



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • February 17, 2026

The News & Observer

Hurricanes goalie, once a waiver-wire castoff, cements future with new contract

By: Chip Alexander

One of the best stories in the NHL this season just got better.

Carolina Hurricanes goaltender Brandon Bussi has been given a three-year contract extension that will pay him an average of \$1.9 million a season, the team announced Monday.

The Canes also said the team will make a \$10,000 donation to the Autism Society of North Carolina. Bussi's younger brother, Dylan, has autism and Brandon's goalie mask is a tribute to Dylan and meant to raise awareness.

Brandon Bussi of the Carolina Hurricanes in net during the first period against the Calgary Flames at Lenovo Center on November 30, 2025 in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Brandon Bussi of the Carolina Hurricanes in net during the first period against the Calgary Flames at Lenovo Center on November 30, 2025 in Raleigh, North Carolina. Jaylynn Nash Getty Images

Bussi has gone from a goalie placed on waivers by the Florida Panthers last October to the Hurricanes' most dependable netminder. Claimed off waivers on Oct. 5, Bussi has posted a 23-3-1 record, with a 2.16 goals-against average and .908 save percentage for the Canes, who led the Metropolitan Division at the league's break for the Winter Olympics.

"It's crazy," Bussi said Monday on a media call. "I think if you told me back in October, I'd be like, 'Sure, that will never happen.' But I think the hockey world can work in mysterious ways in some sense. I'm fortunate I got an opportunity and that Carolina sees me the same way I see myself being here.

"I'm very happy, to say the least, that I get to be here more time."

Bussi beat the San Jose Sharks, 5-1, in his NHL debut on Oct. 14 and posted his first NHL shutout Nov. 30 against Calgary. He matched a franchise record with nine consecutive wins between Oct. 30 and Dec. 19, and became the fastest goaltender in NHL history to reach 10 wins.

Bussi appeared in 111 career AHL games with the Providence Bruins, going 63-31-13, and was named to the AHL's All-Rookie Team in 2022-23. He played collegiately at Western Michigan, where he was 46-25-5 before going pro.

Bussi signed with the Panthers as a free agent after last season and was driving to Charlotte to join the Charlotte Checkers, Florida's AHL team, when he was informed he had been claimed off waivers by Carolina. The Canes had placed goalie Cayden Primeau on waivers with the purpose of sending him to the AHL Chicago Wolves, taking Bussi in case Primeau was claimed — which he was, by Toronto.

"It's difficult to break into the league and sometimes different opportunities pop up in different ways," Bussi said. "Mine happened in a way that doesn't happen for a lot of people.

"There's a lot of good hockey players out there and things happen for a reason. That's kind of been my motto, and I'm very fortunate it gets to happen here for longer."

Bussi has emerged as the Canes' top goalie, teaming with veteran Frederik Andersen. Goalie Pyotr Kochetkov underwent what might be season-ending surgery in late December.

"Before we brought him to Raleigh, Brandon had been successful at every level from the USHL to college to the AHL," Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsky said in a statement. "Given the opportunity at the NHL level this season, he's proven to be a winner here, too. We are thrilled that he will continue to provide a steady presence in the crease for this team into the future."

Now, Bussi has a new contract and considerably more financial security.

"I think we have the potential to do some very exciting things here over the next few years," Bussi said. "It felt like a no-brainer when this became an option to explore and make it happen."



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NORTH STATE JOURNAL

Hurricanes sign Bussi to 3-year extension | The North State Journal

By: Cory Lavalette

RALEIGH — “It’s been kind of a long process to get here.”

Brandon Bussi was just discussing the signing of his three-year, \$5.7 million extension with the Hurricanes on Monday, but he might as well have been talking about his career.

The 27-year-old has won 23 of his first 27 NHL games, making the new deal look like a bargain for the Hurricanes. But his path to putting pen to paper was anything but traditional.

Bussi went undrafted and was 21 when he played his first of three seasons at Western Michigan. He played well enough with the Broncos — 46-25-5 — to earn a contract with the Bruins.

He played on three consecutive one-year deals with Boston, but the Bruins’ goaltending duo was locked in during that time, offering no opportunity for Bussi to get an NHL shot. He signed with the Panthers on July 1 but was again relegated to No. 3 duty, this time behind Sergei Bobrovsky and Daniil Tarasov.

But the fate that never came calling for Bussi earlier in his career did in early October.

The Hurricanes claimed Bussi as an insurance policy when they placed their No. 3, Cayden Primeau, on waivers for assignment to the AHL. Primeau was claimed by the Maple Leafs, Pyotr Kochetkov suffered an injury, and suddenly Bussi was Carolina’s No. 2 goalie.

“It’s difficult to break into the league,” Bussi said during a video call with media on Monday. “Sometimes different opportunities pop up in different ways, and mine happened in a way that doesn’t happen for a lot of people.”

“There are a lot of good hockey players out there, and things happen for a reason. That’s kind of been my motto, and I’m very fortunate it gets to happen here for longer.”

It didn’t take the Hurricanes long to know they wanted to keep Bussi around. Carolina’s front office first approached Bussi’s representation about an extension in October. There was one

problem: Since the goaltender was on a one-year contract, he couldn’t be signed to an extension until after Jan. 1.

Meanwhile, Bussi kept piling up wins. By the time the calendar flipped to 2026, Bussi was 13-1-1 with a minuscule 2.08 goals-against average and .912 save percentage.

The Olympic break proved to be the right time to get Bussi — now the Hurricanes’ unquestioned No. 1 goalie with a record-setting 23-3-1 start to his NHL career — under contract beyond the year.

The result was a deal that will cost \$1.9 million annually against the salary cap through the 2028-29 season. The first multiyear contract of Bussi’s career will pay him \$1 million next year, \$1.85 million in 2027-28 and \$2.85 million in the final season, according to PuckPedia.com. A total of \$2.85M of the full contract is in signing bonuses, and it also includes a partial no-trade clause in Year 3.

“It’s crazy,” Bussi said of the last four months. “If you told me back in October, I would have been like, ‘Yeah, sure, I bet that’ll happen.’ The hockey world can work in mysterious ways. I’m fortunate I got an opportunity, and Carolina sees me the same way I see myself being here, so I’m very happy I get to be here for more time.”

Carolina will resume practicing Tuesday while the team waits on its five Olympians to return from Italy. The Hurricanes enter the stretch run with a healthy eight-point cushion over Pittsburgh atop the Metropolitan Division and neck and neck with Tampa Bay — the team they’ll play next Thursday in their first game after the break — for the top spot in the Eastern Conference.

Chances are, it will be Bussi — with his newly minted contract and the affirmation that it was all worth the wait — in Carolina’s net that first game back.

“It’s great to have stability and feel like I have a home for a few years,” Bussi said, “but it’s still up to me to prove myself every day.”



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Hurricanes sign breakout star to three-year extension

By: Brian Murphy, WRAL News

Goaltender Brandon Bussi, acquired on waivers before the season, has 23 wins for the Hurricanes in 27 games this season.

Hurricanes sign goalie Brandon Bussi to three-year extension

By Brian Murphy, WRAL News

Goaltender Brandon Bussi went from the waiver wire to one of the Carolina Hurricanes' most important players in the 2025-26 season.

Now he has been rewarded.

The Hurricanes signed Bussi to a three-year contract extension that pays an average of \$1.9 million per year through the 2028-29 season. Bussi was acquired on waivers from the Florida Panthers on Oct. 5 and has won 23 of his first 27 games with the Hurricanes, providing Carolina with stellar work in net at a time of need.

Carolina is 36-15-6 and has 78 points, tied for most in the Eastern Conference entering the Olympic break.

Bussi, who matched a franchise record with nine consecutive wins earlier this year, was the fastest goaltender in NHL history to reach 10 wins, 15 wins and 20 wins.

"Given the opportunity at the NHL level this season, he's proven to be a winner here, too," Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsy said. "We are thrilled that he will continue to provide a steady presence in the crease for this team into the future."

Bussi is third in the NHL in wins and second in the league in goals-against average (2.16). Bussi went 63-31-13 in 111 games with Providence in the AHL.

The Carolina Hurricanes Foundation will make a \$10,000 donation to the Autism Society of North Carolina. Bussi's goalie mask is a tribute to his younger brother Dylan, who has autism, and is meant to raise awareness.



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'Nothing Changes': Bussi Remains Hungry After Securing Extension

By: Walt Ruff

"It's amazing to have this stability and to feel comfortable knowing I have a home for a few years, but it's up to me to continue to prove what I do."

RALEIGH, N.C. - Brandon Bussi's meteoric rise is well-documented to this point.

Claimed off waivers from the Florida Panthers on Oct. 5 as he was mid-drive to Charlotte, it turns out that it wasn't just the City of Oaks the 27-year-old backstop was headed toward, it was a full-time NHL role, history, and long-term security.

Securing a spot on an opening night roster in an unconventional way he couldn't have predicted, the unknown backstop has never looked back.

Since becoming the first goalie in league history to the benchmarks of 10, 15, and 20 wins, the first 24 starts of his career at the highest level already are something of that out of a movie. While the film is hopefully far from over, it received its latest celebratory subplot on Monday, when the Carolina Hurricanes and Bussi agreed to a three-year contract extension.

"It's crazy. I think if you'd have told me back in October, I would have been like, 'Yeah, sure. I bet that'll happen.' But I think that the hockey world can work in mysterious ways in some sense," Bussi said as he spoke to reporters following the deal being made official. "I'm fortunate that I got an opportunity and that Carolina sees me the same way I see myself being here. I'm very happy to say the least, that I get to be here for more time."

As Bussi continued to stack win after win, the temporary stopgap quickly became someone that both fans, and front office, began looking at as a potential part of the future. With Frederik Andersen in the final year of his contract, the writing on the wall suggested that there'd be an opening to work in-tow with Pyotr Kochetkov for the 2026-27 season and potentially beyond.

Showcasing an ability to handle an increased workload with Kochevtov on the shelf, the unlikely hero has made the most of his moment.

"It's difficult to break into the league. Sometimes, different opportunities pop up in different ways. Mine happened in a way that doesn't happen for a lot of people," he reasoned. "There's a lot of good hockey players out there and things happen for a reason. That's kind of been my motto. I'm very fortunate that (my story) gets to happen here for longer."

Crediting his teammates and the situation here in Raleigh for making the decision to commit through the end of the 2028-29 season "a no-brainer", Bussi believes that this group is capable of accomplishing their ultimate aspirations.

"A big thing is, you look at the way our team is set up and it's an exciting time to be a Carolina Hurricanes fan. I think the players we have in our locker room, we have a great group and we have high goals," he continued. "We have an opportunity to do something here. Being able to lock this in, and now I just get to focus on hockey, and doing what I can do to help this team win, is important to me."

Always adamant about being where his feet are planted and taking things one day, and one save, at a time, he's not looking too far ahead, nor behind, even following his new stability.

Although he's been a winner in a ridiculous 83.3% of his games played, he'll keep operating like he needs the next stop, and next victory, in order to stick around.

"Nothing changes, honestly. You're always proving yourself in this league, right? [If] things aren't going well for me and I'm not producing, then I won't be here. So nothing changes. Yes, it's amazing to have this stability and to feel comfortable knowing I have a home for a few years, but it's up to me to continue to prove what I do. So nothing really changes, honestly."



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AP ASSOCIATED PRESS

Goaltender Brandon Bussi signs 3-year extension with Carolina Hurricanes | AP News

By: Aaron Beard

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — The Carolina Hurricanes have signed goaltender Brandon Bussi to a three-year, \$5.7 million extension, keeping the one-time waiver pickup in place through the 2028-29 season.

The Hurricanes announced the deal Monday, the latest chapter in Bussi's unlikely rise to prominence for one of the Eastern Conference's top contenders. The rookie is tied for third in the NHL with 23 wins and second with a 2.16 goals-against average. He was set to become an unrestricted free agent after the season.

"I think we have the potential to do very exciting things here over the next few years," Bussi said in a Zoom call with reporters. "It kinda felt like a no-brainer when this became an option to explore and kind of make it happen."

Carolina acquired Bussi on waivers from two-time reigning Stanley Cup champion Florida in October, when the Hurricanes were sticking with veteran Frederik Andersen and 26-year-old Pyotr Kochetkov as their top two netminders. But that depth play — both Andersen and Kochetkov have had a history with injuries — has turned into a massive transaction.

Now he's seized control of the crease for Carolina, potentially for the longer term, with the 36-year-old Andersen not being as effective and Kochetkov lost to season-ending surgery for a lingering lower-body injury by December.

Bussi made his NHL debut in a 5-1 win against San Jose on Oct. 14, earned his first shutout Nov. 30 against Calgary, matched a franchise record with nine straight wins and is 23-3-1 with two shutouts.

Before this season, the 27-year-old Bussi had never played in the NHL while appearing in 111 games in the American Hockey League after playing in college at Western Michigan.

"Before we brought him to Raleigh, Brandon had been successful at every level from the USHL to college to the AHL," general manager Eric Tulsky said in a statement. "Given the opportunity at the NHL level this season, he's proven to be a winner here too. We are thrilled that he will continue to provide a steady presence in the crease for this team into the future."

Bussi's existing deal for this season is worth \$775,000. Andersen is making \$2.75 million this season and is due to become an unrestricted free agent after the season, while Kochetkov is under contract for another season at \$2 million.

The Hurricanes announced their charitable foundation would also make a \$10,000 donation to the Autism Society of North Carolina in honor of the extension. Bussi's younger brother, Dylan, has autism and his goaltender mask is a tribute to his brother to raise autism awareness.

Carolina has won at least one postseason series for seven straight seasons, including trips to the Eastern Conference final in 2019, 2023 and last year during that span. The Hurricanes entered the Olympic break with 78 points and ranked third in points-percentage (.684) behind league-leading Colorado (83 points, .755) and Tampa Bay (78, .709).

The Hurricanes had earned points in their last 10 games before the break, winning eight.

"It's difficult to break into the league," Bussi said. "Sometimes different opportunities pop up in different ways. Mine happened in a way that doesn't happen for a lot of people. But there's a lot of good hockey players out there and things happen for a reason. That's kind of been my motto, and I'm very fortunate that it gets to happen here for longer."



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All aboard: Brandon Bussi's rise to NHL glory

By: Liela Hafshejani

The Carolina Hurricanes have been perennial contenders for the Stanley Cup for years, but can never seem to get over the hump, with some fans pointing to the netminder as their weakest point.

Enter Brandon Bussi, who has taken the NHL by storm, losing just four of the 27 games he has played with a 0.908 save percentage. The 27-year-old has become the Canes' go-to netminder, but it hasn't always been that way this season — or his career.

Premiering in November after missing the start of the season, Carolina Hurricanes goaltender Pyotr Kochetkov had been battling an injury since the preseason. Even with the injury, Kochetkov put up impressive numbers. He had a 6-2-0 record in his eight games played, but ultimately made the decision to ease his discomfort.

"He's been dealing with it all year. He's decided to have surgery, so he's probably going to be out for the year," said head coach Rod Brind'Amour. "He didn't feel right all year. He's been playing great; that's the hard part. He was kind of fighting through it, but doesn't want to continue that way, so we'll get it fixed and go from there."

Carolina started the season with two more goaltenders in Frederik Andersen and Bussi. Also suffering from injuries, Andersen started the season with career lows as his save percentage dropped to 0.875. As for Bussi, no one knew what to expect from the newbie.

The New York native has been a free agent since the beginning of his career, bouncing from team to team. Starting with the Providence Bruins in the AHL, he put up decent numbers, being named to the AHL's All-Star Rookie team during the 2022-2023 season. This past summer, the Florida Panthers signed him as a free agent, and by the first week of October, he was up for waivers, having never played a game for them.

That's when he came to Carolina and changed the team and his career forever.

Starting his season against San Jose, Bussi only let in one goal and ended the game with a 0.941 save percentage. In his next five games, he tallied just one loss and still had a 0.912 save percentage. To say people were impressed with him would be an understatement.

He took each of his next six starts and went on to become the fastest goaltender to reach 10 wins in NHL history, reaching the mark in just 11 games. Breaking another record soon after, he became the fastest netminder to 20 wins, reaching the mark in just 24 games.

Standing at 6-foot-4, Bussi has taken up the tactic to intimidate players in the pursuit of a goal. Spreading his wingspan to take up as much space as possible, anyone trying to score gets less of an opening to put the puck in the back of his net.

"I'm thankful for my size, so when you have it, you got to use it," Bussi said after a 3-2 home shootout win against the Philadelphia Flyers. "There's a difference between being overly aggressive or conservative. Maybe trying to find that middle ground and using my [height] to my advantage."

Even with his frame, he's quick on his skates. Never one to shy away from leaving the goal line, Bussi is known to rush towards players, especially during shootouts. He has even completely lain down on the ice in front of other players' skates to prevent goals, showing his dedication to both the team and his position.

With his historic performance this season, Bussi has become a fan favorite, even earning the nickname "The Bus" in his first season in Carolina.

No place on earth shows its love for the goaltender like the fans in the Lenovo Center. Earlier this season, the Canes hosted the Florida Panthers, where Bussi let in just one goal and saved 15 other shots against his former team, ending with an impressive 0.938 save percentage.

That same night, Bussi got into an altercation with a Panther player, tussling with him and falling to the ground. But as Bussi got back on his feet, the crowd of red started chanting his name over and over again, echoing throughout the arena. It ended up being Carolina's most dominant win of the season, dominating the Panthers 9-1, and the energy in the arena could only be described as buzzing.

We've only seen the beginning of Bussi. As the playoffs crept closer, more and more fans engaged in conversations about extending his contract, desperately trying to keep him in Carolina. Their prayers were answered on Monday as he signed a three-year extension for \$1.9 million a year, staying in Raleigh until the end of the 2028-29 season.

Along with the agreed salary, the Carolina Hurricanes Foundation will be making a \$10,000 donation to the Autism Society of North Carolina in honor of Bussi's younger brother, Dylan, who has autism. Covered in white puzzle pieces, Bussi's goalie mask is in tribute to his brother.

"The hockey world can work in mysterious ways in some sense," Bussi said. "I'm fortunate that I got an opportunity, and that Carolina sees me the way I see myself. I'm really happy to be a Carolina Hurricane and be here for three more years."

With a future as bright as his demeanor, Bussi has and will continue to impress not only Carolina fans but fans across the NHL with his story. Once a free agent being passed from place



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to place to an NHL record holder, the Brandon Bussi story has only just begun.

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happened in a way that doesn’t happen for a lot of people. Things happen for a reason. That’s always been my motto. I’m very fortunate that it gets to happen here for longer.”



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The Hockey News

'It's A Great Day To Say The Least.': Brandon Bussi Talks New Deal, Extending In Raleigh And More

By: Ryan Henkel

Record-shattering goalie Brandon Bussi inks a three-year Carolina extension, ready to chase championships and celebrate big moments in Raleigh.

The Carolina Hurricanes have signed goaltender Brandon Bussi to a three-year contract extension, locking in their potential goalie for the future.

The 27 year old has taken the hockey world by storm in his record shattering first NHL season and now has earned himself a new deal because of it.

Bussi met with the media on Zoom Monday afternoon to discuss his new deal. Here's what he had to say:

Brandon Bussi discusses his new deal.

On when the deal came together: It's been kind of a long process to get here. I can't exactly pinpoint an exact start date because I try to keep a lot of it out of my hands, but I think once things started to get more serious kind of over the last little bit, it intensified a little bit. Overall, I'm really happy to be a Carolina Hurricane and to be here for three more years.

On Carolina feeling more and more like a home for himself: I love the Raleigh area, I love my teammates and I think we have the potential to do some very exciting things here over the next few years. So it kind of felt like a no-brainer when this became an option to explore and make happen. Obviously it's a big day for me and my family and everyone. We're all super excited.

On how crazy the journey has been for himself over the last few months: It's crazy. You know, if you told me back in October, I'd have been like, 'Yeah, sure. I bet that'll happen.' But I think the hockey world can work in mysterious ways in some sense. I'm fortunate that I got an opportunity and that Carolina sees me the same way I see myself being here. Very happy to say the least that I get to be here for more time.

On if he has a message for other players who've had to bide their time and wait for their opportunity: It's difficult to break into this league. Sometimes different opportunities pop up in different ways and mine happened in a way that doesn't happen for a lot of people, but there's a lot of good hockey players out there and things happen for a reason. That's kind of been my motto. I'm very fortunate that it gets to happen here for longer.

On the organization's donation to the Autism Society of North Carolina: That kind of got added in there a little more toward the end, but obviously it means a lot to me that they were able to do that. Me and my brother's relationship is super tight and I get to honor him as well as the autism community on my mask. So I think that part of it was very sweet. I'm extremely excited that that was part of it.

On if this new deal changes any of his upcoming wedding plans: I'm sure we can look at what we're spending right now and maybe splurge on something a little extra. Thankfully we don't have to lock in those final things until about a month before. I'm sure we're gonna be looking at all the other options and maybe making the wedding a little bigger. It's a great day to say the least.

On deciding to re-up in Carolina: You look at the way our team is set up, it's an exciting time to be a Carolina Hurricanes fan because I think with the players we have in our locker room, we have a great group and we have high goals. In terms of the stability, we have an opportunity to do something here and being able to lock this in, now I just get to focus on hockey and doing what I can to help this team win. That was important to me.

On the goaltending group: We all make each other better. We're able to learn from each other and see what everyone brings to the table and what we can all grow in our game. Having all three of those people [Frederik Andersen, Pyotr Kochetkov and goaltending coach Paul Schonfelder] is extremely important in why I feel like I've had success and hopefully will have success going forward.

On the break: While you want to stay in a rhythm and we've been playing good hockey, I think it's extremely important to take this break with what comes with it. An opportunity to rest your body, an opportunity to rest your mind, because it's a grind. The season's long. I think everyone's hunger is going to be there no matter what when we come back, but it'll be even more so now. We have a stretch of hockey here going into the playoffs here and we have high aspirations of building our game and building it the right way once we get into the playoffs. Overall, I think it was good for all of us to get our bodies rested. Anybody who was banged up or hurting a little bit from any time in the season had some time to rest and now we can go full throttle.

On continuing to prove himself even after securing a new deal: Nothing changes, honestly. You're always proving yourself in this league. If things aren't going well for me and I'm not producing, then I won't be here. So nothing changes. Yes, it's amazing to have this stability and to feel comfortable that I have a home for a few years, but it's up to me to continue to prove what I do. So nothing really changes honestly.

On all the media attention he's started to garner: It's part of the gig of what you sign up for. If you want to be in the NHL, stuff like that happens. I don't feel any different. I don't view myself any differently. I'm a goalie and my job is to stop pucks. But yeah, when you take a step back, you definitely have cool moments that you're going to remember for a long time. While I am a day-by-day person — I don't look too far into the future — I can definitely take a step back and appreciate some of the things that have happened this year.



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LINKS

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SportScan

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

1379446 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes goalie, once a waiver-wire castoff, cements future with new contract

Chip Alexander 7-8 minutes 16/02/2026

One of the best stories in the NHL this season just got better.

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"It's crazy," Bussi said Monday on a media call. "I think if you told me back in October, I'd be like, 'Sure, that will never happen.' But I think the hockey world can work in mysterious ways in some sense. I'm fortunate I got an opportunity and that Carolina sees me the same way I see myself being here.

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23. He played collegiately at Western Michigan, where he was 46-25-5 before going pro.

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"There's a lot of good hockey players out there and things happen for a reason. That's kind of been my motto, and I'm very fortunate it gets to happen here for longer."

Bussi has emerged as the Canes' top goalie, teaming with veteran Frederik Andersen. Goalie Pyotr Kochetkov underwent what might be season-ending surgery in late December.

"Before we brought him to Raleigh, Brandon had been successful at every level from the USHL to college to the AHL," Hurricanes general manager Eric Tulsky said in a statement. "Given the opportunity at the NHL level this season, he's proven to be a winner here, too. We are thrilled that he will continue to provide a steady presence in the crease for this team into the future."

Now, Bussi has a new contract and considerably more financial security.

"I think we have the potential to do some very exciting things here over the next few years," Bussi said. "It felt like a no-brainer when this became an option to explore and make it happen."

News Observer LOADED: 02.17.2026

1379447 Carolina Hurricanes

Hurricanes sign Bussi to 3-year extension



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Cory Lavoie 4-5 minutes 16/02/2026

RALEIGH — "It's been kind of a long process to get here."

Brandon Bussi was just discussing the signing of his three-year, \$5.7 million extension with the Hurricanes on Monday, but he might as well have been talking about his career.

The 27-year-old has won 23 of his first 27 NHL games, making the new deal look like a bargain for the Hurricanes. But his path to putting pen to paper was anything but traditional.

Bussi went undrafted and was 21 when he played his first of three seasons at Western Michigan. He played well enough with the Broncos — 46-25-5 — to earn a contract with the Bruins.

He played on three consecutive one-year deals with Boston, but the Bruins' goaltending duo was locked in during that time, offering no opportunity for Bussi to get an NHL shot. He signed with the Panthers on July 1 but was again relegated to No. 3 duty, this time behind Sergei Bobrovsky and Daniil Tarasov.

But the fate that never came calling for Bussi earlier in his career did in early October.

The Hurricanes claimed Bussi as an insurance policy when they placed their No. 3, Cayden Primeau, on waivers for assignment to the AHL. Primeau was claimed by the Maple Leafs, Pyotr Kochetkov suffered an injury, and suddenly Bussi was Carolina's No. 2 goalie.

"It's difficult to break into the league," Bussi said during a video call with media on Monday. "Sometimes different opportunities pop up in different ways, and mine happened in a way that doesn't happen for a lot of people."

"There are a lot of good hockey players out there, and things happen for a reason. That's kind of been my motto, and I'm very fortunate it gets to happen here for longer."

It didn't take the Hurricanes long to know they wanted to keep Bussi around. Carolina's front office first approached Bussi's representation about an extension in October. There was one problem: Since the goaltender was on a one-year contract, he couldn't be signed to an extension until after Jan. 1.

Meanwhile, Bussi kept piling up wins. By the time the calendar flipped to 2026, Bussi was 13-1-1 with a minuscule 2.08 goals-against average and .912 save percentage.

The Olympic break proved to be the right time to get Bussi — now the Hurricanes' unquestioned No. 1 goalie with a record-setting 23-3-1 start to his NHL career — under contract beyond the year.

The result was a deal that will cost \$1.9 million annually against the salary cap through the 2028-29 season. The first multiyear contract of Bussi's career will pay him \$1 million next year, \$1.85 million in 2027-28 and \$2.85 million in the final season, according to PuckPedia.com. A total of \$2.85M of the full contract is in signing bonuses, and it also includes a partial no-trade clause in Year 3.

"It's crazy," Bussi said of the last four months. "If you told me back in October, I would have been like, 'Yeah, sure, I bet that'll happen.' The hockey world can work in mysterious ways. I'm fortunate I got an opportunity, and Carolina sees me the same way I see myself being here, so I'm very happy I get to be here for more time."

Carolina will resume practicing Tuesday while the team waits on its five Olympians to return from Italy. The Hurricanes enter the stretch run with a healthy eight-point cushion over Pittsburgh atop the Metropolitan Division and neck and neck with Tampa Bay — the team they'll play next

Thursday in their first game after the break — for the top spot in the Eastern Conference.

Chances are, it will be Bussi — with his newly minted contract and the affirmation that it was all worth the wait — in Carolina's net that first game back.

"It's great to have stability and feel like I have a home for a few years," Bussi said, "but it's still up to me to prove myself every day."

The North State Journal LOADED: 02.17.2026

1379448 Carolina Hurricanes

Carolina Hurricanes informal player poll: food, feistiness and flapping gums

Cory Lavoie 6-7 minutes 16/02/2026

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Carolina Hurricanes entered the Olympic break right where many expected them to be — atop the Metropolitan Division and among the top five teams in the NHL. Still, it has been a grind because of the condensed schedule, and Carolina has felt the rigors of it with several injuries.

Only eight of the Hurricanes' skaters have played in all 57 games, and nine players have lost at least seven games to injury so far.

The break has given players with lingering injuries or bumps and bruises a chance to mend ahead of the stretch run. It's also a good time to have a little fun with an informal poll from the locker room.

In case you want to make your own guesses before reading the players' responses, I asked a few light-hearted questions to gauge how the Hurricanes view their teammates on and off the ice.

Which Hurricanes player is the most competitive off the ice?

Whose mouth runs the most on the ice?

If one teammate had to order a meal for you, who would you want it to be?

Which teammate would you least want to order a meal for you?

Do you have your picks made? OK then, here we go.

Always going for it

The "most competitive" category had a handful of players named, but two players came up the most.

"I think (Jacob Slavin) loves competing — like, a lot — and he's good at everything, so I think he's probably up there," goalie Frederik Andersen said while also adding the other most-named person. "(Sebastian Aho), he's the one who gets the most upset if he loses, probably because he's maybe a sore loser. He's also good at a lot of things, so he obviously tends to win a lot. But the two of them are definitely very competitive."

Slavin's affinity for being good at everything came up a couple of times.

"I spent a lot of time playing games at his house — pickleball, tennis," defense partner Jalen Chatfield said. "He goes pretty hard. It's hard to beat him at everything."

While the Hurricanes seemed mostly annoyed at Slavin's aptitude at anything, they also noticed Aho's desire to win — and grumpiness when he loses.



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"He's pretty competitive," Mark Jankowski said of Aho. "Like in the soccer circle before games and stuff, he gets pretty upset when he gets out."

Slavin also pointed to Aho — affectionately called Fish or Fishy by his teammates — when asked.

"Fish is pretty competitive," Slavin said. "I mean, we all are. We're all hockey players. But I would probably say Fish. He likes to win."

Others mentioned included Pyotr Kochetkov, Shayne Gostisbehere and Eric Robinson.

Chatty Canes

The pick for the player who does the most talking on the ice was nearly unanimous.

"Well, if you don't take me..." Andrei Svechnikov said before being told nearly everyone chose him. "Because I am! OK, I'm going to take myself."

As did most of his teammates.

"During TV timeouts, a lot of guys just do their own thing, focusing up or getting some water or whatever," Andersen said. "I always look around and see Svech — I don't know if he's talking to the fans or the other goalie or refs or something. He's always busy talking to someone. So I think that's maybe how he kind of gets himself into the games."

Chatfield picked himself second but also directed me to Svechnikov.

"We've got a pretty quiet team," Chatfield said. "I might go with Svechy. I think Svechy's a pretty vocal guy."

Nearly everyone else gave a one-word answer: Svechnikov. Gostisbehere did get another mention, as did fellow defenseman Sean Walker.

Yes, chef

The near-unanimous pick as the team's culinary expert picked himself.

"I should get every vote," Jordan Martinook said.

He did offer a runner-up.

"I'm going to say Freddy because he knows what I like."

Andersen was listening in when I was talking to Martinook and immediately agreed that No. 48 is No. 1 when it comes to being a foodie.

"Oh, my God, yeah. He's not wrong about that," Andersen said. "He's very well versed in knowing just restaurants in general. He always seems to know the restaurants in Raleigh that pop up before anyone else finds out. So he's good at that. He knows what guys like a lot, but he definitely does his homework, too."

Brandon Bussi is pretty new to the team but already appreciates Martinook's expertise.

"Probably (Jordan Staal) or Marty," he said. "They've been around the block for a lot of trips to different places, so I trust them on the road with a good meal."

Slavin also picked Martinook, as did Jankowski.

"I feel like he's the big food guy on the road and everything," Jankowski said. "And I've heard a lot of guys talking about how when he goes to dinner, he basically just orders everything for the table. So I trust him, and I feel like he's a big foodie."

One vote did go to William Carrier — but not for the reasons one would think.

"Probably (Carrier) because he eats very healthy and takes care of his body for the most part," Logan Stankoven said. "He's very dialed in to that stuff."

No thanks

Carrier's habits also were the reason he got some mention for being the last guy the players would want ordering for them.

"He'd probably give you something too healthy," Chatfield said.

It also seems Martinook would not venture to Cafe Carrier.

"Probably Will just because his is like a sweet potato and dry chicken with no seasoning on it," Martinook said.

The most popular choice, however, was Seth Jarvis, who was mentioned alongside both Jackson Blake and Jesperi Kotkaniemi.

"We went to a super nice sushi spot in L.A.," Jankowski said after indicating Jarvis, "and I think he just ended up ordering a couple cheeseburger sliders or something at the super nice sushi spot."

Svechnikov, Bussi and Stankoven all mentioned Jarvis, while Andersen settled on Svechnikov.

Slavin, however, had a different angle.

"Can I go with a past player?" he asked. "Spencer Martin because he's a vegetarian. It would make him gag whenever he tried (meat). So every once in a while he could eat a chicken finger. I'll go with him because I want some meat."

The Athletic LOADED: 02.17.2026

1379493 Websites

The Athletic / Pierre Crinon suspended by French hockey federation after Tom Wilson fight

By Mark Lazerus

Feb. 16, 2026 Updated 4:38 pm EST

MILAN — Tom Wilson's Canadian teammates loved every second of his scrap with France's Pierre Crinon in Sunday's group-stage game.

The French weren't as amused.

Crinon has been suspended by the French Olympic federation for the rest of the Olympic tournament — likely just Tuesday's qualification-round game against Germany — for his actions during and following the fight.

The fight was precipitated by a high hit that Crinon laid on Canada star Nathan MacKinnon. Wilson, whose fiery persona and willingness to get physical helped him get on the team in the first place, engaged Crinon shortly after, and Crinon slammed Wilson face-first into the ice. Wilson got up and angrily went back at Crinon, and the two shoved each other a few times.

Crinon was egging on the pro-Canada crowd walking back to the locker room as they booed him.

Wilson got into a fight with Pierre Crinon as retribution for a dirty hit the French defenseman laid on Nathan MacKinnon.

"That's just what Willy does," Canada's Brandon Hagel said of Wilson. "He sticks up for teammates. Obviously, we didn't like what happened to Mac behind the net. That's what you call a team. That's why everyone praises and loves Tom Wilson, because that's the stuff he does."

According to the French release, Crinon's "provocative behavior upon leaving the ice" was the main reason for his banishment, and explicitly not the fight itself (or the high hit, for that matter). The release said it was



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"a clear violation of the Olympic spirit and also undermines the values of our sport."

The Athletic LOADED: 02.17.2026

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The Athletic / What to watch for as 2026 Olympic men's hockey qualifying round gets started

By Arpon Basu and Pierre LeBrun

Feb. 16, 2026 Updated 9:23 pm EST

MILAN – The field finally gets cut down at the 2026 men's Olympic hockey tournament Tuesday with four Qualifying Playoff games, two of them foregone conclusions.

Because of one late third-period goal given up to Slovakia, powerhouse Sweden somehow finds itself having to play this extra game ahead of Wednesday's quarterfinals. The Swedes should absolutely have no issues with Latvia, but it's the idea of having to play back-to-back days in a do-or-die scenario that's the piece of adversity the Swedes didn't need. Not to mention what lies on the other side of it if they make it to the quarterfinals as expected. More on that in a moment.

As a reminder, the overtime format changes slightly for playoff games. It remains three-on-three overtime but goes from five minutes to 10 minutes through the bronze medal game. In the gold medal game, it's three-on-three forever until a goal is scored, using 20-minute periods. Imagine that scenario.

From the Qualifying Playoff games starting Tuesday through the bronze medal game Saturday night, if no goal is scored in the 10-minute overtime period, the game goes to a shootout. Five shooters from each team go, until there's a winner. If the game is still tied after five rounds of the shootout, it goes into sudden death shootout attempts. Where it also differs from the NHL is that the same player can continue taking the shootout attempt at this stage, as we saw with T.J. Oshie at the 2014 Olympics in Sochi.

Let's dive into the four games Tuesday:

No. 12 seed Italy vs. No. 5 Switzerland (6:10 a.m. ET)

Winner plays Finland in quarterfinals

LeBrun: The Italians got waxed 11-0 by Finland in the preliminary round and they have zero chance here against a much superior Swiss side. About 25 years ago, when I was covering men's world championships every year, this was a close rivalry with intense games. It shows you how dramatically the Swiss program has risen since then. This won't be close. Especially if Italy goes to the box. The Swiss have the third-ranked power play in the tournament so far (27 percent).

Timo Meier has gone beast mode in these Olympics after struggling most of the season in New Jersey. Here in Milan, he's the power forward the Devils traded for.

"Yeah, he's playing at his full potential," said Swiss star Nico Hischier, his Devils teammate. "You can hit out there. He can hit, he can score, he can make plays, he's a very effective player when he's on his game. It's fun to play with him.

"He gives you room out there. If the puck goes deep and you have Timo on your neck, it's not a nice feeling. He's a very impactful player and great to see him being rewarded for his work."

Basu: The big question for Switzerland, not so much in this game but in the quarterfinals, is the health of Andrea Glauser, a top-pair defenseman who has been Roman Josi's partner at the last two world championships, where the Swiss won silver both times. Glauser took a big hit from Canada's Connor McDavid in the second game of the preliminary round, and Swiss coach Patrick Fischer said after the game that he was suspected to have sustained a concussion. Glauser was on the ice with the Swiss team at practice Monday, but there was no confirmation he would play in the qualification game Tuesday. Though Glauser has never played in the NHL — he plays for Fribourg-Gottéron in the Swiss NL — he has 79 games of international experience for Switzerland and is a crucial player for them.

No. 11 seed France vs. No. 6 Germany (6:10 a.m. ET)

Winner plays Slovakia in quarterfinals

LeBrun: The Germans have disappointed so far in this tournament, with only one regulation win in the preliminary round. Not that anyone was picking them to medal but with Leon Draisaitl, Tim Stützle and J.J. Peterka up front, stud Moritz Seider on defense and Philipp Grubauer in net, there was a sense they could make life more difficult for some of the big teams. Instead, they lost to Latvia in the Group Stage. They should obviously beat France, but what we really need to see here is Germany flex a bit to gain some momentum ahead of a matchup with Slovakia that could have upset potential. But that's only if we see the best version of Germany in the playoffs. It would help if the Germans woke up on the power play; they're just 1-for-9 with the man advantage, tied with France with the worst ranking at 11 percent.

"We've just got to hunt a little bit more," Seider said Sunday night about the power play after a 5-1 loss to Team USA. "We try to be very cute, breaking in the puck. And obviously they got great sticks and they're there in the right spots all the time. So I think sometimes we just got to get it deep, put the boots on and go to work."

Basu: Stützle has four goals in three games for Germany. The rest of the team has scored three goals combined. There is an opportunity for Germany against France to get their other big guns going. In fact, it's a necessity. France has been focusing on this game for the entirety of the tournament, stating from Day 1 that they need to win their fourth game, and perhaps they should not be overlooked. But in the likely event that Germany advances, they have a winnable game in the quarterfinals against upstart Slovakia, especially with Grubauer — owner of the NHL's third-best save percentage at .916 — between the pipes. If their star power can start to shine in the qualification round, a trip to the semifinals and playing for a medal could be within reach.

No. 10 seed Latvia vs. No. 7 Sweden (3:10 p.m. ET)

Winner plays United States in quarterfinals

LeBrun: One measly goal late in a game with Slovakia on Saturday lost Sweden a three-team tiebreaker and sent the Swedes down a murky path: an extra game plus a date with Team USA if they can get past Latvia, which they should.

One thing Erik Karlsson told me over the weekend is that if they end up winning gold, they might look back at all this adversity and realize it actually brought them together and fortified them. Head coach Sam Hallam himself mentioned Team Canada needing to play in the Qualifying Playoff round at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver en route to gold.

It could all be true. But one thing has to change: The Swedes are tied for the tournament lead with 15 minor penalties; that's way too many. They're third in penalty killing so it hasn't been too impactful but that much time in the box takes your five-on-five game out of rhythm.



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"We've got to stay out of the box. We took way too many penalties," Sweden's star defenseman Victor Hedman said postgame Saturday. "If we stay out of the box and play five-on-five, we're a tough team to beat."

Basu: Hallam's decisions have been widely questioned throughout this tournament, and he has a few big ones entering the elimination rounds. First and foremost will be his decision on the starting goaltender. Filip Gustavsson started Sweden's first two games and allowed five goals on 45 shots against Italy and Finland. Jacob Markström started the game against Slovakia and allowed three goals on 32 shots, including the Dalibor Dvorský goal with 39 seconds left that cost Sweden a chance at winning Group B and avoiding this game. Hallam would not tip his hand at practice Monday, but this decision will be crucial, especially against a Latvia team that will be a tough out.

At forward, Hallam began the tournament with Filip Forsberg as his 13th forward before shifting him up the lineup and dropping Jesper Bratt further down. Elias Pettersson scored twice against Slovakia, but otherwise has looked pretty disinterested. On defense, Rasmus Andersson was scratched for Hampus Lindholm against Slovakia, and an argument could be made that both should be in the lineup.

These are not easy decisions, and whichever way Hallam goes will likely be criticized. More so than any single player on Sweden, Hallam has a lot of pressure entering a do-or-die game.

No. 9 seed Denmark vs. No. 8 Czechia (10:40 a.m. ET)

Winner plays Canada in quarterfinals

LeBrun: Veteran Czech defenseman Radko Gudas told me after his team's Group Stage finale Sunday that the recipe is simple for the Czech Republic to advance deeper in this tournament.

"For us that means playing smart, putting pucks in the right places and make the other team go 200 feet and make them go through all of us at all times. That's a big key for us," Gudas said.

Translation: win gritty, defensive, low-scoring games.

The Czechs should handle Denmark; I didn't mind their game in an OT loss to the Swiss on Sunday. But they need their big dog David Pastrňák to find another gear. He's been just OK, with one goal and two assists and nine shots on goal in three games, but it's not been at the lofty Pasta standard so far.

Basu: One of the big advantages the Czechs had entering the tournament was their goaltending. Young Anaheim Ducks goaltender Lukáš Dostál arrived in Milan at No. 1 on the depth chart despite having the worst NHL save percentage among the three Czech goalies at .897. In two starts at the Olympics – albeit one against Canada, which kills any goaltender's save percentage – Dostál has an .862 save percentage. The only goaltender who is worse is France's Antoine Keller at .857. Either Dostál will need to step up, or perhaps Czech coach Radim Rulík should turn to Dan Vladar or Karel Vejmelka.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.17.2026

1379495 Websites

The Athletic / Weekend rankings, Olympics edition: Ghosts, bridesmaids, a fight and more

By Sean McIndoe

Feb. 16, 2026 Updated 9:39 am EST

You may have noticed that the league is on hold while some tournament is played over in Italy. It feels like it's kind of a big deal. People seem to be enjoying it.

OK, so let's go with the flow. It's like the old cliché goes: When in Rome, or at least in the same country as Rome, do as every other hockey writer in the world is doing and serve up some Olympic hockey takes.

This week, we'll take the rough format of the Weekend Rankings you know and love and/or tolerate, and use them for some men's Olympic hockey observations. We'll get to the good and bad, but let's start with a few stragglers I'm still working on.

Bonus five: Olympic topics I haven't made my mind up on yet

5. The round-robin format – Mirtle called it "terrible" and laid out what he thinks is a better way to do it, and he makes a solid case. Some readers pushed back in the comments, and I get where they're coming from, too. Ultimately, I don't think I'll be able to authoritatively say whether this was the right format or not until I find out whether my team won.

4. Goal differential being so important – On the one hand, having differential play such a key role in the round-robin seeding means that every minute of every game mattered, even when the end result was already determined. In theory, that's good. And sometimes it is; the third period of Sunday's Canada-France mismatch still felt important, because every goal could have made a difference.

On the other hand, sometimes that means an underdog team like Italy gets smoked 11-0, which doesn't feel right. So put me down as undecided, even as I'm not sure there's any other way to do things.

3. James Duthie and Elliotte Friedman on the same panel – They're both great, and both are doing great work as always, but this is a weird watch for us Canadians. My hockey fan brain gets confused every time I see it. Seeing Duthie on an otherwise Sportsnet panel is like when you were a little kid and you'd see your teacher at the grocery store. You're not supposed to be here, you live at the other place.

2. Jordan Binnington – A shutout in the opener, followed by a performance against France that was just shaky enough to make a Canadian fan worry and/or give everyone else some hope. He wasn't so bad that Jon Cooper is going to bail on him, but also not quite good enough to make the whole "What if he's bad now?" concerns go away. As somebody who makes their living in the narrative mines, I thank you for your dedicated service, Jordan. Dude is out here handing red meat to the take merchants like it's a big juicy rebound in the slot.

1. This all being over this time next week – It's weird, right? We waited forever for this tournament, spent years filling out projected rosters, debated all the snubs and late replacements, and enjoyed a fun round robin. And now we get a few more days, and it's done. The gold medal game is Sunday morning. This is going to be a wild week, with what will basically be 11 different Game 7 showdowns. Strap in.

Road to the Cup Gold Medal

Five teams, players or storylines that have looked good so far in Milan.

If you missed it, the Friday and Monday rankings combined for a special rank-fest last week, as we each took our shot at all 12 Team Canadas and Team USAs from the NHL's Olympics era.

5. The rink – Hey, remember when this was going to be a big story, and maybe even the reason that we wouldn't be able to play the tournament at all? One week in, and the ice has been fine, and those missing four feet of surface have barely been noticeable. (Until your team loses, in which case it was the rink's fault.)

4. The crowds – With apologies to Team Italy, this is essentially a neutral site tournament. That's not ideal from a purely NHL marketing perspective, because you get the time zone factor. It also means you won't ever get a truly rabid crowd like we had on that memorable



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Saturday night in Montreal during the 4 Nations Face-Off. But the flip side is that you've got all these unique fan bases mixing and matching, and every game brings a different combo. It's been great fun. Also, I want this flag.

3. Quinn Hughes ghost memes – If you know, you know. And apparently, a whole lot of people who may have never even heard of Hughes now know. Between this and confused fans trying to figure out what the deal is with the Tkachuk brothers, Team USA is building a brand new audience for the sport, and we're here for it.

2. The round robin using a 3-2-1-0 format – Unlike the other format stuff up above, this feels like a pretty clear upgrade over what we're used to. We'll get into this more later this week, but for now I have a request. If you don't like the 3-2-1-0 points system, and you don't want to see it in the NHL ... why? What's your argument against the format? Please let me know in the comments.

1. Juraj Slafkovský – Guys, I'm starting to think the Canadiens picked the right guy.

Slafkovský is one of the few NHLers who isn't making his Olympic debut, since he was part of Team Slovakia in 2022. He looked great then, which was a big part of his move up to the top of the draft boards. And he's doing it again now. As Arpon has pointed out, this isn't new — he's been doing this in Montreal for a while. But even so, it's cool to see somebody introduce themselves as a legit star on the biggest stage.

Not ranked: That short-lived(?) McDavid/MacKinnon/Celebrini line – Some are calling it the Mc/Mac/Mack line, and yeah, we might need to convene a special session of Nickname Court to rule on that one.

It didn't last long because Jon Cooper is still a coach at heart, and coaches love to spread their offense around and also hate fun. But hoo boy, was this ever a fun unit, featuring the two best forwards in the world plus Macklin Celebrini, who's moving toward joining that conversation with every shift. Shades of Mike Keenan in 1987, finally giving in and putting prime Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux together in what turned out to be pretty much the most unstoppable line in hockey history. And it's proof-of-concept for a "break glass in case of emergency" tactic that Jon Cooper could turn to over the next few days.

The bottom five

Five teams, players or storylines that might wish the league had skipped the Olympics yet again.

Look, I want to make fun of Team USA as much as anyone, and I'm extra happy to do it if it's a goalie. But after two days of making fun of Jeremy Swayman for that long-distance goal against Denmark, can we all admit that it clearly deflects off of Matt Boldy? It's subtle, but that's enough when a goalie has already started his reaction. I'm not even saying Swayman shouldn't have stopped it anyway, but the Tommy Salo comparisons can probably stop.

Oh man, I'm out here defending goalies like I'm store-brand Jesse Granger, this is the worst. Let's move on.

5. Team Sweden – Losing to Finland stings, especially since it was really the only classic rivalry game we got from the round robin. Worse, it cost them top spot in Group B and a shot at a first-round bye, meaning they'll have to play an elimination game tomorrow while other contenders are resting, and should also have a tougher path through the rest of the playoff round that would include facing the United States in the quarters.

Does that add up to disaster? Maybe, but we don't know yet, which is why I'm only putting them here. They wouldn't be the first team to start slow-ish at this sort of tournament and then take care of business once the games are one-and-done. But at the very least, they've made the mission tougher.

4. Any NHL forward who doesn't have a point yet – You're a bum, Tomas Hertl. You too, Nino Niederreiter, Seth Jarvis and Alex Wennberg. And you, J.T. Miller and Kyle Connor. And sure why not, even you, Alexandre Texier. Why did you even bother going? Waste of time if you ask me. Could have stayed home and got a few errands run.

(Also, congratulations in advance to each of these players for the career game they're about to have in the elimination round.)

3. Leon Draisaitl getting called a "bridesmaid" – That one came yesterday, caught on a hot mic courtesy of Matthew Tkachuk, and was an obvious dig at Draisaitl's Oilers losing to Tkachuk's Panthers in back-to-back Stanley Cup Finals. And honestly, it's got to be a pretty effective putdown, especially given the source. Draisaitl already goes through life looking like one of the most miserable people on the planet on a good day, so I can only imagine how much he appreciated that one.

(Polite Canadian in me: Don't say it, don't say it, don't say it...)

Also, can you imagine getting accused of never winning the big one by an American hockey player? That's like Mats Zuccarello calling you "shorty." Just devastating for everyone involved.

(Polite Canadian in me: Sorry.)

2. There are shootouts in the elimination round – Every game except for the gold medal finale can end in a shootout. Just wanted to remind you of that and ruin your whole day.

1. Kevin Fiala – Injuries are unavoidable in hockey, at least when the intensity ramps up, so it was almost guaranteed that we'd see at least one star get hurt. That's just part of the deal when the NHL sends its players over this sort of tournament. Still, it's one thing to know it's probably coming, and another to see it all play out.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Kings' Kevin Fiala has surgery after leaving Olympics on stretcher, 'likely' done for season

The Kings forward left Switzerland's group-stage game against Canada after getting tangled up with Tom Wilson along the boards.

Aside from the obvious impact on Fiala himself, the injury is a brutal one for the Kings. They just pulled off a blockbuster trade to bolster their forward ranks for the stretch run, and now they lose a key piece of their attack for the season, and maybe beyond. Just awful stuff all around.

Not ranked: Tom Wilson fighting – I'll be honest, I didn't think it would happen, if only because Wilson would have so many people warning him to be on his best behavior. But sure enough, when yesterday's matchup between Canada and France threatened to get ugly after a high hit on MacKinnon by defenseman Pierre Crinon, Wilson switched into old-school enforcer mode.

At first, that just meant some vaguely threatening interactions with a few French players, including captain Pierre-Édouard Bellemare. That almost felt more like an attempt to settle things down than anything else. But then Wilson got a shift on the ice with Crinon, and an attempt at message-sending turned into a very brief scrap.

Both players got majors, so we can technically call this a fight, although it certainly won't go on Wilson's highlight reel in that regard. We all know about the 4 Nations' infamous three fights in nine seconds, but you could have fit about nine Wilson/Crinon tilts in that time. Still, as the first official fight at the Olympics since 1998, the pairing at least made a bit of history.

And sure, some fans will roll their eyes at the whole thing. Some may view it even worse, feeling like the act of dropping the gloves is beneath this sort of international event. Other fans will say it's still hockey, and this sort of thing happens, especially when the elbows come up. The fact that it's Wilson, a guy most NHL fans already have strong opinions on one way or another, plays a role, too.



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At the end of the day, nobody got hurt and there are no further automatic penalties, so barring a surprise suspension, everyone moves on. And now we wait and see whether this was the appetizer for something more, especially with the potential of a Canada-U.S. gold medal game looming, or just a trivia question you'll get wrong in ten years.

Either way, at least the men's hockey tournament got to have a little bit of bad blood. Can't let those curling hotheads have all the fun.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.17.2026

1379496 Websites

The Athletic / Olympics hockey vibe check: Switzerland and Slovakia surprise, goalie highs and lows

By Shayna Goldman

Feb. 16, 2026 Updated 9:23 pm EST

Few saw Slovakia as the breakout team of the 2026 Olympic men's hockey tournament. Most of us pegged the Czech Republic, also known as Czechia, as the surprise. But after being upset by Switzerland on Sunday morning, the Czechs' road to the podium is extremely difficult, with Canada waiting in the quarterfinal if they can get past Denmark on Tuesday.

Instead, it's Slovakia playing disruptor at the Games. It started with an electric 4-1 win over Finland and continued with a pesky late goal against Sweden to clinch a spot in the quarterfinal. Now this team's chances of reaching the semis have spiked from eight percent at the start of the tournament to 47 percent.

There was a strong relationship between Dom Luszczyszyn's pre-game expected goals and Dimitri Filipovic's scoring chance tracking in the preliminary round. Based on that, Luszczyszyn figured out what the 'expected scoring chances' were for each game, to help spot which teams played better than expected. Slovakia is one of the few teams that have exceeded expectations on both ends. Having Italy as a Game 2 opponent plays into that, since Slovakia generated 24 slot shots and only gave up eight. Still, that was far from their only impressive showing so far.

A few players are driving Slovakia's success. Along with his clutch goal against Sweden, Dalibor Dvorský has been a spark and created some quality looks in transition. Simon Nemec's 14 scoring chance contributions (through two tracked games) are a standout not just among defensemen, but all skaters in the tournament. Five of those 14 came against a tougher defensive opponent in Sweden. While Nemec is still pretty raw and has his lapses (like getting walked by Lucas Raymond for the 5-2 goal), he has shown a lot of promise in a meaningful role.

But the story for Slovakia is Juraj Slafkovský, who continues to dominate on the international stage. His seven goals in seven games back in 2022 raised his draft stock up to the No. 1 pick. Four years later, after leveling up to true difference-maker status in the NHL, he is the backbone of this team with 11 slot shots (second only to Leon Draisaitl's 12) and six points in three games.

Switzerland exceeding expectations

One other team pushing the boundaries above expectations? Switzerland.

On the men's side, Switzerland has led the way with 11.7 scoring chances above expected. Losing a needle-mover like Kevin Fiala was a major blow, but this team has taken a by-committee approach to this point. Roman Josi is the driver from the back end, while players like Timo

Meier and Nico Hischier are doing damage from the slot. Supporting players like Pius Suter and Sven Andrighetto have stepped up, too. And then there's Leonardo Genoni's .949 save percentage through two games; granted, his one night off was when Switzerland had to take on Canada.

Chart by Dom Luszczyszyn

While the men's 3-2 overtime win against Czechia was an upset, the women had an even slimmer chance (30 percent) against Finland in the quarterfinal. Andrea Brändli was the difference for Switzerland, with an impressive 40-save shutout that included eight key saves from between the dots and clutch stops against rising Finnish star Nelli Laitinen. Alina Müller's game-winning goal was her 27th Olympic point (eighth all-time) and her 15th goal, which is only three back from Marie-Philip Poulin's record.

Sweden's goalie woes

Goaltending can make or break a team's chances, especially in a fast-paced tournament setting.

That made it a major discussion point for some favorites heading into the men's tournament. Jordan Binnington's status as Canada's presumed starter despite ranking dead last in goals saved above expected for this NHL season drove the conversation. Connor Hellebuyck's recent trends and play in high-pressure situations, and the USA's deep crease, also took up a lot of air space.

Meanwhile, Sweden's goalie situation went pretty under the radar, because the focus wasn't on how their trio could crater its chances of medaling — it was how key injuries to Leo Carlsson and Jonas Brodin would strain this group.

But now their goalies are front and center heading into the elimination rounds.

After a shaky start against Italy and seriously struggling against Finland, Filip Gustavsson has a .889 save percentage and minus-0.76 goals saved above average (GSAA) through two games. As strong as he was for the Minnesota Wild in the first half of the season, his play in the month leading into the Games dipped. Gustavsson only earned two quality starts in his last nine appearances, and that level put Sweden in a tight spot heading into Saturday's matchup against Slovakia.

Jacob Markström took over the net for that crucial game, and it proved costly. He lucked out in the first period when Adam Ruzicka's shot trickled past him but ultimately didn't cross the line. But the real dagger was Slovakia's third goal in the final minute of regulation — that mistake erased the goal difference that was the standing tiebreaker, earning Slovakia a bye in the playoff round and putting Sweden into the qualifiers and on a collision course for a matchup against Team USA in the quarterfinal. Sweden's odds of reaching the semifinals have subsequently dropped by a dramatic 40 percent since the start of the tournament.

Forsberg's usage

Since the goaltending has been less than stellar for Sweden, the team needs to outscore its problems. The ice time distribution just doesn't quite reflect that logic, considering how little Filip Forsberg has played.

Forsberg only saw 1:07 minutes of action as the 13th forward against Italy in Game 1. He played more in Game 2, but was still limited to less than 10 minutes. Those deployment decisions were glaring as Sweden struggled to convert on its chances through the two games, considering Forsberg is on track for 35 goals through 57 games with the Nashville Predators this year and his scoring pace is second only to William Nylander on Team Sweden.

While Forsberg still didn't play much on Saturday (11:45, to be exact), moving him into a top-nine role at least gave him actual reps and a



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chance to make an impact. He led the way with 10 scoring chance contributions, according to Filipovic's tracking. In theory, that should lead to a more meaningful role as the stakes rise.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Canada advances in women's Olympic hockey as Marie-Philip Poulin makes history in return

Poulin tied Hockey Hall of Fame forward Hayley Wickenheiser for most goals at an Olympics in women's hockey history.

Poulin's importance

It's never easy losing a player in an Olympic tournament without a pool of replacements at the ready. It's even worse when a team loses one of the greatest players of all time.

With her elite offensive skill, defense, all-situations deployment, leadership and clutch play, Marie-Philip Poulin is her team's backbone. And Canada looked absolutely lost without her against Team USA in a 5-0 rout.

That game was the second half of a back-to-back, so Canada really didn't have a chance to practice and restructure the lines without Poulin before matching up against their toughest opponent yet. Still, some questionable decisions — like over-deploying Blayre Turnbull instead of leaning on Sarah Fillier and an up-and-coming fourth line, proved costly.

Two things have changed since then: Canada rebalanced its lines more successfully, and Poulin returned (in a limited role). That puts this team in a better position if another meeting with the USA is on the horizon in the gold medal game. But is it enough?

Canada can never be fully counted out, especially with Poulin in the lineup. Still, this team has been outscored by Team USA 29-7 between that preliminary game and the Rivalry Series. Players like Jocelyne Larocque have been exposed in the process, as has Canada's unwillingness to lean on its fourth line. So this aging core has to prove they have the juice to take out USA's up-and-comers.

Team USA's young guns leading the way

Speaking of those up-and-comers...

As much as Hilary Knight making history is a story for Team USA, the young guns are stealing the spotlight. Hannah Bilka and Abbey Murphy are a dangerous combination on Team USA's second line. Laila Edwards' versatility and bomb of a shot have been a threat from the blue line. Caroline Harvey, after playing a very limited role back in 2022 (with less than 9 minutes per game in the prelims and only 1:02 minutes in the gold medal game), is showing that she is one of the most dynamic defenders in the world. Joy Dunne, Tessa Janecke and Kirsten Simms, among others, have added a much-needed spark, too.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Caroline Harvey is having a star-making run at the Olympics for U.S. women's hockey

Harvey, who is expected to go first overall at this year's PWHL draft, might be the best offensive defender to ever play women's hockey.

Team USA's skill, speed, and energy have been noticeably different from the silver-medal-winning squad in 2022. And that was clear, even against an opponent as deep as Canada in that 5-0 win. Team USA was stingy at the blue line, disruptive in the neutral zone and played with a lot of pace to generate rush chances and win puck battles.

Before getting to the gold medal game, the USA still has Sweden in its path (a team that deserves a lot of credit for upsetting Czechia to get to this point). But the game plan is there to advance and take home gold this time around.

USA's 4 Nations glow-ups

Jack Hughes wilted at the 4 Nations Face-Off last February. He was a mismatch on the wing, where he generally hasn't been his most effective, and that, paired with some health concerns, raised questions about his potential impact level. Through three games at the Olympics, his creativity and puck-moving have been a difference-maker from the wing. While the USA has over-relied on playing a chip-and-chase game, Hughes has been one of the more effective puck carriers.

Hughes' game has paired well with Brock Nelson already; in Game 1 against Latvia, he set up two inner-slot goals with his primary passing. Nelson's 4 Nations performance was forgettable at best, and that raised similar questions as Hughes on whether he should have been named to Team USA this time around. His goal scoring and shutdown play in Colorado earned him a utility role, and he is proving management right so far.

But maybe the player with the most to prove was Auston Matthews. Team USA's captain only earned two points on his team's 11 combined goals against Latvia and Denmark. But his efforts stemmed deeper than the scoresheet — through two games, he had eight scoring chance contributions, which trailed only Jack Eichel. On Sunday, it all came together in a two-goal, three-point performance where he generated four scoring chances and set up another three.

Canada's MVP line

No one can hold a candle to Canada's star power on the men's side, especially when Macklin Celebrini, Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon are on the ice together. It's a combination of three offensive forces, who are all front-runners in this year's Hart Trophy conversation.

When Jon Cooper puts this combination together, magic happens — whether it's Celebrini's one-timer set up by MacKinnon against Switzerland, or a drawn penalty shot that gave Canada a 5-1 lead over France.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Should Canada start MacKinnon-McDavid-Celebrini line in Olympic quarterfinals?

Canada's coaching staff will be mulling whether to start its Wednesday quarterfinal game with the nuclear option.

The risk of keeping these three together is that Canada's lineup gets a little too top-heavy. The reward is that it brings out the best version of each of these players in their minutes together. The MacKinnon-Nick Suzuki combination hasn't been as effective as hoped, and Tom Wilson isn't standing out enough with Celebrini and McDavid, either.

The coaches could make other tweaks, whether it's moving someone like Seth Jarvis or Sam Reinhart up, or working Brad Marchand into one of those combinations to limit any potential weak links. But with Mitch Marner, Sidney Crosby and Mark Stone absolutely thriving on the 'third' line (with a 15-5 shot advantage and 88 percent xG through two games), Canada may have enough top-six balance to load up those three as they advance.

Quick odds and ends

- Italian goalie Gabriella Durante was phenomenal in an impossible situation in Italy's quarterfinal loss to Team USA. She made 19 saves in the first period alone, including a ridiculous stick save against Murphy. She ended the night with 45 saves against an absolutely stacked Team USA in a 6-0 loss. Damian Clara deserves a lot of hype for his play between the pipes for Italy, as well; the home team was much more exciting than expected. He is tied for a tournament-high 85 saves with Samuel Hlavaj of Slovakia.

- Monday's women's quarterfinal between USA and Sweden will feature the two best goalies in terms of save percentage in the tournament: Aerin



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Frankel, who is rocking a .978 save percentage (and has only given up one goal against), and Ebba Svensson Traff, who has turned aside 82 of 84 shots for a .976 save percentage.

- Juuse Saros leads the men's tournament with 2.91 GSA. Finland hasn't rotated its goalies like most other teams, so two days off gives him a chance to rest ahead of Wednesday's quarterfinal.
- Per Filipovic's tracking, Leon Draisaitl generated 17 scoring chances and set up another 13 in three games for Team Germany in the preliminary round.
- David Pastrnak and Marty Necas have been so dynamic together for Czechia, combining for 18 slot shots in three games.
- Only two men's players have crossed the 10-minute threshold in penalty minutes in the prelims: Pierre Crinon (33) and Tom Wilson (27), who fought each other in Canada's 10-2 rout of France on Sunday.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.17.2026

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The Athletic / Celebrating Jarome Iginla, his Winter Olympics success and the 'Golden Goal': Excerpt

By Julian McKenzie

Feb. 16, 2026 6:00 am EST

The following is an excerpt from "Black Aces: Essential Stories from Hockey's Black Trailblazers" by The Athletic's Julian McKenzie, copyright ©2026 and reprinted with permission from Triumph Books. All rights reserved. The book is available for purchase here.

The party began once Jarome Iginla got to his feet on a Sunday evening in February 2010.

Sidney Crosby's hands were already in the air, his gloves floating above his head as he jumped with jubilation. The weight of an entire nation was thrown off his back. Crosby's teammates, Scott Niedermayer and Drew Doughty, were the first to catch him once gravity brought him back down. Iginla soon joined the growing dogpile of red-and-white sweaters, with each man achieving Olympic immortality.

Many remember the gold medal, overtime-winning moment as the "Golden Goal."

"It was one of the coolest memories because it was everything. It was relief, it was elation. You can't believe it. It was like a minor hockey moment, like in peewee, where you imagine when you're on the outdoor rink. It's over. In overtime. Guys throwing their gloves everywhere. It was awesome," Iginla said.

"It was four-on-four, and I had a rush," Crosby said, reliving the goal. "It was kind of like a one-on-two, I think. It got broken up. The puck went in the corner. I tried to take it up the wall. Just kind of got stuck along the wall. And when it was stuck, Jarome was coming there to help out ... I just jumped to the middle and called for it. Just tried to get it away as soon as it hit my stick, and it went five-hole."

In the prior game, the Canadians needed a shootout-winning goal from Crosby to upend Switzerland. In the semifinals, Canada needed late saves from Roberto Luongo to preserve a 3-2 win to advance to the final. And just when it looked as if Canada would win over the U.S. in regulation, Zach Parise's last-second goal sent it to overtime. The Canadians weren't exactly dominant in 2010, and Crosby bore a

significant chunk of that pressure despite playing at his first Olympic Games.

Iginla knew everything about the pressure, having experienced something similar in 2002 when he joined Team Canada at the Olympics as the NHL's leading scorer at the time. Following a tournament-opening loss to Sweden, Iginla swapped lines to join Joe Sakic and Simon Gagné. Iginla credits Sakic as the savvy veteran who helped him find his place on the team. In 2010, Iginla was able to extend that comfort to the Pittsburgh Penguins' superstar.

"The whole Olympics, it didn't seem like goals were coming easy," said Crosby, who scored four goals and seven points in seven tournament games. "And he just said stay with it, keep going. And he was really supportive. As a young player at the time, and obviously a lot of pressure playing in Vancouver at home at the Olympics, he was just so good to me. So, to be able to connect with him on that goal was pretty big."

Iginla is the first Black male athlete ever to win a Winter Olympics gold medal when he won in 2002 with Team Canada. Iginla's worldly assist on the Golden Goal in 2010 wasn't even his first time delivering in an Olympic gold medal game.

Iginla saved his best performance of the 2002 tournament in the gold medal game, a matchup against rival and host United States. Iginla gave the Canadians their first lead of the game in the first period. Sakic fed Iginla with a pass from the faceoff circle. Camped in front of the goal, Iginla swiped at the puck and beat Team USA goalie Mike Richter with less than 90 seconds to play in the first period.

The Canadians spent much of the third period clinging to a one-goal advantage. But it was Iginla who gave Canada the breathing room it needed. Sakic rushed up ice and entered the offensive zone. As two defenders closed in on him, he passed the puck back to Steve Yzerman. The then-Detroit Red Wings captain sidestepped around a defender before finding a wide-open, streaking Iginla, who immediately shot the puck toward the goal. Richter tried to catch it with his glove but couldn't hold it cleanly.

"It went up in the air, and it barely rolled over the line against Richter," Iginla said.

When the puck crossed the line, Canadian fans celebrated in the stands and across the world. Members of Canada's executive team, including Wayne Gretzky, hugged one another. Gretzky pumped his fists in celebration as he looked down onto the ice.

In victory, Iginla became the first Black male athlete to win a Winter Olympics gold medal. Following in the footsteps of Darren Lowe and Claude Vilgrain, who played in the Olympics before him, Iginla succeeded.

"You think back to all the things that fall into place from starting hockey to my grandparents' support and getting to be a part of it," Iginla said. "(Hockey's) not just a sport for me. It's been my life, and it's been an awesome thing to be a part of."

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The Athletic / Meet the coach with his fingerprints on the U.S. women's and men's Olympic hockey teams

By Michael Russo and Hailey Salvian

Feb. 16, 2026 Updated 6:29 am EST



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MILAN — Last Wednesday, John Wroblewski headed over to the United States' Winter House, where the men's and women's Olympic hockey teams came together for a function.

As his players mingled with NHL stars, the women's national team coach reunited with the likes of Jack and Quinn Hughes, Brady Tkachuk and Matt Boldy.

Wroblewski, 44, had once coached these American Olympians as members of USA Hockey's National Team Development Program.

"I saw Wrobo sitting and talking to Brady and was thinking, 'Here we are probably seven, eight years later, and here they are both with a chance to win gold,'" said USA Hockey assistant executive director John Vanbiesbrouck. "It was just so cool."

On Monday, the United States' women, who have rolled through the 2026 Milan Cortina Olympics with five consecutive victories and four consecutive shutouts, will play Sweden in the semifinals. A win puts them into a likely gold-medal meeting with fellow hockey power Canada, whom they have now defeated seven straight times, including 5-0 in the preliminary round.

And on Wednesday night, the United States' men, currently undefeated at these Olympics, head to the knockout round.

As the winner of Group C and the No. 2 seed, the United States gets a bye into the quarterfinals but is expected to face Sweden.

Wroblewski has his fingerprints all over both teams, first as the coach guiding the top-ranked women's team in the world and second as the coach who helped mold some of the American men's brightest players.

"Those women are lucky to have him and we were lucky to have him as well," said American star defenseman Quinn Hughes. "He's got a lot of interesting ideas about the game. Works incredibly hard — I think he's the ultimate teacher."

When Wroblewski's playing career ended in 2007 — with a fourth and final season in the ECHL after spending four years at the University of Notre Dame — he immediately pivoted to coaching.

Wroblewski played on the inaugural NTDP roster in 1997. As an alumnus, he started as an assistant coach with the program.

For six years, he worked his way through the ECHL and American Hockey League coaching ranks. By 2017, Wroblewski was named the head coach of the NTDP — a program that assembles the best USA Hockey players with an emphasis on developing them into NHLers — where he led one of the most talented cohorts the country has ever produced for four years.

Wroblewski coached the under-18 team to gold and bronze medals at the men's under-18 world championships. Twenty-nine of his players were taken in the NHL draft, including a record eight first-rounders in 2019, led by first-overall selection and New Jersey Devils star forward Jack Hughes.

While Wroblewski took over the program at a beneficial time, with elite talent like Jack and Quinn Hughes coming through the pipeline, he also played a big part in their success.

"Wrobo's one of the best communicators and motivators I've ever seen," said Jack Hughes. "He knows the game, he works his butt off and all he does is want his players to succeed, both as individuals and as a team."

John Wroblewski met with players from the U.S. men's Olympic hockey team last week at Team USA's Winter House in Milan. (Courtesy of USA Hockey)

Wroblewski's stature in the game started to take off and his success with the development team made him a rising star for any organization looking for a coach with a track record of developing high-end players,

and getting the most out of elite young talent. His climb up the ladder ultimately landed him with the Los Angeles Kings AHL affiliate, the Ontario Reign.

"John has a proven background in working with young players and helping them develop their game," then Kings general manager Rob Blake said in a press release in August 2020. "He's a strong leader who communicates well and he'll play an important role for our organization."

In his second season, however, Wroblewski took a personal leave of absence. Three months later, in March 2022, Wroblewski and the organization mutually agreed that "Wroblewski would not return as head coach of the Ontario Reign."

Neither the organization nor Wroblewski ever disclosed the reason for his leave. And, in an interview with The Athletic, Wroblewski said he wanted the details to remain private. "There were just a lot of things going on in my life at that time that didn't make a lot of sense," he said.

For the first time in decades, Wroblewski was faced with the very real possibility that a hockey season would start without him behind a bench. Then, he got a call from USA Hockey, asking him to come home, this time with an opportunity to coach the U.S. women's national team at the 2022 women's world championships.

"The women's program saved me," he said.

Vanbiesbrouck said he did his due diligence looking into what happened with the Kings organization and called several people, including Ellen Hughes, the mother of Quinn, Jack and Luke Hughes.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

She raised 3 NHL stars. Now Ellen Hughes hopes to help the U.S. women's hockey team win gold

Hughes, mother to Quinn, Jack and Luke, is a player development consultant working with the U.S. women's team vying for gold in Milan.

"We loved him," said Ellen, whom Wroblewski hired in 2023 to be an on-and-off ice liaison between him and the players.

After losing in the gold medal game to Team Canada at the 2022 Olympics, and with several veteran players leaving the program, the American women were a team in transition — but with elite young talent on the way. That, more than anything, is what made Wroblewski "an easy fit," for Vanbiesbrouck.

"I thought for this time and for this quad that he would challenge them," he said. "And (that) he would give opportunities to some of our young players coming up — we have so many good ones that we didn't want to get stagnant."

Since then, Wroblewski has provided a stabilizing presence behind the U.S. bench after years of turmoil at the head coach position. Between 2017 and 2022, the women's national team made four coaching changes, including one just three weeks before the 2021 world championships, when Bob Corkum abruptly stepped down, citing concerns with COVID-19 protocols.

In his first tournament, the 2022 women's world championships in Denmark, Wroblewski introduced newcomers Taylor Heise, Hannah Bilka and Rory Guilday to the mix. He also gave star defender Caroline Harvey, who was benched as a 19-year-old at the 2022 Olympics, a nudge to play free and confident.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Caroline Harvey is having a star-making run at the Olympics for U.S. women's hockey

Harvey, who is expected to go first overall at this year's PWHL draft, might be the best offensive defender to ever play women's hockey.



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"The women did not have enough belief in themselves when I first came into the program," Wroblewski said. "They didn't understand how good they were and what their ceiling was.

"I really believe it's their program. I'm just here to try to be as thorough as possible, to give them the guidance and to make the decisions for them to achieve their dreams."

Canada beat the U.S. in that tournament for a third straight gold medal at a major international tournament. At the 2022-23 Canada-USA Rivalry Series, where Canada won four-straight games by a combined score of 16-5, it became apparent to Wroblewski that it was time for more change.

"There's no way we were going to be able to catch Canada (by 2026) if our older players can't carry us now," Wroblewski said. "So then you start considering how you're gonna circumvent (that) and that's only through development."

Wroblewski shook up the roster, adding 21-year-old Penn State forward Tessa Janecke and 20-year-old defender Haley Winn ahead of the 2023 women's world championships. He also gave goalie Aerin Frankel the reins in net after she'd only played in one game at the senior international level. Frankel went 5-1 in the tournament and backstopped the U.S. to its first world championship win since 2017.

"He was really excited for me to get that opportunity, and obviously, with it being my first worlds, he was aware that there'd probably be some nerves, but he felt like I was prepared and had done a good job to earn myself some starts," said Frankel. "Anytime your coach has confidence in you it's a great boost."

The youth movement continued when NCAA stars Kirsten Simms, Laila Edwards and Joy Dunne entered the picture in 2024. While the U.S. lost that world championship — in a thrilling 6-5 overtime victory by Canada — that youth movement is now a critical piece of the 2026 Olympic team.

Of the 13 national team rookies Wroblewski has introduced over the last four years, eight — Janecke, Bilka, Heise, Edwards, Dunne, Guilday and Simms — made the Olympic roster. Heading into the semifinals on Monday, those players alone have combined for 11 goals and 26 points through five games. Harvey and 23-year-old Abbey Murphy have added another three goals and 14 points to help pace the offense, though they're playing in their second Olympics.

"I'm really proud of the way the program has developed," Wroblewski said.

For all the confidence he works to instill, Wroblewski can be demanding and believes there's a certain way the game should be played. He coaches an up-tempo style in which he believes the best defense is an aggressive offense, and so far, the U.S. women have done it to perfection. It feels like they always have the puck and Team USA has steamrolled opponents in five-straight victories in Milan, outscoring opponents 26-1.

"He's putting in the work," said Kendall Coyne Schofield, a four-time Olympian who has medaled three times, including a gold. "When it comes to the details, the X's and O's, the film, I mean, it's unbelievable, the amount of work he does. You guys don't see it, we don't see it, but it's every day. He's prepared to make us the best that we can be. And, and it's obviously showing."

The U.S. women are heavily favored to win the Olympic gold medal Thursday. The U.S. men, too, are contenders, with six players from Wroblewski's days with the NTDP now on the Olympic team.

"It feels really good to see those guys succeed," Wroblewski said. "It's not like I feel like, 'Wow, what a job that I did.' But you look at what they're doing, and you're so happy for them, and (that) you're along for their ride."

Minnesota Wild star Matt Boldy, who was coached by Wroblewski in the program, sees a lot of their team in the U.S. women.

"(They're) high-flying, fast, offensive creativity all over the ice," he said. "The women's games I've watched have been crazy."

John Wroblewski congratulates Matt Boldy at the 2019 NHL Draft in Vancouver. (Michael Russo / The Athletic)

Boldy led the NTDP in goals as a rookie in 2017-18. One year later he was taken 12th overall by the Wild in the 2019 NHL draft. Now, in Milan, he's a bonafide star and the highest producing American forward in the NHL, with 32 goals.

"I owe a lot of credit to him with the trust he had in me and the faith he had in the player that I was going to become and the opportunity he gave me and the situations he put me in," Boldy said about Wroblewski's part in his path.

Just over four years ago, Wroblewski wasn't sure if he was going to stay involved in hockey. Now, his team is two wins away from an Olympic gold medal. It's not an opportunity he ever expected, having spent so much time in the men's game. But it's one he's been "very humbled" by.

Contracts for national team coaches are for the length of a quad. Vanbiesbrouck expects that Wroblewski will have other coaching opportunities after the Olympics, but if he wants to return, Vanbiesbrouck would love to have him back.

"Being here and having this opportunity has been so amazing for me, and those women mean so much to me," Wroblewski said. "And that team is just incredible. Those are special women in that room, a real collection of not only winning hockey players, but winners in life."

The Athletic LOADED: 02.17.2026

1379499 Websites

The Athletic / For aging captains in Olympic men's hockey, the goals vary but the pride is universal

By Mark Lazerus

Feb. 16, 2026 Updated 9:23 pm EST

MILAN — I could sit here and wax poetic about what it means for France to be on the global hockey stage. I could spin 1,200 flowery words about how awe often overwhelms opportunity when you look up at a faceoff circle and see Connor McDavid, or Nathan MacKinnon, or Macklin Celebrini, or — gulp — all three. I could throw in a bunch of colorful adverbs to underline just how momentous it was when France scored three goals in five minutes on Friday afternoon to take a 3-2 lead on the Czech Republic, a traditional hockey power.

Or I could just let Pierre-Édouard Bellemare do it. He's better at it, anyway.

"We came here to earn respect," the 40-year-old elder statesman of French hockey said after the Czech Republic pulled away for a 6-3 win. "There was never talk about a medal. For us, we try to explain it to all our newspapers at home that don't know the game, that don't know our team. They compare us to handball or soccer or basketball, rugby — we are not there. In the international level, France is nowhere near the 12th (best team). That's the truth. We're in a tournament where this is supposed to be the 12 best nations in the world. We knew it was going to be difficult, but we always said whatever the talent that we're facing, they cannot have more heart than us and more legs. Play like dogs and we'll see at the end of the game. I feel like we've done this. It's just



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unfortunate that a couple mistakes there and there, and then the score looks like we were totally out of the game, when actually, even if they had triple the amount of shots, it was 4-3 before the second. If you would have told me that two years ago, I would have signed a contract, no-brainer."

I could listen to Bellemare talk all day. That was true two years ago when he was wrapping up a 10-year NHL stint with the Seattle Kraken, and it's still true now that he's wearing the captain's "C" for his native country. There's a reason he's the captain. There's a reason he's content to stand and answer questions at length even though he's a middle-aged man whose body is breaking down, and standing in the mixed zone talking to reporters after a 60-minute game is tantamount to torture. At one point, he had to lean on the waist-high barrier just to brace himself for a moment.

Bellemare is French hockey. He's a national institution who helped put his country on the hockey map. He was on the national team that attempted — and failed — to qualify for the Olympics way back in 2004. And 2008. And 2012. And 2016. And 2021. And 2024. But Russia's exclusion from the 2026 Olympics opened the door for France, and here they are. And here Bellemare is. Finally. So if you think he's going to skip right through the mixed zone to rest his aching knees, his balky back, you just don't understand what this all means to him. He wants to talk about it, to revel in it, to make others — back home and abroad — understand.

France isn't here to win. France is here to learn. To experience. To soak it all in. And Bellemare isn't here to win, either. He's here to teach. To connect. To ensure his young teammates do soak it all in.

Alexandre Texier is the only current NHLer on the French roster, but maybe in four years there'll be more. That's Bellemare's hope. And after a solid but unmemorable NHL career, maybe that could become his legacy.

"I see myself coming into the World Championship in two thousand — I'm not gonna say the date," Bellemare said with a smile. "And I was a youngster, 18 years old. You try something (on the ice) and it goes straight back into your face, right? This is the moment that can mold a generation. This is the moment that can force kids to see OK, we're never going to play against guys like this in our league in France. So this is the moment where you're playing the best. It's a privilege to do that. And those mistakes, if you don't see them as a lesson, then there's no point in playing this game that we all love so much. That's how I see it."

Roman Červenka, the venerable captain of the Czech Republic, is a little different. Like Bellemare, he's 40 years old. Like Bellemare, he's beloved back home for his ceaseless devotion to his native country. But unlike Bellemare, he's in his fifth Olympics. And unlike Bellemare, he is here to win. He has to win — a rivalry game, a medal, something. It's been nearly three decades since Dominik Hašek led the Czechs to the gold medal in Nagano in 1998. In Červenka's time, Czechia has finished seventh, sixth, fourth, and ninth.

This year's team — with three strong NHL goaltenders, and two star forwards in David Pastrňák and Marty Nečas — has a real chance to leave Milan with a medal. Even after Sunday's overtime loss to Switzerland left a difficult road ahead, there isn't a team in this tournament that the Czechs don't think they can play with.

Červenka scored a goal in that France game. That mattered to him. While he understands his role as the venerable veteran, he wants to be more than just a mascot, a father figure.

"It means a lot," he said. "Every game for the national team means a lot, and I'm proud I can be here and I'm really glad. I still believe I can help the team. I enjoy every game, every second in this jersey."

That's why Červenka is so beloved back home. While every player in this tournament wants to represent his country well, those from North America, Sweden and Finland are just dabbling during a two-week break

from the NHL. For so many Europeans, international hockey comes first. Always has, always will. This is the 34th event in which Červenka has worn the shield of Czechia, dating back more than 20 years.

He's been through the pride of playing for the bronze medal in PyeongChang in 2018, and he's been through the humiliation of flaming out in Beijing. The passion of Czech hockey fans is extraordinary. You can feel it inside Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena when they're jumping in unison, chanting and singing at big moments of the game. But that passion can also be a crushing weight.

"It's a pleasure," Červenka said when asked what it's like being a national hero. "But it's not always like this. It depends (on our results)."

Asked if they've been hard on him in the past, Červenka didn't even pause to think about it: "For sure," he said.

But playing without them in Beijing, during the pandemic, was disorienting. There was no way Červenka was going to let that be his last Olympic experience. He owed them a better performance, and he owed himself one last chance to earn their love.

"I think we have the best fans in the world," he said. "It's always strange without them. We are happy they are here. Big energy from them."

Then there's Sidney Crosby. He's not quite 40, but at 38, he's pretty close. Crosby couldn't be more different than his fellow aging captains. He's one of the most accomplished players of all time, with three Stanley Cups and two Olympic gold medals, one of which he won on home soil by scoring the golden goal in overtime. Virtually nothing could befoul Crosby's legacy in Canada at this point. Certainly nothing that could happen on the ice in Milan.

And yet, he feels the magnitude of the moment every bit as much as Bellemare and Červenka. That thin little "C" stitched on your jersey can feel heavy as hell.

"Playing for Team Canada over the years, that's something you learn is part of it — that expectation and that responsibility," he said.

Like Bellemare and Červenka, Crosby is no longer burdened by being the top threat on his team. But his contribution still means something. He had two assists in the opener against Czechia, a goal the next day against Switzerland, and added an assist against France. He might not have the speed of McDavid, or the strength of MacKinnon, or the youth of Celebrini, but he still competes as hard as anybody. He still matters. He's still the one Canada will look to in the medal round, when the pressure mounts and heartbeats rise and breath shallows.

Crosby is Canadian hockey. Just as Červenka is Czech hockey. Just as Bellemare is French hockey.

The expectations are different, the goals don't align, and the glare of the spotlight varies wildly. One seeks respect, one redemption, one reaffirmation. But one way or the other, the weight of a nation rests on their shoulders. Which is exactly where they want it.

It's about pride. And pride is universal — whether you're on top, stuck in the middle, or mired all the way at the bottom.

"You can hear it in the locker room, when guys are talking about which teams are going to be there, and then they're like, 'Oh, we're playing France,' and one guy's laughing about it and then the other guy's like, 'No, we played them last time — it was a nightmare,'" Bellemare said. "This is the kind of respect that you get to earn. Is the media going to give us that type of respect? I don't know. We don't have McDavid. We don't have anyone fancy. And we are a small country. But at the end of the day, if we can be here and show our value to our countrymen and show them that, OK, these guys are working their nuts (off)? I'll be happy. Happy with that."

With that, Bellemare straightened up, twisted this way and that to loosen up his 40-year-old spine, and limped off to the next batch of reporters,



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the next set of questions, the next opportunity to talk about the game he loves, the country he loves, and what it means to bring them together for the whole world to see.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.17.2026

1379500 Websites

The Athletic / Macklin Celebrini's Olympic success is surreal even for his accomplished, stoic dad

By Marcus Thompson II

Feb. 16, 2026 Updated 9:23 pm EST

MILAN — Rick Celebrini loves the paradox of the story he's telling. It's one about a call he received from his son Macklin. The San Jose Sharks' rising superstar called his pops as he waited at the San Francisco airport for his flight bound for New York, where the charter awaited to take the Canadian men's Olympic hockey team to Italy.

Among other things, the lad had a question. One revealing the youngster's concern and need for the comforting assurance of his father.

"They wouldn't bring me all that way," Macklin asked, "not to play me, right?"

Celebrini smiled. He's still smiling, even now, while he watches his daughter take in a tennis lesson in Italy. It's a story that both reveals how sudden and surreal this all is for the Celebrini family.

"I'm pretty sure you're going to play," the father said. "I don't think you have to worry about that."

The story ends later, days later, before Team Canada first took the ice.

"He gets there and looks up on the board an hour before the first practice," Celebrini said, "and he's playing with (No.) 97."

Dad was right. Celebrini went from wondering if he would play to being the young buck in a fantasy of a top line. Call them the Three Macs: Connor McDavid (the aforementioned No. 97), Nathan MacKinnon, and Macklin. Two of the best players in the world and a 19-year-old phenom who is living a dream that keeps unlocking levels.

His father went from hoping his son would make their national team to watching his son score the first goal of Canada's first game in his first Olympic appearance. Assisted by MacKinnon.

Celebrini, the Golden State Warriors' vice president of player health and performance, has a stoic exterior thicker than a teenager's skull. It's been hardened by decades in sports, in Canada and the United States, in soccer, hockey and basketball, and working with some of the biggest names in sports.

Oh, the awe is there. The 58-year-old guru physiotherapist knows as well as anyone what greatness looks like, what it requires and how cool it is. He just doesn't ogle at it, doesn't let it bubble to the surface. His competitive edge, his respect for process, how much he's seen, makes him cling to perspective.

But this? It's just too much to play it cool.

His son playing for Team Canada? In the Winter Olympics? For Vancouver's own, the Burnaby, B.C.-born former Canadian pro soccer player whose heart is the shape of a maple leaf? And not only that, but tied for the tournament lead in goals with four in three games?

Yeah, this hits differently.

Celebrini trained with the likes of Steve Nash and Steph Curry. He knows the highs of championships and the lows of having his own soccer career snuffed out by injuries. Seeing what he's seen, it takes "epic" to elicit excitement from him. And this, for all the exceptional people, places and moments he's been around, is epic. Celebrini even rediscovered his nerves.

"The first game, I was legit nervous," he said. "I've been more nervous than I've been in a long time watching any of the kids' sports games. And I think Mack was — well, I know Mack was really nervous as well. When he scored that goal, I think it settled us all down. I think the whole team was nervous. But I think when he got that tip goal, it just kind of allowed us to breathe a little bit and relax."

Macklin fits because his game surpasses his age. It's built on intelligence and skill, allowing him to read and respond at their speed. It takes quite the processor to keep up with McDavid and MacKinnon. But Celebrini doesn't need the puck to be impactful. He anticipates lanes, wins small-area battles and makes the quick, connective plays — necessary when part of an attack featuring McDavid at center. Plus Celebrini's shot deserves respect. With his motor, Celebrini proves a complement on a line defined by pace, precision and explosiveness.

This ride seems to have no end. It began with being the No. 1 pick in the 2024 NHL Draft. He finished third in voting for the Calder Trophy. He opened his second season with 23 points through the first 15 games, already producing as one of the league's best offensive creators.

The ride turned up again on New Year's Eve. That's when Canada named Macklin to the squad. He became the youngest NHL player ever to make their Olympic roster. He was the youngest player considered when Canada invited him to orientation camp.

Hence Macklin's concern about playing. Canada's never seen this before, so it made sense for him to wonder whether his inclusion was more ceremonial, a way to prepare him for the future when he actually plays. But no, Celebrini's kid is no token call-up.

His talent, his mindset, his physique — it's ready now. Ready enough to be grouped with the best. After opening the scoring against the Czech Republic, surpassing Jonathan Toews as the youngest Canadian NHL player to score an Olympic goal, Macklin scored again in a 5-1 win over Switzerland.

Still higher levels could be unlocked. Canada's a favorite to win gold. So much can happen in a hockey tournament, but they could ... you know.

And wouldn't that be something.

Celebrini trained his son for this, which is largely why Macklin can play at this level at this age. But his readiness for these persistent monumental accomplishments is merely a byproduct and not the intended aim. Celebrini didn't set out to sculpt a hockey star, one who can run with the big boys even though he just became of legal age to drink back home in B.C.

That Macklin is here, doing this, is cosmic fortune, an alignment of excellence not even a father could imagine.

Over time, it became clearer Macklin was good enough to eventually be an NHL player, and maybe an Olympian. Even as a rookie, his production and ability pointed toward him one day making the team.

"Up until the start of the season," Celebrini said, "when he got off to a pretty good start, I didn't think that this year would be realistic."

But this has been fast enough to crack his father's stoic facade. Team Canada doesn't do teenagers. At least it didn't. This iteration came to Milan with gold-medal quality and intentions as the Winter Olympics returned to best-on-best hockey with the inclusion of NHL players for the first time since 2014. This squad seemed too strong for the second-year Sharks sensation. But to see this?



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"It is crazy," the dad continued. "Not only is he playing, but he's contributing in a meaningful way and having fun out there. And by extension, so are we."

The Athletic LOADED: 02.17.2026

1379501 Websites

The Athletic / Ranking the Olympic men's hockey goal songs, from 'Free Bird' to pizza menus

By Mark Lazerus

Feb. 16, 2026 5:00 am EST

MILAN — Five days into the men's hockey tournament at the Olympics, I have heard The Ting Tings' "That's Not My Name," a quirky little number from 2008, 11 times. I have heard the masses at Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena mangle John Lennon's "Imagine" during an intermission sing-along seven times. I have heard the J. Geils Band's "Freeze Frame" so many times during an intermission game played by the delightful in-arena host — who looks alarmingly like either Kenny G or Richard Simmons, depending on who you ask — that I find myself randomly freezing in exaggerated poses whenever there's a lull in conversation.

There's the EDM power-play song that pulsates after every penalty, the classic Italian ditty "Che La Luna Mezzo Mare," Pearl Jam's "Even Flow," which plays every time matching minors are called, and all sorts of Euro power pop I've never heard of but will never forget.

But it's a 40-year-old campy operatic gibberish song that'll stay with me long after I leave Milan. The Swedes and their goal song have destroyed my brain, and I don't know whether to thank them or sue them. Either way, I think I love them.

Let's rank all 12 men's hockey goal songs at the 2026 Milan Cortina Games, based solely on my impeccable, unimpeachable taste. That's right, it's time for some Important Journalism:

1. Switzerland: "Richi" by Stubete Gäng

Listen to this track and you might find it cute. A little catchy, a little hokey, a little fun. Listen to 8,000 Swiss fans scream it at the top of their lungs and you will want to tattoo the "lyrics" onto your forehead. A great goal song requires two things: a catchy, repetitive melody and fan participation. Simple, easy-to-remember lyrics — or even better, simple scatting — is a huge plus. Add in a little local flavor, all the better. This one has it all. It's like the Swiss "Chelsea Dagger." A perfect goal song for one of the most electric fan bases in the tournament.

For years, goal songs have signaled joy in NHL arenas. Our staff rated each one, based on personal opinions and how the tune fits the team.

2. Sweden: "Canelloni Macaroni" by Lasse Holm

The first time I heard this, when Gabriel Landeskog evened up Sweden's game against Italy on Wednesday, I turned to my colleague Arpon Basu and said, "This is the stupidest song I've ever heard." Five days later, I think it might be better and more significant than "Beethoven's Fifth," "Für Elise" and "Livin' on a Prayer" combined. I will be singing the goofy operatic part of this song on my deathbed. It will never leave me. The only reason it's not No. 1 is that the Swedish fans don't really seem all that into it. Fan participation matters.

Honestly, I didn't think the Swedes could top "En För Alla För En," their goal song from Sochi in 2014 by a band called The Poodles, which I can only describe as Sweden's Motley Crüe. That song even had a video in which the entire Swedish team, coach Pär Mårts included, dramatically

entered a music studio and sang the chorus off printed lyrics sheets like in "We Are The World." It was perfect. Yet somehow, it's been topped by a song that is literally just some dude reading a pizzeria menu. God, I love hockey.

3. United States: "Free Bird" by Lynyrd Skynyrd

This song breaks all the rules. It's not repetitive. The part that's used doesn't have lyrics. There's no fan participation. But "Free Bird" is the most 'Murican thing imaginable, so it works. It's more American than baseball, than apple pie, than butchering a local's language and then rudely mocking them for not speaking Boston. This is a good song. But it is a GREAT Olympic goal song.

4. Slovakia: "Tak, tak, tak + A ja taka dzivočka" by Ščamba

Accordions! Fiddles! Scatting! Slovakia brings a great local flavor to its goal song, going full folk. This song is nothing but good vibes, which is appropriate for a team that's been the exciting surprise of the tournament. I asked a Slovak journalist friend of mine what the lyrics mean, and he replied, "It's in a special dialect. It means something such as this: 'I'm such a wild little girl, cingi lingi bom. I like to braid little feathers, cingi lingi bom ... I tuck it behind my hat, cingi lingi bom.'" That's better than I possibly could have imagined. The Slovaks are by far the most fun team here, both taking this event by storm and not taking it too seriously.

5. Finland: "Peto on irti (Vain elämää kausi 4)" by VilleGalle

You know how I know this is a pretty good goal song? I heard it 11 times on Saturday and didn't want to throw my laptop across the press tribune. It's not a great participation song, but it's super upbeat and has great energy. A lot of these songs start sounding the same after a while, but this one stands out as something different. And the name of it is great: "The beast is loose."

6. Canada: "Feeling Good" by The Sheepdogs

There was a bit of controversy on opening night in Milan, as Canada's first two goals were greeted with Canadian icons The Tragically Hip. Nobody's ever going to complain about hearing The Hip, but The Sheepdogs were Canada's choice. It's not bad. "I'm feeling good" is a solid goal-song lyric. It's got a bit of a country tinge to it and reminds me of the Nashville Predators' goal song, "Gold on the Ceiling." It's simple, it's repetitive, it's fine.

7. Czech Republic: "Hoja hou" by Walda Gang

This song feels like someone typed "What if the Dropkick Murphys were Eastern European?" into Chat GPT. It's not awful, but it feels very generic. The lyrics are patriotic and even a little militaristic, which plays well at an international event like this. The Czech fans are among the most active and loudest ones in Milan, but the goal-song participation isn't as high as I'd like.

8. Latvia: "Par Latviju" by Marhils, Dons, Muktupāvels, Fomins, Kaukulis un Čakste

Well, at least Latvia has the best jerseys in the tournament. Points for having the name of the country in the title and in the lyrics, but the instrumental underneath sounds like one of those rights-free guitar licks you use in a podcast intro.

A return to best-on-best hockey at the Olympics means heightened interest in the on-ice aesthetics of the 12 participating nations.

9. Germany: "Major Tom (Coming Home)" by Peter Schilling

This is a curious one. It reminds me of the Vancouver Canucks using Simple Minds' "Don't You (Forget About Me)." Great song, but is it a great goal song? I mean, "Major Tom" is a sad song! He gets lost in space! Though I suppose it's very German to celebrate a moment of triumph by



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ponderously examining the human folly and existential insignificance of life in the cold and uncaring endless void.

10. Denmark: "Vi er dem" by Kim Larsen

Another generic mix of old-timey folk and modern rock. Call and answer is always a good idea in a goal song (think how Seattle has added "Let's Go, Kraken" to Nirvana's "Lithium" chorus), but the phrases are too long and cumbersome here. I do love the "Oh, yeaaaaaaaaahhhhhh" and "la la la" transitions. I just wish they were transitioning between better segments of the song.

11. Italy: "Tutta L'Italia" by Gabry Ponte

This sort of feels like one of those 1980s sports-team videos, like "The Super Bowl Shuffle" or "Let's Ram It" or "Let's Go Mets Go." "All of Italy" is a nice sentiment, but this one falls flatter than a pappardelle noodle.

12. France: "La Foule (Le Monde Club)" by TR3NACRIA (feat. StereoKilla)

This is very, very bad. Like, so bad. No fan participation. No lyrics to the chorus. No juice whatsoever. It's lame house music briefly interrupted by some indifferent French singer in a noir film, leaning on a piano with a lit cigarette in her hand, the smoke curling up to the ceiling in black and white. Le boooooo.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.17.2026

1379502 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Canada's top line of Celebrini-McDavid-Wilson embodies joy of Olympic hockey

Justin Bourne

6–8 minutes

With 12 nations represented in men's hockey at the Winter Olympics and most of the world's hockey talent concentrated in (let's generously call it) four to six countries, we were always going to get some lopsided games.

As I see it, that's just fine. Great, even, and not saying that just because I'm Canadian.

It's enthralling to see talents such as Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon play in a game where the opposition isn't able to send out a handful of elite defensive players whose entire goal is to smother their speed and grace. You can coach a "clog-it-up" style against them all you like, but if you don't have the raw ability to execute it, you're still cooked.

There's an old stand-up comedy bit about how the Olympics should have a regular person in every event to demonstrate how great the athletes actually are, and honestly, that's kind of what it's like when McDavid plays the 10th- through 12th-seeded teams. It's refreshing.

For the nations without as much NHL talent, they win too. Maybe not literally, but their players get the exposure of playing against the best in the world, which is an honour itself. No athlete wouldn't love a crack at facing the best in their sport. Then there's games against other nations where they have a chance at a win or two, to say nothing of how even keeping the games close against the dominant nations can become small victories themselves.

I know Italy's opening showing against Sweden was a source of pride for them, and it should've been.

More than all that is that the best games are coming. All that stuff above is great, but eventually, the teams — after a few games finding some

chemistry — have circled up and built speed like two protons shot in opposite directions in the Large Hadron Collider, and are now set to run smack into each other in the semis and finals.

Single-game elimination, massive stakes, elite talents. We're gonna get that for dessert, too.

More than any of this, though — and I admit this is a joy unique to Canadians — is that you almost get to play that game where you'd say to a friend (or perhaps a fellow radio host, depending on your occupation): "What's the most complete line you could build using literally anyone from the NHL," then you get to see it in practice, not just fantasy.

So far in the group stage, Canadian coach Jon Cooper has given us everything we could've asked for. He's put together McDavid and MacKinnon and Macklin Celebrini, three of the NHL's top-four scorers. I saw Brandon Hagel try to connect with Sam Bennett on a play, two Florida rivals coming together for the greater cause. We've seen power-play connections between the great Sidney Crosby, McDavid and MacKinnon too.

But as for a real line, one that allows you to spread talent throughout your group a bit and can play it any way you want, nothing has been more "Canadian hockey" than the line of McDavid, Tom Wilson and Celebrini. Through three games, they've been everything you could ask for. Not to be too old-school and throw it back to my father-in-law, but there's shades of Trotter-Bossy-Gillies here.

It feels like we perpetually overlook our greatest assets from a story perspective, as it's so obvious to heap praise on McDavid that it's not even newsworthy anymore. But he's been super human in this tournament, completely controlling the pace and direction of every shift, every touch a threat. He creates the space for everyone else out there, forcing defenders in retreat with just his presence when the Canadians gain possession. He's first in tournament scoring with nine points in three games, and it feels like he should have more.

What's been so cool is how the idea of "maybe Tom Wilson would fit beside him" has worked out in practice. The big power forward has thrown as many hits as anyone in the tournament, helping his line get the puck back into the hands of McDavid and Celebrini. He's seemingly spent all three games in the O-zone, cycling the puck, putting up a goal and two assists, parking at the net front and causing problems. And, as we know, he went after the French player who took a shot at MacKinnon, showing that even in a tournament that isn't a years-long commitment to his teammates, he knows exactly where he fits into the equation.

Celebrini, then, has been both a benefactor of those complementary skill sets and the perfect guy to exploit what comes available. Between his ability to deceive with the puck, and to read the play without it, he's shown he's fully deserving of every label calling him the "Next One." I mean, he'll need a more lasting nickname soon, as he's already arrived, but to have him on the same team as Crosby and McDavid and MacKinnon is a treat. He sees the play like only the best can, and can absolutely rip it when he finds soft spots.

To me, there's some gatekeeping among "real hockey fans" here in North America when it comes to the Olympics. I see the harumphing about mismatches, and how it doesn't make for the most competitive matchups, which I've acknowledged here. But in those games, the score gets lopsided because everyone's trying. The good teams need to run up the score for goal differential, and the lesser teams are playing hard for their national pride on the big stage. So, no, the scores aren't always as close as say, 5-3 between Columbus and Utah on a Tuesday in January, but the parties involved are far more invested. Once every couple years, I'll take the level of mid-February passion over close.

Now, on the cusp of the tournament's most dramatic games, we'll see if the "perfect" line of McDavid with Wilson and Celebrini holds up. We'll see when NHL players play NHL players and the coaches try to clog it up, if the overall tools of that trio can still plow on through whatever



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barriers get set up. I can't imagine there's many plans to stop them, but could they at least be slowed?

Canada and the U.S. are on a collision course. The Tkachuks, Eichel, Hughes, Matthews, Werenski, they'll have something to say about the fun the Canadians have been having. The Scandinavians aren't gonna roll over.

It will be exciting, and it's been damn fun to watch on the way there. Questions are being answered, but are still floating out there, which means the best is yet to come.

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 02.17.2026

1379503 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / What you need to know about the men's Olympic hockey bracket

Rory Boylen

8-10 minutes

After a day of thinking about goal differentials and tiebreak scenarios, the men's Olympic hockey tournament becomes a win-or-go-home playoff.

Canada, USA, Slovakia and Finland finish 1-4 in that order and get a bye into the quarterfinal games on Wednesday. Before that, the teams finishing ranked 5-12 will play through a qualifying round on Tuesday.

Here is what the rankings look like coming out of the preliminary round.

RANK

TEAM

PTS

GOAL DIFFERENTIAL

*1

Canada

9

+17

*2

USA

9

+11

*3

Slovakia

6

+2

*4

Finland

6

+11

5

Switzerland

5

+1

6

Germany

3

-3

7

Sweden

6

+2

8

Czechia

4

-3

9

Denmark

3

-3

10

Latvia

3

-5

11

France

0

-15

12

Italy

0

-15

In the qualifying round, it's No. 5 seed vs. No. 12, No. 6 vs. No. 11, No. 7 vs. No. 10, No. 8 vs. No. 9, and the winners will move on to face a predetermined opponent. However, keep in mind that when we get to the semifinals, the remaining teams will be re-ranked, so the top remaining team will meet the lowest-ranked team.

Here's how the matchups are shaping up heading into Tuesday's qualification round:

No. 5 Switzerland vs. No. 12 Italy

The Swiss gave Canada its toughest game in the preliminary round, though it was a 5-1 final. Kevin Fiala, Denis Malgin and Andrea Glauser were all injured and out of the lineup by Switzerland's third game, where they beat Czechia in the only contest to reach overtime so far. Switzerland's only win in an NHL Olympic playoff round was a 3-2 victory over Belarus in 2010.

The winner of this game will play against Finland in the quarterfinal. In the 2022 Olympics (without NHL players), Finland beat Switzerland 5-1 in the quarterfinal.



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No. 6 Germany vs. No. 11 France

There were seven teams that had more than Germany's three points, but a second-place finish in Group C puts them in a great position to reach the quarterfinal and even have a shot at a medal game. The Germans have never won a playoff round in an NHL Olympic tournament -- losing 8-2 to Canada as the No. 11 seed in 2010, and 5-0 to the USA in the 2002 quarterfinal -- but were silver medallists in the 2018 Olympic tournament. Tim Stutzle is tied with Macklin Celebrini for the goal-scoring lead in the tournament (four).

The winner of this game will play Slovakia in the quarterfinal. If it's Germany, that would create a rematch from the 2022 Olympics, where Slovakia shut out Germany in the first playoff round, 4-0.

No. 7 Sweden vs. No. 10 Latvia

The last-minute goal against Sweden by Slovakia's Dalibor Dvorsky makes the road more difficult for the Tre Kronor, who shouldn't even look past Latvia. In 2014, the last Olympic tournament with NHLers, Latvia beat Switzerland 3-1 as the No. 11 seed, then lost to Canada by just a narrow 2-1 score in the quarterfinal. And in 2010, as the 12 seed, Latvia took the Czech Republic to overtime before losing 3-2.

The winner of this game will face Team USA in the quarterfinal. Sweden and the Americans have never played in the playoff round of an NHL Olympic tournament.

No. 8 Czechia vs. No. 9 Denmark

Czechia didn't have the strongest showing in the preliminary round. They were overwhelmed and shut out by Canada in their opener. They allowed France to score three of its five goals, and trailed that game in the second period. Their best effort was an overtime loss to Switzerland in the third game. Overall, Czechia's -3 goal differential from the preliminary round is the same as Denmark's.

The winner of this game will play No. 1 seed Canada in the quarterfinal. The last time Canada and Czechia met in a playoff round of an NHL Olympic tournament, it was 1998. Dominik Hasek dominated the shootout, Wayne Gretzky was left on the bench, and the Canadians were upset in the semifinal. This is already the furthest Denmark has made it in an NHL Olympic tournament.

Meantime, here's what the path to gold looks like for the teams that will get a bye straight into the quarterfinal:

No. 1: Team Canada

A +17 goal differential ended up well ahead of the USA's +11. Canada has allowed just three goals against but also leads the tournament in offence. Three of the top four scorers in the tournament are Canadians: Connor McDavid (11 points), Macklin Celebrini (six) and Sidney Crosby (six). McDavid has a chance to make some history, too. He has seven assists, just one shy of tying an NHL Olympic record (Saku Koivu eight assists in 1998 and 2006), and his nine points are just two shy of tying that NHL Olympic record (11 by Teemu Selanne and Koivu in 2006).

Their path to gold: The No. 1 ranking puts Canada in place to see Czechia in the quarterfinal instead of Sweden. However, if the bracket stays chalk, they'd also have to play Finland instead of Slovakia in the semifinal.

Something else to keep in mind: If Sweden were to upset Team USA in the quarterfinal, it would lock in a matchup with Canada in the semis (unless France or Italy find a way through).

No. 2: Team USA

The Americans had the easiest path through the preliminary round, avoiding any of the top countries. They got through without issue, outside of a single early scare from Denmark, who took two leads in the first period before losing 6-3. Jeremy Swayman's shaky start locks in Connor

Hellebuyck as the No. 1 goalie, if there were any doubt. Through the preliminary round, Hellebuyck has a tournament-leading .952 save percentage.

Their path to gold: Unless Latvia pulls off an upset, the USA will meet Sweden in a quarterfinal matchup that will leave one country leaving earlier than planned. However, it also puts the Americans on track to meet Slovakia in the semifinal, barring an upset.

Something else to keep in mind: If Germany happened to get through Slovakia in the quarterfinal, the U.S. path would most likely have to go through Sweden, Finland and Canada for gold.

No. 3: Team Slovakia

The biggest surprise of the preliminary round was Slovakia finishing ahead of Sweden and Finland in Group B. Juraj Slafkovsky's two-goal, three-point effort in their opening win gave Slovakia the leg up it needed to outlast a narrow one-goal win over Italy, and a loss to Sweden. Slafkovsky is tied for second in scoring this tournament, the only non-Canadian player with six points.

Their path to gold: The best playoff run Slovakia has ever had in an NHL Olympic tournament was in 2010, when they upset Sweden in the quarterfinal before losing to Canada 3-2 in the semifinal and to Finland 5-3 in the bronze medal game. This time, they will be favoured in their quarterfinal matchup and are in line to meet the USA in the semifinal.

Something else to keep in mind: If Canada or the USA were to lose in the quarterfinal, Slovakia would be reranked as the No. 2 seed and be in place to face Finland in the semis, a team they beat 4-1 in the preliminary round.

No. 4: Team Finland

Even though they had a disappointing 4-1 loss to Slovakia to start the tournament, the Finns had no trouble with Sweden or Italy and come out of the preliminary round with the same goal differential as Team USA. Joel Armia, Kaapo Kakko, Artturi Lehkonen and Mikko Rantanen are all tied for the team scoring lead at four points.

Their path to gold: Do not underestimate Finland. With the exception of 2002, Finland has eliminated at least one of the five other top six hockey nations in every NHL Olympic playoff tournament. If there are no upsets, Finland would meet Canada in the semifinal. Those countries have played twice in an NHL Olympic hockey playoff game: In 1998, Finland beat Canada 3-2 in the bronze medal game, and in 2002, Canada beat Finland 2-1 in the quarterfinal.

Something else to keep in mind: In the five NHL Olympics so far, Finland has won a medal four times, more than any other country.

And one more thing...

Remember the overtime rules!

In every elimination game except the gold medal game, overtime will consist of a 10-minute, 3-on-3 sudden-death period, followed by a shootout if it remains tied.

In the gold medal game, overtime will consist of 20-minute periods of 3-on-3 sudden-death hockey until someone scores.

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Sportsnet.ca / Olympic Notebook: Matthews inspires U.S., Fiala gives a fright



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Luke Fox

9–12 minutes

MILAN — When his international rival and Los Angeles Kings teammate left Friday's game in agony and on a stretcher, Drew Doughty wanted to cut his media availabilities short and go find his friend "as fast as I can."

Doughty's attempt would be in vain.

Kevin Fiala had been rushed from Milano Santagiulia Arena to the hospital, where he underwent season-ending surgery to repair fractures in his left leg.

Doughty tried getting hold of Fiala on the phone.

"But he didn't respond. And I'm sure he's high as could be on whatever, trying to take the pain away. So, I'll go check my phone right now," Doughty said late Sunday night. "Either way, I'm gonna go see him at the hospital."

This was always the risk, if not an inevitability.

Send so many NHLers overseas for an intense best-on-best tournament on less-than-perfect ice, and some of them are going to return to their NHL teams worse for wear.

Until offence-starved L.A. traded for Artemi Panarin, Fiala was the Kings' leading scorer (20 goals, 46 points). And the team is in go-for-it mode. The Kings need him.

Just as the New York Islanders needed their leading scorer, John Tavares, in 2014. Tavares tore his MCL in Sochi, an injury that robbed him of participation in the gold medal game and ended his season. The Islanders were furious.

The Kings can't be thrilled, either. But this is a risk the players fought for.

"We know that's a possibility, but we don't care," Doughty says. "We want to play, and it's best-on-best hockey. We're not worried about that as players. We don't come here worrying about being hurt. We just come here to try to win games and win a gold medal.

"I mean, people get hurt all the time. I've missed 80 games in the last three years. Just the way she goes. And it's s----- and unfortunate, and I feel for Kevin big time. But it's just part of the game."

From his hospital bed, Fiala recorded and sent an emotional video message to his Swiss teammates to pump them up ahead of a 3-2 overtime victory over Czechia Sunday.

"He's still with us," Nico Hischier said. "We'll play for him.

"He's one of our best players, so it's obviously a tough loss for us. He's still engaged with us and he'll cheer us on."

The Swiss hold no ill will to Canada's Tom Wilson, who accidentally fell on Fiala's leg after the two awkwardly collided along the boards.

"It's just bad luck. He's a competitor, and we're here at the Olympic Games. I feel terrible at the thought that he might not be able to continue playing," Wilson said. "I send my best wishes to him and his family. You never want to see someone miss a tournament like this. It's really bitter for his country, for his team. I just wish him a speedy recovery."

Auston Matthews 'plays winning hockey'

Early in the event, Mike Sullivan gently called out Matthews and his line, which is flanked by Jake Guentzel and Matt Boldy. The U.S. coach and his staff even discussed mixing up the personnel around the Toronto Maple Leafs centreman.

"I think they're capable of making more of an impact on the game, and we'll walk the line of trying to let them play through stuff," Sullivan said last week. "We're trying to give them a chance to build a little bit of

chemistry and we'll go from there, but certainly we think they're capable of making more of an impact."

Well, Matthews erupted for three points Sunday and was arguably the best player on the ice in Team USA's 5-1 victory over Germany.

Sullivan's patience is paying off, as he says Matthews' unit is improving by the day.

"Auston's game is building. It's getting better with every game," Sullivan said. "We've exercised some patience with that group, because we feel like those guys are capable, and we try to give them an opportunity to build a little bit of chemistry, and I think it's unfolding right in front of us."

With three goals and two assists, the captain leads all Americans in scoring and ranks fifth overall through the preliminary round.

"He's been great all tournament," Guentzel said. "You guys put a lot of heat on him for no reason. He's just an unbelievable player and plays in all situations."

Detroit's Dylan Larkin sees plenty of shifts against Matthews in the Atlantic Division. He's enjoying sharing a bench with him.

"People don't realize how much he sacrifices his offence to be in good defensive position. And that's winning hockey. He plays winning hockey. Plays like a leader should play and blocks shots. Good on faceoffs," Larkin said.

"He was used as a matchup guy and still produced. That's one of the hardest jobs in hockey — you got to shut someone down and try and score. He did that (Sunday), and that's world-class."

Matthews has brought his whole family over to Italy and is having a blast.

"Just spending so much time with everybody at the village. I mean, there's lots of laughs. Finally, being on this stage and playing is a lot of fun," Matthews said.

"It's obviously a big honour to wear this jersey and represent your country and see all the support — the USA flags, the chants... so it's just been a really special experience."

Sullivan describes Matthews as "a quiet guy by nature" but one who leads his teammates through action: a blend of game-breaking skill and defensive detail.

"His defensive game gets underrated. He tracks back hard. He's committed defensively in the defensive zone. There's an element of physicality to his game. He's getting inside. The goal he scores in the blue paint is a perfect example," Sullivan said.

"It inspires the group with the way that he played (versus Germany). And all our guys know what he's capable of. He's an elite player. He's one of the best players in the world. And so, when he does a lot of little things, and he's committed to play on both sides of the puck like he is tonight, I think he's an inspiration to all of them."

Hughes has a sixth sense

"I mean, I dunno," the U.S. defenceman replied. "I'm usually pretty zoned in on what's going on with myself and trying to get ready to do what I need to do.

"Sometimes you hear some funny stuff out there, but, yeah... as the people say, I'm usually seeing ghosts, so I'm usually focused on myself."

Love how self-aware he is about his unawareness.

Pierre-Edouard Bellemare is an international treasure

Following a 700-game NHL career, the 40-year-old French captain continues to ply his trade in the Swiss League.



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Team France could not have a better spokesman than the affable, intelligent, and insightful Bellemare, who conducts his scrums in three languages and doles out quotes as scrumptious as croissants. Even after a 10-2 loss.

Bellemare on Nathan MacKinnon saying that Macklin Celebrini is already better than him:

"Nate is a little bit generous, but I haven't had the chance to play against that kid (until now), and he looks absolutely amazing. It's a long time since I've seen a guy coming in the league and play like he's been in the league for 15 years. Like, he played like a veteran, I feel. I think he's 19 or whatever it is."

Yep, 19.

"God damn. It's good that I stopped in the NHL. If this is what it's gonna look, it's better for me to not be in there anymore."

Bellemare on what he's seen from Connor McDavid in Milan:

"One of the best players in the world. Like, I wasn't expecting anything different, right? What I saw in him different is that he's hustling, and he's hitting guys. Just fun to see a guy that is that talented decide, 'You know what? I'm gonna show I can grind too.' That's cool. So, a lot of respect."

USA x Snoop Dogg collab

Snoop Dogg, the busiest man in showbiz, swung by Team USA's compound to give the hockey players a pump-up speech ahead of the tournament.

Dylan Larkin: "One of the few people I've met that's kind of larger than life. You look at him, he doesn't even look real. So, it was an awesome experience. We got to talk to him, and then there's cameras around, and he can just turn it on and be in entertainer mode right away. It's pretty impressive. Getting to meet him was just another thing I'll remember forever."

Charlie McAvoy: "Just getting to meet him and see what his energy is — he was awesome. I took a million pictures. He's a different kind of celebrity than we are. It's just fun. There's a lot of really cool experiences that come with all the support that we're getting."

Jeremy Swayman: "I felt bad. I didn't want to keep him too long, so we just talked about (being a) goalie a little bit, and he spread his wingspan. It was, like, nine feet long. So, I said he'd be a good one."

Matthew Tkachuk: "He was hilarious. It was a lot of fun. He had some great one-liners and just made for a hilarious 15 or 20 minutes. I mean, some of it was motivating. Some of it was just pretty funny. A lot of selfies."

Connor Hellebuyck believes in himself more than you do

How good does Team USA's starting goalie feel about his game?

"Is there more than a hundred percent?" Hellebuyck laughs. "No, I feel good."

Hellebuyck (2-0) leads all Olympic goaltenders with a .952 save percentage, and backup Swayman had some shaky moments in his one start. Hellebuyck is the guy.

"He's one of the best goalies in the world," Matt Boldy said.

"He's confident. He wants to be in the net. He wants to make the saves and to make a big difference. He has the skills to back it up, but I think that attitude and how confident he is in himself and in his game is what makes him so great."

One-Timers: Who should start in net for the struggling Team Sweden? Filip Gustavsson (1-1) is the country's No. 1, but he has posted an .889 save percentage. No. 2 Jacob Markstrom delivered a nice win over Slovakia. Coach Sam Hallam has made his decision but declined to

announce it... Who comes out of Canada's lineup for Brad Marchand in the quarterfinal? Sam Bennet logged the lowest ice time versus France (9:19), but no way I'm not taking him out. Seth Jarvis was the initial scratch, but Nick Suzuki hasn't looked great on the wing... Canada's power-play: 44.4 per cent.

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Sportsnet.ca / What makes Mark Stone tick: Understanding Canada's sneakiest player

Jason Bukala

6-7 minutes

The game of hockey at the highest level has never been played as fast as it is today. It's undeniable. In order to survive in the NHL, or the Olympics, skaters have to keep up the entire length of the ice surface and have an element of quickness in small areas.

Considering that, there's one player on Canada's men's Olympic hockey team who can stand out for how he does not perfectly fit that description.

Mark Stone approaches the game with his own unique style, and he does it without quickness or the open ice speed other players on his team possess.

What's fascinating about Stone's approach to the game is the fact his below average foot speed doesn't negatively affect the impact he has on either side of the puck. Stone is an outlier, but he makes up for it with his elite hockey sense and the routes he takes to plays in all three zones.

Here's a look at why Stone is on Team Canada, and what makes his game tick.

He's a complete player

Stone has missed some time with injury this year, but the stats speak for themselves:

Stone is deployed in all situations for the Vegas Golden Knights. He would likely be leading the team in scoring if not for the fact he has played nine fewer games than Jack Eichel and he's easily out-paced Mitch Marner with a 1.46 points per game average.

Stone is tied for the team lead with his plus-18 rating and trails only Eichel in average time on ice. He and Eichel log the most average time on the penalty kill amongst the Golden Knights' forward group.

How his foot speed compares to other NHL players

Noting that Stone is a complete player who can be trusted in a variety of roles, analyzing his speed metrics unearths some fascinating results compared to the rest of the skaters in the NHL.

Stone is well below the 50th percentile in all skating categories. It might not seem like a massive difference, but when a skater is tracking half a mile per hour slower than his peers in average max skating speed it should mean he is chasing the play more often than not.

Here's how Stone's overall speed compares to John Tavares and David Perron, both of whom aren't considered fast by NHL standards:

How he overcomes a lack of speed with hockey sense and smart routes

Considering what I have revealed above, including how Stone is deployed and his statistical impact in relation to his skating speed, it begs



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the question: How does he make up for his lack of foot speed to generate these results?

The answer lies in the sequence of clips I'm about to present below.

Stone has elite hockey sense. He reads how plays are developing in the defensive zone, gets in shooting lanes on time to intercept pucks, and has a great stick. He's also very proficient at finding "quiet ice" in the offensive zone, which leads to high-danger scoring chances that he usually capitalizes on. Stone also has exceptional hand/eye coordination. Pucks are on and off his stick in a flash, making him very difficult to defend.

This first clip displays the route Stone takes in the defensive zone while on the penalty-kill. He doesn't stop moving his feet in his quadrant and ends the sequence with a shot block, zone exit, and timely line change. Stone isn't the kind of player who will milk a shift for an extra 10 or 15 seconds. He knows his limitations and fatigue threshold and adjusts to the scenario in front of him to get off the ice before he runs out of gas:

In this next sequence, Stone presses up ice after the puck is chipped to his strong side corner and positions very well. He seals the wall and guides the Vancouver defender behind the net. Stone then retreats above the play.

At this point he's in position to either support defensively if the puck spills out of the Canucks zone, or pounce offensively if the puck works itself out to the deep slot.

Once the puck ends up on Stone's stick, he makes a sneaky-quick play to Ivan Barbashev, who snaps a shot into the back of the Canucks net:

The last clip I'll highlight takes some time to develop, but it shows how connected Stone is with his linemates.

Eichel provides up-ice speed as the first forechecker on the puck. He attempts to make a play to the net to Barbashev.

By the time the puck ends up below the goal line, Stone has taken his time entering the fray off a line change and works to identify where the open ice is in front of the LA Kings' net.

Stone finds quiet ice and ends up kicking the puck from his skate to his stick before quickly depositing it into the Kings net. It's another example of Stone's elite ability to find open space and make a quick and nifty play before opponents have a chance to engage him defensively.

Why Mark Stone is on Team Canada

To impact today's NHL game, players have to be able to keep up with the pace, display reliable hockey sense on and off the puck and provide a relentless work ethic.

Stone has never been the quickest or fastest skater, but his combination of elite hockey IQ and enthusiastic and competitive approach to the game leads to significant impact. He leads by example and provides consistent results.

The shorthanded goal he scored against France showcased several of the skills I mentioned above. He had good defensive positioning at Canada's blue line, made a strong stick check on the attacking France player, and he smartly shielded the puck with his body as he slowly made his way down the ice, before flipping a sneaky backhand past the goaltender.

Stone is a complete player. He's adjusted to the speed of the NHL game and has the unique ability to outsmart his peers. He's an outlier on many levels but a massive contributor offensively and defensively nonetheless... even on the Olympic stage.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canada crushes France to close preliminary round, clinches No. 1 seed at Olympics

Luke Fox

7-9 minutes

MILAN — When Kyle Rehman pointed to centre ice, awarding Macklin Celebrini a penalty shot in an already lopsided affair, you just knew the referee's next point would be toward the back of the net. Where the youngest NHLer in the 2026 Olympic tournament would surely stuff the puck.

But wait a second.

Celebrini wasn't required to take the shot.

Rehman skated over to remind Team Canada coach Jon Cooper that IIHF rules allow any player to take the free breakaway. Sidney Crosby? Connor McDavid? Nathan MacKinnon?

Canada's entire bench turned and looked up at Cooper: "Oh, what are you going to do now, Coach?"

Cooper looked up and saw Celebrini already circling around Jordan Binnington's net, revving up for his deke.

"I would've been booed out of the building if I didn't let him shoot it," Cooper said, following Canada's 10-2 smoking of Team France at Milano Santagiulia Arena.

Celebrini is a teenage dream living his Olympic one.

Three games, four goals.

Keep up with Olympic men's hockey

Keep up with Olympic men's hockey

The men's hockey tournament at Milano Cortina 2026 runs from Feb. 11-22. Follow along with all the scores and standings.

Scoreboard

And in Sunday's preliminary-round finale for Team Canada, the 19-year-old put a cherry on top of a cupcake matchup against an overwhelmed and winless Team France, who trudge to the qualification round.

"Just trying to embrace it. Trying to just kind of not let it weigh you down. There's a lot of excitement, a lot of nerves going into it. But I think once you get there, you kind of feel free and you're just able to play your game," Celebrini said.

"A different kind of atmosphere, a different kind of energy. I think it's all pride. You're just honoured to wear the Canadian sweater and represent all the people back at home and all the other athletes that are here."

Although they had already locked up first place in Group A, the Canadians (3-0) had reason to rout.

Hungry for top seed overall and a weaker opponent in Wednesday's quarterfinals, Canada needed a greater goal differential than Team USA (3-0), who could've run up the scoreboard against underdog Germany in Sunday's late game but settled for a convincing 5-1 win.

The No. 2 seed—Americans are likely to face a formidable Sweden squad in the quarterfinals, provided the Swedes aren't upset by Latvia.

Outscoring its opponents 20-3, Canada secured the No. 1 seed with a plus-17 goal differential and will face the winner of the Czechia-Denmark elimination game.



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It was of little surprise that the dominant Canadians had already scored seven by the time the French had seven shots, chasing poor starter Julian Junca after 40 minutes.

Backup Antoine Keller, coming for third-period relief, faced a Connor McDavid breakaway 20 seconds in. You can imagine what happened.

"I'm just cold sitting on the bench for two periods, and I have to come in against one of the best teams in the world," said Keller, giving up four in 20 minutes. "It's pretty hard, but I try my best."

"The best players in the game against a national team (where) hockey is not the best sport in the country. That's normal."

Supernormal is McDavid and Canada's offence. With a third three-point showing, McDavid already has as many Olympic points as periods played (nine) and just surpassed Jonathan Toews (eight) for most points by a Canadian in an NHL-participation Olympics.

Tom Wilson (spending time back on McDavid's top unit and registering a Gordie Howe hat trick), Cale Makar, Devon Toews, Mark Stone, Sidney Crosby, Brandon Hagel, and Bo Horvat all found the net as well.

Simply ridiculous, relentless depth.

In all, Canada had nine different goal-scorers Sunday and 12 through its three games.

"Yeah, I guess that's good," Makar said. "Spread the love a little bit."

Cooper said his pre-game talk did not focus on goal differential, but rather: "Are we getting better as a team?"

"How you're playing without the puck. I don't care about the rest of this stuff. You want to win this tournament? You better be giving up one or two goals a game. Anything more than that, the game's in jeopardy."

Canada's power play struck twice more, Stone scored shorthanded, Wilson enforced, and all four lines seem to be clicking.

"They are hustling. Those are the best players in the world, and they were playing a nation that is supposedly not in the top 12, so they could really take it easy. Instead, they are just working their bag off," French captain Pierre-Edouard Bellemare said. "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe they were like, you know, smoke a cig and playing, but I feel like they worked."

"That generates even more respect, because I don't feel like they took us like, you know, snobbing us. When you have some of the top line hitting you, you feel like, 'Let's go.' I like that."

"They have the talent, and they have all these things, but, God damn, they are working hard."

Is there anything Canada needs to improve?

"That's a great question," Makar said. "I feel like there's lots of little aspects of our game that we can clean up, regardless of what it is. For us, the power play, we're still scoring, but I think there's little things we can do a little bit better on it. Even the PK, too. I mean, you're never a perfect team."

Sure, but Canada is easily the favourite team heading into the knockout stage, where Celebrini can continue his global coming-out party.

"I can't say enough good things about that kid. He's so, so impressive," McDavid said.

"He's a great young player, but not just because he's so good with the puck. Just all the little things he does, the hard work he puts into the game, good along the wall, wins battles, plays just a hard game. Impressive kid."

Impressive team.

Fox's Fast Five

• Nice for Logan Thompson to start — and win — an Olympic game. But, barring injury or an early disaster, the net belongs to Jordan Binnington from here on out. Ride or die.

"He's a big-moment guy, and that's the biggest compliment you can pay a guy," McDavid said.

• As was the case Friday, Brad Marchand and the injured Josh Morrissey did not dress. Both players did practise Sunday morning with third-string goalie Darcy Kuemper.

Cooper had said previously that Marchand would play in this one, but the veteran is dealing with an undisclosed injury.

"We want everybody to make sure they're 100 per cent," Cooper said. "We thought this was a game that if we didn't have to play him, we didn't need to."

Marchand will play in Wednesday's quarterfinal, Cooper assures, and Morrissey will practise with the team Tuesday.

• Hot take: Team France's whites might just be the slickest uniforms in the tournament.

Stone says he cried when Canada failed to medal at the 2006 Winter Games in Turin. He was 13.

Playing for the Brandon Wheat Kings, Stone says he cried again in 2010, when his now-teammate Sidney Crosby scored the golden goal in Vancouver. Better tears.

• Because IIHF warmups go for 20 minutes, Canada shows up four minutes late. The players wait until there are 16 minutes on the warmup clock to mimic their NHL routine.

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1379507 Websites

TSN.CA / With potential marquee game against USA looming, Sweden looking to find winning formula against Latvia

Mark Masters

5–6 minutes

MILAN – The first question William Nylander faced in his English-language media session on Monday was about the potential of facing Toronto Maple Leafs teammate Auston Matthews in the quarter-finals at the Olympics.

"We have to play Latvia first," the winger said with a smile.

After finishing third in its preliminary-round group, Sweden will need to beat Latvia in the qualification round on Tuesday in order to set up a blockbuster showdown with the United States on Wednesday. The Americans won all three of their games in the preliminary round to earn a bye to the quarter-finals.

While Sweden plays the late game on Tuesday, the Americans will be resting up after their most convincing performance of the tournament. Matthews scored twice and added an assist in Sunday's 5-1 win over Germany.

"I'm feeling good," Team USA's captain said. "Obviously it's not about me personally. I think it's about the team. Everybody's contributing and doing the right things, the little things that go a long way. We had a great effort from everybody from the drop of the puck."

Matthews is tied for the team scoring lead with five points.



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The Tkachuk brothers were also at their best on Sunday. Matthew and Brady helped shut down Leon Draisiatl and let the Edmonton Oilers superstar centre hear about it with some chirps.

"They do a little bit of everything," Matthews said. "They're a pain in the ass to play against. They make it hard on the opposition at all times. They've had a lot of success in the NHL playing that brand of hockey and it's no different over here. It's nice to be on this side with them."

The Americans appear to be rounding into form, though they haven't truly been tested so far in wins against Latvia, Denmark and Germany. So, the hockey world is already anticipating the chance to see two hockey powers face off with the ignominy of an early Olympic exit on the line.

Nylander is looking to elevate his game after posting a goal and an assist in the preliminary round.

"It's a lot of fun competing against the best players in the world and seeing where your level's at," he said.

Nylander has missed two practices in Milan for maintenance, but was a full participant in Monday's workout.

Sweden won two of three games in the group stage, but so did Finland and Slovakia. The Swedes fell to third due to the goal differential tiebreaker. What's the mood like around the Tre Kronor squad?

"It's great," assured defenceman Victor Hedman. "Excited to go play an Olympic elimination game. These things don't come along very often. It doesn't matter if it's a [qualification] round instead of a quarter-final. We'd rather be on the ice than have a day off tomorrow."

"I think good things come from adversity," said defenceman Rasmus Dahlin. "In the past, Sweden has always won the round robin games and cruised to the playoffs, so now it's different and hopefully it will help us."

Head coach Sam Hallam is stressing positives with his group. He believes they have played a lot of good hockey, especially in their last game against Slovakia.

"My job now is just preparing the team and making everybody understand and remember how good we are, how many good minutes we have out there and go out there and do that tomorrow," Hallam said.

A late penalty against Slovakia led to a goal that swung the tiebreaker against them. A short-handed goal allowed against Finland swung the momentum in that game, which ended in a loss.

"We've been tested," Hallam said. "Like, overall, if you look at our games, we've done a lot of really good minutes. Overall, we played some really good hockey. There's been these small margins coming up against us."

Nylander believes his team needs more offensive-zone time. Hedman is looking for a better start. Dahlin is calling for more of a north-south approach. The pressure is on to find the right formula.

"We're focused on what we have in that room and not reading too much into what's being said about us," Hedman said. "We know the quality we have and skill that we have so nothing really to doubt inside that room."

"This is why I play hockey," said Dahlin. "This is where I want to be. This is what I love."

TSN.CA LOADED: 02.17.2026