jose Sharks), Adam Ruzicka, Juraj Slafkovsky (Montreal Canadiens), Matus Sukel, Samuel Takac, Tomas Tatar

Defenseemen: Peter Ceresnak, Erik Cernak (Tampa Bay Lightning), Martin Fehervary (Washington Capitals), Martin Gernat, Michael Ivan, Patrik Koch, Martin Marincin, Simon Nemecek (New Jersey Devils)

Goaltenders: Samuel Hlavaj, Adam Gajan, Stanislav Skorvanek

* Cingel replaced the injured Hrivik

Prelim schedule (ET): Wednesday vs. Finland, 10:40 a.m. | Friday vs. Italy, 6:10 a.m. | Saturday vs. Sweden, 6:10 a.m.

Expectations for the Games: Spoiler

Strengths: Slovakia is in the mix of teams that could surprise a few teams in the Olympic field.

Just look at its recent tournament history. Slovakia won the bronze at the Olympics in 2022 while winning gold at the 2022 men's worlds. Combine that with the seven NHL players on its roster, a group led by Erik Cernak, Martin Fehervary and Juraj



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Slafkovsky. It could be enough to help reinforce why Slovakia is entering the Olympics ranked ninth by the IIHF.

Weaknesses: That all sounds great. But what makes assessing Slovakia's chances at the Olympics such a challenge is how the squad compares to other NHL-heavy teams in the tourney.

Slovakia is part of a collection of nations that all have a particular profile. They've had fairly recent international success at major tournaments. They have anywhere between five to 10 NHL players. That's the formula Slovakia has used to make it this far. Then again? So have those other nations. -- Clark

Sweden

Gold medals: 1994, 2006

Gold medal odds: +600

Roster

Forwards: Jesper Bratt (New Jersey Devils), Leo Carlsson (Anaheim Ducks)*, Joel Eriksson Ek (Minnesota Wild), Filip Forsberg (Nashville Predators), Pontus Holmberg (Tampa Bay Lightning), Marcus Johansson (Minnesota Wild)*, Adrian Kempe (Los Angeles Kings), Gabriel Landeskog (Colorado Avalanche), Elias Lindholm (Boston Bruins), William Nylander (Toronto Maple Leafs), Elias Pettersson (Vancouver Canucks), Rickard Rakell (Pittsburgh Penguins), Lucas Raymond (Detroit Red Wings), Alexander Wennberg (San Jose Sharks), Mika Zibanejad (New York Rangers)

Defensemen: Rasmus Andersson (Calgary Flames), Philip Broberg (St. Louis Blues), Jonas Brodin (Minnesota Wild)**, Rasmus Dahlin (Buffalo Sabres), Oliver Ekman-Larsson (Toronto Maple Leafs), Gustav Forsling (Florida Panthers), Victor Hedman (Tampa Bay Lightning), Erik Karlsson (Pittsburgh Penguins), Hampus Lindholm (Boston Bruins)**

Goaltenders: Filip Gustavsson (Minnesota Wild), Jacob Markstrom (New Jersey Devils), Jesper Wallstedt (Minnesota Wild)

* Johansson replaced the injured Carlsson; ** Lindholm replaced the injured Brodin

Prelim schedule (ET): Wednesday vs. Italy, 3:10 p.m. | Friday vs. Finland, 6:10 a.m. | Saturday vs. Slovakia, 6:10 a.m.

Expectations for the Games: Medal contender

Strengths: Sweden has a strong team -- one that would have been considered a serious threat to be a top medal contender. That still might be true. But it all depends upon how the team adjusts to life without top-line center Leo Carlsson along with top-four defensive option Jonas Brodin once the tournament begins.

Sweden still possesses one of the most balanced and talented rosters at the Olympics. It's a group that could rely upon its two-way reliability and goaltending in its bid for a third Olympic gold.

Weaknesses: It's the injuries. Carlsson's absence means that Sweden loses a top-line, two-way center who was projected to finish with more than 100 points this NHL season prior to his injury. Sweden does have other centers who can generate goals and be trusted in the defensive zone, but that's a big loss.

There is also still the situation facing captain Gabriel Landeskog while he continues to recover from an upper-body injury suffered on Jan. 4. At his best, he gives the Swedes another top-nine forward who can be trusted in numerous situations. -- Clark

Switzerland

Gold medals: None

Gold medal odds: 25-1

Roster

Forwards: Sven Andrighetto, Christoph Bertschy, Kevin Fiala (Los Angeles Kings), Nico Hischier (New Jersey Devils), Ken Jager, Simon Knak, Philipp Kurashev (San Jose Sharks), Denis Malgin, Timo Meier (New Jersey Devils), Nino Niederreiter (Winnipeg Jets), Damien Riat, Sandro Schmid, Pius Suter (St. Louis Blues), Calvin Thurkauf

Defensemen: Tim Berni, Michael Fora, Andrea Glauser, Roman Josi (Nashville Predators), Dean Kukan, Christian Marti, J.J. Moser (Tampa Bay Lightning), Jonas Siegenthaler (New Jersey Devils)

Goaltenders: Reto Berra, Leonardo Genoni, Akira Schmid (Vegas Golden Knights)

Prelim schedule (ET): Thursday vs. France, 6:10 a.m. | Friday vs. Canada, 3:10 p.m. | Sunday vs. Czechia, 6:10 a.m.

Expectations for the Games: Sneaky medal contender

Strengths: Switzerland has a chance to impact the Olympic hockey landscape in a way that few could. Finishing second at the IIHF Men's World Championship in consecutive tournaments has set the stage for why it is No. 2 in the IIHF rankings.

The Swiss have 10 NHL players -- including Nico Hischier, Roman Josi, Timo Meier and Nino Niederreiter -- which adds to the belief that they could parlay their world championship success over the past two years into an Olympic medal for the first time since winning bronze in 1948.

Weaknesses: There are more than a dozen players on Switzerland's roster who are currently in the NHL or have at least played there. That puts the Swiss in a strong position compared to most of the field.

But how will that help them against Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United States of America? Is it enough depth that can see them defeat those nations to advance further in the tournament? Will it be similar to what they've done in the men's world championship -- or could a different fate await the Swiss on this grand stage? -- Clark

United States

Gold medals: 1960, 1980

Gold medal odds: +175

Roster

Forwards: Matt Boldy (Minnesota Wild), Kyle Connor (Winnipeg Jets), Jack Eichel (Vegas Golden Knights), Jake Guentzel (Tampa Bay Lightning), Jack Hughes (New Jersey Devils), Clayton Keller (Utah Mammoth), Dylan Larkin (Detroit Red Wings), Auston Matthews (Toronto Maple Leafs), J.T. Miller (New York Rangers), Brock Nelson (Colorado



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Avalanche), Tage Thompson (Buffalo Sabres), Brady Tkachuk (Ottawa Senators), Matthew Tkachuk (Florida Panthers), Vincent Trocheck (New York Rangers)

Defensemen: Brock Faber (Minnesota Wild), Noah Hanifin (Vegas Golden Knights), Quinn Hughes (Minnesota Wild), Seth Jones (Florida Panthers)*, Jackson LaCombe (Anaheim Ducks)*, Charlie McAvoy (Boston Bruins), Jake Sanderson (Ottawa Senators), Jaccob Slavin (Carolina Hurricanes), Zach Werenski (Columbus Blue Jackets)

Goaltenders: Connor Hellebuyck (Winnipeg Jets), Jake Oettinger (Dallas Stars), Jeremy Swayman (Boston Bruins)

* LaCombe replaced the injured Jones

Prelim schedule (ET): Thursday vs. Latvia, 3:10 p.m. | Saturday vs. Denmark, 3:10 p.m. | Sunday vs. Germany, 3:10 p.m.

Expectations for the Games: Top medal contender

Strengths: This is the strongest collection of American talent playing in the NHL in history -- including an elite 1-2 punch at center in Jack Eichel and Auston Matthews, and Cup winners on the wings in Jake Guentzel and Matthew Tkachuk. And no country has goaltending as good as what the Americans will put on the ice.

Furthermore, different groups of players on this team have won youth events like the IIHF World Junior Championship, and have achieved success at the senior level too.

It started last February when the Americans pushed Canada to overtime in the title game of the 4 Nations Face-Off. That ignited the discussion around how the country needed more buy-in from those elite players to go play at the men's worlds. That led to the U.S. winning its first men's worlds gold since 1960, and earning the No. 1 spot in the IIHF rankings. Is all of that enough to earn the country's first gold in 46 years?

Weaknesses: Did the USA Hockey management group select the strongest possible roster?

This could become a moot point if the Americans win gold, but there will be questions about this particular group if it struggles to score goals. It stems from the fact that Cole Caufield, Alex DeBrincat and Jason Robertson are in the top 10 in goals this NHL season -- and they were all left off of the Olympic roster. -- Clark

play

1:13

P.K. Subban's biggest question for Team USA heading into the Olympics

P.K. Subban's biggest question for Team USA heading into the Olympics

Best bets for the tournament

Odds by DraftKings Sportsbook, subject to change.

Tournament top points scorer: Mikko Rantanen (13-1)

Short tournaments create odd incentives, and the Olympic format quietly rewards teams that stumble early. Missing a quarterfinal bye means one extra qualification game and, in a race decided by a goal or an assist, that additional night can be decisive.

We saw it play out in Vancouver in 2010, when both Canada and Slovakia failed to earn byes, played eight games instead of seven, and dominated the scoring leaderboard as a result. Finland is talented enough to make a deep run, but not immune to a group stage misstep. If that happens, Rantanen is well positioned to benefit from the added opportunity.

Canada's stars sit atop the odds board, but the value play lies in identifying elite scorers who might get more games. If Finland takes the longer road, Rantanen becomes one of the best bets on the board to lead the tournament in points. -- Allen

To win a medal: Czechia (+400)

Medal contention can come down to just two games: a qualification matchup and a quarterfinal. From there all it takes is one more win to land on the podium, and no position swings outcomes more than goaltender.

Czechia has leaned into that volatility before. Dominik Hasek famously carried his team to gold in 1998 with a series of otherworldly performances, and the modern version of that script is still very much in play. With David Pastrnak leading a balanced forward group and either Lukas Dostal or Karel Vejmelka capable of catching fire, Czechia has the ingredients to play spoiler again.

When goaltending can hijack a bracket, as Kristers Gudlevskis nearly did for Latvia in 2014, the most interesting medal bets tend to cluster just outside the top tier of favorites. At +400 to win a medal, Czechia offers a strong blend of price, pedigree and positional chaos. -- Allen



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The Hockey News

Milan Winter Olympics Men's Ice Hockey Schedule: When To See Your Favorite Carolina Hurricanes

By: Ryan Henkel

Witness top international talent battle for gold starting February 11. Discover matchups, key dates, and Carolina Hurricanes stars on the ice.

The 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan will see the world's best hockey players compete for gold, with the first men's match set to kick off on Wednesday.

12 teams will compete across two groups in a round-robin style to then determine final playoff seeding for the eventual eight teams that will advance to the quarterfinals.

Carolina has five players competing this year, spread out across four national teams: Sebastian Aho (Finland), Seth Jarvis (Canada), Jaccob Slavin (USA), Frederik Andersen (Denmark) and Nikolaj Ehlers (Denmark).

Here's the schedule for the men's tournament.

Finnish leadership solidified with Aho, while Olympic practices reunite Hurricanes chemistry and reveal key defensive pairings for USA and Canada.

thehockeynews.com Aho Named To Finnish Leadership Team; Lines/Pairs From Olympic Practices Finnish leadership solidified with Aho, while Olympic practices reunite Hurricanes chemistry and reveal key defensive pairings for USA and Canada.

Round Robin

Wednesday (Feb. 11)

Slovakia vs. Finland - 10:40 a.m.

Sweden vs. Italy - 3:10 p.m.

Thursday (Feb. 12)

Switzerland vs. France - 6:10 a.m.

Czechia vs. Canada - 10:40 a.m.

Latvia vs. USA - 3:10 p.m.

Germany vs. Denmark - 3:10 p.m.

Friday (Feb. 13)

Finland vs. Sweden - 6:10 a.m.

Italy vs. Slovakia - 6:10 a.m.

France vs. Czechia - 10:40 a.m.

Canada vs. Switzerland - 3:10 p.m.

USA vs. Italy - 3:10 p.m.

Saturday (Feb. 14)

Sweden vs. Slovakia - 6:10 a.m.

Germany vs. Latvia - 6:10 a.m.

Finland vs. Italy - 10:40 a.m.

USA vs. Denmark - 3:10 p.m.

Sunday (Feb. 15)

Switzerland vs. Czechia - 6:10 a.m.

Canada vs. France - 10:40 a.m.

Denmark vs. Latvia - 1:10 p.m.

USA vs. Germany - 3:10 p.m.

Elimination Games

Tuesday (Feb. 17)

Qualification Playoffs

1 - 6:10 a.m.

2 - 6:10 a.m.

3 - 10:40 a.m.

4 - 3:10 p.m.

Wednesday (Feb. 18)

Quarterfinals

1 - 6:10 a.m.

2 - 10:40 a.m.

3 - 12:10 p.m.

4 - 3:10 p.m.

Friday (Feb. 20)

Semifinals

1 - 10:40 a.m.

2 - 3:10 p.m.

Saturday (Feb. 21)

Bronze Medal Match

2:20 p.m.

Sunday (Feb. 22)

Gold Medal Match

8:10 a.m.



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SportScan

Articles from outlets covering the Hurricanes' upcoming opponents and league-wide news

1379148 Websites

The Athletic / Oddly specific Olympic men's hockey predictions as NHL players return to the Games

By Sean McIndoe

Feb. 10, 2026 11:10 am EST

Good morning to everyone except Czech Republic's Kristýna Koltounková. You leave our sweet Marie-Philip Poulin alone! If you truly feel the need to injure a Canadian, I volunteer myself as tribute.

Some significant breaking news to address right off the bat: Poulin, the best women's hockey player of all time, has been ruled out for today's Canada versus United States rivalry game. I hope she gets well soon, as we'll need her for overtime of the gold-medal game, where she'll be the one to ... wait, I've already given too much away.

Where were we? Oh right, it's Tuesday and the Olympics are well and truly here, so let's get you caught up on what else has already transpired and ready for the next couple of weeks.

Anticipation

Let's be honest, you weren't sleeping last night. You were only pretending to sleep because you know that Olympic Hockey Santa doesn't come if you're awake. But he's here, and things are about to get very real.

Before we get too far, a PSA: You can find all of our Olympics coverage — a certified glut of it — on this page throughout the Games. And you can sign up for our daily Games Briefing newsletter here.

OK, let's start on the men's side of the hockey tournaments ...

The long wait is over

We're breaking out the bullet points. Here's what you need to know:

This is the first Olympic men's hockey tournament featuring NHL players since 2014 in Sochi. There are reasons for that, but let's just move on and say we're all happy for the return.

The men's side has 12 teams competing in three divisions. The four teams within a division play each other once each in a round-robin format, followed by the playoffs. We'll be tracking the results so you can easily keep up.

Every team makes the playoff round. There are no "must-win" games in the round robin. That said, seeding matters, maybe a lot. The top four teams will get byes into the quarterfinal round and theoretically easier matchups the rest of the way.

The round robin uses a 3-2-1-0 format, which is to say teams get three points for a regulation win, two for a win in OT or the shootout, one for a loss in OT or the shootout, and nothing for a regulation loss. You know, the way the NHL should do it.

Yes, I did mention the shootout. That stupid thing is part of the tournament. In the round robin, tied games get five minutes of three-on-three overtime followed by a shootout. In the playoff rounds, it's 10 minutes of three-on-three, then a shootout. The lone exception, thankfully, is the gold-medal game — that's still three-on-three, but overtime lasts until there's a winner. No shootouts with gold on the line.

Dom Luszczyzyn's previews for all 12 teams are here. Canada and the U.S. are the favorites, as you'd expect. By the way, Canada is in Group A, while Team USA is in Group C. That means the rivals are not playing each other in the round robin. Their only meeting, if we get one at all, will be in the elimination phase. Here's a quick look at Dom's odds in a handy chart:

The tournament is being played with international rules, which are similar but not identical to NHL rules. Jesse Granger has a good breakdown of the key differences, with rink size most notable.

Don't forget about the time-zone difference, which will have games played during the day in North America. The gold-medal game is at 8:10 a.m. ET on a Sunday, so make your weekend plans accordingly. Here's a full Olympics schedule automatically adjusted to your time zone.

Now that you know how everything works, the only thing left is to sit back and see how it all plays out. Of course, we've already told you, with our staff predictions that went up yesterday. But maybe you found those were lacking something. Maybe they weren't quite ... specific enough?

Oddly specific predictions

Some of you will know that I like to mark the start of each new NHL season by making oddly specific predictions for each team. (This



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season's version is here.) You may also remember that we offered up five bonus predictions in the newsletter itself, one of which has already come true. Twice! Sort of. We got the goalie fight prediction right, but not the nationalities involved. Some would see that as glass half-empty, others would say half-full. In the oddly specific prediction game, we call it "a miracle that there's anything in the glass at all."

You'll notice these predictions are tough to get right, because that's the whole point. Anyone can tell you that Canada will win gold. Let's go beyond that. Let's get weirdly specific, with half a dozen Olympic predictions ...

Somebody on one of the two North American teams is going to take a major penalty for a hit that likely wouldn't be called that way in the NHL, and controversy will ensue. Bonus prediction: Against all odds, that player will not be Tom Wilson.

Congratulations to Sebastian Aho for briefly leading the entire tournament in scoring. Specifically, it will happen tomorrow when he scores the tournament's first goal.

Connor Hellebuyck will be in Team USA's net when the Americans open their schedule. He will not be there when it's time to start their final game of the tournament.

The surprise for Team Sweden won't be Rasmus Dahlin leading the team in scoring, but how big the gap is between him and second place.

There will be one (and only one) game during the tournament in which the winning goal will be scored by a player who'll go on to be traded by his NHL team ahead of the March trade deadline.

Finally, some bad news, at least for the NHL's marketing department: Team Canada and Team USA will not meet in the final, because one of them is going to get knocked out during the elimination phase in a shootout. This will lead to everyone wondering why loser-goes-home games are being decided this way. Nobody will have a good answer, other than "we really hoped this wouldn't happen."

Trivia Time

In the five previous Olympics to feature NHL players (1998, 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2014), a total of 35 players have scored more than 10 career points.


Only three of those players are currently still active in the NHL — and none of them are going to this year's tournament.


Can you name all three?


Hint in the photo. Answer at the bottom.


Coast to Coast


 Our writers are on the ground in Italy and were there for yesterday's first men's practices. Here's Michael Russo on what he saw from Team USA, and Arpon Basu on Team Canada's burgeoning identity.


 The big question: Who should start in goal for Team Canada? If you're Canadian, you probably don't want to read this about Jordan Binnington.


 Mark Lazerus has three Olympic hockey names you may not know well but might hear a lot about over the next couple of weeks.


 Charlie McAvoy and his grotesquely swollen jaw have already made some news with an interesting tweet. He gets into it as part of his first Olympic diary.


 Chris Pronger has joined The Athletic as a guest columnist for the Olympics. His first column is about how winning gold changed him as a player.

 Pierre LeBrun talked to some of the stars who'll be competing at the Olympics for the first time.

 Juraj Slafkovský is like the Sidney Crosby of Slovakia, and this could be his breakout moment. The 21-year-old is playing in his second Olympics after leading his country to its first-ever men's hockey medal, a bronze in Beijing.

 Team Sweden is "not overly concerned" after William Nylander was absent from practice Tuesday on the eve of the team's opener against Italy.

 Russia isn't competing in Milan, but Pierre and Dom looked at what that team might have looked like, and how its absence impacts everyone else's medal chances.

 "The Athletic Hockey Show" two-part men's Olympic hockey previews are up and running ahead of play tomorrow. Be sure to subscribe on YouTube to watch live episodes and reactions throughout the tournament, all the way through the gold-medal game.

What to Watch

The men don't start until tomorrow, but the women are already well underway. And you know what that means ...

 United States vs. Canada, women's prelims

2:10 p.m. ET on USA/Peacock (U.S.), CBC (Canada)

Follow The Athletic's live coverage here

So, who's up for the single greatest rivalry in hockey?

This one won't be the main event of the women's tournament because that will almost certainly come in a rematch in the gold-medal game. Instead, consider this the undercard. It's the moment in the movie when the hero and villain cross paths, but it's too early to be the final fight.

(I'll leave it to you to figure out who's the hero and the villain in this analogy, but there is a right answer.)

On the surface, the game itself won't matter all that much. Marie-Philip Poulin, the best player in the world, is out with a lower-body injury sustained yesterday. Both teams will easily qualify for the quarterfinals, and there are no byes in the women's tournament. Assuming both teams run the table in their other games, they'll finish first and second and won't cross paths again until the gold-medal game. So, ultimately, this one doesn't mean much.

Except that it does, because it's Canada and the U.S. These two teams hate each other and have a history of serving up absolute classics. They'd probably get heated playing Scrabble or pregame soccer two-touch. There's no such thing as a meaningless loss between them.

And for the record, the losses lately have all been on the Canadian side. The two programs last met late last year in the Rivalry Series, which the Americans swept, including one win in which they scored 10 goals. It's fair to assume the Canadians remember.

For now, both teams head into action with perfect records in this tournament. Team USA is sitting in the top spot at 3-0, while Canada holds down second at 2-0 (after having a game postponed due to Finland's norovirus outbreak). Today's game should essentially clinch first place for the winner. The loser will get to take some notes for next time. And there will be a next time.

We'll have live coverage of the game right here. You won't want to miss it.

Your Trivia Answer

The three active players with more than 10 career points in the Olympics in the NHL era includes two Russian legends: Evgeni Malkin (15) and Alexander Ovechkin (11 points). The third is from Team Canada: Jonathan Toews, pictured left, who has 11 points.



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If you're wondering, Sidney Crosby, pictured right, has a career total of nine points, making him the leader among players in this year's tournament. He heads into action sitting one point ahead of Canadian teammate Drew Doughty and Penguins teammate Erik Karlsson of Team Sweden.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.11.2026

1379149 Websites

The Athletic / Sweden 'not overly concerned' after William Nylander misses Olympic hockey practice

By Pierre LeBrun

Feb. 10, 2026 Updated 10:56 am EST

MILAN — William Nylander was absent from practice Tuesday on the eve of Sweden's Olympic men's opener with host Italy, raising a bit of concern about the Toronto Maple Leafs star who had battled a groin injury earlier this season.

"It's a maintenance thing," head coach Sam Hallam said after practice. "He's done two full ice practices with us and felt, after yesterday, a bit sore, so we'll just give him an extra day. And then we'll see for tomorrow if he's ready to go. It's going to be a pretty late decision."

Nylander did return for the Leafs and played three games before the Olympic break. But as Hallam said, Nylander felt sore after practice Monday.

"Not overly concerned at all," said Hallam. "He's been looking really sharp and good on the ice for two days. We felt that we'd give him today. It's a short tournament, but we're still in the beginning of it and (have) bigger games coming up, so let's keep our priorities in focus there."

Sweden has full health otherwise, which includes veteran leaders Victor Hedman and Gabriel Landeskog. Both are ready to go, Hallam said.

Sweden goalie question

Hallam wouldn't yet confirm his Game 1 starter in goal.

Jacob Markstrom has the pedigree, Filip Gustavsson has the best form going in the NHL this season, while Jesper Wallstedt is the kid breaking through.

"That question's been up there pretty much all year, and I've said nevertheless which three goalies we're going to pick to this group and to the Olympic squad, I'm confident playing either one of them," Hallam said. "That's still the feeling, but of course we have made our decision. We're not going to announce that until tomorrow."

Based on practice Tuesday, it seemed like Markstrom was in the starter's net. But again, Hallam wouldn't tip his hand.

"It's a big decision. I mean, do you go on form? Do you go on how many games and what you have under your belt? It's different," Hallam said. "But I feel confident in all three. They look good, and hopefully we make the right decision there."

The Swedes have rival Finland on Friday in their second game. So that's the other layer to it — which goalie does Sweden want for what should be an easy opener with Italy compared to the always tough matchup with Finland?

Gustavsson probably deserves to be the starter overall in the tournament based on form, but the career body of work argument for Markstrom will be at play.

Relieved Andersson

There's a world in which Rasmus Andersson could have been here on the Olympic stage, still wondering about his NHL future.

But thankfully for him, his expected trade happened before the Olympics last month, which allows him to be here in Milan without that weighing on him.

Relieved?

"Yeah, but it's kind of boring for you guys, eh? You don't have to write about me anymore (smiles)," Andersson said with a chuckle.

And for full transparency, Andersson was speaking directly to me, because I am guilty as charged for the many Andersson trade updates we did on TSN's Insider Trading since last June.

Still, in all seriousness, it was nice to have the trade from Calgary to Vegas go down before the Olympic competition begins.

"Obviously I'm super excited about joining Vegas," said Andersson. "The skill on that team is through the roof. I've said it from the start, I think they're a real contender. That's where I wanted to go. But at the same time, everyone knows how grateful I was about the Calgary Flames and everything they did for me. Yeah, it's been a whirlwind the last 10 to 12 days or whatever, it's tough, my family is still in Calgary and obviously I don't get to see them for a little while. I'm fortunate enough that my wife is flying in here in a couple of days. It sucks that I can't see my kids for about six weeks. That part is tough. But I'm trying to have the full focus here on Team Sweden and I'll kind of deal with all the other stuff when I get back."

Lessons from 4 Nations

Adrian Kempe didn't sugarcoat it. Adjusting to the pace of best-on-best last February at 4 Nations was a real thing. And it was a great lesson in what awaits Sweden on the Olympic stage with all the top NHL players here.

"That first 10 minutes against Canada is one of the fastest 10 minutes I've ever played in my career," Kempe said Tuesday about the 4 Nations opener last February. "It was fun but also a little bit of a 'wow' moment where you kind of feel that best on best tournament. After those first 10 minutes, I think we played 15 minutes really solid. I think we responded to that really well. So I think we're a little bit prepared for what's gonna come now. Obviously a couple different opponents throughout the tournament but as the tournament goes on, we're gonna play really good teams. It's a good experience to have, I think, that we played in the 4 Nations last year."

Sweden lost in overtime to Canada in that opener and beat the U.S. in the finale of the round robin, a game that didn't hold any meaning for Team USA.

But still, from a Swedish perspective, while they didn't make the 4 Nations final, they came away from it confident that they can compete with the co-favorites from the U.S. and Canada for gold in Milan.

"We definitely learned that we can play with any team," Jesper Bratt said Tuesday. "It doesn't matter who the team is that we're playing against. Even if it's Canada in overtime or U.S. or Finland or whichever team it is, we can play with any team. We can win any game, and I think that's just the confidence level on this team that we know from past experience, we're just going to grow and we're going to get even better than we were last year. It's just a lot of excitement in the group."

The Athletic LOADED: 02.11.2026



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1379150 Websites

The Athletic / Juraj Slafkovský, Slovakia's most adored athlete, is embracing pressure at the Olympics

By Arpon Basu

Feb. 10, 2026 Updated 9:13 am EST

MILAN — When Juraj Slafkovský first took the ice as an Olympian for Team Slovakia four years ago in Beijing, he was a teenager, braces on his teeth, the best years of his hockey life still well ahead of him.

He scored eight goals and was named tournament MVP as Slovakia won their only Olympic medal in men's hockey, a bronze — a moment of great national pride for the nation of roughly 5 million.

A few months later, the Montreal Canadiens selected Slafkovský with the No. 1 overall pick in the 2022 NHL Draft, a first for a Slovak player.

While Slafkovský was already viewed in Slovakia as the country's next big hockey star when he made his men's world championships debut at 16 a year prior, his Olympic performance vaulted him into another stratosphere in his home nation.

The hopes and expectations of a long-suffering hockey nation were heaped on the shoulders of a 17-year-old kid.

As Slafkovský first took the ice as an Olympian for Team Slovakia at practice Monday, he did so as a young man of 21, no braces on his teeth, 257 games of NHL experience behind him, and bearing the weight of those expectations he helped create four years earlier.

Slafkovský is Slovakia's most adored athlete; every game he plays in Montreal, every comment he makes, anything he does is widely reported across the country. He is on par with 2022 Olympic gold medal skier Petra Vlhová, who completed a two-year comeback from injury to compete in the women's team combined event Tuesday. The main difference is that at 30, Vlhová's best years are likely behind her.

Slafkovský's best years are still ahead of him, and perhaps directly ahead of him.

He is back at the Olympics, and though this tournament features NHL players and Beijing's did not, the expectations on Slafkovský in his home country are far higher than they were four years ago.

"Well, good thing our country's small," Slafkovský said with a smile Monday. "It's not like Canada."

In some ways, however, it is like Canada for Slafkovský, and more specifically, like what Canada's captain, Sidney Crosby, experienced in 2010 at the Vancouver Olympics. At least on a per capita basis.

Crosby was 22 in Vancouver; Slafkovský will be 22 next month. While Crosby was surrounded by veteran talent, he was seen as his team's best forward despite his young age. Same with Slafkovský. Crosby had been anointed as his country's next great player as a young teenager. Same with Slafkovský.

It is a completely different scale and he is obviously nowhere near the same player and never will be, but in many ways, Slafkovský is like Slovakia's Crosby.

"It's a completely different Slafkovský now," said Vladimír Országh, Slovakia's head coach. "He was a young guy on a roll (in Beijing). He scored eight goals. There is a quote, even when he shot from the buffet, he would score. So that's how hot he was in those Olympics.

"Now, he's a different player. He's a lot more mature. He's the guy who should be taking over the leadership and leading the team."

As Slovakia ran through some five-on-five drills a little less than an hour into practice Monday, Slafkovský and his teammates were going hard at each other. As the puck came around the boards and Slafkovský went to gather it, he got drilled hard into the boards by Calgary Flames forward Martin Pospíšil.

Slafkovský, five years Pospíšil's junior, laughed it off. He appreciated the intensity.

But it was indicative of the type of defensive attention Slafkovský will draw in this tournament as Slovakia's offensive leader.

The expected top contenders in men's hockey face opposite conundrums in net over such a short tournament. Let's break it down.

"We have to realize he's still a young guy. He's 21 years old, soon 22, but we're going to play against the best teams, the best players," Országh said. "They know he's our top offensive guy, so I'm pretty sure they're going to be watching him and they're going to know where he is going to be on the ice. So it's not going to be just about him because he's going to be playing against the best defenders in the world.

"Of course, there is going to be some pressure, because he's an NHL player, he's our point leader in the NHL and the pressure's going to be (there). But it's not going to be just about him, everybody's got to step up and everybody's got to help out."

But Slafkovský is wired in a way to embrace this kind of pressure. He wants to be the best, always has, and he has worked toward this moment his whole life.

As far as he's concerned, bring it on.

"I feel like I want to be the difference-maker, I've got to be able to play against anyone, no matter what they're going to do," Slafkovský said. "I want to play hard, I want to make it hard for them and score some goals."

However, the scrutiny he will face from his opponents on the ice may pale in comparison to what he will face from his own people. Slafkovský's dealings with the Slovak media who cover his every move are, to put it mildly, strained.

When he was named Slovakia's hockey player of the year for a third consecutive year last summer, Slafkovský refused to speak to the gathered print media. He says he has to hide when he goes home to Košice every summer. His good friend Simon Nemeč, the No. 2 pick behind Slafkovský in the 2022 NHL Draft and an important defenseman for Slovakia who is also playing in his second Olympics, is not under nearly the same scrutiny.

"I have a little bit of trouble, and he's got really big trouble," Nemeč said two years ago. "That's the difference."

The "trouble" has only grown since, and it will reach a crescendo in Milan.

And he won't be able to hide.

As Slafkovský stepped off the ice after practice Monday, he did two sets of television interviews before addressing a pack of Slovak print writers. He answered their questions for a few minutes with a straight, almost stern expression on his face before being moved along by the team's media relations officer to the North American media.

As he arrived, he immediately smiled and made a joke.

Olympic hockey is a wild ride. What matters is how you handle adversity and improve as a team.

"They let you in here?" he said.

The contrast was striking.



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But ultimately, Slafkovský says he understands the scrutiny, where it comes from. It is a result of an impassioned hockey nation thirsty for international success.

"No, I like it," Slafkovský said of the pressure from home. "I dreamed of it since I was a little kid. I enjoy it now and I like it."

The success Slovak hockey fans crave was somewhat sated by the bronze medal in Beijing, but the tournament in Milan is not the same animal. Slovakia has seven NHL players on the roster and its first game Wednesday will be against Finland, which has a single player who is not in the NHL.

"It's a different tournament," Slafkovský said. "Every team is way better than before."

That is true. But the same could be said of Slovakia's best player as well, the player viewed as the future of Slovak hockey. As a young boy, Slafkovský was inspired by watching Marián Hossa.

After all these years of waiting, Slafkovský is now in a position to provide that same inspiration for a young Slovak boy or girl. And he is ready for it.

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The Athletic / NHL Awards WATCH: Can MacKinnon and Makar hold on to Hart and Norris leads?

By Dom Luszczyszyn

Feb. 10, 2026 6:00 am EST

Throughout the season I'll be breaking down the numbers behind the race for each major player award: the Hart, the Norris, the Calder, the Selke, the Vezina, the Art Ross and the Rocket Richard. Numbers of course aren't everything, but they add much-needed context to the awards race and can help shine a light on players deserving of more recognition while adding caveats to other players that may have some warts. This post will present the top 10 for each category based on a set criteria of guidelines. There is plenty of room for discussion and debate within (and outside) those guidelines.

Welcome to the third edition of this year's NHL Awards Watch, conveniently timed at the league's Olympic break. That makes it a great time to check in where each of the awards races currently stand — and boy do we actually have some races this season.

The Hart, Norris, and Selke all look spicy after the first half and while each race has a clear front-runner, the gap doesn't seem nearly wide enough in any race to crown a victor just yet.

Everything can still change in the final quarter, but for now we've got a lot of interesting things to watch across the board. Based on my interpretation of the numbers, here's how each of the key races currently shake out.

Data as of Feb. 6

Hart Trophy

Given to the player judged to be the most valuable to his team.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by Net Rating percentile relative to position.

In the first half of the season, this looked like an open-and-shut case in Nathan MacKinnon's favor thanks to his scoring and five-on-five

dominance. A slow month from him and some major heat elsewhere has turned the race at the top into a serious discussion. MacKinnon has a lot of company with the way Connor McDavid and Nikita Kucherov have been playing. With the two so close in production, it's going to be really tough separating the three.

MacKinnon's case is still predicated on five-on-five dominance. The Avalanche are up 73-25 in his minutes, a truly preposterous number. McDavid's case depends on him being the points leader and how much of a 'luck' pass he gets at five-on-five. The Oilers are only up 52-48 in his minutes, but his impact on xG is the highest of the three with 57.2 percent of expected goals and a relative impact of 0.66 per 60, one of the highest marks in the league. Net Rating considers both, but still leans MacKinnon at five-on-five.

As for Kucherov, a third straight Art Ross could do the trick and he has the narrative edge of his current hot streak breaking current precedents in production. When a player's numbers start looking Gretzky-like, it's impossible to ignore. It's also worth mentioning just how strong Kucherov has been at five-on-five. In previous years, the main thing holding him back by Net Rating was a lesser ability to drive play (especially defensively). This year, his puck possession rate is right there with MacKinnon and McDavid, though his minutes aren't quite as difficult.

All in all, just 3.5 goals separates MacKinnon (plus-33.2), Kucherov (plus-30.1) and McDavid (plus-29.7) in Net Rating per 82. It's going to be a tight finish.

It's hard to imagine anyone catching those three in Net Rating, but there are two other contenders worth discussing: the best goalie in the world and the most-valuable-to-his-team guy.

Ilya Sorokin has been marvelous this season and the New York Islanders wouldn't be anywhere close to the playoffs without him. The gap between him and the average goalie would be the fifth-largest among skaters, which puts him right in the "should be on ballots" conversation.

Notably absent from this list is another guy who will probably make a lot of ballots: Macklin Celebrini. He currently ranks 14th in Net Rating at plus-13.8, but he has a lot less help than the other guys on this list. The gap between him and the next best Shark currently sits at 10.3 goals, one of the largest-ever divides between a team's first- and second-best players. I'm not usually someone who gets cute with the 'to his team' part of the MVP award description, but Celebrini's case is extreme enough to warrant consideration.

Norris Trophy

Given to the defenseman who demonstrates throughout the season the greatest all-round ability in the position.

Criteria: Defensemen ranked by Net Rating.

The first edition of Awards Watch this season had Cale Makar comfortably ahead of the competition, enough to believe he would cruise to his third Norris trophy. At the 25-game mark he had a plus-11.5 Net Rating, a plus-37.7 pace that would've been a high-water mark for the analytics era. In 30 games since, he's at just plus-4.5 — a much more ordinary plus-12.3 pace. Makar's scoring has slowed down to the point that he's now fifth in points per game amongst defensemen.

Makar's full-season numbers are still great at both ends of the ice and he still leads all defensemen in Net Rating. But boy, has he allowed the field to catch up and make this interesting. Here are the top challengers:

Zach Werenski: the offensive choice

The most goals, the most points and doing it as the team's top offensive driver. That Werenski has scored five more goals and points than Makar in three fewer games is a big deal given he doesn't have the benefit of playing with Nathan MacKinnon. On a per-game basis, he's neck-and-neck with Makar in Net Rating and may deserve more praise for that



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given the way he gets there with stronger underlying numbers and less help.

Moritz Seider: the defensive choice

His point pace may have slowed down a touch (seven points in his last 15), but Seider's elite defense is still the draw here. Seider's 57.7 percent xG rate leads the top candidates, a direct result of allowing just 2.22 expected goals against per 60, an impressive mark given his usage. Seider's relative impact at five-on-five is among the highest in the league. Many always clamor for a defensive defenseman to get more Norris consideration; in the analytics era there's never been a better choice than Seider. That he still ranks second in total value with defense being his primary driver is unheard-of.

Jake Sanderson: the two-way choice

If you want a little more offense than Seider's 54-point pace, Sanderson is the next-best bet. He's not getting much hype for the season he's having, but Sanderson has been a two-way machine, posting slightly worse defensive numbers than Seider but also slightly better offensive numbers. He's a tough-minutes workhorse on pace for 66 points, an impressive feat considering how strong he is without the puck.

Quinn Hughes: the new-home choice

There are two versions of Hughes this year: the one playing through injury and a broken Adam Foote system, and the one thriving with the Wild. The latter version has been so unbelievably good that it's mostly erased the slow start of the former. Through 26 games with the Canucks, Hughes played at a Net Rating pace of plus-8.6. In 26 games with the Wild, that pace has climbed to plus-33.2 — MVP-caliber stuff. If he keeps going at that rate and Makar keeps falling at his, there's a real chance Hughes is the Net Rating leader by season's end.

Lane Hutson: the up-and-coming choice

Turns out last year's Calder winner was playing at a major disadvantage last season on his off side. Hutson has exploded over the last few months playing on his strong side, looking every bit the mini-Hughes many figured he might one day become. His offense is right up there with the other league greats, and he is far from the defensive sieve he's often made out to be. Few control the game like Hutson and while he may not win this year, this is a big reputation-building season that can pave the way for future wins to come. The really scary part: what he's been doing lately on a pair with Noah Dobson. The two have a 64 percent xG rate together and have outscored opponents 17-6 in just under 200 minutes. They look like the new Makar-Toews.

That's six players with a really strong case, which will make filling out ballots a real challenge. I've got time for the other four — Jakob Chychrun, Josh Morrissey, Evan Bouchard, Darren Raddysh — but they're a step behind that top tier.

Selke Trophy

Given to the forward who best excels in the defensive aspects of the game.

Criteria: Forwards who play over 16 minutes per game, receive 15 percent of their team's short-handed minutes and face top-line forward competition, ranked by their Defensive Rating.

After a brief defensive lull where he slid momentarily to second in Defensive Rating, Nick Suzuki is back atop the leaderboard with a plus-5.1 Defensive Rating. He's maintained his excellent play at five-on-five and his short-handed ice time is up around one minute per game — enough to not be a non-issue for voters. A lot of Suzuki's five-on-five impact is results-driven, but even his impact on xG looks strong given his role. With some of the hardest assignments in the league, the Canadiens allow 0.16 fewer expected goals against per 60 with Suzuki on the ice. He's been excellent.

Down the list, last month's surprise leader Charlie Coyle has slowed down defensively (while picking things up offensively!) and dropped to fifth. Surpassing him are last year's Defensive Rating leader (Sam Reinhart) and a couple of defensive depth standouts who have played extremely well in elevated roles (Yanni Gourde and Noah Cates).

While a lot of people love Anthony Cirelli, it's Gourde doing a lot of the defensive heavy lifting for the Lightning this season. His line has taken on the tough matchups and the defensive zone starts, and he's been dominant in those minutes. The Lightning have allowed just 2.2 xGA/60 with Gourde on the ice compared to Cirelli's 2.93, and they're getting similarly strong actual results (1.93 GA/60). Cates has been stronger relative to teammates with a huge edge in actual results, but the heavy usage Gourde takes on gives him the edge.

Down the list, Roope Hintz and Mitch Marner have had strong defensive impacts, but have notably played secondary competition this season behind Wyatt Johnston and Jack Eichel (though the gap is smaller for Hintz). Matty Beniers and Shane Pinto fly under the radar for their defensive contributions, while Artturi Lehkonen is currently Colorado's shutdown standout.

Calder Trophy

Given to the player selected as the most proficient in his first year of competition in the NHL.

Criteria: Rookie skaters ranked by Net Rating percentile relative to position.

Any way you slice it, Matthew Schaefer has put up one of the strongest seasons ever for an 18-year-old defenseman. He's scored a mind-boggling 16 goals in 58 games, which is a 23-goal pace, and his 39 points puts him on pace for 55. He's played extremely tough minutes for most of the year and has still managed to earn 47.4 percent of expected goals and 57.5 percent of actual goals — both near the team lead. On the whole, Schaefer has been the league's best rookie this season.

But his recent underlying numbers have caused his value to stagnate a bit from his initial rocket-like trajectory. Schaefer is still getting results, which is great, but his 43 percent xG of late ranked fourth among regular New York Islanders defensemen. Again, that's under seriously tough deployment which he gets credit for. But he has slowed from his initial pace, where he looked like he could surpass Cale Makar's rookie-year Net Rating. Now he looks like he'll fall a shade short. Given the age difference, that's still incredibly impressive, but using the G-word (as I did in a previous edition of Awards Watch) may have been slightly premature. That it's even a conversation he still could reach, though, speaks volumes about his talent.

As for the rest, the cream of the crop has risen as both Ivan Demidov and Beckett Sennecke's offense looks strong enough to more than make up for any defensive shortcomings. They both look worthy of nomination, with Demidov's efficiency and stronger defense giving him the edge. Jesper Wallstedt's game has regressed a bit, but he should still be right there in the top five.

After those four is a tier of interesting choices. Justin Sourdif has been a defensive stud for the Capitals, Ben Kindel has been an extremely pleasant surprise as an 18-year-old rookie himself, and Fraser Minten was particularly electric over the last month. Alexander Nikishin rounds out that group with steady play on the third pair.

Vezina Trophy

Given to the goalkeeper adjudged to be the best at this position.

Criteria: Goaltenders who have played half of their team's games or more, ranked by goals saved above expected courtesy of Evolving-Hockey, Hockey Stats and MoneyPuck.

I added a new goalie model to the criteria (this is a great read, by the way), but that doesn't really matter this time around because they all say



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the same thing: Ilya Sorokin is king. No matter the source, the Islanders netminder leads all goalies in GSAX and should be the obvious choice for Vezina this season. He's almost singlehandedly carried the Islanders into a playoff spot with his dominant play night in and night out. While his save percentage isn't far off from Andrei Vasilevskiy or Logan Thompson, it's the degree of difficulty that stands out. Doing this behind that defense is special.

After Sorokin, it's a tough choice between Vasilevskiy and Thompson, who have both been special this season. Vasilevskiy has the winning edge that GMs love for this award, while Thompson has arguably been more critical to Washington's success this season. Can't go wrong with either.

Igor Shesterkin, despite missing the last month of action, still leads the next tier along with Jeremy Swayman, who has had a strong bounce back this season. Karel Vejmelka has been the league's busiest workhorse which deserves some credit, while Jet Greaves has been excellent for a rising Columbus Blue Jackets team (although has seemingly lost the starting job to a red-hot Elvis Merzlikins).

Art Ross Trophy

Given to the player who leads the National Hockey League in scoring points at the end of the regular season.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season point total.

No one has been hotter than Nikita Kucherov over the last few months, as he's on a Gretzky-like tear. That superhuman effort has vaulted him to the top of the Art Ross race where he's now projected to win his third straight. Considering his competition, that's an incredible feat. Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon currently have more points and can still make this race interesting, but it's hard to bet against Kucherov with how he's produced lately.

Rocket Richard Trophy

Given to the NHL's top goal scorer.

Criteria: Skaters ranked by their projected end-of-season goal total.

Nathan MacKinnon has slowed down considerably since the last Awards Watch, with just five goals in 14 games, but he should still cruise to victory here. He has a six-goal lead over Connor McDavid with three games in hand while Leon Draisaitl is even further back. It's possible the Oilers duo catches fire down the stretch, but this race still looks close to over.

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The Athletic / Olympic goalie heat check: Which NHL netminders have been surging or struggling?

By Jesse Granger

Feb. 10, 2026 6:00 am EST

In a short tournament such as the Olympics, goaltending has the potential to play a disproportionate role in the outcome. The entire men's tournament will span only 12 days, and with single elimination in the knockout stage, goalies can determine a lot.

The problem is, goaltending can be fickle. Brilliance in the crease can come and go on a whim, and recent form matters more than it does for most positions on the ice. Countries selected their rosters based on

pedigree, and more than a month before the Olympics, without the benefit of knowing what form each goalie would be in by the time they arrived.

Now that we're here, let's do a "heat check" on every NHL goalie set to represent their country. We'll look at how their season has gone as a whole, but will be specifically focused on how they've played since the turn of the calendar.

There are 21 NHL goalies on Olympic rosters, and 12 of them have played at least 10 games since Jan. 1. All but one have played at least six games. It's a small sample size, but that is kind of the point: to see how each is trending before the big tournament.

The goalies have been separated into four tiers (surging, trending up, stable and trending down) based on their recent form.

Surging

Karel Vejmelka, Czech Republic

Karel Vejmelka

15

15.94

.915

Vejmelka has been a workhorse for the Utah Mammoth, and is handling the workload brilliantly. He has been one of the best goalies in the NHL since Jan. 1 and is tied with Andrei Vasilevskiy for the most wins this season.

The netminder for the Czech Republic, also known as Czechia, plays a simple game. He's big, and makes himself even bigger with a picture-perfect stance. He has stayed ahead of the play with quick reads and defensive depth, and enters the Olympics on a heater. His final game with Utah was a 29-save masterpiece against the Detroit Red Wings.

Incredibly, Vejmelka may not even be Czechia's No. 1 goalie in the Olympics, because the next goalie on our list has been just as good.

Lukáš Dostál, Czech Republic

Lukáš Dostál

13

11.44

.915

The Czechs enter the Olympics with the luxury of two red-hot goalies to choose from.

Anaheim allows more scoring chances than any team in the NHL, but with his play-reading and skating, Dostál is built to make up for it. He's also reading the game incredibly well and keeping his skates underneath him.

Czechia will have an interesting decision between the two. When Vejmelka is on, he's a brick wall, but Dostál is more athletic and has shown his ability to singlehandedly steal a game as recently as Jan. 21 vs. Colorado. That 40-save outing in a 2-1 shootout win was arguably the best performance by any goalie in the NHL this season.

Lukáš Dostál has heard plenty about Dominik Hašek's gold medal in 1998. Can he help his country pull off the upset this month?

Jeremy Swayman, United States

10

6.67

.901



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Swayman has been a model of consistency this season. His 25 starts with a save percentage north of .900 are second behind only Vejmelka (26), who has started seven more games than Swayman.

His save percentage since Jan. 1 is lower than the other goalies in this tier, but the degree of difficulty on the shots he has faced is significantly higher. Swayman has stood on his head to get the Bruins back into the playoff picture, despite Boston allowing more expected goals per 60 minutes than any team in the league.

He was the United States' third goalie at the 4 Nations Face-Off, and never saw the net. This summer, he backstopped the Americans to gold at the World Championships with a shutout in the championship game. Will that, combined with the fact that he has outperformed Connor Hellebuyck and Jake Oettinger this season, be enough to earn him the net in Milan?

That still feels unlikely, but the U.S. has an embarrassment of riches in the crease.

Joonas Korpisalo, Finland

7

7.87

.918

Korpisalo was a late addition to Finland's roster as an injury substitution for Buffalo's Ukko-Pekka Lukkonen last Tuesday, but he is deserving of the spot.

The 31-year-old did allow eight goals in his final two starts for Boston, but before that had a .940 save percentage over his previous six games. It wouldn't be surprising to see Korpisalo in the Finnish crease at some point when you consider the form of the other two goalies (we'll get to them much, much later).

Philipp Grubauer, Germany

10

6.82

.916

Grubauer's resurgence in Seattle has been one of the best storylines in the NHL. After four consecutive years with putrid statistics, it was fair to wonder if Grubauer had this level of goaltending left in him, but he has played with a newfound confidence and looked great for the Kraken.

Grubauer's glove is still incredibly quick, and he has looked more patient lately. If he can carry this form into the Olympics, the Germans may surprise some teams.

Logan Thompson, Canada

11

6.32

.905

Thompson followed up last year's breakout season with another great campaign for the Washington Capitals, establishing himself as one of the best in the NHL. He has the third-best odds to win the Vezina Trophy and enters the Olympics in great form.

He did cool down a bit in mid-January, and then had to miss a few games last week after taking a puck off his mask, but he returned Thursday night against the Nashville Predators and looked terrific.

Thompson is twitchy, explosive and capable of making the type of game-changing saves often needed to win a tournament such as this one, but he was also left off the roster for the 4 Nations Face-Off. Based purely on results and form, he should be Canada's starter.

Trending up

Elvis Merzljikins, Latvia

7

5.87

.915

Merzljikins has always been a streaky goalie, and Latvia might be catching him at the perfect time. The Columbus Blue Jackets netminder won four of his last five starts and earned his first shutout of the season in his final start last Tuesday.

Merzljikins has ridiculous athleticism, and while the lack of structure in his game can make it difficult to produce consistently good numbers over an 82-game season, he's the type of goalie — both in style and personality — who can play hero in a tournament like this. Latvia will be overmatched in most of its games, but if Merzljikins makes a few big saves early, the opposition should be concerned.

Arturs Silovs, Latvia

9

3.59

.910

Latvia may only have five NHL skaters on its roster, but it has a strong goaltending duo entering the Olympics in good form. With 26 starts already under his belt in Pittsburgh, Silovs has nearly tripled his previous career high for NHL starts in a season.

Silovs has looked more comfortable as he has gotten more playing time. He posted a save percentage north of .900 in each of his last four starts, and six of his last seven.

Akira Schmid, Switzerland

9

2.76

.894

Similar to Silovs, Schmid has also found himself in a larger role. With Adin Hill missing extensive time with an injury, Schmid has stepped in and helped the Vegas Golden Knights stay atop the Pacific Division standings with steady play in net.

It's been a bit of an up-and-down season for Schmid, but he's found his stride lately. He has looked calm and confident in his reads, and his glove hand has been particularly sharp down the stretch. Leonardo Genoni has been a stalwart in the Swiss crease for two decades, but Schmid may have forced his way into the starting role with how he's played lately.

Dan Vladař, Czech Republic

10

-0.05

0.89

It's been a career season to this point for Vladař, who has been one of the Philadelphia Flyers' best players through 56 games.

The structure coach Rick Tocchet has the Flyers playing in front of him has certainly played a role, but Vladař has looked much quicker laterally than he did in his years in Calgary. He's a giant of a man, so when he's reading the play and moving as well as he has, he's tough to score on.

Stable

Filip Gustavsson, Sweden



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11

-2.72

.898

Gustavsson is the perfect goalie to start this tier off, because "stable" is a great word to describe his game. The 27-year-old is as calm, collected and consistent as they come, and he has once again been a stabilizing force for the Minnesota Wild.

There's nothing eye-popping about his recent numbers, but he won six of his last seven starts. He stays within his structure perhaps better than any goalie in the league, and makes difficult saves look easy.

Gustavsson could be the top option, or maybe he will share the Swedish net with his Minnesota goalie partner, which transitions perfectly into the next goalie.

Jesper Wallstedt, Sweden

7

-2.06

.883

There was a point at which Wallstedt was the hottest goalie in the NHL. Those days felt like a distant past in mid-January after a rough stretch for the rookie, but he turned things around with two impressive starts heading into the Olympic break.

In totality, it's been a strong first full season in the NHL for the big Swede. Wallstedt is a strong skater with good flexibility for his size, and his compete level and patience make him great in one-on-one situations.

Just making the Olympic roster adds to what has been a dream rookie season for Wallstedt.

Frederik Andersen, Denmark

6

3.59

.887

Father Time may be catching up to Andersen this season. He has a career-low .871 save percentage with the Carolina Hurricanes, and looks like a goalie who is slowing down, if only a bit. The 36-year-old, in his 13th NHL season, has found some form lately. He still tracks the puck exceptionally well, and his numbers since Jan. 1 are up from his season-long statistics.

He and his Danish teammates will likely be overmatched, but it's nice that he gets to compete in the Olympics. His career was nearly timed perfectly to fit into the gap without NHL players at the games, so this experience is a reward for his longevity.

Connor Hellebuyck, United States

14

-3.04

.889

No goalie enters the Olympics with more to prove. The way things are trending in Winnipeg, it doesn't look like Hellebuyck will get the opportunity to exorcise his Stanley Cup playoff demons, so this could be his chance to perform on a big stage this season.

His season has been pedestrian by Hellebuyck's lofty standards, but he has still been really good. He missed time after undergoing knee surgery in November and hasn't played at an elite level since returning. Considering he's the defending Vezina and Hart trophy winner, he likely

begins the tournament as the U.S. starter, but there are some talented goalies behind him vying for a shot.

Jacob Markström, Sweden

10

-3.46

.880

Overall it has been a disappointing season for Markström in New Jersey, marred by an early injury and inconsistencies. When he's on his game, Markström is a big, athletic goalie who can make saves other goalies simply can't. When he's off his game, he can get caught outside of his posts a little too often.

Luckily for Sweden, Markström played some of his best hockey just before the Olympic break, giving some hope that he's ready if called upon. The 36-year-old showed he can still have tide-turning sequences in a few of last year's playoff games, and looked good in his last two games against Nashville and Columbus.

Trending down

Darcy Kuemper, Canada

13

-7.31

.869

Kuemper hasn't been able to replicate last year's stellar numbers that made him a finalist for the Vezina Trophy, but he has been solid. He has looked calm and connected in the Los Angeles Kings' crease, and rarely lets in leaky or soft goals.

The biggest difference this season is that Kuemper hasn't made quite as many of the highlight-reel saves on the doorstep as he did a season ago, and the numbers bear that out. His .822 save percentage on high-danger shots is still above the league average (.810), but it's well below the .862 number he led the NHL with on those chances last season.

Jake Oettinger, United States

12

-7.80

.864

With Hellebuyck's injury and the Jets' struggles, Oettinger had an opportunity to seize the starting job for the U.S., but he hasn't been quite good enough to make himself the favorite heading into Milan.

Oettinger hasn't been at the top of his game lately. It's really just small details and angles. He's typically excellent positionally, so it wouldn't be surprising if that's cleaned up on this stage. The Dallas Stars have given him goal support, and he has made some clutch saves, so he's winning even when not at his absolute best.

As poor as the recent numbers are, Oettinger won six straight games for Dallas prior to the break.

Mads Søgaard, Denmark

2

-2.17

.833

After getting his shot in the NHL in 2022-23, Søgaard has spent the majority of the last three seasons in the AHL. He has made two appearances for Ottawa this season and gave up six goals on 36 shots.



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His numbers in the AHL are passable. With all of the issues the Senators have had in net, it's a missed opportunity for the young, towering goalie.

To Søgaard's credit, he's clearly one of the three best Danish goalies and deserves his spot on the Olympic roster.

Kevin Lankinen, Finland

13

-8.48

.859

Lankinen has been up against it. He's playing behind the worst team in hockey, the Vancouver Canucks, who struggle to score and don't defend the slot very well. His poor statistics are a product of his environment more than his personal execution, but with five straight losses and 11 goals allowed in his last two starts, it's hard to place Lankinen anywhere else on this list.

Juuse Saros, Finland

14

-11.05

.880

For a country with a rich, proud history of goaltending, it's odd to see Finland entering these Olympics with as many questions as it has in goal. Based on the eye test, Saros is still one of the most dynamic goalies in the world. His skating and quickness in the crease are a treat to watch.

But the numbers don't lie, and Saros' numbers are bad. His minus-13 goals saved above expected rank 86th out of 91 goalies to play in the NHL this season, and he has allowed three or more goals in nine straight games.

He still has the highest ceiling amongst the Finnish goalies, so he'll probably start for that reason alone, but Saros' form entering the Olympics doesn't inspire confidence.

Jordan Binnington, Canada

8

-5.81

.850

Binnington was a hero for Canada in overtime of the gold-medal game at the 4 Nations Face-Off, and has a history of playing his best in big moments. He has also been statistically the worst goalie in the NHL this season.

Both are true, and it makes predicting what will happen in Milan nearly impossible.

Binnington's .864 save percentage and minus-24.9 goals saved above expected are both career lows, and his recent form has been even uglier. The St. Louis Blues haven't allowed 30 shots in any of Binnington's last six starts, but he has allowed an average of four goals per game and lost all six. He is playing aggressively at the top of his crease, and is still typically good for a couple of jaw-dropping acrobatic saves every night, but that aggression also makes it tougher to stop second-chance opportunities. St. Louis has given up the third-most rebound goals in the NHL despite not allowing many rebounds.

Backup Joel Hofer has started more games for the Blues and put up better statistics than Binnington since mid-December. And yet, Binnington could be backstopping the most talented roster in the world this week in Italy, and it shouldn't surprise anyone if he does it brilliantly.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.11.2026

1379153 Websites

The Athletic / Chris Pronger: How winning Olympic gold as an NHL player shaped me as an athlete

By Chris Pronger

Feb. 10, 2026 6:00 am EST

Chris Pronger is a guest columnist for The Athletic during the 2026 Milan Cortina Olympics.

Both times I won a gold medal with Team Canada at the Winter Olympics, in 2002 in Salt Lake City and in 2010 in Vancouver, something went sideways in the round robin stage.

That's what can happen at these tournaments. You don't have to be perfect in the round robin. What matters is how you handle adversity and how you improve as a team in time for the elimination round.

You look at the Canadian teams that won gold in 2002 and 2010, and it's a similar story. There was a drastic improvement as the tournament moved along. Every player bought into their role and was willing to do whatever they had to do to help the team. In hockey, things are quite simple when a team starts to gel and find chemistry.

This is a short tournament. Everything is on the line, especially playing for Canada. There's no saving grace, no best foot forward. It is gold or bust.

You are going to play to the highest level and you're going to win at all costs because that's what's expected of you. Anything less is a disappointment.

By the time you arrive in the elimination round, it's a Game 7. It's a Game 7 every game from the quarterfinal to the semifinal to the gold medal game, and believe me, it feels like it.

There's no pressure like representing your country at the Olympics, and after 12 years, I'm glad this next generation of NHL players is finally getting to experience it.

I was still very young and getting up to speed when I went to Nagano in 1998 for my first Olympics. I remember getting a sense of the pace of play right away when we got out there for our first practice.

I thought we were going to be feeling it out and going at a 60 percent pace, but in this setting, it's just different. I learned quickly that there is no way guys this good and this competitive are ever going to practice at a 60 percent pace. Ever.

Right away, everybody starts looking at each other. Then one guy goes a bit harder, and another guy matches it. Then the next guy brings it. Suddenly, you're on the ice with 25 of the best players in the world going full tilt.

When those moments start, you can feel the energy start to pick up. It really was something special, a reminder that these guys are as competitive as it gets.

Chris Pronger celebrating his gold medal win in 2010 with his parents, Eila and Jim. (Courtesy of Chris Pronger)

For most players at this level, they're "the guy" on their NHL team. At the Olympics, you walk into that locker room and everybody knows who the alpha is.

Sometimes, some players are just trying to fit in. Maybe it's their first time in this setting. That was me in 1998, just taking it in and getting a sense of the landscape and the dynamics.



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I walk into that locker room, there's a Team Canada practice jersey with the maple leaf hanging from my stall and there I am sitting there between Scott Stevens and Ray Bourque. Those are guys I grew up watching. You look right, there's Wayne Gretzky lacing up his skates. Look left, there's Steve Yzerman heading out to cut his stick.

There's pressure that comes with that. There was for me.

You want to appreciate the opportunity and show respect, but you want to compete. You want to show them how good you are, prove that you belong. That's healthy.

It's part of the dynamic that gets everyone sitting up straight and what gets you working to play at the highest level possible.

As I remember it, the Olympics were also an opportunity to take my game to the next level and to test out where I was in my development. I remember watching how prepared Bourque and Stevens were, how they practiced, how they competed and played. It was a window into their process.

If you really pay attention to that, you get to pick apart your own process and figure out where you have to level up.

By 1998, I was on my way. I'd figured out how to prepare myself, but I used those guys as a measuring stick. It sort of affirmed that I was on the right path, both in terms of how I was preparing and also in terms of my game.

It's a chance to check yourself against the best players in the world. For me, I remember recognizing that maybe I can be this good. We didn't win gold that year and it was devastating, but after the Olympics, I was nominated for the Norris Trophy. I hurt my ankle the next season, but the year after, I won the Norris and the Hart Trophy. I don't think any of that is a coincidence.

That first Olympics validated that I was on the right path. It helped me trust my process and double down on it. Younger guys at this tournament now are going to have that experience over the next few weeks, and I hope it will be as important for them as it was for me.

Playing in the Olympics as an NHL player, it's mostly about hockey. There is more to the experience, though.

It goes without saying that you're there to win and you're focused on your job. You've got practice and treatments and you're banged up and sore from the NHL season. You've got jet lag. It's tough to really soak up the Olympic experience and watch other events.

Still, it's amazing. It's about the village and it's about meeting other competitors and Olympians, and that stuff is really neat.

You get a chance to meet other competitors and hear about their journey. For a lot of them, they get one chance. They work for four years and then they get 12 seconds, or maybe it's a minute, depending on the event, and that's it. That's your shot for greatness. It's pressure-packed.

Now I know you want me to talk about the rosters and how these teams measure up. I think it's only natural for people to constantly question this, that or the other thing.

The Olympics really put the onus on team building. You're not just assembling an All-Star team. I hear people say, "Just put the best players on the ice and they'll figure it out," but trust me, that's not always the case.

The second-guessing from fans and the media hasn't changed. It was the same in 1998, and in 2002, and in 2006, and in 2010.

Great players will always be left off of Team Canada; that's how it goes. What's interesting this time is that we're seeing great players left off of the rosters from other countries, too.

For me, that showcases the development of the game, the sport and the athletes. It's a little bit new for American hockey fans to get worked up about "Why isn't this guy there?" and "Why are you taking this guy?" I think that's a sign that the USA is a real threat at this tournament.

Another thing I get asked about a lot is Tom Wilson, and whether or not he'll be able to adjust to how they call the game at the international level.

Yes, the international game is called differently. And because the rules differ, so does the environment. This is where I found that things sometimes got a bit interesting. There are players from other countries who become pretty brave in that Olympic setting.

There's nothing you can really do about it with the players who play outside the NHL. One thing I did do, with my NHL opponents, is that I'd have these subtle moments where I'd remind them, "Hey, we play in three weeks, just remember that!"

I wasn't going to retaliate at the Olympics, but I'd use that reminder to give a guy a little wake-up call. Just in case they thought they were getting a freebie.

Back in 2002, I remember, Teemu Selanne hit me from behind and split me wide open. I needed eight stitches to close the cut. He hit me with around three minutes left from behind. He jumped, dirty hit. My head went in between the glass partition and it sliced me from top to bottom across my forehead.

I had this massive cut, and I'm pissed off. I'm looking at the ref going, "What the f—?!"

I get off the ice and I'm just thinking, "OK, great. OK, this is how we're going to f—ing do this." They're trying to clean my cut, but it's bleeding, and I can't get back out on the ice until the bleeding stops. Finally they throw some Steri-Strips on it.

So the game ends, and right at the buzzer, the puck goes in the corner, and I beeline it over to Teemu, and just told him, "Dude, we play you in 12 days. And I am going to f—ing kill you!"

I had a ton of respect for Teemu as a competitor and later as a teammate. A few years later, we won a Stanley Cup together, but that's what's fun about hockey and how things play out.

We battled hard, sometimes you do intense s— on the ice and that's what makes you great. You're highly competitive people.

To win in this game, you have to be passionate. Teemu was like that, too. And another guy who had that passion was Steve Yzerman.

When I reflect on the Games that I played in, one of my clearest memories is from 2002. I remember at that tournament just watching Yzerman and being so impressed by the way he managed his knee injury through the whole tournament.

If you remember that season, Yzerman was playing hurt and won Gold at the Olympics. Then he went out and won the Stanley Cup that year, too. And he was basically playing on one leg the whole time.

That left a huge impression on me. It's moments like that, just the leadership that it takes to play through an injury like that, it reminds a group that you have to seize the opportunities you get.

I was hurt a bit at the time, too, coming into that Olympics, but I'm watching Steve arrive at the rink early every single day. Just trying to recover and hold his knee together long enough to play. He was basically just living with the trainers the whole time, doing everything he could to play. Just emptying the tank.

When a guy like Stevie Y is going through all of that just to be a part of the team, it's powerful for a group. It's not that you're trying to win it for him, but you're watching that sacrifice, and it definitely raised the stakes of what we demanded of ourselves. If that's how badly Steve wanted to



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make up for losing in 1998, then nobody else could give any less than everything they had.

Those are the small edges that make all the difference. At the Olympics, sometimes things come down to matchups, or connections, or chemistry, or pairings. Sometimes it's just natural and sometimes you've got to bounce a couple of different guys around until you find the right combinations.

It's all of those factors, and how they accumulate, that allow a group to peak at the right time in order to win an Olympic gold.

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The Athletic / NHL trade matchmaker: Predicting where top targets go by the deadline, part 4

By Chris Johnston and James Mirtle

Feb. 10, 2026 6:00 am EST

We're less than a month away from the NHL's March 6 trade deadline. That means teams have only a handful of games remaining before their front offices need to make big decisions.

With the NHL season on hold during the Milan Cortina Olympics, it's a perfect time to survey our latest Big Board and identify some intriguing fits.

Enjoy our latest version of trade-board matchmaker.

Robert Thomas

Team: St. Louis Blues

Position: Center

Shoots: Right

Age: 26

Contract term: 2031 UFA

Current cap hit: \$8,125,000

Trade Board ranking: No. 5

Johnston: Los Angeles Kings

Acquiring Artemi Panarin just before the roster freeze kicked in was a major splash dripping with "win now" ambitions, but it didn't address the organization's biggest need moving forward.

The Kings still have a chance to replace Anze Kopitar's minutes before he officially retires after the season.

Even if Thomas isn't quite at the Selke Trophy level the Kings have come to count on from Kopitar, he is a bona fide No. 1 center who is under contract into his early 30s. It's not too often a player fitting that profile is available on the NHL's trade market. This is a rare opportunity.

One of the best parts of the Panarin trade for the Kings is that they didn't have to surrender any premium assets to complete it. The Blues are going to need a haul to part with Thomas, but the Kings are in a position to make an aggressive bid with first-round picks in 2026 and 2027 still in the cupboard, plus other young players and prospects to deal.

Mirtle: Carolina Hurricanes

Something tells me that Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsy is going to keep swinging on the biggest fish until one is reeled in for the long term.

The Hurricanes have missed on Artemi Panarin, Mitch Marner and (sort of) Mikko Rantanen and Jake Guentzel of late, but Thomas would be an even better fit as a center, given he'd allow Logan Stankoven to shift to the wing and give Carolina two higher-end scoring lines.

Thomas has a full no-trade clause in his deal and five years remaining, so some of this would be contingent on where his head is at, but cap space and playing time won't be an issue in Raleigh. His exceptional vision and two-way ability would fit in well under coach Rod Brind'Amour.

Unlike most of the league's contenders, the Hurricanes have a first-round pick this year, too: the one they received from the Stars for Rantanen at last year's deadline. But it'll take a bigger haul than that to coax the Blues to give up one of their biggest stars.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

What would a Robert Thomas trade look like for the Blues? Comps, return — and would it be worth it?

Thomas ranks No. 15 on The Athletic's NHL trade board — but would the Blues actually move him, and if so, what could they get?

Shane Wright

Team: Seattle Kraken

Position: Center

Shoots: Right

Age: 22

Contract term: 2027 RFA

Current cap hit: \$886,666

Trade Board ranking: No. 4

Johnston: Winnipeg Jets

The Jets need to search out opportunities amid a step-back season, and the possibility of bringing in Wright could put the organization on a stronger footing moving forward.

For starters, the perpetual cycle of needing to acquire a second-line center at the trade deadline every year would immediately be stopped.

That's a win in and of itself.

Of course, there's going to be risk attached to any trade for a 22-year-old selected near the top of his draft class who is still playing on an entry-level contract. The Kraken are going to need something enticing in return, like Cole Perfetti, who is two years older than Wright and still has room to grow.

But given how sideways things have gone in Winnipeg in recent months, it's a good time to take a swing. Fortune favors the bold.

Mirtle: New York Rangers

The Kraken are looking for a gamebreaker — and already took a big run at Artemi Panarin — so why not keep talking to Rangers GM Chris Drury and see if there's a fit for another high-end piece as they try to surprise in the wide-open Pacific?

With the Rangers in retool/rebuild mode, they'll likely find the former No. 4 pick (2022) enticing, especially if the acquisition cost is a package involving an older player (Vincent Trocheck) or an underperformer (Alexis Lafrenière).

Wright just turned 22 and has the high IQ that could allow him to develop into more of an offensive threat over time, especially if given more



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opportunity than the 13 minutes and change he's had per night in Seattle this season. This could be a change of scenery deal on both sides, and sometimes those can pay off with surprising results.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

NHL trade board 6.0: Could we get a blockbuster before the Olympic freeze?

The clock is now ticking loudly on pending trades with the Olympic freeze set to take effect at 3 p.m. ET on Wednesday.

Nazem Kadri

Team: Calgary Flames

Position: Center

Shoots: Left

Age: 35

Contract term: 2029 UFA

Current cap hit: \$7,000,000

Trade Board ranking: No. 9

Johnston: Montreal Canadiens

Even after acquiring Phillip Danault earlier in the season, the Canadiens could still use another center to strengthen their ability to go on a playoff run.

Kadri is a competitor who would immediately raise the ceiling in Montreal. While there's legitimate concern around how well his contract will age, with another three seasons remaining after this one, the fact he would be in favor of a move to the Habs, according to league sources, should bring a measure of comfort. Kadri has a 13-team no-trade list, and Montreal isn't on it

Acquisition cost shouldn't be a significant barrier here, given the term left on Kadri's deal, while the potential upside is apparent for anyone who watched him elevate during multiple long playoff runs with the Colorado Avalanche.

There was a time when Montreal might have held out hope Sidney Crosby would become available on the trade market, but that ship has now sailed with the Pittsburgh Penguins in a playoff spot. Surveying the list of other veteran centers available, they might not get a shot to add anyone better than Kadri.

Mirtle: Minnesota Wild

Another team with an obvious gap down the middle that a savvy veteran could help to fill.

The Wild have been excellent since their huge swing on Quinn Hughes, but they know they need another pivot to get out of the Central given the Avs' and Stars' depth. Kadri has been there and won before, with Colorado in 2022, and would fit in well with any of Minnesota's big-shooting wingers. He plays on both sides of the puck and elevate in big moments.

Kadri is on the back nine in his career and has had a tough stretch of late in Calgary, but he's also likely to be somewhat cheap given his cap hit and the term left on his deal. And Minnesota is well-positioned to absorb his salary, with a potential extension for Hughes still 18 months away.

Dougie Hamilton

Team: New Jersey Devils

Position: Defenseman

Shoots: Right

Age: 32

Contract term: 2028 UFA

Current cap hit: \$9,000,000

Trade Board ranking: No. 6

Johnston: Carolina Hurricanes

Hamilton enjoyed three productive seasons in Raleigh, N.C., before getting a free-agent offer he couldn't refuse from the Devils in 2022. However, the relationship ended on good terms, and there would be obvious comfort from both sides with a reunion.

Acquiring Hamilton as a mildly distressed asset also fits the profile of how the Hurricanes tend to do business.

The Devils may not have the same urgency to trade the veteran defenseman as they did earlier in the season because of an injury to Luke Hughes, but it's no secret that they're looking to get out from under the weight of Hamilton's contract amid a terribly disappointing season.

Hamilton has battled injuries the past couple of seasons, but there have been some recent signs of strong play. That's critical for a team with Stanley Cup ambitions. And while Carolina may not have a glaring hole in its lineup that needs patching, the Hurricanes are a team forever looking for upgrades that make sense wherever they can find them.

Mirtle: Toronto Maple Leafs

I was told by a league source that this was highly unlikely in mid-January, but call me stubborn: There's a good fit here, should the Devils decide to sell low on the big right-shot defenseman.

The retooling Leafs need to remake their defense to have more of a playmaking element, and with Chris Tanev (injuries) and Morgan Rielly (underperformance) both having cloudy futures in Toronto, there are going to be cap dollars and big minutes available.

The Leafs' first attempts at a deal here, per the source, were contingent on a lot of retention — understandably not ideal for New Jersey — but what if they opted to take on the bulk of the AAV? Toronto lacks many high-end picks or prospects, but if this becomes a cap dump, Hamilton brings an intriguing mix, including the ability to quarterback a top power play with star talent.

And cap room is no longer an issue in Toronto.

The Leafs are going to have to get a lot bolder and take some chances to right the ship next season; swinging hard on an oft-injured \$9 million reclamation project qualifies.

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The Athletic / The Olympics put Canada's goalie woes in the spotlight. How did we get here?

By James Mirtle

Feb. 10, 2026 Updated 7:50 am EST

It was the kind of phone call that could have devastated any other national team's hopes at the Olympics.

In November 2001, Patrick Roy — perhaps the best goaltender in the sport's history — called to let Team Canada executive director Wayne



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Gretzky know he was bowing out of the 2002 Games in Salt Lake City to focus on pursuing a fifth Stanley Cup. Rather than have a heart attack, Gretzky then had the unusual luxury of simply turning to three other Vezina candidates, all-time wins leaders and/or future Hall of Famers, with Martin Brodeur, Curtis Joseph and Ed Belfour tapped to wear the Maple Leaf.

That was how it used to be for Canada in international competition. It always had a ridiculous level of talent to choose from, at every position, including most of the best netminders in the NHL, with Roberto Luongo and Carey Price filling that role in more recent years.

Six Olympics after the Brodeur-Joseph-Belfour trio led Canada to gold, however, it's safe to say things have changed.

You don't have to look much further than who the Canadians took to last year's 4 Nations Face-Off for signs of national weakness in net. All three of Jordan Binnington, Adin Hill and Sam Montembeault have had disastrous 2025-26 campaigns, with save percentages in the NHL's basement — .864, .870 and .875 — and questions about their futures in St. Louis, Vegas and Montreal.

Thankfully the Team Canada brass were ready and willing to pivot, replacing Hill and Montembeault with Logan Thompson, who has been legitimately great this season for Washington, and 35-year-old Darcy Kuemper, who came third in Vezina voting last year. The fact Binnington could still be their starter, however, throws some doubt on Canada's status as the favorites. And it also highlights just how much harder picking Canada's goalies has become over the past 25 years.

The evidence of that decline in dominance is not hard to find in the NHL. There's the dramatic fall-off in the number of Canadian goalies being selected in the NHL draft every year. There's the fact just one Canadian has won the Vezina in the past decade (the now-retired Marc-André Fleury). And there's the overall drop-off in Canadians' share of games played in NHL creases, a figure that has dipped from 65 percent at the turn of the millennium down to an all-time low of 24.9 percent this season.

That number continues to decline every year, to the extent that Canada has been, on average, losing a starting job each season for decades.

The reality now is that more and more Canadian goalies have been relegated to backup duties, if they're in the league at all. Of the 26 goalies across the NHL who have started more than half of their team's games this season, just six are Canadians: Thompson, Kuemper, Binnington, Stuart Skinner, Jet Greaves and Scott Wedgewood.

Looking at the sport's next generation through that lens is even more concerning: Greaves and Joel Hofer are the only Canadian goalies under 27 who have appeared in regular NHL action this season (15-plus games played).

The question of "Where have all the Canadian goalies gone?" is complex with more than one root cause. Dan Robson and I wrote a deep-dive on some of the key issues last year leading into the 4 Nations, and some of what we learned from those on the ground level of hockey development was alarming.

Some of the problems are inherent to the sport itself, given the high costs for both ice time and equipment, which is driving participation rates in this country lower on their own. The fact goalies require highly specialized instruction and gear often raises those already-prohibitive costs dramatically, making the position one almost exclusively for wealthy families to pursue in a sport that's increasingly become that way overall.

But when you talk to the former pros who have become goalie coaches across this country, they point out more troubling trends. There is a level of intense professionalization happening in Canadian minor hockey, they say, a movement that includes young goalies specializing at the position earlier than ever, with some exclusively playing in net as early as seven years old. The best goalies are also often asked to play for super teams

at a young age, meaning they face fewer difficult opponents and adversity. Other young children who wish to play the position get left behind.

"In Canada, coaches are under a ton of pressure because the focus in minor hockey here is about winning," said Rob Gherson, one former pro who has been disturbed by what he has seen coaching in Toronto's youth system in recent years. "And it's crazy. It's essentially like these kids are becoming professionals at eight years old."

Other countries began to radically change their goalie development systems decades ago, starting with the Finns and Swedes as they attempted to equalize the playing field with larger nations by excelling at the game's most important position. Russia and then the United States took note of their progress and adapted many of their advancements, including dramatically scaling up the number of full-time goalie coaches in their countries at every level.

The results have become especially evident at the NHL level in recent years, with Russia boasting far more top-end goalies than Canada — led by Andrei Vasilevskiy, Sergei Bobrovsky, Igor Shesterkin and Ilya Sorokin — and the U.S. improving its depth at the position every year.

For the first time ever, American netminders have played more games in the NHL (497 versus 478) this season than Canadians, a shift that is projected to grow in the coming years given development trends. USA Hockey has even set a goal to have its goaltenders play 50 percent of the minutes in NHL creases by 2030, a mark that would have previously seemed nonsensical.

None of these shifts are new. And the majority of the goalies at the Olympics this year progressed through their country's development systems 15 to 20 years ago, making this tournament more an echo of an earlier era than a reflection of where things stand today at the youth level. Even so, these rare best-on-best events often become a referendum on where a program is at, and it's unmistakable that the overall caliber of Canadian goaltending in the NHL is at its lowest point in a very long time.

Unsurprisingly, Team Canada coach Jon Cooper was asked about that fact on Monday in Milan, and he quickly pointed to the Cup-winning pedigree of Binnington (in 2019) and Kuemper (in 2022), as well as Thompson's excellent numbers the past two seasons, in their defense.

Which is fair enough. While Binnington has struggled mightily in the NHL this season, he has earned his "Big Game Binnington" nickname after proving doubters wrong and coming through for Canada at the 4 Nations last year in the final. Thompson and Kuemper, meanwhile, aren't all that far off the best 1-2 tandem of other nations, especially with Russia absent. And the Canadians' overwhelming talent level at other positions, especially up front, means their goalies should have more run support than anyone in the tournament.

But if Team Canada is to win at these Games, taking gold for the fourth time in the past five best-on-best Olympics, they'll likely have to win in a different way than the past. While their goalies no doubt remain competitive in an event like this, there is no Patrick Roy or Martin Brodeur, no Luongo or Price. Though competent and potentially even clutch, Canadian goalies are no longer the class of the field, winners of the top individual honors or headed to the Hockey Hall of Fame.

And judging by the generation that's coming, that appears to be something Canadians are going to have to get used to.

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Men's Olympic hockey preview: Why Canada and the United States are co-favorites

By Dom Luszczyzyn

Feb. 10, 2026 6:00 am EST

At long last, Olympic hockey featuring the NHL is back. Naturally, the first subject up for debate is who's going to take home the gold.

In past tournaments, the favorite going in was always obvious: Canada. You could get cute with a contrarian pick, but it was Canada whose expectations were gold or bust with every other country vying to dethrone them.

Those are still Canada's expectations, but the competition at the top has become more fierce this time around. Canada is no longer the de facto team to beat. The Canadians have company with the arrival of the United States' strongest generation of talent coming together to make this tournament very interesting.

Our projections have been officially unveiled, with a page that will be updated after every game and within them, Canada and the USA start as co-favorites, with a slight lean towards Canada. Those projections are based on each player's Net Rating relative to the role they're expected to play at the tournament. For non-NHLers, we're using win share equivalencies based on work by Cedric Ramqaj and Thibaud Chatel from NL Ice Data (who also provided the data to make that possible), translated into projected ratings.

Below, we outline exactly why Canada and the USA lead the pack and what to expect from the other 10 teams at the tournament, with roster projections for each nation and a non-NHL player to watch courtesy of Chatel.

May the best country win.

Gold-medal contenders

Canada

Gold: 42%

Silver: 23%

Bronze: 17%

Whether or not Canada is the favorite in this tournament depends entirely on one high-leverage decision: who starts in goal when it matters.

There is no bigger gap in goalie options for any other team than the one Canada has between Logan Thompson and Jordan Binnington, given the wide chasm in how the two have performed over the last two years. Canada would be the favorite with Thompson as the unquestioned starter, but for now, we're going with a slight lean toward Thompson which puts Canada only slightly ahead of USA for medal probability. Binnington being named the knockout game starter would shift things significantly in the United States' favor.

CATCH UP ON THE STORY

Canada can't risk starting Jordan Binnington over Logan Thompson at the Olympics

There should be no question who Canada's starter is at the Olympics. That it's even up for debate feels like the country is being gaslit.

It's a testament to the strength of the rest of the roster that Canada would still have such a high chance to win gold, even with the statistically wrong decision between the pipes. That's thanks to its immense offensive firepower and defensive prowess up front, combined with elite two-way ability on the back end. The Canadians have the highest Offensive

Rating from any forward group and the highest Defensive Rating from any defense group.

On the offense side, Canada has a generational branch at the top that goes from Sidney Crosby to Connor McDavid to Macklin Celebrini, with Nathan MacKinnon sprinkled in between. That may be the strongest forward quartet we have ever seen at any Olympic event and may be enough on its own to power Canada to gold. The depth after featuring some of the absolute best two-way players in the game — Sam Reinhart, Mitch Marner, Brandon Hagel, Mark Stone, Nick Suzuki and even last-minute replacement Seth Jarvis — is ludicrous. A few of those guys would be top-three forwards elsewhere. Here, they're the middle six.

On the defense side, the stopping power across the board is a huge plus. Every single defender can defend with the best of them, which should immensely limit chances before they even get to the net. There's not one liability here. Having said that, a lot of the offense from the back end hinges on Cale Makar, which feels risky. It helps that it is Makar, the best in the world, but a secondary elite offensive threat might've helped.

While there are some choices to quibble with and one major decision in net that can change everything, this is still one of the best teams Canada has ever put together on paper. The only problem is that their North American rival can boast the same thing.

United States

Gold: 37%

Silver: 26%

Bronze: 18%

USA Hockey has come a long way in the past decade. The sheer depth at every position is astounding — enough for the team's management group to make some downright puzzling choices. Not taking two of the country's best goal-scorers and one of its best defensemen is the difference between Team USA being the co-favorite with Canada and the team to beat.

Still, just being co-favorite is a big step up from past tournaments, where it was usually obvious who the alpha dog was. This time around, the USA has closed the gap considerably with a roster that is the strongest it has ever brought to the tournament. The Americans have star power and depth at every position and are well-balanced on offense and defense. They're poised to be a heavy threat to Canada's reign of hockey supremacy.

That starts at the top with an incredibly strong group led by Auston Matthews, Jack Eichel, and Matthew Tkachuk up front, with Quinn Hughes and Zach Werenski on the back end. It's the best fivesome the USA has ever had at its disposal and while it's not quite at Canada's level, it's as close as ever. Where the USA really shines is with its depth. It is loaded on the wing, has some strong shutdown depth up front and looks well-situated for any role necessary on the back end. It's a versatile group that may not have the firepower some hoped, but is still loaded from top to bottom.

The big X-factor for the USA is whether the country's biggest strength will actually play out that way. Connor Hellebuyck is the reigning best goalie in the world and still projects as such, but he's notoriously struggled in a playoff setting and hasn't looked himself since coming back from injury. If he can be his usual unstoppable self, that could be the difference for the United States. If worst comes to worst, turning to Jake Oettinger or Jeremy Swayman is as great a backup plan as any country could ask for. It just wouldn't be the same advantage as prime Hellebuyck.

Put it all together and the USA has an exceptionally strong team, one that could very well win its first gold since 1980. The only thing standing in America's way is Canada looking just as good.

Medal threats



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Sweden

Gold: 11%

Silver: 20%

Bronze: 22%

Sweden has suffered some setbacks due to injury — Leo Carlsson, Jonas Brodin — but the country's biggest issue would've been present regardless: a lack of high-end talent. Relatively speaking, of course. Lucas Raymond, William Nylander and Rasmus Dahlin are really good. But in terms of each country's Big Three, that trio would probably rank fifth behind Canada, the USA, Finland and Germany. Being closer to the Czech Republic and Switzerland is not the best starting point.

Where Sweden makes up ground is its depth, especially with defensive stoppers throughout the lineup. What the Swedes lack in game-breaking skill, they make up for in shutdown ability up and down the roster. A center spine featuring Joel Eriksson Ek, Mika Zibanejad, Elias Pettersson and Alex Wennberg should be able to handle the best other countries throw at them. Ditto on defense with Dahlin, along with shutdown experts Gustav Forsling and the rising Philip Broberg.

Goaltending should be fine in the hands of Filip Gustavsson as the likely starter. He tends to perform strongly in Minnesota's vaunted defensive system and Sweden should be able to create a similar support structure around him. He is closer to an average starter than a world-beater, but in this tournament, that may be enough. Depending on what Canada does in net, Sweden should have the third- or fourth-best goaltending at the tournament.

Sweden's depth at every position makes it the biggest threat for bronze, but the lack of oomph could hold it back from a higher podium finish.

Finland

Gold: 7%

Silver: 15%

Bronze: 18%

It is a real shame that Aleksander Barkov, Finland's best player, won't be at this tournament. His presence would've pushed Finland's medal chances from 40 percent to 44 percent. Even without him, this is still arguably the best Olympic roster Finland has ever had on paper, as the nation has seen a real rise in star talent.

Up front, Mikko Rantanen, Sebastian Aho and Roope Hintz are a feared trio that stacks up well to the best-of-the-best at the tournament. The continued emergence of Artturi Lehkonen and Anton Lundell adds some needed support behind them with a secondary layer Finland has often lacked. On the back end, stout defense will be at the forefront of Finland's identity with Miro Heiskanen leading the way as one of the game's very best. He's aided by a trio of sturdy options — Esa Lindell, Niko Mikkola and Rasmus Ristolainen — that will make life very difficult for opposing teams. Finland's plus-21.2 Defensive Rating from its defensemen trails only Canada at the tournament.

For Finland to win a medal over the three better teams, though, it will need a vintage all-world performance from Juuse Saros. At the top of his game, he can go head-to-head with anyone, but that's hard to bet on when we haven't seen it in a while. Some still revere Saros in that way, but he's been outside the top 25 in GSAX in three straight seasons. During that stretch, he ranks 46th among goalies to play 50-plus games. Unless Saros steps up, goaltending could be Finland's Achilles' heel.

Dark horses

Czech Republic

Medal probability: 19%

The Czech Republic's lack of NHL depth is concerning — especially now with Pavel Zacha out. It's the main thing holding them back from the next tier with Sweden and Finland. It's a major problem on the back end where they have two players who could no longer stick at the NHL level (Radim Simek and Jan Rutta) and another (David Spacek) who struggled in a two-game call-up this season. If the Czechs bow out early, that will likely be why. This group is not close to the golden generation that were a legitimate power from 1998 to 2006.

With that being said, the Czech Republic, also known as Czechia, is a nation on the rise and has the power to upset one of the Big Four with a return to its winning formula: offensive star power and elite goaltending.

With the way he'll likely be used, David Pastrnak could be one of the most impactful players at the tournament and he'll have his fair share of help with Tomas Hertl and Martin Necas. The rise of Necas in particular is a big deal for the Czechs. Combine that with a genuinely strong tandem of Lukas Dostal and Karel Vejmelka (or even Dan Vladar for that matter) that projects to be the second best at the tournament, and the Czech Republic suddenly looks a lot scarier than it would've in 2018 or 2022. The Czechs might be back.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Could the Czech Republic's goaltending make it an Olympic men's hockey dark horse?

Lukáš Dostál has heard plenty about Dominik Hašek's gold medal in 1998. Can he help his country pull off the upset this month?

Non-NHL player to WATCH: Matej Stransky

"Stransky is the leading scorer in the National League. The HC Davos captain is a massive, do-it-all power forward who uses his size and skills to either beat defenders off the rush or win pucks along the boards. Owing an NHL-level shot, he will fit nicely in the Czech bottom six and fill any role thrown at him."

Switzerland

Medal probability: 13%

The Swiss have come a long way in men's hockey and that's thanks mostly to a trio of star forwards at the top of the lineup. Back in 2014, Switzerland had just two NHL forwards to play a meaningful amount of games, neither of which were impact players (though Nino Niederreiter eventually grew into one). This time around, the Swiss have an entire top six, headlined by a trio of star players expected to carry a lot of the load.

Nico Hischier is one of the main reasons to be optimistic about Switzerland's chances as a do-it-all forward, and he'll have some potent help next to him in Kevin Fiala and Timo Meier. The team's biggest strength, though, might be a blue line with a strong defensive identity. Roman Josi can still bring the heat offensively while J.J. Moser's breakout this season gives the Swiss another valuable option to eat minutes. With Jonas Siegenthaler and former Blue Jacket Dean Kukan, the Swiss have a strong collection of shutdown options at their disposal. That's felt up front too, where only Canada, USA and Sweden have a stronger group of defensive forwards.

Switzerland's main concern could be in net, where there's some separation with Czechia, Switzerland's chief Group A rival for the second seed. While the skaters are miles better than past iterations, the lack of an NHL-caliber starter such as Jonas Hiller or Martin Gerber to tie everything together is notable. Goalie Leonardo Genoni, who Chatel calls "the GOAT of Swiss hockey," could be a real wild-card given how strong he is annually at the World Championships. He posted a .953 en route to winning silver last spring. Genoni has serious big-game pedigree with a .936 save percentage over 191 playoff games in the NL and is the best non-NHL goalie here; it's just hard to be sure how strong he can be in an Olympic setting at 38 years old.

Non-NHL player to WATCH: Dean Kukan



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"After six seasons with Columbus, Kukan chose to come home to play for his hometown Zurich Lions. Kukan secured two national titles and one Champions Hockey League title in recent years and is the best all-around defenseman in the National League. At 32, he can skate, move the puck, support the rush and will fit nicely alongside the three NHLers on the Swiss blue line."

Germany

Medal probability: 8%

It's hard not to be bullish on Germany with the way some of the country's best players are playing. Leon Draisaitl was a Hart finalist last season and remains a top-five player in the world. Moritz Seider has seriously elevated his game this season and looks like a Norris threat as arguably the best two-way defenseman in the NHL. And Philipp Grubauer has had a dramatic comeback this season, where he ranks top 10 in GSAX. That's an incredibly strong trio to lead each position, bolstered further by Tim Stützle scoring at an 88-point pace and JJ Peterka being a five-on-five beast.

Germany's sudden collection of high-end talent gives it a real shot against any team and it has an advantageous path in Group B to make some noise. I expect Germany to lean heavily on its superstar quartet, which is one driver of higher-than-expected ratings for Draisaitl, Stützle, Peterka and Seider. But don't overlook the country's collection of non-NHL talent, where the German league has a strong defensive reputation. What the group lacks in offense it more than makes up for defensively.

The recipe for victory is there: tough defense, a goalie who can steal games again and some high-end offense at the top. Germany may be unlikely to win a medal, but the Germans are still going to be a really tough out along the way.

Non-NHL player to WATCH: Leon Gawanke

"Gawanke is one of those gifted European players — big, right-handed defenseman, skates well, drives offense — who, despite a few productive AHL seasons, didn't make the NHL. He went back home in 2023-2024 and became one of the best defensemen in the DEL. Gawanke could see some decent depth action behind Seider, bringing some much-needed offensive help to potentially push Germany toward a historic upset."

Minnows

Denmark

Medal probability: 3%

The good news for Denmark is Group B is fairly soft. The bad news is star goaltender Frederik Andersen has struggled this season.

Everything hinges on Andersen returning to form. He was top-10 in GSAX per game over the last three seasons, but ranks 49th out of 70 goalies (minimum 10 games) this season.

The Danes have some weapons up front in Nikolaj Ehlers and Oliver Bjorkstrand. But if Andersen can't steal games, Denmark will likely have a short tournament. Even then, its medal chances are low.

Non-NHL player to WATCH: Mikkel Aagaard

"Aagaard is a late bloomer, having been through the ECHL, AHL, USports, and Swedish second level before finally reaching the SHL at 27. While he rarely drives his line, he's good at everything. Aagaard is a master of finding open spots to be given the puck, making space for the others, being around the net and getting shots and chances."

Slovakia

Medal probability: 2%

Slovakian hockey has seen a major fall from grace since finishing fourth in 2010. That team had 13 NHLers, led by some serious superstar talent in Marián Hossa, Marián Gáborík, Zdeno Chára, and Jaroslav Halák.

With Juraj Slafkovský as the only real needle-mover, the 2026 version isn't close. For Slovakia to win games, it will need big performances from up-and-comers such as Pavol Regenda, Dalibor Dvorský and Simon Nemeč. Regenda, with 1.37 goals per 60 and a strong five-on-five impact in the NHL, is the best bet for that if he can translate that play to a bigger role as the model suggests.

The non-NHL group performing well defensively is a necessity given Slovakia's biggest issue in net. The lack of an NHL goalie is what separates it and the seven nations with realistic medal hopes.

Non-NHL player to WATCH: Martin Gernát

"Gernát should see plenty of ice time on the Slovakian blue line as one of the best defensemen in Europe. The 6-foot-4, 203-pound defender is an all-around asset, a decent skater and an offensive weapon who chose the KHL in recent years after a few seasons in Czechia and Switzerland."

Latvia

Medal probability: 1%

How successful Latvia can be depends on how successfully its NHL depth players can handle other nations' best and whether the goaltending duo of Elvis Merzlikins and Arturs Silovs can steal wins.

Latvia is set up well to defend and keep things tighter than expected, with Zemgus Girgensons being particularly strong in that regard this season. But scoring will be extremely difficult to come by if the country's best weapons are Sandis Vilmanis and Teddy Blueger.

Non-NHL player to WATCH: Rudolfis Balcers

"Some NHL fans may remember Balcers for his five seasons spent between the big league and the AHL before he chose the comfort of Switzerland. As one of the best forwards on the Zurich Lions, the 2025 European champions, Balcers is a skilled winger with slick transition skills and is capable of generating chances in tight spaces. As a playmaker and shooter, Balcers is the perfect do-it-all complement that Latvia will desperately need to survive."

France

Alex Texier will get a feature role for France that boosts his rating, but he would still be one of the least impactful 'best' players at the tournament. His presence alone isn't enough to carry France to relevance, especially in a difficult Group A.

Non-NHL player to WATCH: Stephane Da Costa

"Da Costa has been nicknamed 'The Magician' by French fans, having been their best playmaker for over a decade, and scored some life-saving goals at World Championships. The former Senator, deemed too small for the NHL, has been one of the best players in the KHL ever since."

Italy

With zero NHLers on the roster, Italy likely struggles all tournament as even its non-NHL skaters stack up poorly with those on other rosters. Of Italy's 22 skaters, none rank in the top 40 and 18 rank in the bottom half of the non-NHL group.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Why Italy didn't name heritage players to its Olympic hockey team, and why it thinks it can surprise

With a coach who knows how to win internationally and a determined roster, Italy isn't waving any white flags despite its underdog status.

Non-NHL player to WATCH: Damian Clara

"Clara will carry most of Italy's hopes for a miracle, being a goaltender and the first Italian-born player drafted in the NHL (Anaheim, 2023). He



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trained in Austria as a teenager and has been a starter in the SHL for two seasons now despite his youth. This is a huge opportunity for him to shine against the best in the world."

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The Athletic / 2026 Olympic men's hockey rules vs. NHL rules: How they differ and what's changed

By Jesse Granger

Feb. 10, 2026 5:30 am EST

For the first time in 12 years, NHL players will compete in the Olympic men's hockey tournament.

We were treated to an appetizer of best-on-best international hockey last February, when the United States, Canada, Sweden and Finland battled at the 4 Nations Face-Off, but that tournament was run by the NHL and was played under its rules. In Italy, the games will be governed by the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), and there are several distinct differences in the rules.

Because it's been a while since the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, here's a refresher on the rule differences that you may notice while watching Olympic hockey.

Rink size

One of the biggest differences between NHL and Olympic hockey has always been the dimensions of the rink. NHL ice surfaces are 200 feet long and 85 feet wide. Historically, Olympic competition was played on a much wider rink: 98.5 feet wide (and 197 feet long).

This Olympic tournament was supposed to be played on NHL-size ice, similar to Vancouver 2010 and Beijing 2022, but the rink turned out slightly smaller than anticipated. The rinks inside these two Olympic arenas will be more than three feet shorter than NHL regulation, measuring roughly 196.85 feet by 85.3 feet.

After concerns about the rink size were voiced, the IIHF released a statement saying, "While these dimensions differ slightly from a typical NHL rink, they are consistent with IIHF regulations, match the rink size used at the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games and are fully consistent with the dimensions the NHL requires as part of its Global Series Game arena specifications. All involved, the IIHF, the Organizing Committee, NHL, NHLPA, IOC and the relevant venue authorities agree that the differences in rink specifications are insignificant, and should not impact either the safety or quality of game play."

Overtime rules

There have been several tweaks made to Olympic overtime rules, and they will change as we get deeper into the tournament. Here's how it will work if teams are tied at the end of regulation in each round:

Preliminary round: Teams will play five minutes of sudden-death, three-on-three overtime. If no goal is scored, the game will be decided in a shootout. This is similar to how the NHL decides regular-season games, with one slight difference: In the Olympics, the shootout is at least five rounds, not three.

Initial playoff rounds: Once teams reach the knockout stage of the tournament, they will play 10 minutes of sudden-death, three-on-three overtime. If no goal is scored, it will go to a five-round shootout.

Gold-medal game: This is where the IIHF made the most significant changes to more closely imitate overtime in the NHL playoffs. If teams reach overtime in the gold-medal game, they will play full, 20-minute periods of sudden-death overtime until a winning goal is scored. The only difference between this and the Stanley Cup playoffs is that it all will be played at three-on-three.

Points system

The 12 participating countries have been split into three groups of four for the preliminary round. They will play each other to finish as high in their standings as possible, but the points system during that stage will differ from what NHL fans are used to.

A regulation win will be worth three points. An overtime or shootout win will be worth two points. An overtime or shootout loss will be worth one point, and a regulation loss will be worth zero.

Bigger bench

In the Olympics, teams are afforded bigger rosters with more active players than NHL teams. The active game-day roster jumps from 18 skaters and two goalies in the NHL to 20 skaters and two goalies in the Olympics. This means coaches will have two extra players to deploy. Most choose to go with 13 forwards and seven defensemen.

Shorter intermissions

The time between periods will be slightly shorter at the Olympics, with a break of only 15 minutes compared to 18 minutes in the NHL. For viewers, this difference will hardly be noticeable, but it could be a slight inconvenience for players with deeply-engrained intermission routines.

Stricter rules on fighting

Fighting is a regular part of NHL games, and provided some of the most memorable moments from last year's 4 Nations Face-Off, but the IIHF clearly states in its rulebook that "fighting is not part of international ice hockey's DNA."

Under IIHF rules, players engaging in a fight are typically ejected from the contest. From the rulebook: "Any player who persists in continuing or attempting to continue a 'fight or altercation' after they have been ordered by the referee to stop, or who resists a linesperson in the discharge of their duties shall, at the discretion of the referee, incur at least a major penalty, plus an automatic game misconduct penalty, in addition to any additional penalties imposed."

Stricter rules on checks to the head

The IIHF's rule on checks to the head begins, "There is no clean check to the head or neck. The player delivering the hit must avoid hitting the opponent's head or neck."

In the NHL, checks to the head cannot be called as major penalties or game misconducts. They are either ruled a two-minute minor penalty, or can be elevated to a match penalty if the referee determines the player attempted to or deliberately injured his opponent with an illegal check to the head.

The IIHF rulebook allows referees to call illegal checks to the head as a major penalty and automatic game misconduct if, in their judgment, a player recklessly endangers their opponent by an "illegal check to the head or neck."

The differences in wording are slight, but important.

Rules that used to differ but don't anymore

Over the years, the IIHF has continued to adopt more and more rules from the NHL. If it's been a while since you've watched Olympic hockey, you may be surprised by some rules that are now congruent with the NHL.



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Trapezoid rule: The NHL introduced the trapezoid behind the goal line in 2004, preventing goalies from playing the puck in the corners. In the Olympics, goalies continued to be free to play the puck anywhere behind the goal line until the IIHF adopted the trapezoid in 2021. Now, it is ruled the same way as it is in the NHL.

Crease violations: Crowding the goal crease to interfere with the goalie's field of vision has become an increasingly popular offensive strategy in today's NHL. Under previous IIHF rules, in which players were prohibited from ever stepping foot in the blue goal crease, that would be tough to execute. In 2018, the IIHF adopted a policy similar to the NHL's, which allows players to skate through the blue paint, as long as they don't interfere with the goaltender.

Icing: The last time NHL players competed in the Olympics, they played with automatic icing — meaning icing was called the moment the puck crossed the goal line, regardless of players' positions on the ice. In 2015, the IIHF adopted hybrid icing, which matches what the NHL has used since 2013.

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The Athletic / Tricky goalie decisions for Canada and the USA could make or break their Olympics

By Pierre LeBrun and Michael Russo

Feb. 10, 2026 Updated 8:08 am EST

MILAN — The co-favorites for gold in men's hockey each have a tricky goaltending decision to make.

It is not the same decision, mind you. Team USA needs to pick between three Ferraris. Team Canada has to decide what hot hand will emerge from what the outside world has pinpointed as its weakest link.

But within all that, they're still equally potentially thorny decisions nonetheless in net for each powerhouse team.

Let's dive into it:

Team USA

As Brock Nelson said Monday, the United States has a luxury of riches in goal with Connor Hellebuyck, Jake Oettinger and Jeremy Swayman, "but who knows who they go with?"

"I'm glad I don't have to make that decision," the veteran center said. "I'm glad they're behind me though."

Former NHL goalie Brian Boucher, working the NBC men's hockey broadcast, said the U.S. may actually have a trickier decision than Canada because all three are upper-echelon goalies.

But judging by Monday's practice, the net may be Hellebuyck's to lose after his strong play at last year's 4 Nations Face-Off and, of course, the fact that he's the NHL's reigning Hart and Vezina Trophy winner.

Hellebuyck said, "We'll know soon enough."

What makes this a tough call is that Swayman, who didn't get playing time in the 4 Nations, may arguably be playing better this season than Hellebuyck and Oettinger.

Hellebuyck is 13-16-7 with the Winnipeg Jets with a 2.79 goals-against average and .900 save percentage, and ranks 24th in goals saved above

expected at five-on-five at 3.5, according to Money Puck. Oettinger is 23-10-4 for the Dallas Stars with a 2.73 goals-against average and .897 save percentage. He ranks 26th in goals saved above expected at 0.7.

Swayman is 22-12-3 for the Boston Bruins with a 2.92 goals-against average and .903 save percentage but ranks second in the NHL in goals saved above expected at 17.9. And it's clear Swayman hopes to grab the spot at some point.

"That's our job, baby: make it hard for them," Swayman said. "We want that. We want that high competitive environment, and I think it's only going to raise our own level as well as the team's level."

Added Oettinger, "That's the tough part about being a goalie. I wish all three of us could stand in there at same time. If I get my number called, I just got to be ready to go and try to play my best, and then hopefully they keep calling my number. Obviously it's out of my control, and until then, I'm just gonna work my butt off and stay sharp and try to be ready to go."

Goalie analytics are tricky. Sometimes you want to see a big body of work to make a decision. Other times it can be a game of "what have you done for me lately." Recent trends can be very illuminating, especially when it comes to goaltending decisions for Canada and the USA.

For that, our analytics expert Dom Luszczyzyn looked at a rolling average of a goalie's last 41 games of goals saved above expected per game.

For Canada, he felt the choice should be obvious. For the United States, the choice looks a lot more wide-open since Hellebuyck came back from injury. He's only played 22 games since, but has an average GSAX of minus-0.13 during that stretch. Swayman's return to form this year makes it a legitimate conversation.

Coach Mike Sullivan has not named a starter for the United States' opener Thursday against Latvia, but he said they have a plan.

"We've obviously talked about this stuff at length on what our approach is going to be and how we're going to go about it," he said. "The reality is we have three excellent goalies. They're all very capable. I think at the end of the day, performance will inevitably be the dictator. In a tournament like this, it has to be. And so, we have an idea going in of how we want to go about it and how we want to approach it and we'll go from there. I do think that performance matters, and so that will be part of it as the tournament evolves."

"What I will tell you is that we feel regardless of which guy we put in, we have three elite goaltenders, all of which will give us an opportunity to win. That we know. We'll do our best to make the best decisions for the team. That's a discussion we have with our goaltenders, and that's how we'll go about it."

Hellebuyck still has the inside track because of his play at the 4 Nations.

"I can understand the pace of play and the speed," he said. "I know what's expected with the way we play and what's expected around me. There's some good takeaways, and other than that I'm just going to enjoy every single day over here."

Team Canada

Let's sit back and consider the Canadian goalie history at play when it comes to the NHL-populated Olympics: Patrick Roy in 1998, Martin Brodeur in 2002 and 2006, Roberto Luongo in 2010, Carey Price in 2014.

It's a lineage that we brought up with Jordan Binnington, Darcy Kuemper and Logan Thompson after practice Monday.

"That's special," said Binnington. "I think it's hit me more and more as I'm here and just how big of a deal it is and what an honor it is, truly, to represent your country. Obviously some great names, great goaltenders have played for this organization and had success. History is such an



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important part of the game for you to understand what it takes and learn from their experiences and be inspired by moments they've had."

But at the same time, all three Canadian goalies understand that it's in fact because of that world-class goalie lineage that there's a narrative now about the drop-off at the position at these Olympics. They get it.

"You know, I think when you're saying the names that you were saying, those are Hall of Famers, so maybe that's where it all stems from," said Kuemper, smiling. "But we're really confident with the three of us, our union — we know what we're all capable of. We're just looking forward to get started here."

Thompson said it hadn't dawned on him the line of Canadian superstar goalies from past NHL Olympics that preceded the current trio.

"Those are all pretty elite goalies. I didn't even think about that," he said. "I guess it's cool to be a part with those names. Just want to make those guys proud."

There's no denying no one is fueling the doubters more than Binnington, whose struggles this season have opened him up to that. He ranks dead last in the NHL in goals saved above expected at minus-18.5, while Thompson ranks third at 17.9 and Kuemper 14th at 6.5, according to Money Puck.

Team Canada's goalie consultant just happens to be the director of goaltending for the St. Louis Blues. So David Alexander knows all too well what the narrative is ahead of the Olympics regarding Binnington — because it was the exact same narrative a year ago before 4 Nations, an event in which Binnington proved the doubters wrong.

"It was the same storyline, yes," Alexander told The Athletic after practice Monday. "That's one thing Binner and I talk about all the time: when the critics stop, you're not in a good spot. Because the reality is, any position worth holding, brings criticism. It's just the reality of it. The criticism is really affirmation, is what it is. When you're surrounded by noise, it should elevate you. And he's a guy that's got a good brain for that and is able to recognize those moments and he's done a great job handling it."

Binnington calmly answered the same old questions Monday. He gets it. And he insists he's not sick and tired of it.

"No, no. I think that's what keeps me going in some aspects, is proving myself and seeing what I'm capable of and seeing where I can take it," he said. "That's something I've used as motivation. That's just part of sports is people are going to doubt you, and it's how you handle it. For me, it's just staying in my own process and building my game and trying to get better every day, every year and seeing where it takes me."

His performances in Game 7 at Boston in the 2019 Stanley Cup and in the 4 Nations championship game in Boston last February speak to what Binnington can achieve when he channels it. Can he tap into that again here?

"It is experience, right?" said Binnington. "You gain wisdom and knowledge from experience. At the same time, none of that really matters when it comes (to) game time. You've got to do whatever you can to be ready for that moment. Just enjoy it, take it all in and leave it all out there."

Team Canada won't say yet who will be the Game 1 starter. That's because the coaching staff hasn't even told the three goalies what the pecking order actually is, which all three goalies confirmed to be true Monday.

The conventional wisdom is that Binnington starts the tournament but is kept on a short leash. And remember this: even with that Hall of Fame lineage, Team Canada has had some interesting goalie twists in past NHL Olympics. Curtis Joseph started Game 1 in Salt Lake City in 2002, but after the team got blown out in the opener, Brodeur took over and never looked back. Eight years later in Vancouver, it was Brodeur, the NHL's all-time wins leader, who got replaced in net after a round-robin

loss to the U.S. Then Luongo took over for the rest of the tournament en route to gold.

There is absolutely a world in which we see a goalie switch in this tournament.

Regardless, Alexander — as one would imagine — takes issue with the narrative that's formed about Team Canada's goalie weakness.

"I know the outside world thinks there's a goaltending issue, but the reality is two of these guys are Cup winners. Logan's name is being tossed around for a Vezina," said Team Canada's goalie consultant. "I get the outside perception, it's great noise, but all three of these guys are deserving to be here and they stack up well against any other goalie in the tournament."

Boucher also downplayed Team Canada's perceived weakness in goal.

"You can't just make it all about goaltending, right?" Boucher told The Athletic on Monday. "They have to understand they have a really good team. Yeah, there were some Hall of Fame goaltenders before them, but they're all capable guys. Kuemper was a Vezina finalist, Binnington's won 4 Nations and Stanley Cup, Logan Thompson is having a great year, so I mean, you can't make it about them. They just got to be who they are, they're solid NHL goaltenders. It's not like they have to be all-world. I don't think it requires that."

"I don't think it should come down to that," Boucher added. "They're good enough to win just based on their lineup. They just have to do their job. That's what it boils down to."

And to Boucher's point, it is hard to forget the moment in the middle of the gold medal game in Sochi in 2014 when Carey Price yawned during a stoppage. He wasn't too busy that day. Team Canada was that dominant.

If Team Canada's deeply talented lineup does its job, it shouldn't be about Canadian goaltending having to save the day.

Also from the Games on Monday: How the U.S. and Canada asked players to prepare for tournament, and who starts in goal for Sweden?

"Has Canada had a string of goaltenders that have been exceptional, Hall of Famers? They have," Team Canada head coach Jon Cooper said Monday. "Have they been a part of this tournament and won? They have. To me, Carey Price goes down as one of the greatest goalies for sure of his generation and of all time. He was a winner. We have those guys. Some of these guys may not go down as generational goaltenders, but they're Stanley Cup winners. They have championship pedigree. They've made the big saves at the times they've needed to."

"I watched that in Darcy Kuemper in my own building in Tampa ('22 Cup final). I watched it in Jordan Binnington. I've watched Logan Thompson the last two years. Like, they're as good as anybody, and what they've done for us not only last year but as teammates, I mean, we have all the faith in the world in them. I understand people have to write about stuff, but our guys go through a wall for them and they do the same for us. To me, it's not a story. I don't know where it comes from."

Sorry Coop, it's a story. But Binnington, Kuemper and Thompson have a chance to re-write it for themselves.

"Anyone in this tournament obviously belongs to be here, and it's fun," Binnington said. "There's always something to talk about out there. I think for us it's just sticking together and whoever's in there is just supporting and pushing each other. It's been fun so far, just two great guys. We're just working at it day to day, and we'll see how it all plays out."

Kuemper, who can tap into his '22 Cup run with Colorado to help prepare for this stage, says proving doubters wrong will happen if they play up to their ability.



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"You can't really listen to what people are saying, but we're all aware of how capable we are and confident in ourselves," said Kuemper. "Really at the end of the day you just go play your game. If you're looking to prove people wrong that's all you've got to do. Just go out there and play and not be too worried about what people are saying. Just go do what you do."

Still, all three goalies know what's being said.

"I mean, you always hear it. Everyone always just says how they think the goaltending is the weakest part," said Thompson. "I mean, it's been the word for the last couple of years. I don't see it that way. I don't think we see it that way. But for some reason everyone else does."

Here's the thing about the biggest stage in hockey: win Olympic gold and the doubters go away.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.11.2026

1379159 Websites

ESPN / Lapsed fan's guide to the Olympic men's hockey tournament – ESPN

18–23 minutes

Greg Wyshynski Feb 10, 2026, 12:00 PM

The 2026 Milan Cortina Olympic men's ice hockey tournament begins Wednesday with round-robin play, and it's the first time NHL players have participated in the Winter Games since 2014.

Here's a primer for this best-on-best tournament for the hockey die-hards -- and for those Olympic fans asking, "What's a Tkachuk?"

Why are NHL players back in the Olympics?

The NHL began sending its players to the Winter Olympics in 1998. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Canada men have won three gold medals since then, having previously not won once since 1952. Canada's last gold was in the 2014 Sochi Games, which was also the last time NHL players graced Olympic ice.

For decades, the NHL and its players have sparred over Olympic participation. The players want to represent their countries in the world's most prestigious and historic athletic event -- like the generations of Americans inspired by the "Miracle on Ice" in 1980. NHL owners are loathe to shut down their regular season and loan their talent to an IOC that doesn't share revenues or give the league any tangible financial benefit. But for the sake of "growing the game," the NHL has participated, with some exceptions.

The league didn't participate in the 2018 Olympics in Pyeongchang because of a change in terms with the IOC and because "the overwhelming majority of our clubs" were "adamantly opposed" to disrupting the 2017-18 season, according to commissioner Gary Bettman, who was also seeking concessions from the NHL Players Association. NHL owners were opposed to shutting down the regular season to play in South Korea, a market the league didn't consider a priority for global growth.

Discouraged by that decision, the NHLPA had language written into their new collective bargaining agreement signed in 2020 that stated the players would participate in the 2022 and 2026 Olympics. But the caveat for the 2022 Beijing Games was whether the 2021-22 NHL season was "materially impacted" by COVID-19 postponements. The NHL and

NHLPA agreed to hold players back from the Beijing Games after 50 NHL games had already have been postponed through Dec. 23, 2021.

International Ice Hockey Federation president Luc Tardif backed the league, saying, "We understand the NHL's decision is in the best interest of the health and safety of its players." When Marty Walsh, former U.S. Secretary of Labor under President Joe Biden, was hired as NHLPA executive director in 2023, he made a return to the Olympics his priority. After months of contentious negotiations, the NHL announced in February 2024 that it would send its players to the Milan Cortina Games. Bettman said the negotiations turned on the players' "big ticket" items being taken care of, like insurance and travel and accommodation costs, as that responsibility fell to the IIHF and IOC.

With that, it was game on for Italy, for players from almost every country.

Why isn't Russia in the tournament?

Russia and Belarus have been banned from IIHF events at every level since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, including the 2026 Olympics. The IIHF has cited "security conditions" as the motivating factor.

Hence, some see the 2026 tournament as "best-on-most-of-the-best."

Two of the NHL's top 10 scorers -- Tampa Bay Lightning winger Nikita Kucherov and Minnesota Wild winger Kirill Kaprizov -- are absent from the tournament, as are stars such as Artemi Panarin (Los Angeles Kings), Evgeni Malkin (Pittsburgh Penguins) and Alex Ovechkin (Washington Capitals), who became the NHL's all-time leader in goals scored last season.

This could be the last Olympic hockey tournament played under these restrictions. The IIHF kept its ban in place for the 2026-27 season, but signaled a willingness to reconsider the status of Russian and Belarusian under-18 teams for 2027-28. Organizations such as FIFA also have signaled they're ready to lift their restrictions on Russia.

Russia's absence from international tournaments prevented the NHL and NHLPA from staging another World Cup of Hockey since the last one in 2016, so they had to get creative. The result was the 4 Nations Face-Off held last February in Montreal and Boston, a successful event that solidified the U.S. and Canada as hockey's current superpowers and gave their rivalry nuclear-level heat.

P.K. Subban's biggest question for Team USA heading into the Olympics Is U.S. vs. Canada an inevitability in the gold-medal game?

Like King Kong and Godzilla (or the Canadian kaiju equivalent) flattening cities before the two monsters throw down against each other, so are the U.S. and Canada in the men's tournament. They are easily the deepest two teams in all positions, especially as injuries have affected other traditional hockey powers. They also have Cup-winning coaches in Canada's Jon Cooper (Lightning) and Team USA's Mike Sullivan (Rangers).

Team Canada's offense offers:

One of the greatest center trios in hockey history, Edmonton Oilers star Connor McDavid, in his first Olympics, has four MVP wins (three regular season, one postseason) and five scoring titles in his 11-year NHL career. Colorado Avalanche star Nathan MacKinnon, also in his first Olympics, has scored 40 goals in 55 games this season. Pittsburgh Penguins star and two-time Olympic gold-medalist Sidney Crosby remains a point-per-game player at 38 years old and is considered the NHL's best all-around player of this century.

A collection of wingers such as Mitch Marner and Mark Stone (Vegas Golden Knights), Nick Suzuki (Montreal Canadiens), Brandon Hagel (Tampa Bay Lightning) and Sam Reinhart (Florida Panthers) who are as good offensively as they are defensively.



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The NHL's greatest antagonist in Brad Marchand (aka the "Rat King") of the Panthers, and the league's most controversial checker in Tom Wilson of the Washington Capitals, both of whom can also thrive offensively.

Macklin Celebrini, the San Jose Sharks' 18-year-old scoring phenom who played his way onto the Olympic team.

Defenseman Cale Makar of the Avalanche, who is third all time in the NHL for points per game among defensemen (1.08).

But for the first time in the NHL's Olympic era, Team USA has iced a roster that can match Canada's depth while surpassing it in some areas. Even while deciding to leave some great offensive players off the roster -- Montreal's Cole Caufield and Dallas Stars winger Jason Robertson most prominently -- the Americans might have their deepest collection of scoring talent ever.

Minnesota GM Bill Guerin built the 4 Nations team that lost in overtime to Canada in the championship, and ran back much of that roster for the Olympics. Among the Team USA highlights:

Matthew Tkachuk (Florida Panthers) and younger brother Brady Tkachuk (Ottawa Senators), the truculent pacesetters of this squad. Please recall the brothers sparring three fights in the opening nine seconds of Team USA's 4 Nations opener against Canada. They hit, they yap and they can embarrass you on the scoreboard, too. Matthew Tkachuk just recently returned from offseason surgery to repair a torn adductor muscle and sports hernia. He had eight points in his first 10 games back with the Stanley Cup champion Panthers.

Jack Eichel (Golden Knights) and Auston Matthews (Toronto Maple Leafs) give the Americans their best center duo ever in an Olympic tournament.

Their defense offers explosive offensive players such as Quinn Hughes (Wild), who sat out 4 Nations, and Zach Werenski (Columbus Blue Jackets) as well as stout defenders such as Jacob Slavin (Carolina Hurricanes), who was arguably the Americans' best player at 4 Nations.

Their goaltending depth is unmatched in the tournament. Connor Hellebuyck (Winnipeg Jets) won NHL MVP and the Vezina Trophy for top goalie last season. Jake Oettinger (Dallas Stars) and Jeremy Swayman (Boston Bruins) are more than capable backups and could push him for the starter's job.

There's a reason fans have been shaking with anticipation about these Olympics. U.S. vs. Canada could be an all-timer, whether they meet for a medal or earlier in the knockout round.

When could the U.S. and Canada conceivably meet?

The Olympic men's hockey tournament is split into three groups for the qualification round. Though the Olympic draw does give us an opening-round rivalry game between Finland and Sweden, the other two teams from the 4 Nations Face-Off, Canada and the U.S., are in separate groups:

Group A: Canada, Switzerland, Czechia, France

Group B: Finland, Sweden, Slovakia, Italy

Group C: United States, Germany, Latvia, Denmark

Seeding for the elimination round is determined (in order) by record, points, goal differential, total goals scored and then IIHF world ranking. The top four teams receive a bye to the qualification round, and it would be stunning if Canada and the U.S. were not among them. Team USA has arguably the easiest draw, while Canada should be better than Switzerland and Czechia -- although neither will be easy outs.

Keep in mind that this isn't a rigid bracket. According to the IIHF, the semifinal round has the highest-seeded team playing the lowest-seeded team after the quarterfinals, and the second- and third-highest seeds play

each other. So if Canada and the U.S. are seeded first and second after the round robin and win out, they could meet for gold.

But there's an X factor here: Group B. Please recall in the 2014 Sochi Games that the U.S. and Canada were seeded in different groups and both had two regulation wins and one overtime/shootout win. Sweden, meanwhile, was in a third group and had three regulation wins to finish first after the round-robin. That led to the U.S. and Canada facing off in the semifinals for the right to play for gold. Canada beat the U.S. 1-0 and the Americans were so disheartened that they didn't even win bronze.

What are the major concerns for Canada and the U.S.?

Canada's weakness is glaring: Its goaltending.

St. Louis Blues netminder Jordan Binnington was absolutely brilliant in Canada's 4 Nations overtime win over the U.S. but has been one of the two worst goalies in the NHL this season by traditional or advanced stats. Canada swapped out its other 4 Nations goalies (Adin Hill of Vegas and Samuel Montembeault of Montreal) for demonstrable upgrades: Kings goalie Darcy Kuemper, who won a Stanley Cup with Colorado in 2022; and Capitals goalie Logan Thompson, tied for sixth in NHL save percentage over the past two seasons. They're better, but still nowhere near the U.S. in goaltending quality.

For the Americans, it's scoring and experience. Will GM Guerin regret leaving off some pure scorers at forward and on defense -- where Montreal's Lane Hutson and the Rangers' Adam Fox were snubbed -- in favor of players with more defensive acumen? How much can New Jersey Devils star Jack Hughes, hampered by injuries and playing out of position, and New York Rangers captain J.T. Miller, having a terrible season, contribute? Can Matthews, who didn't have a goal at 4 Nations, find the back of the net?

Team USA has Stanley Cup champions in forwards Eichel, Matthew Tkachuk and Jake Guentzel (Tampa Bay Lightning), but Canada has more rings in the room. It also has Crosby, and no one on the U.S. roster comes close to matching the experience and leadership of Canada's captain. When adversity hits -- like a third-period deficit in an elimination game -- the Canadians have calming influences where the Americans might have players gripping their sticks tighter.

One of Guerin's big bets on this roster is IIHF world championship experience. The Americans won that event in 2025, the first on-ice trophy for USA Hockey in the tournament in 92 years. Olympic forwards Tage Thompson (Buffalo Sabres) and Clayton Keller (Utah Mammoth), defensemen Jackson LaCombe (Anaheim Ducks, an injury replacement for Florida's Seth Jones) and Werenski, as well as Swayman, played in that championship game. So a lot of American players have "big game" experience. But they don't come much bigger than Olympic tournament elimination games.

Who are the other medal contenders?

Sweden is the consensus pick for the third-best team in the tournament, and it would be foolish to count the Swedes out.

They have a stout defense corps: Buffalo Sabres star Rasmus Dahlin and Panthers stopper Gustav Forsling; Tampa Bay Lightning captain Victor Hedman and the Golden Knights' Rasmus Andersson; as well as Erik Karlsson, the 35-year-old Penguins blueliner who can still make things happen on offense.

Their forward group has dangerous scorers in William Nylander (Maple Leafs), Adrian Kempe (Kings), Filip Forsberg (Nashville Predators) and Lucas Raymond (Detroit Red Wings). What they lack is quality down the middle, especially with Anaheim star Leo Carlsson (44 points in 44 games) missing the Olympics because of injury. That said, Mika Zibanejad's resurgent season with the New York Rangers (23 goals) has helped ease some concern.



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But to take down either Canada or the U.S., it will take elite goaltending. Sweden might have it. Minnesota's Filip Gustavsson has been one of the NHL's top netminders and is seeking redemption after giving up two goals on four shots to Finland in the 4 Nations Face-Off before being pulled because of illness. He should be their No. 1 over the inconsistent Jacob Markstrom (Devils) and Wild rookie sensation Jesper Wallstedt, who has better numbers than Gustavsson this season.

Finland is the reigning gold medal winner, having captured the championship in Beijing with non-NHL players. The Finns suffered the tournament's most significant injury loss when Florida star Aleksander Barkov needed preseason surgery to repair a torn ACL and MCL in his right knee. He was the engine that drove the Panthers to back-to-back Stanley Cup wins and a center who would have given Finland formidable depth at the position along with Sebastian Aho (Hurricanes), Roope Hintz (Stars) and Anton Lundell (Panthers).

As usual, underestimate the hard-working Finns at one's own peril. Winger Mikko Rantanen (Stars) showed in last season's Stanley Cup playoffs that he can carry a team on his back offensively. His Stars teammate Miro Heiskanen is one of the best defensemen in the tournament. If Juuse Saros (Predators) can level up his game from a below-average regular season, the Finns could be dangerous. At a minimum, Finland is never a pushover.

Switzerland brings an interesting squad to Italy, with NHL standouts in forwards Nico Hischier and Timo Meier (Devils), Kevin Fiala (Kings), Nino Niederreiter (Jets) as well as defenseman Roman Josi (Predators) and J.J. Moser (Lightning). What they don't have in these Olympics is a difference-maker in goal, with NHL goalie Akira Schmid (Golden Knights) joining Swiss league players Reto Berra (who has NHL experience) and Leonardo Genoni, who has played well at Worlds. Where have you gone, Jonas Hiller?

Germany boasts one of the best hockey players in the world in Oilers star Leon Draisaitl, as well as one of the NHL's best defensemen in Moritz Seider of the Red Wings. They also have pair of accomplished scorers in Utah's JJ Peterka and Ottawa's Tim Stutzle. The rest of the roster is mostly made up of Deutsche Eishockey Liga players, some with NHL experience. Someone who could play spoiler: Seattle Kraken goalie Philipp Grubauer, one of the NHL's best netminders this season and a candidate for comeback player of the year.

Czechia's forward group is dotted with names familiar to NHL fans, each of whom have 22 goals on the season: Boston scoring star David Pastrnak, Colorado winger Martin Necas and Vegas center Tomas Hertl. But the great hope for the Czechs is their goaltending, which boasts one of the best trios in the tournament based on their NHL campaigns: Anaheim's Lukas Dostal, Utah's Karel Vejmelka and Philadelphia's Dan Vladar.

Slovakia won its first men's hockey medal when it captured bronze in Beijing. Montreal forward Juraj Slafkovsky was that tournament's MVP and returns here as one of Slovakia's only NHL standouts at forward. They have some NHL talent on the back end, including Erik Cernak (Lightning), Martin Fehervary (Capitals) and Simon Nemec (Devils). But none of their three goalies have any NHL experience -- and one of them, Adam Gajan, is in his second NCAA season with the University of Minnesota-Duluth.

Denmark has three familiar faces at forward -- Nikolaj Ehlers (Hurricanes), Oliver Bjorkstrand (Lightning) and Lars Eller (Senators) -- and in net Frederik Andersen (Hurricanes), who once upon a time was a game-stealer internationally but has been off his mark with Carolina this season.

Latvia has several players with North American experience but only three currently in the NHL: Forwards Teddy Blueger of Vancouver, Zemgus Girgensons of Tampa Bay and Uvis Balinskis of Florida. The Latvians do have some intriguing goaltenders in Elvis Merzlikins of the Blue Jackets and Arturs Silovs of the Penguins.

France made the 2026 Olympics after Russia was ruled ineligible. Italy made the tournament as the host nation. It would be a mini-miracle if either of them won a game in group play. But hey, maybe they'll benefit from the smaller ice.

What was the controversy over the Olympic rink?

Well, the most prominent controversy was whether the Olympic hockey tournament would be held in a pile of slush in the middle of rubble. As of November, construction was so far behind schedule that test events had to be moved and Olympic organizers declared there was no "Plan B." As late as Jan. 25, there was a layer of mud down the Zamboni tunnel all the way to the ice at Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena.

By the time the Olympics started, the venues were still be worked on but were more than functional -- including the ice, which players called soft but not unplayable.

The other controversy was over the size of the Olympic ice. A few months ago, Team Canada GM Doug Armstrong and assistant coach Peter DeBoer casually mentioned that the ice in the 2026 Olympics would be smaller than an NHL rink. The IIHF released a statement in September confirming the rink would be a 196.85-foot by 85.3-foot sheet, smaller than the NHL's standard 200-foot by 85-foot dimensions.

Though NHL teams that play internationally have often had to adapt to different ice dimensions, the fact the Olympic sheet was smaller caught some observers off guard. Will the smaller ice surface create more physicality between the teams, necessitating Canada's adding of Wilson to the roster? Or is he simply an anti-Tkachuk deployment mechanism?

What are the major dates to know for the tournament?

The fun starts Wednesday with round-robin action in Group B. Team USA, seeking its first gold medal since 1980, hits the ice against Latvia on Thursday, and Canada opens against Czechia.

The men's qualification round playoff is scheduled for Feb. 17, with the quarterfinals set for Feb. 18. The semifinals are set for Feb. 20, with the losers of those games vying for the bronze medal on Feb. 21, and the winners playing for Olympic gold on Feb. 22.

Will we see another round of hockey's g

ESPN LOADED: 02.11.2026

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Sportsnet.ca / Why Canada is about to fall in love with Macklin Celebrini at Olympics

Eric Francis

5-7 minutes

There's a certain type of Canadian hockey star we fall for.

Not just the ones who score in bunches or skate like they're late for something important.

No, the ones who win us over - the ones who become ours, carry themselves with a quiet dignity, a humility that feels stitched into the maple leaf itself.

At 19, heading into his first Olympics, Macklin Celebrini is already checking every box.

He's the kid you want representing your country on the world stage.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • February 11, 2026

The kid you want your own kids watching. The kid who, in true Canadian fashion, recently tried talking a referee out of giving the other team a high-sticking penalty.

Who does that? A unicorn. A throwback. A budding superstar who isn't as unaware he's a budding superstar, but is fully cognisant of the responsibility that comes with it.

And yes, a kid who deserves every comparison to Sidney Crosby - on the ice, off the ice, and in the way he treats the game like a privilege, not a platform.

Celebrini doesn't shy away from the Crosby talk. Why would he? He grew up studying the man like a textbook.

At last year's World Championships, he found himself on Crosby's line for a few games. Imagine being 18 and suddenly sharing shifts with the guy you've watched your whole life conduct himself like a true gentleman.

"Everything on the ice," Celebrini said when asked what he learned.

"I was on his line for a couple of those games and asking him questions and trying to learn from him, just the way he kind of thinks the game and talks to his linemates and things he's looking for.

"But also off the ice, just how good of a person he is, how well he treats everybody. He's always looking out for everybody else before himself, which is really cool to see a human being like that."

Sound familiar?

It should. Because Celebrini is cut from the same cloth.

And Canadians are about to fall in love with him.

Not just because the NHL's fourth-leading scorer will be perched alongside Connor McDavid and Tom Wilson on the Canadian Olympic team's top line, but because his genuine, aw-shucks approach is the very best of what being Canadian is all about.

Ask him what he's great at - really great at - and he won't talk about his shot, his skating or his hockey IQ.

"I was gonna say I can make a good banana bread... but it's my mom's recipe," smiled the affable teen.

Determined to come up with an answer, he chuckled.

"This is gonna be weird, but I think I'm really good at keeping my place tidy. I'm a little bit of a clean freak. I like to keep my home in order."

Once again, he credits his mom.

Of course he does.

It's the most Celebrini answer imaginable.

So, one wonders, what is he most looking forward to learning from the five-ring experience?

"I think just the level of play, seeing where I stand with the best-on-best pace, and how it feels," he said.

That's the thing about Celebrini. He's not intimidated by the moment. He's curious about it.

He's not trying to prove he belongs. He's trying to understand how high the bar is so he can vault over it.

Much like how his 200-foot game speaks to what a great teammate he is, his wide-eyed enthusiasm will make the country want to wrap their arms around him with an Olympic-sized hug.

"I got a package with a jersey, and that was pretty cool, just getting the jersey," said San Jose's talented centre when asked when his Olympic dreams felt real.

"The travel gear is cool as well, because it has Team Canada and the Olympic logo on it."

He exudes Canadian pride.

With just a few sticks in his collection - Kopitar, Ovi - he's not chasing autographs in Milan. He's chasing memories.

And he plans to bring home plenty from Italy.

"For sure, I'll bring back whatever I can bring back to kind of remember the tournament," he smiled, knowing a gold medal would be the ultimate souvenir.

It would also do well to cement him as one of the next gatekeepers of our great game, the kind of boy next door you can cheer for, and know he'd never embarrass his team, his family, his country or his sport.

After all, he's still being mentored by Joe Thornton, with whom he has been living the last two years.

"I mean, if you've met Jumbo, he's just like, 'have fun,'" Celebrini said of Joe's Olympic advice.

"He's just all joy. And he's like, 'it's gonna be great, just enjoy it.' Nothing too serious."

Perfect advice for a kid who already plays like nothing fazes him.

On the ice? Nothing rattles him.

Off the ice?

"Traffic," he said without hesitation. "I hate traffic. Every time I hit traffic it rattles me."

San Jose traffic isn't exactly Los Angeles or Toronto, but to Celebrini, being limited in the speed in which he's accustomed to operating is still "the worst."

It's endearing, really. The kid can stare down NHL veterans without blinking, but put him behind a slow minivan, and he's ready to lose it.

We've seen phenoms before.

We've seen teenage stars.

We've seen kids arrive with hype and pressure and expectations that would crush most adults.

But Celebrini is different.

He's grounded. He's gracious. He's grateful. And, oh boy, is he talented.

The kind of kid who makes you proud he's wearing your flag.

And on Thursday, when he makes his Olympic debut against Czechia, Canadians from coast to coast will see the beginning of a new era.

Because Macklin Celebrini isn't just the future of Canadian hockey.

He's the present. And he's ready.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 02.11.2026

1379161 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / How NHLers feel about being forced to wear neck guards at Winter Olympics

Luke Fox

5-6 minutes



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • February 11, 2026

MILAN, ITALY — Zach Werenski steps off the Milano Santagiulia ice and tugs at the foreign band of sweat-soaked fabric Velcro'd around his throat.

The Team USA defenceman is still getting used to wearing a neck guard. He must.

"This is light. It's very easy," explains Werenski, who was also forced into neck protection during the Americans' run to gold at the 2025 world championship.

"At the worlds, I wore one of the shirts, and it was pretty hot. Like, I was sweating a lot more. But this has been super easy for me. I really don't notice it too much. It's really not bad at all."

Cut-resistant neck protection is now a mandatory accessory at all International Ice Hockey Federation games, and it has added a new wrinkle for the veteran NHLers who are used to letting their collars breathe.

In previous Winter Games attended by NHLers, neck guards were optional.

The 2023 death of Adam Johnson — who died after defenceman Matt Petgrave's skate blade cut Johnson's neck during an Elite Ice Hockey League game in England — sparked change.

Nearly two months after Johnson's death, the IIHF Council mandated the use of a neck laceration protector at all levels of IIHF competitions.

A few NHLers have resisted test-driving the various neck guards — loose straps, undershirts with extended collars — available to them while practising in Milan, but most are using the training sessions to get accustomed to their new accessories.

"I do not wear one in Vegas, no," Jack Eichel says, after Team USA's second skate. "So, it's new for me. But it's new for a lot of guys. You just try and find whatever's most comfortable for you. Obviously, it's part of the international play, so we'll make it work."

"This is the first time I've worn mine. I forgot to wear one yesterday in practice. I really haven't worn in quite a while. So just try and get used to what it feels like. But, honestly, it's not, it's not bad."

"I mean, you can feel it a little bit, right? I think you're usually more free. But it's not like a hindrance or anything."

Not that bad is a common refrain from these pro athletes who are happy to adjust to jetlag and imperfect ice to realize their long-deferred Olympic dreams.

"I mean, I don't think many guys love it," U.S. captain Auston Matthews says. "But I think once you kinda get out there, you don't notice it much."

Players like Matthews and the Tkachuk brothers haven't experimented adding neck protection while playing with their club teams, but most have added cut-resistant sleeves over their wrists and ankles into their repertoire.

Coincidentally, former U.S. Olympic shootout hero T.J. Oshie was at the forefront of the neck-guard movement at the pro level. Oshie's Warroad performance brand has seen a spike in base layers and cut-resistant neck guards for players as adults began taking safety more seriously since Johnson's death.

"When you see that, you think about your own kids," Oshie told Sportico. "I have my own kids, and it makes you want to go out there and find whatever is available, and you want the best."

Neck guards will be mandatory for first-time NHL players starting in the 2026-27 season, in accordance with the new collective bargaining agreement rules. However, the rule will be grandfathered in, much like face shields and helmets before that.

Anyone who has appeared in at least one NHL game before 2026-27 season won't be subjected to the rule.

"I just haven't worn one since youth hockey, and I know they're implementing them here and in junior leagues and stuff like that," Brady Tkachuk says. "Whatever those leagues feel is safe for their players, it's up to those individual leagues. Yeah, I'm just not used to it. Being in the NHL, I've never worn it in forever. So, just gotta follow the rules."

Tkachuk sounds like a guy who will be ditching the guard once he returns to Ottawa. He's hasn't considered wearing one in the NHL.

"I don't know. I just try not to think about getting cut," Tkachuk says. "But I have all the other cut-proof stuff, wrist and socks. I just haven't tried it. I haven't done it since youth hockey. I know a lot of guys who use it do like it, so I guess we'll see what happens in our future."

Werenski sounds more open to the idea.

"I've thought about. I won't say I'm superstitious, but maybe a little bit," Werenski says. "And I've never worn one (in the NHL), and I don't like changing anything. I don't like changing my equipment around."

"But maybe after this tournament, if I like it and I feel good with it, you never know."

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Sportsnet.ca / Led by Leon Draisaitl, Germany enters new era of expectations

Mark Spector

6–8 minutes

EDMONTON — Somewhere between Anze Kopitar and Connor McDavid lies Leon Draisaitl.

The pressure to bring a gold medal home from Milan? That lies unarguably with McDavid.

The expectation to raise his country's international profile in the hockey world? Well, Kopitar would plead "no contest."

Slovenia squeaks into the men's world championships off and on, but it has never produced a roster that Kopitar — in all his greatness — could reasonably lead anywhere.

Then there is Germany at these Olympic Games, newly captained by The Deutschland Dangler himself, the son of German hockey royalty, Leon Draisaitl.

A suddenly emerging hockey nation, even teammate Nico Sturm fears that the relatively uneducated (in hockey) German sports fan may be expecting more than their team can deliver.

"There has been a lot of talk about, 'This is the best team that we've ever sent to a tournament!' But," Sturm says, pausing to make sure everyone hears this next part: "Obviously all the other countries also sent their best team."

"Sometimes, people who don't follow hockey as much don't always grasp how much of an impact having NHL players at the Games has."

The best German team ever? The best German player ever?

What does that even mean?



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Well, let's start with the fact the "Träger der Adler" — the Bearers of the Eagle — have as their leader not only the best they've ever produced, but a top-five player in the world.

We would argue that Germany's captain is a superior player today than any captain of any Olympic hockey team in 2026. Yes, better — at this moment in time — even than the legend that is Sidney Crosby.

When has Germany been able to say that?

Yet, the same way that many Canadian sports fans would not be able to identify soccer superstar Alphonso Davies if they saw him in street clothes, Sturm isn't sure if the average German truly knows what they have in the Cologne born-and-raised Draisaitl.

"If you'd ask random people on the streets, not necessarily sports fans, and you showed them a picture of Leon... I don't know," Sturm admits. "Soccer is still so predominant. It overshines everything.

"While Leon has been the face of our hockey federation for a long time, hockey is still a niche sport in Germany. And I don't expect that to change."

On our side of the Atlantische Ozean, Draisaitl has amassed 1,036 points in 845 NHL games.

The next best all-time NHL German scorer is Marco Sturm. He had 487 points in 938 games.

As such, on Monday, the Germans named Draisaitl as captain, succeeding 39-year-old Moritz Müller, who has played 22 seasons with the Cologne Sharks, three Olympic Games for Germany and has captained his country internationally since 2018.

German hockey has passed the torch to Draisaitl, officially. He will be the unchallenged face of Germany ice hockey for the foreseeable future.

"I don't know if I view it as that," Draisaitl said, downplaying the 'face of the game' angle. "I see it as just wanting to go there, be around some of my best friends and show the hockey world how good we can play hockey as a team.

"We know we're going to be an underdog in the majority of the games that we play. But we've got some great players, and German hockey has come a long, long ways."

Far enough, we'd say, that come the quarter-final round Draisaitl can stand at centre ice for an opening face off against Canada, look McDavid in the eye, and....

Well, what would that be like?

"Scary," Draisaitl said, breaking into a smile. "For him."

A game against his bestie would mark unprecedented opportunity for Team Germany. Opportunity to show where the new Eaglemen stand in hockey's new world order. And, of course, opportunity to be shown that it's nowhere close to the guys wearing the red Maple Leaf.

"(A game versus Canada) would be really special, of course," Draisaitl said. "It all might feel a little weird at first. But when the puck drops, (McDavid) is going to look to give his team the best chance to win, and I'm going to do the same for our country. That would obviously be a unique situation, certainly, and an odd feeling, but... we'll see where it goes."

While McDavid will play alongside childhood teammates like Sam Bennett and Sam Reinhart for the second time in a calendar year, this is a rare opportunity for Draisaitl, who doesn't find opportunity to play in any world championships with his Oilers an annual playoff team.

When they were kids playing U-16 hockey in Mannheim, Dominik Kahun and Draisaitl led the league with 126 and 103 points respectively.

Mannheim played just 27 games.

"If you get six points every night, it's pretty fun. But let's not read too much into that," Draisaitl admitted. "My childhood best friend is on the (German) team, Freddie Tiffels. Our moms went to school together. I've known him since I was, like, minutes old.

"It's been a long time since I've been able to represent my country and be around those guys. That's partly what I'm most excited about, just being around my friends and getting to experience this with them."

Sturm, who is the same age (30) as Draisaitl, recalled playing Mannheim.

"It was usually him, Freddie Tiffels and Dominik Kahun. We'd get torched. Oh my God, it would just be double digit games all the time. It was horrible."

Somewhere between the success that Mannheim team had and getting torched is likely where Team Germany will end up in Milan.

But a new attitude is already being forged within German hockey. A new belief that — if they can have the best player on the ice for the majority of their games (Germany is in a pool with the U.S., Denmark and Latvia) — then perhaps the rest of the team can elevate accordingly.

Maybe German hockey can crack the top tier with the Swedes, Finns, Canadians, Americans, Czechs and Slovaks, in a true best-on-best like these Milan Olympics.

You hear it in the voice of the new Oiler Josh Samanski, a recent arrival to pro hockey who would not declare a quarter-final appearance as the ultimate success for the Germans.

"I don't know if I would say that defines success," Samanski said. "You go there to win games. So you want to make the quarters. And when you make the quarters, you're hungry. You want to make the semis. You're hungry.

"Then when you make the semis, you want to make the finals."

They finally have someone to follow, these Germans. Sometimes, that's half the battle.

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Sportsnet.ca / Team Canada's lines: Who's playing with Connor McDavid, and why

Luke Fox

5–6 minutes

MILAN, Italy — Jon Cooper flashes a grin as wide as a Zamboni entrance.

Team Canada doesn't open its Olympic tournament for three days, but the head coach knows his first crack at the forward lines will be juicy fodder for the hot stove.

The answer as to who gets to play with Connor McDavid on the favourites' top line, at least for the first practice: teenager Macklin Celebrini and steamroller Tom Wilson.

Two guys who weren't even selected to 2025's golden 4 Nations roster are riding shotgun alongside the world's most dynamic player.

"That was for you guys," Cooper smiled Sunday night, after wrapping an hour-long skate at Milano Santagiulia. "Just in case a fight breaks out, he's protected."



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There is no fighting at the Winter Games, however. And although Coach Cooper has jokes, he's dead serious about giving Celebrini and Wilson a peek in the penthouse.

Hours of preparation were poured into determining which combinations of talents will click. Cooper asked his stars — and, in some cases, their NHL coaches — which linemates best complement their skill-set. Not specific names, but rather what type of player they need.

Zach Hyman's not here, but Wilson sure is.

"Everybody needs an F1 right? That big boy there is one of the best I've seen," Cooper explained.

"It's never like a situation where (the player is) pointing the fingers: 'Oh, I want to play with this guy.' Nobody does that. But what helps them? And so, some guys are forecheckers. Some guys aren't. Some guys are puck-possession guys. And when you find that right mix..."

That's the mission over these hasty, jetlagged practice days and the three games of round-robin action to follow.

Figure out what clicks. Because if you're still searching for chemistry when the knockout rounds hit, you'll be searching for an earlier flight home.

Revealed, Mitch Marner said, just an hour before Canada hit the ice, Cooper's lines are balanced. How could they not be, with Sidney Crosby at 3C?

Here's our first look:

Forwards

Celebrini – McDavid – Wilson

Marchand – MacKinnon – Suzuki

Stone – Crosby – Marner

Hagel – Horvat – Reinhart

Jarvis – Bennett

Defence

Toews – Makar

Morrissey – Parayko

Harley – Doughty

Theodore – Sanheim

Goaltenders

Binnington

Thompson

Kuemper

McDavid says his initial wingers inject a fine blend of skill, speed, and physicality. The trio has already piled a combined 226 points in the NHL this season.

"Very different players," McDavid said. "But great players in their own way."

Celebrini's way is mature beyond his birth certificate. Only 19, he's the youngest athlete participating in the men's bracket.

"Take his age out of it. He's a helluva hockey player," said Cooper, who worked with the Sharks phenom at the '25 world championships. "He may be 19 years old — like, his physical body is — but his acumen for the game is not. He's wise beyond his years."

Wilson, 31, is the oldest first-timer on Canada's squad. Not since the U17 worlds in 2011 has he repped the Maple Leaf at a best-on-best.

"I've played against Macklin and Connor a lot, and it's not fun. Playing with them is a lot more fun. They're so good with the puck. For me, it's about, go get it for them and get open, and they'll do the rest," Wilson said.

"It's not every day you play with a guy that just has the skating ability like Connor. Obviously, I'm a straight-line skater and a hard worker."

McDavid is already taking Wilson to school on where to go on certain routes and how to trust that his centreman will join the rush.

"He's like, 'Hey, I'm gonna catch up to you, you know. Like, maybe you don't need to go there. Maybe widen out there. I'll catch up with my skating,'" Wilson explained. "Creating space for him versus crowding his space or whatever."

"And if we stay together, we'll get better and better."

That's a major if.

As diligent as Cooper is when it comes to constructing his blueprint, he'll be searching for weaknesses, ways to tweak and adapt his lines as these two weeks roll on.

"If anybody watched 4 Nations, the lineup we started against Sweden was not the lineup that finished against the U.S. four games later," Cooper said. "Ultimately, you have to start somewhere. This is where we started tonight."

"But, I'll tell you, it sure is fun."

Team Canada's first-look power-play units:

PP1

Makar

McDavid – Reinhart – MacKinnon

Crosby

PP2

Theodore

Celebrini – Horvat – Marner

Stone

Canada's first men's hockey game at Milano Cortina 2026 will take place Feb. 12 against Czechia at 10:40 a.m. ET on Sportsnet.

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1379164 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / How Drew Doughty grew from unsure Olympic rookie to Canadian cornerstone

Eric Francis

5–6 minutes

LOS ANGELES – Drew Doughty swears he didn't want the flag.

Of all the memories a two-time Olympic gold medallist could lead with - the Golden Goal, the pressure of overtime, the legends in the room - he goes straight to the moment his teammates forced him, a 20-year-old rookie, to skate a victory lap with a Canada flag so massive it could've doubled as a parachute.



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"I sprinted to Sid and kinda blacked out," he said of the seconds after Sidney Crosby scored the most famous goal in Canadian Olympic hockey history.

"And then the guys made me skate around with this massive Canada flag, and I remember I didn't want to do it. But they're like, 'you're doing it, no option. You're a rookie.' I didn't want all the attention on me. I hate that."

That's the beauty of Doughty. Even in the middle of a moment that will be replayed in this country for generations, he was just a kid trying not to be noticed.

And yet, he was impossible to miss.

Doughty's Olympic story starts long before the Golden Goal, when he started the 2010 tourney as the seventh defenceman on a team so stacked it could've iced two medal contenders.

"I was just so nervous that I don't even remember what the (expletive) happened," laughed Doughty of his earliest Olympic memories.

"I was roommates with Chris Pronger, so I remember spending time with him, and he made me laugh a lot."

Imagine being 20, walking into a room with Pronger, Crosby, Niedermayer, Iginla, Nash, Toews, Bergeron: the hockey equivalent of sitting at the grown-ups' table for the first time.

"We all sat on our own on the bus, but once in a while one of the vets would just come and sit with me on the bus and talk to me," said Doughty, who was less than 200 days older than Macklin Celebrini will be when the 19-year-old plays in Milan this week.

"I remember one instance, Sid doing that, talking to me the entire time until we got to the practice arena. I just remember thinking, 'Damn, I'm lucky to be here.'"

Lucky, maybe. But he wasn't just there to soak it in.

He was there because Team Canada's executive director Steve Yzerman saw something in the second overall pick of the 2008 NHL Draft.

"I didn't really know if I felt like I belonged until I kind of went from the seventh defenceman to, like, the fourth D," said Doughty.

"And then Stevie Y came to me, and he could see in my game that I was just playing very simple. And he was like, 'Hey man, we chose you to play the way that you play. Go out there and be confident.' From that moment on I thought I stepped up my game and played much better."

He didn't want to let anyone down. He'd watched these guys as a kid. Now he was trying not to screw up in front of them.

Yet, there he was, on the ice in overtime of the gold medal game against the Americans, somehow comfortable in one of the most intense scenarios in hockey history.

"Back then nothing fazed me," said Doughty, now 36, and the only Canadian team member other than Crosby with Olympic experience.

"I didn't feel it in that moment. As I've gotten older, I think about things more, like maybe negative outcomes and things like that. But when I was young, man, it was 'play, have fun off the ice, and that was it.'"

He remembers the play in Vancouver like it was yesterday, or at least the part before the blackout.

"I just remember seeing Sid in the corner, thinking not much was gonna happen," he grinned, as he stood in shorts at the Kings' practice facility.

"I was going to kind of go back door, so if he shot or missed the net, I was gonna go get that puck. And then it went in."

And then the sprint. And then the flag. And then a lifetime of Canadians remembering exactly where they were while he was trying to hide behind a piece of fabric the size of a billboard.

Four years later, in Sochi, Doughty wasn't hiding from anything.

He was driving the bus.

Doughty led Canada in scoring with four goals, something even his Kings teammates didn't realize until recently.

"Someone spoke about that recently, I don't know who it was, and guys on my team were all shocked," said Doughty, well-aware his role now is as a defensive stalwart alongside Thomas Harley.

"I was like, 'Yeah, screw you.' Maybe I don't put up the points I used to, or have the offensive touch that I used to, but I was really good back then."

He wasn't just good. He was dominant.

"In Sochi, I was more of a guy that was counted on, and I just ran with it," he said.

"Even then, I remember I had so many good seasons with L.A., but I don't think until that 2014 Olympics, and that 2014 Stanley Cup, that people actually realized how good of a player I was. I remember, even guys on the team saying, like, 'Wow.'"

That's the thing about Doughty: he's always been elite, but he's never been shy about reminding you he knows it.

Doughty's Olympic arc is one of the great Canadian hockey stories - from the wide-eyed rookie who didn't know if he belonged, to the guy carrying the flag (literally), to the veteran who led the team in scoring four years later.

He didn't ask for the spotlight. He didn't want the flag.

But he earned both.

And he'll always be part of the moments this country will never forget.

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TSN.CA / Czechia preps for Canada with closed practices

Mark Masters

5-7 minutes

MILAN – One day after Canada closed its practice at the Olympics, Czechia followed suit by shutting the media out of their practice on Tuesday.

"There's obviously some special teams stuff that we want to work on and some other stuff that goes along with the team game," assistant coach Tomas Plekanec told TSN. "It was an option; we decided to take it."

Canada and Czechia will play each other in their first game of the Olympics on Thursday. Was Czechia's decision to close practice a response to what Team Canada did?

"No, not at all," Plekanec insisted. "I didn't even know they closed it. We had some team stuff going on so, like I said, it's an option for teams that is good for them."



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But not good for the media covering the event in Milan and, apparently, not good for the family of players.

"I didn't know we could close it up," said Anaheim Ducks defenceman Radko Gudas with a smile. "I tried to get my kids here, but they wouldn't allow them to go in the stands. Maybe that was the problem."

Canada coach Jon Cooper explained his decision to close practice by saying there would be too many people in the small practice rink, which would create a distraction.

The Czechs, though, made it clear they believe there's a competitive advantage in keeping outside eyes away from their workouts.

"We did some special [teams] stuff," said Gudas. "We did some faceoff [plays]. We did a lot of things that only we should know probably so maybe that's why."

"We did some power play and PK," noted Vancouver Canucks centre David Kampf. "The coaches probably don't want you to see it."

Czechia is also closing Wednesday's practice.

TSN's Ryan Rishaug reports that Canada will hold an open practice on Wednesday.

Plekanec says Czechia decision to close practice is not a response to Canada. The trend of closed practices continued on Tuesday, as Czechia followed suit in closing their session. Assistant coach Tomas Plekanec explained the decision, while the players didn't even realize practice was closed.

Czechia is in tough on Thursday when they face Canada, and they know it.

"It's going to be the hardest game of our career I would say for everybody," said Gudas. "But it's still the first game of the tournament so we're trying to get better as the whole tournament is going to go. Maybe we catch them sleeping a little bit too with the time zones."

Canada's entire 25-man roster is NHL players. After losing Boston Bruins centre Pavel Zacha to injury, the Czechs are down to 12 NHL players.

"They have a great team," said Utah Mammoth goalie Karel Vejmelka of Canada. "Maybe one of the best in history, so exciting to have that team as a first to play against. [Sidney] Crosby especially is a legend, but we are excited for sure."

In a sign of just how deep this Canadian team is, Crosby skated as the third-line centre at the first two practices.

"That's the biggest 'wow' for us," said Gudas, "having Sid as third-line centre."

So, how do the Czechs pull off a big upset?

"No turnovers for sure," said Dallas Stars centre Radek Faksa. "No taking penalties. No turnovers at the blue line and good goaltending and just simple stuff. We know Canada got all four lines really good. We got to show them no respect as well. We need to play hard. That's how we can beat Canada."

Czechia feels like they are set up to hit the ground running in Italy. They have 18 players back from the team that won the 2024 World Championship on home ice.

"We have a good style of hockey for us, that works in our favour and we can beat anybody," Gudas said. "I think the resiliency of our group will be a big problem here for some other teams."

Gudas on facing Canada at Olympics: 'Going to be the hardest game of our careers' Czechia discusses their excitement to open the Olympic tournament on the 'biggest stage' against Canada. Radko Gudas jokes that maybe they'll catch the Canadian team sleeping with everyone adjusting to the time change in Italy.

The Czechs also have great depth in net with Anaheim's Lukas Dostal and Philadelphia Flyer Dan Vladar joining Vejmelka.

"I would say our goalies are our best players," said Kampf. "We are very excited about our goalies."

"It's big confidence for us," said Gudas. "I don't think we really scored on them yet. It's been fun practising."

Czechia has already decided who will start on Thursday, Plekanec said, but won't inform the goalies until Wednesday morning.

Dostal was the go-to guy during that run to gold at the 2024 Worlds.

"He showed up two years ago on one of the biggest stages at the World Championship in Czech and showed he can be in big games and stay calm," said Gudas. "His calmness helps the team feel confidence on the back end."

'Big confidence for us': Czechia's path to Canada upset starts in net Czechia has a glut of goaltenders with NHL experience at the Olympics and assistant coach Tomas Plekanec says it's the position they're least worried about.

Team Czechia projected lines based on Monday's practice:

Necas - Hertl - Pastnak

Palat - Kampf - Kase

Cervenka - Sedlak - Tomasek

Stransky - Faksa - Kubalik

Flek, Chlapik

Hronek - Simek

Kempny - Gudas

Spacek - Rutta

Tichacek - Kundratek

Dostal

Vejmelka

Vladar

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