



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • February 18, 2026

The Athletic

U.S. men's Olympic hockey team reacts to lighter boards, plus Auston Matthews vs. William Nylander

By: Michael Russo

The Athletic has live coverage of Canada vs Czechia in the 2026 Winter Olympics men's hockey quarterfinal.

MILAN — For the first time since 2014, a hockey game will take place that features Toronto Maple Leafs teammates Auston Matthews and William Nylander playing against each other.

The last time they played against each other was in the Under-18 World Championship 12 years ago; Matthews scored a goal and Nylander had an assist.

When Matthews' Team USA and Nylander's Team Sweden played against each other in last year's 4 Nations Face-Off, Matthews missed the game with an injury.

This time it'll be in the quarterfinal in the Olympics, meaning the loser heads back to Toronto and won't have a chance to medal with their respective United States or Sweden.

"It'll be a lot of fun," Nylander said of facing Matthews. "I think 12 years ago, I probably didn't even know that we were going to be teammates. So now after playing, I don't know, 10 years together, it's going to be very special and a lot of fun."

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Matthews leads the Americans with three goals and five points in three games, while Nylander scored a goal and an assist Tuesday night in a Sweden win over Latvia to lead the Swedes into the quarters. He has scored two goals and four points in four games.

"I'm sure it'll be interesting," Matthews told TSN's Mark Masters. "Obviously he's a good friend and teammate of mine for 10 years now. He's a special player, a great guy, a great friend."

Matthews has been one of the United States' best players, clearly challenged after a subpar opening game where his line with Jake Guentzel and Matt Boldy wasn't clicking at even strength. But coach Mike Sullivan "exercised patience" with the line and now has spent the past two games raving about how Matthews' game is building.

"He does a lot of things really well, even when he's not producing, that people might not notice," U.S. teammate Zach Werenski said. "Everyone's always focused on his goal-scoring and rightfully so. He's one of the best goal scorers in the world. But since we've been here, he's been such a leader for us the way he plays the game."

Added GM Bill Guerin, "There are a lot of different ways to lead. He's not a man of many words, but he puts it out there every night. Auston's two-way game and his ability to strip pucks and check and play defensively when he needs to ... is elite. And that, going along with his offensive capabilities, makes a pretty good player. He's a pretty special kid."

Based on practice Tuesday, it appears as if Team USA will start the knockout round with Kyle Connor out of the lineup. Gregory Shamus / Getty Images

Connor on outside looking in ... again

Just like the 4 Nations Face-Off, where he was scratched in the final against Canada, it appears as if the United States will start the knockout round with Kyle Connor out of the lineup.

After having no shots in two games on the third line with Dylan Larkin and Tage Thompson, Connor sat in the final prelim game against Germany and was the 14th forward during line rushes at Tuesday's practice in preparation for Wednesday's quarterfinal.

Clayton Keller looks like he'll get a second game in a row on the left of Larkin and Thompson.

"He has good offensive instincts," coach Mike Sullivan said of Keller. "I think he has good instincts away from the puck, also just his ability to play within structure. His panic threshold with the puck is really high. He hangs onto pucks down low. For a guy that's undersized, he's pretty stiff on the puck, and his ability to create separation, to make the next play, is really good. His lateral agility in tight space, he's not easy to handle. I thought he made an impact on that line."

USA PK perfect

One of the best parts of the United States' game at this juncture has been its penalty kill. They are a perfect 9-for-9 on the PK.

The sets up front are J.T. Miller-Vincent Trocheck, Larkin-Brock Nelson and Jack Eichel-Boldy, with Jake Guentzel working in. The defense pairs are Jacob Slavin-Brock Faber and Jake Sanderson-Charlie McAvoy, with Noah Hanifin worked in.

"Obviously, we come here with a role that's been placed upon us," Trocheck said. "Me and J.T., the penalty kill's a really big part of that. Obviously it helps when you have elite D back there."

What's also been huge for Team USA is that they are winning most draws. The Americans are smoking the competition in



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the faceoff circle with Larkin winning an Olympic-best 79.1 percent of his draws, Trocheck winning 66.7 and Nelson 61.5.

"I think (assistant coach John Hynes has) done a good job organizing them," Sullivan said. "I think the guys that have been on it are really buying into it. They pride themselves on that element of our overall team game. One of the things that we've tried to do is cast these guys in roles where they know what the expectations are and the contribution that they can make to help us have success. And I think these guys, they can hang their hat on that."

Nelson and McAvoy trade full cages

For the first time since sustaining a fractured jaw in November after taking a slap shot to the face, McAvoy abandoned the "fishbowl" to protect his face in Tuesday's practice. He is expected to play without one Wednesday.

McAvoy told The Athletic before the Olympics that he had always planned to take the fishbowl off to start the Olympics, but the hit he took to the jaw from Florida's Sandis Vilmanis before the tournament meant he'd have to keep on a little longer.

Coincidentally, Nelson suddenly wore a full cage in Tuesday's practice due to some kind of facial injury sustained.

"Charlie gave him some advice on how to play with it," Sullivan joked.

Lighter boards attached

As expected, the banners that cover the boards at Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena had lighter green areas for Tuesday's qualifying games. The dark green colors were replaced after the NHL and Team USA pointed out to the IOC that dark colors can affect a goaltender's ability to see the puck, something that could have affected Jeremy Swayman's ability when he allowed a goal from beyond center ice against Denmark.

"I know there was discussion. There was discussion about that," Sullivan said. "Obviously, the dark boards, sometimes

it's hard for the goalies to pick up the puck coming off that. So I know that there was a discussion. How that decision was made, I'm not aware of."

Lukáš Dostál, who backstopped the Czech Republic to a win over Denmark on Tuesday to advance to the quarterfinals to face Canada, said he didn't even realize the banners were swapped out.

"In Anaheim, we have really dark seats," Dostál said. "Some of the NHL rinks, they have dark seats, so the background sometimes — I don't want to say you lose the puck, but you've got to stay focused a little more. Obviously it's just better for us, for the goalies, (that they changed it)."

Hugheses excited for Mom

Ellen Hughes is a development consultant for the United States women's hockey team, which plays Canada for the gold medal Thursday. The team is 6-0 in the tournament, has recorded five consecutive shutouts and outscored teams by a combined 31-1.

"I'm excited," her son Jack Hughes said. "Went to that game (against Sweden in the semifinals) yesterday. Had a lot of fun just watching it. Their team snaps it around pretty good. They got a great team so it should be fun. Hopefully (we'll) win the quarterfinals, then (brother Quinn and I) can go to that gold medal game."

While Quinn has been the United States' most offensive defenseman with four assists, Jack has been solid in a fourth-line role with three points in three games.

"It seems like he's got the puck on a string," Matthew Tkachuk said of Jack. "He's always been an incredible player. Seems like he has the puck each and every shift. He's really good along the boards and in the D-zone, especially not being a winger. Making that adjustment really easy. He's an incredible player. Sees the ice so well, skates well just like his brother. He's been really good for us."

Ranking the 14 potential Olympic men's hockey gold medal matchups

By: James Mirtle, Sean McIndoe

The Athletic has live coverage of Canada vs Czechia in the 2026 Winter Olympics men's hockey quarterfinal.

With all 12 teams technically still alive in the Olympic men's hockey tournament entering Tuesday's qualification games, there are a huge number of possibilities ahead for the medal rounds.

As of this moment, however, there are only 14 gold-medal game matchups, however, that are plausible — which we're defining as odds of 1 percent or greater.

We'll acknowledge up front that a huge upset or two could add some chaos to the bracket and potentially serve up an unexpected outcome. Some of these teams listed below could even get eliminated early in the qualification period, perhaps by the time you read this.

But we're boldly still going to go ahead and rank these 14 possibilities — from most compelling to least — and then cross our fingers that this tournament finishes with a bang.

(For more on how the bracket works in the elimination and medal rounds, see our explainer of the format. And for more projections and odds, Dom Luszczyzyn has a great breakdown here that he's updating throughout the tournament.)

1. Canada vs. United States

Chance it happens: 44 percent

Mirtle rank: 1

McIndoe rank: 1

We don't have to overthink things here. While hockey fans around the world are rooting for their own countries, there's no doubt what the NHL is hoping for at this tournament. And while it took a few years back in the Canada Cup era, it's fair to say



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that these two teams really do represent the best rivalry in the sport right now, complete with some very legitimate bad blood.

Last year's 4 Nations Face-Off was a success beyond just about anyone's expectations, with Team Canada and Team USA providing a pair of classics. While there's probably some element of fatigue in other countries at having to hear about this rivalry as if it's the only one in the sport, it's still fair to call this matchup the ideal ending of this tournament.

And it's clearly the most likely one to happen, with these countries seeded 1-2 and the brackets lined up for a memorable showdown. — McIndoe

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2. Finland vs. Sweden

Chance it happens: 4.3 percent

Mirtle rank: 2

McIndoe rank: 2

These longtime rivals would be serving up a 20-years-later rematch of the 2006 gold medal game won by Sweden off a Nick Lidstrom winner in the third period. Battles between the Finns and Swedes are always great theater, regardless of their level of NHL talent on paper, as they always find a way to close the gap and play tight, heated games.

Finland's gutsy win over the Swedes during the round robin led to a lot of the bracket chaos that has unfolded, ultimately bumping Sweden down to the No. 7 seed and giving them a grueling path that likely goes through the U.S. and Canada to a medal.

It would be fitting if they then both clawed their way back to play for gold, beating the world's best teams to get to face one another in a big game, yet again. — Mirtle

3. Canada vs. Finland

Chance it happens: 15.7 percent

Mirtle rank: 3

McIndoe rank: 4

You could really take your pick between these next two entries, as both would have similar appeal: tons of NHL talent, an underdog facing stiff but far from insurmountable odds, a North American powerhouse facing a gold-or-failure ultimatum, and most of the rest of the world rooting for Team Finland.

I went with the Canadian matchup over the U.S. one for a couple of reasons. First, I'm a raging homer. And second, in an NHL season in which you could argue that the two best teams have been the Colorado Avalanche and Dallas Stars, this would be a phenomenal appetizer for an eventual playoff showdown. Team Canada has Cale Makar and Nathan MacKinnon, while Team Finland has... well, Team Finland pretty much has the entire Stars roster.

As an added bonus, when the entire crowd is chanting "A-HO," you wouldn't be sure if it was directed at Finland star Sebastian Aho or if it was because Tom Wilson just flipped out again. — McIndoe

4. USA vs. Finland

Chance it happens: 9.3 percent

Mirtle rank: 4

McIndoe rank: 5

We always talk about the Finns as the underdogs, but they also have the most medals (four) of any country during the previous five NHL-attended Olympics, with one silver and three bronze. The U.S., meanwhile, has two silvers total, going home empty-handed three times (1998, 2006 and 2014).

The Finns are also the defending Olympic champs after winning gold in 2022 without NHL players there. Winning gold here, however, in a best-on-best tournament, would be a massive cultural moment for Finland and a monumental accomplishment for one of the most passionate hockey countries in the world. The Americans, meanwhile, are searching for their first Olympic gold since the Miracle on Ice 46 years ago, one of the peak moments in Games history and their own touchstone moment.

That's a lot on the line, to be sure. — Mirtle

5. USA vs. Germany

Chance it happens: 3.7 percent

Mirtle rank: 6

McIndoe rank: 3

Their meeting in the round robin was legitimately spicy, with high stakes and some notable trash-talking. It also wasn't especially competitive, at least after a tight first period. But if we're going to get a David versus Goliath matchup in the final, this would be the best of the bunch.

Mix in Leon Draisaitl trying to get his revenge for the bridesmaid thing and the Tkachuk brothers gleefully playing the villain role, and it's not hard to figure out who most of the rest of the world would be rooting for. And while you might assume Germany wouldn't have much chance against a stacked American squad, remember that in this scenario, they've already beaten some very good teams in the elimination phase to get here.

In a single-elimination tournament, sometimes it's just about who gets hot at the right time. Watching it happen to a Cinderella team could be all sorts of fun, especially against a suitable final boss such as Team USA. — McIndoe

6. Canada vs. Germany

Chance it happens: 2.7 percent

Mirtle rank: 5

McIndoe rank: 8

Sure, the odds are going to be heavily stacked against the Germans, given they have only eight NHLers — and that's if we include AHLers Josh Samanski and Lukas Reichel. Canada, meanwhile, has 400 to choose from. But the fact you'll have Draisaitl leading this squad up against his Edmonton Oilers teammate and close friend Connor McDavid with the uber-favorites certainly adds a nice storyline to this one.



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If you love an underdog matchup, it doesn't get much bigger in the sport than this. The Germans have been making strides internationally for years and have a vibrant domestic league with passionate fans, but a win in Milan could catapult interest in the sport and player development in the country to the next level. — Mirtle

7. Canada vs. Slovakia

Chance it happens: 3.8 percent

Mirtle rank: 7

McIndoe rank: 9

What more can you say about Juraj Slafkovský's incredible Olympics? The 21-year-old's three goals and six points through three games put him second in tournament scoring and have been instrumental in getting the underdog Slovaks the third seed after the round robin and a far easier path through to the medal games.

Watching him try to lead his team up against powerhouse Canada for the gold medal would be great theater, especially after Slafkovský has arrived as one of the best young players in the NHL this season with a rising Montreal Canadiens club. The Slovaks are a little thin on NHL talent after some lean development years, but there's another wave coming — and it's clear who's going to be leading the charge for the next couple decades. — Mirtle

8. USA vs. Switzerland

Chance it happens: 2.2 percent

Mirtle rank: 10

McIndoe rank: 7

As James reminded me, this would be a rematch of the most recent World Championships final. Team USA won that one, but Switzerland took home their second straight silver medal at the event. These guys are the real deal, and having them make an appearance in the gold medal game would be an emphatic way to announce that to the rest of the hockey world once and for all.

Would they have a chance at beating Team USA? Sure. They'd be massive underdogs, but it's hockey, and it's winner-take-all. Cheering for an upset is a cherished part of sports fandom, so you could absolutely get on board here. And we'd also get some nice NHL-themed subplots built in, including Jack Hughes vs. Nico Hischier and Timo Meier, plus Team Switzerland playing for injured teammate Kevin Fiala.

(Plus, if you're a bitter Canadian and you're willing to drink heavily enough on a Sunday morning, you could squint and tell yourself those red-and-white guys are Team Canada.) — McIndoe

9. Finland vs. Czech Republic

Chance it happens: 1.2 percent

Mirtle rank: 12

McIndoe rank: 6

Maybe this is the old man in me talking, but I could live with a matchup between two teams from what we used to call the hockey world's Big Six or Big Seven nations. The Czechs are one of only three countries to ever win gold at an NHL

Olympics, and the Finns have won more medals than any other country. (Yes, including Canada.) If you're not familiar with their game, as the kids say, that's on you.

Would this matchup be a tough sell in North America? Maybe. It's certainly not the one Gary Bettman and friends are hoping for. But let's be honest: Most American and Canadian fans would probably admit that if their team isn't in the final, they don't want the other guys to make it either. And in a world in which everyone over here is freaking out about Team USA and Team Canada both getting knocked out early, it might be kind of fun to sit down and watch a classic battle between two teams that feature plenty of elite NHL talent.

There might even still be time to get Jaromir Jagr and Teemu Selanne over to drop the ceremonial puck. Or suit up and play. — McIndoe

10. Germany vs. Sweden

Chance it happens: 1.0 percent

Mirtle rank: 9

McIndoe rank: 11

There would need to be some big upsets for these two teams to link up for gold, with both nations knocking off giants in earlier rounds. But the fact the probability exists at all speaks to how much the bracket has been disrupted already with Germany (along with Slovakia and Switzerland) ranked ahead of powerhouse Sweden after the round robin.

Draisaitl and Moritz Seider would again have their hands full in this matchup, but what adds to the intrigue here is that Germany might be more likely to pull off the upset given how uneven the Swedes have looked in the tournament. And if they've felled one giant to get to the final, why not another? — Mirtle

11. Canada vs. Switzerland

Chance it happens: 3.8 percent

Mirtle rank: 8

McIndoe rank: 12

We watched this one once already in the round robin, and the results were just OK. Led by Roman Josi and Hischier, the plucky Swiss hung with Canada's star-studded lineup for the game's first half, but the talent gap was evident in what became a 5-1 win for the Canadians.

Plus, Switzerland will be missing a big piece without Fiala, who was forced out of the tournament with a leg injury suffered in that game against Canada when Wilson landed on him.

The underdog story helps give this rematch some intrigue, especially given Switzerland's success at World Championships in recent years, but not enough to bump this one any higher. — Mirtle

12. Slovakia vs. Sweden

Chance it happens: 1.1 percent

Mirtle rank: 10

McIndoe rank: 13

After everything Team Sweden would have been through to get here, including injuries and the toughest possible path to



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the final, it would feel weird to see them emerge as the heavy favorites in a gold medal game.

I'm honestly not sure if that helps or hurts the appeal of this matchup, since it would be awfully tough to root against either side. I suppose there's something to be said for just sitting back and enjoying a high-stakes hockey game. And besides, watching Rasmus Dahlin battle it out with Slafkovský will be good practice for the next decade of Atlantic Division finals. — McIndoe

13. Sweden vs. Czech Republic

Chance it happens: 1.1 percent

Mirtle rank: 14

McIndoe rank: 10

Keep in mind the path that each team would have taken to get here, which would include Sweden beating Team USA and the Czechs beating Canada. If this is the matchup we end up with, nobody would be able to say these teams hadn't earned it.

Mix in the star power on both sides, especially Sweden, and a lot of what I wrote about a potential Finland/Czech Republic matchup would apply here, too. And there's probably just enough separation between the two teams that you could talk

yourself into the Czechs as a fun underdog story. Or maybe you'd root for Sweden, which has had to overcome some tough injury luck. Or maybe you'd just sit back and remember that the combination of high-stakes hockey without a strong rooting interest can be an amazing watch. — McIndoe

14. Switzerland vs. Sweden

Chance it happens: 1.2 percent

Mirtle rank: 13

McIndoe rank: 14

Maybe we're not being creative enough, but we both struggled to identify a reason this would make for a compelling final for a global audience.

That said, there is a budding rivalry here in international play. The Swiss consider Sweden a bit of a nemesis, given they've had a lot of crushing defeats against them over the years, including losses in the 2013 and 2018 gold medal games at the World Championships. Perhaps a rematch with Olympic gold on the line would increase the visibility of that rivalry — and further showcase how far Swiss hockey has come in recent years. — Mirtle

All scenarios, via Dom Luszczyzyn



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Team Czechia holds off Denmark, advances to Olympic quarterfinals

By: Shawn P. Roarke

MILAN -- Team Czechia will get another chance against Team Canada in the men's hockey tournament at the Winter Olympic Games Milano Cortina 2026.

Martin Necas had a goal and assist, and the Czechs advanced to the quarterfinals with a 3-2 victory against Team Denmark in the qualification round at Santaguita Arena on Tuesday.

The tougher-than-expected win assures No. 8 Czechia a rematch against the top-seeded Canadians in the quarterfinals here on Wednesday (10:40 a.m. ET; Peacock, USA, ICI Télé, CBC Gem, TSN, CBC). Canada shut out Czechia 5-0 on Feb. 12 in the preliminary round.

"Everybody kind of knew what we were playing for," Czechia defenseman Jan Rutta said. "Maybe a little too cautious, too nervous. Super, super happy, super proud that we won today."

Roman Cervenka also had a goal and an assist, and Lukas Dostal made 24 saves for Czechia.

"[Canada is] going to be a great challenge for us," defenseman Radko Gudas said. "They are one of the best teams in the tournament, and for us it is a great challenge. It's going to be fun. If we want to get the medal, we have to beat the best teams, and they are one of those teams."

"If anybody can't get motivated for the game tomorrow, there is something seriously wrong with them and I don't think they should be playing hockey."

Frederik Andersen made 28 saves, and Alexander True and Nick Olesen each scored for Denmark.

"[Czechia] a really good team," Andersen said. "You have to play close to mistake-free hockey over a full game and they will capitalize on their chances."

After a tense and conservative first period without a goal, all five of the game's goals were scored in the second period, four in a span of 5:45.

Necas gave Czechia a 1-0 lead on a power play at 5:39. With Lars Eller serving a high-sticking penalty, the Czechs worked the puck low-to-high until Filip Hronek passed it to Necas, who blasted a rising one-timer into the far corner.

"He's the best player for us," Czechia forward Tomas Hertl said of Necas. "But tomorrow it can't be about just one [player]; if we have any chance against Canada, we need all four lines plus goalie. We have to be ready because Canada is winning this tournament, but you never know."

True tied it 1-1 at 9:02 when he played give-and-go with Joachim Blichfeld, who was behind the goal line. The return pass was one-timed into the net before Dostal could react.

The Czechs retook the lead at 10:15 when David Kampf established position in the slot and outmuscled the defense to set his stick on a pass from Rutta and directing it past Andersen to make it 2-1.

"We had a set play off the face-off, so it was a good play by Rutta," Kampf said. "He found me and it was basically an empty net, so I just put it in the net. Great pass by him."

Cervenka extended the lead to 3-1 at 11:24, taking a pass from David Pastrnak before going wide and wiring a high shot past Andersen's glove.

Olesen cut it to 3-2 with a power-play goal at 17:12. He received a pass from Oscar Fisker Molgaard at the goal line, spun into the slot and snapped a shot past Dostal.

Denmark outshot Czechia 12-5 in the third.

"It was huge. For us, this wasn't an easy game," Hertl said. "When we got the lead, it was kind of tough when we give up that goal. But then 'Dusty' made some huge saves for us and we defended."

Czechia has reached the quarterfinals in each of the six Olympics involving NHL teams. It next faces an enormous test Wednesday.

"They might be the best team ever, so maybe we have to put the respect aside a little bit," Pastrnak said. "Take their game to them. Offensively, their power is incredible and we just have to be a little stronger on the puck, play more in the [offensive] zone and [be] more confident."

"We have nothing to lose, so we are going to go out there and leave it all out there. Like I said, as a team, we haven't played our best yet, so hopefully we saved it for tomorrow."

NOTES: Necas has a three-game multipoint streak (six points; three goals, three assists) and tied Vinny Prospal (four goals, two assists in 2006) for the third-most points by a Czechia player in a single Olympics with NHL participation; he trails only Martin Straka (eight points; two goals, six assists in 2006) and Jaromir Jagr (seven points; two goals, five assists in 2006). ... Hronek led all skaters with 27:53 of ice time. ... Olesen finished with four goals for Denmark and is tied with Tim Stutzle (Team Germany) and Macklin Celebrini (Team Canada) for the tournament lead. The 30-year-old is the only non-NHL player here with more than one goal.



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Picks for the 2026 Olympic men's hockey medal round bracket - ESPN

By: Greg Wyshynski

The United States and Canada are on opposite sides of the 2026 Olympic men's hockey tournament bracket, meaning their next battle would have to be for the gold medal.

Will that happen? Now that the qualification round is over, the road there is a lot tougher for one of them than the other.

Here's how I see the Olympic men's medal round shaking out, with one big upset and some great hockey to be witnessed. Stats are courtesy of HockeyStats.com unless otherwise noted.

Let's see if there will be a Canada vs. U.S. party ... or if another country will play spoiler.

No. 1 Canada vs. No. 8 Czechia

Martin Necas had a great comment after the Czechs won their qualification round game against Denmark: "We let them win the first one because we knew we were not going to win two in a row against Canada."

Now that's the spirit!

Necas has been awesome for Czechia. The Colorado Avalanche winger's seven points through four games ties him with Jaromir Jagr (seven in 2006) for the second most by a Czech player in a single Olympic tournament. He's one point behind Martin Straka (eight in 2006) for the record. The question is whether Necas, or any of his teammates, will generate a goal against Canada, because even one would be an improvement over their first meeting.

Canada shut out Czechia 5-0 in the opening game of Group A. The Czechs played them tough for 19 minutes, 54 seconds before Macklin Celebrini scored on that perfect tip of a Cale Makar shot to break their will at the end of the first period. Eventually, it was all Canada, outshooting the Czechs 14-3 in the third period.

It has been interesting to see how the Czechs have evolved since that loss. Coach Radim Rulik loaded up his top line with their three best scorers in the opening game: Necas, center Tomas Hertl (Vegas Golden Knights) and winger David Pastrnak (Boston Bruins). In their qualification-round win over Denmark, Rulik had each on their own line. Pastrnak's line with captain Roman Cervenka produced a goal, as did Necas' line with David Kampf. Necas also scored his second power-play goal of the tournament with the same one-timer blast from the circle. If nothing else, this Czech team is now better balanced.

Their defense corps is filled with NHL veterans, but not much in the way of offensive potency -- there's a reason why the Canadians hit Filip Hronek every chance they had in their first matchup. Goalie Lukas Dostal made 24 saves against Denmark and held his own against Canada for a good portion. The Anaheim Ducks' netminder has what it takes to steal a

game in the Olympics. To do so against Team Canada's preposterously deep group of forwards, which include the tournament's leading scorer in Connor McDavid (nine points in three games), would be the hockey equivalent of robbing the vault of the Bellagio, the Mirage and the MGM Grand on a fight night.

WINNER: Canada. Fans with long memories might shudder at Canada playing the Czechs, who infamously eliminated the Canadians in a medal round shootout in 1998, the first Olympics with NHL players. History will not repeat itself, even if Necas & Co. have lulled Canada into a false sense of security.

No. 2 United States vs. No. 7 Sweden

The Swedes have been trending in a scary direction for the Americans over the past two games. They took over their game against Slovakia over the last two periods in the group-play finale, earning a qualification round date against Latvia. And then they dispatched Latvia with relative ease to set up perhaps the Americans' toughest challenge as the U.S. looks to earn a rematch with Canada.

The Swedes have scorers who can be opportunistic if not overwhelming in the same way Canada and the U.S. are. Adrian Kempe (Los Angeles Kings), William Nylander (Toronto Maple Leafs) and Mika Zibanejad (New York Rangers) are all adept at finding the back of the net. Elias Pettersson has been great, in contrast with his regular season with the Vancouver Canucks.

Where the Americans have the advantage is at center, where Sweden really misses having a player such as Leo Carlsson, who missed the Olympics because of injury.

The biggest concern for Team USA in this draw is Sweden's defense, which is second only to the Americans in quality depth. Victor Hedman (Tampa Bay Lightning), Rasmus Dahlin (Buffalo Sabres), Gustav Forsling (Florida Panthers), Erik Karlsson (Pittsburgh Penguins), Oliver Ekman-Larsson (Toronto Maple Leafs), Philip Broberg (St. Louis Blues) and Hampus Lindholm (Boston Bruins) ... is a group that can score and play shutdown and be physical. In other words, it's a group that can very much handle what the Americans can throw at them.

Also concerning: Sweden might have found its goaltender in Jacob Markstrom, who has been solid in their past two games but will be playing on back-to-back days should he get the nod against the U.S.

There are two things the U.S. will need to excel at to beat the Swedes. The first is managing the puck. The Swedes are too opportunistic to turn the puck over in the defensive or neutral zones. The Americans have been pretty good with this during the tournament. The other imperative is physicality and antagonism. This needs to be a game where the line of Brady



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and Matthew Tkachuk, and center Jack Eichel create chaos in the Swedish zone -- before and after the whistle.

WINNER: United States. As good as they've looked in the past two games, there still seems as if something is off about this Swedish team. Too often the Swedes play like a collection of disparate parts looking for cohesion. If they find that against the U.S., this could be trouble for the Americans.

The key will be the first period: Team USA has started slowly in group play. They can't give a veteran team like this any confidence with an early lead. Ultimately, the Americans' offensive depth wins out. But it would not be a surprise to see Sweden ruin the U.S. vs. Canada rematch party, and relish that it did.

No. 3 Slovakia vs. No. 6 Germany

Germany built a 3-0 lead over France in the first period of their qualification-round game, then got bored and played passive the rest of the way, with the French holding a 27-23 advantage in shots on goal in the final two periods. Germany had only one win in Group C play -- over Denmark -- but had the tiebreakers to earn the second-highest seed behind the U.S.

Unlike a lot of midtier teams in the tournament, Germany actually has two lines that might concern opposing defenses. Edmonton Oilers star and noted "bridesmaid" Leon Draisaitl centers Lukas Reichel (Vancouver Canucks, now in the AHL) and Draisaitl's childhood best friend Frederik Tiffels of the Berlin Polar Bears, which might be one of the most adorable combination of words we've written about the tournament. Tiffels has a goal and two assists in four games.

Ottawa Senators star Tim Stutzle centers the other line, and was tied for the tournament lead in goals (four) after four games. JJ Peterka of the Utah Mammoth, who's had a really strong tournament, is on his right and Joshua Samanski, in the Edmonton Oilers' system, is on the other wing.

Defenseman Moritz Seider is a Norris Trophy contender for the Detroit Red Wings, and has been an absolute rock for the Germans on the blue line, the only player over 100 minutes in total ice time through four games.

Seattle Kraken goalie Philipp Grubauer was fourth in goals saved above average (2.14) and sixth in save percentage (.934) through three starts, although he didn't face Team USA. He has been arguably the comeback player of the year in the NHL statistically. Without question, he is one of those goalies who could lead an upset on the right day.

Whether Grubauer can stop Juraj Slafkovsky is immaterial, because no one can stop Juraj Slafkovsky. The Slovak winger has three goals and three assists in three games, giving him 10 goals in his past 10 Olympic games. I angered some Montreal Canadiens fans by saying that Slafkovsky goes "beast mode" in the Olympics because they argued he has been that good lately in the NHL (25 points in 23 games), which is the first time I've insulted a player by claiming he elevates his game on the most important stage. (Insert shrug emoji.)

Slafkovsky and his center Adam Ruzicka are two of three players with multiple goals for Slovakia, the other being third-liner Dalibor Dvorsky. Former NHL player Tomas Tatar, who has played with Slafkovsky, has one assist in three games.

This game boils down to whether Slovak goalie Samuel Hlavaj can keep the dam from breaking again. A minor leaguer for the Minnesota Wild, he made 46 saves against Sweden and 39 saves against Finland. He's third in the tournament in goals saved above average (2.14). Then again, Germany isn't the same shot-attempt generating team that the Swedes and Finns are, at least in this tournament.

WINNER: Germany. I'm underestimating Slovakia at my own peril, I'm sure.

No. 4 Finland vs. No. 5 Switzerland

It's not exactly easy to get a handle on the Finns after group play. They were humbled by Slovakia in the opening game 4-1. They did the humbling of archrival Sweden (4-1) in a physically taxing game. Then they made Italy briefly regret hosting the tournament with an 11-0 humiliation that saw them pump 62 shots on goal.

So who are the Finns? I think they're the team we saw against Sweden: a pesky, physical group that spreads out its scoring. There were 12 Finland players who earned a point against the Swedes; 14 players had at least a point against the Italians. It's a team that has gotten as many points out of Joel Armia and Kaapo Kakko (four) as it has out of Mikko Rantanen.

Finland has two extremely solid defense pairings, including one of the best in the NHL: Miro Heiskanen and Esa Lindell, as the Dallas Stars score 58.4% of the goals when they're on the ice together. The Florida Panthers' Niko "The Condor" Mikkola and Philadelphia Flyers blueliner Rasmus Ristolainen get the second-most ice time.

Juuse Saros has not had a good NHL season with the Nashville Predators, but he has had a very good Olympics so far for Finland: .946 save percentage and 2.62 goals saved above expected. He stopped 34 of 35 against Sweden, which is no small feat.

But if we're talking underappreciated goaltending performances, then we're talking about Switzerland's Leonardo Genoni. He has stopped 76 of 79 shots for the best save percentage (.962) and goals saved above expected (4.07) through the qualification round. Genoni was the key in allowing the Swiss to rally against the Czechs, which was a critical overtime win that matched them against Italy in the qualification round.

The Swiss generate a good number of shot attempts and high-danger chances with an offense led by Timo Meier (seven points in three games); like Team USA's Jack Hughes, Meier is playing so well that it has made people wonder what's preventing that from happening with the New Jersey Devils. His Devils teammate Nico Hischier (four points) has been good, while the Swiss have gotten scoring from the back end thanks to Nashville's Roman Josi (four points) and Tampa Bay's J.J. Moser (four points).

They will of course miss winger Kevin Fiala, as the Los Angeles Kings star was injured in their loss to Canada and is expected to sit out the rest of the NHL season.

WINNER: Finland. This could end up being the best game of the quarterfinals, but I'll take the Finns' depth advantages and ability to lock it down defensively.

SEMIFINALS

No. 1 Canada vs. No. 6 Germany



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Keep in mind that the Olympic hockey tournament is bracketed through the quarterfinals, but then protects its highest seed in the semifinals. Hence, Canada gets the lowest seed still alive in the tournament, which is Germany.

The Germans played the tournament's other hockey superpower, the United States, in Group C play and lost 5-1 after going down 5-0. They played the Americans tough in the first 19:51 of the game until Zach Werenski's disheartening goal late in the first period. But Team USA's depth really took over in the second period, and Germany's lack of quality depth beyond its few NHL standouts really stood out.

Which is to say that this team isn't equipped to be the one that takes down Canada.

This forward group for Canada is one of the greatest assemblages of talent the Olympics have ever seen:

Line 1: Macklin Celebrini-Connor McDavid-Tom Wilson. The tournament's leading scorer flanked by the San Jose Sharks' young superstar and the Washington Capitals' ruffian who earned an Olympic "Gordie Howe Hat Trick" against France: a goal, assist and a fight.

Line 2: Brandon Hagel-Nathan MacKinnon-Nick Suzuki. Two fantastic two-way forwards surrounding the offensive force of nature from the Avalanche, who has two goals and three assists in the tournament.

Line 3: Mitch Marner-Sidney Crosby-Mark Stone. This team has Crosby on its third line.

Line 4: Whoever-Sam Bennett-Sam Reinhart. Brad Marchand, Seth Jarvis, Bo Horvat ... whoever Jon Cooper decides to slot next to the Florida Panthers' dynamic duo, Canada's good.

And don't even get me started on their power play.

WINNER: Canada. The spoils go to the team with the perfect record and the best goal differential in group play. Canada rolls to the gold medal game.

No. 2 United States vs. No. 4 Finland

How else will the United States get its proper fill of Miracle on Ice-like "overcoming insurmountable odds to play for gold" if not by facing Sweden and then Finland, considered the tournament's third- and fourth-best teams?

If they get past the Swedes and Germany in fact upsets Slovakia, then the Americans will face the Finns for the right to play for gold. And based on Olympic history, this is not who they want to face. Finland knocked the U.S. out in the quarterfinals in Turin 2006 and won the bronze medal over the Americans in Sochi 2014 after the U.S. blew its game vs. Canada in the semifinals. (The U.S. did thump them 6-1 in the Vancouver 2010 semifinals scoring six times in the first period.)

To state the obvious: This matchup would be a lot more intriguing if Finland had star center Aleksander Barkov of the Florida Panthers, who has sat out the entire NHL season so far after preseason knee surgery. His leadership, his will to win, his defensive game, the way the rest of the lineup would settle in behind him ... what could have been.

Still, the Finns are going to be a tough out for the Americans. They're a tenacious group that is unfazed by a talent disparity

on the roster sheet -- true to form, they welcome it and thrive under those expectations. The Finns have a few defenseman who can handle the American forecheck and some grinding forwards who aren't looking for style points when scoring. They also have Rantanen, one of the players in this tournament who could power his team's offense alone.

There's going to be a moment in the quarterfinals or semifinals when the Americans find themselves trailing in the second half of a game, facing a team with growing belief and a goaltender that is shutting the door. And it's in that moment they will either earn their rematch against the Canadians or squander the chance. Finland always makes you earn it.

WINNER: United States. Unless they're looking ahead so intently that they miss the Finns like Jeremy Swayman facing a shot from center ice, Team USA advances to play for gold.

BRONZE MEDAL GAME

No. 4 Finland vs. No. 6 Germany

Finland is really good at two things: Finding time for the sauna and winning Olympic men's hockey medals. Since 1994, no country has collected more of them in this tournament. Finland won gold in Beijing (2022) and silver in Turin (2006). They won bronze in 1994, 1998, 2010 and 2014.

WINNER: Finland. The trend continues here, as Finland's depth and defense handle Germany's two potent lines with Draisaitl and Stutzle. Prepare the fountains in Helsinki for dancing.

GOLD MEDAL GAME

No. 1 Canada vs. No. 2 United States

All due respect to the other contenders and the potential Cinderellas, but anything less than the next chapter of this epic rivalry playing out for Olympic gold would be a crime against hockey.

Both teams are different than the ones that battled in that overtime classic to end the 4 Nations Face-Off with McDavid's goal and Canada's celebration. The Canadians didn't have Celebrini, brilliant young scorer, and Wilson -- Tkachuk brothers countermeasure -- on their top line. They didn't have Logan Thompson, giving them a viable goaltending option should their faith in Jordan Binnington wobble.

But the Americans have the greater improvements, starting with a healthy Quinn Hughes, the Minnesota Wild defenseman who missed 4 Nations because of injury. Forward Tage Thompson, who was only an injury replacement at 4 Nations, gives the U.S. a forward with size and offensive punch. They'll have a healthy Matthew Tkachuk, who didn't play in the third period or overtime in the 4 Nations finale because of injury.

Perhaps most critically, they'll have four lines that can match the incredible depth of Canada's forward group. That's thanks to the most important development of group play: the way Brock Nelson and Jack Hughes clicked on their fourth line. Hughes is a center playing the wing. He looked overwhelmed and lost in 4 Nations. He looks like Patrick Kane 2.0 in the Olympics, and has formed a trio with Nelson and J.T. Miller that has been the Americans' best line at times on a team that also features Eichel in between Matthew and Brady Tkachuk and Toronto Maple Leafs star Auston Matthews centering their second line.



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The U.S. path to victory is closing off the Canadian path to the attacking zone. The Americans have the best defense corps in the tournament, filled with great skaters and puck movers like Quinn Hughes, Charlie McAvoy and Werenski. They have forwards who can win the neutral zone and grind out shifts in the offensive zone. GM Bill Guerin built this team not to win gold but to beat Canada, knowing the latter probably had to happen to accomplish the former.

These are two teams filled with stars, but the Americans don't have Connor McDavid or Nathan MacKinnon. (Whether they have a Cale Makar proxy depends on where you are on the Quinn Hughes vs. Makar debate.)

They also don't have Sidney Crosby, who has two Olympic gold medals and went through the Americans both times to win them. When adversity hits, there's a reason Crosby wears the C. Overall, experience is the point of demarcation between these two teams. The Americans have three players with Stanley Cup rings. Canada has 12 of them, along with Olympic gold for Crosby and defenseman Drew Doughty. Of these two teams, there no question which one is more unflappable.

WINNER: United States. This victory has been decades in the making. That's how long it has taken for the Americans to fill their talent pool to Canada's levels.

It happened because of the growth of hockey's popularity -- fueled by the NHL's expansion into "nontraditional" hockey markets -- that produced players such as Matthews (Arizona) and Jack Hughes (Florida) alongside players from hockey hotbeds like Minnesota. It happened because there are better athletes playing hockey, who are being developed through an improved USA Hockey pipeline.

These aren't players inspired by the Miracle on Ice -- although they like watching Kurt Russell play Herb Brooks on the bus during youth hockey road trips. These are player who wanted to be Patrick Kane and Sidney Crosby, but most importantly be Patrick Kane beating Sidney Crosby.

And so in the gold medal game of the 2026 Olympics, the Americans finally plant their flag for hockey supremacy, justified by world juniors wins and world championship success and, finally and most satisfyingly, defeating the Canadians on Olympic ice for the first time in the medal round during the NHL participation era.

It won't be a "miracle." It won't be an underdog story made into a Disney movie. It'll be a hard-earned win in a battle of equals, a battle that's sure to continue beyond this Olympics.



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SPORTSNET™

Olympic men's hockey power rankings: Finland, Sweden heating up at right time

By: Ryan Dixon

We're down to the elite eight.

The men's hockey quarterfinals are lined up for Wednesday at the Winter Games in Italy and there are certainly some tantalizing matchups to soak in.

Canada will pay its second game of the tournament versus Czechia, the upstart Slovaks will take on Germany, the Swiss and Finns will get after it, and a hockey heavyweight is guaranteed to leave without a medal when Team USA and Sweden square off.

The four top-ranked teams — Canada, the U.S., Slovakia and Finland — have played three times, while Czechia, Germany, Switzerland and Sweden all played their fourth game of the event on Tuesday during the qualification round and will be competing in a back-to-back situation on Wednesday in the quarters.

While everyone has a seed associated with their team based on the preliminary round, that number — in some cases, anyway — may not completely jive with how these countries seem to stack up as the heat cranks up at the Games.

With that in mind, we wanted to put together an Olympic power ranking on the eve of the quarterfinals. (Team records are win, overtime win, loss, overtime loss).

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

1. Canada (3-0-0-0, 1st seed): Nothing has happened so far to knock the country that's won the past two best-on-best Olympics out of the catbird seat. Certainly there are questions about how the lineup will roll out versus Czechia, with Brad Marchand set to draw in for his first game since the tournament-opening win. Connor McDavid is the leading scorer in Italy with nine points in three games and his linemate, Macklin Celebrini, is not far behind with six. Canada, though, is still searching for the best way to maximize Nathan MacKinnon's impact — playing wing on a power line with McDavid and Celebrini or finding the most complimentary wingers on his own trio? — and probably needs cerebral defenceman Josh Morrissey — who left the first game with an injury and has not played since — back in the lineup to be at its best.

Still, there's precious little in the way of serious nitpicks with this club.

2. Team USA (3-0-0-0, 2nd seed): The only ding you can really stick with the Americans with is also something that's

completely out of their hands. Based on pre-tournament IIHF world rankings, the U.S. wound up in a group with Germany, Latvia and Denmark, meaning they haven't yet seen any country that would be considered in the top half-dozen hockey nations in the world. Now, suddenly, they're facing a Swedish squad that — despite a slow start in Italy — is among the more stacked at the tournament. Still, led by captain Auston Matthews and his three goals, the Yanks have taken care of business. Any notion a goalie other than Connor Hellebuyck would be America's guy has been put to rest and the Stars and Stripes are in good shape heading into the do-or-die portion of the Olympics.

3. Finland (2-0-1-0, 4th seed): Finland, in a surprising result, lost the first game of the event 4-1 to Slovakia. Since then, they beat their rivals from Sweden by the same 4-1 score, then pumped Italy 11-0 to end up with the same plus-11 goal-differential as the U.S. in the preliminary round. Finland has started Juuse Saros in every game, so there's no doubt who the Lions are riding with the rest of the way. Up front, Finland needs its big boys with loads of NHL playoff experience — Mikko Rantanen, Roope Hintz, Anton Lundell and Sebastian Aho — to really drive the bus. The only guy from that group who has two goals so far is Aho. Still, the Finns have a history of rising to the occasion and certainly have the battle-tested NHLers to do it.

4. Sweden (3-0-1-0, 7th seed) Are the Swedes cresting at the right moment? They finished the preliminary round with a win over Slovakia, though not by enough goals to avoid the qualification round. Sweden took care of business against Latvia, opting to go with goalie Jacob Markstrom in the crease after Filip Gustavsson played two of the preliminary-round games. Sweden will need Markstrom — and everybody in Blue and Yellow — to be at their best versus Team USA, but this is a very strong team that could be finding itself at the right time.

5. Slovakia (2-0-1-0, 3rd seed) Juraj Slafkovsky has been one of the stories of the tournament, netting three goals and three assists for six points in Slovakia's three outings. There's no doubt the Slovaks have a little something going in Italy, even down to scoring a late power-play goal in a loss to Sweden that nailed down top spot in Group B (and a qualification-round bye) based on goal-differential. If they can get past Germany, Slovakia — which won its first-ever Olympic men's hockey medal with a hugely-celebrated bronze last time out in 2022 — will guarantee itself a chance to play for another hockey medal, this time in a best-on-best event.

6. Switzerland (2-1-1-0, 5th seed) Losing Kevin Fiala for the tournament hurts a team that, now that we're really in crunch time, could struggle to score enough goals. That said, Switzerland is a cohesive unit that is getting strong performances from its top guys like Timo Meier (three goals and six points in four games) and captain Roman Josi (two goals and four points). Combine the handful of high-end



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NHLers on this team with the fact Switzerland — for lack of a better way of putting it — probably gets more from the guys you've never heard of on the roster than teams with a similar roster composition and you have the formula for a club that could certainly end somebody's tournament earlier than anticipated.

7. Czechia (2-0-1-1, 8th seed) You could argue Czechia could be last on this list, largely because two players — David Pastrnak and Tomas Hertl — can't seem to find their best offensive game. Hertl, in fact, is without a point in Italy. That said, Lukas Dostal is the kind of goalie who can steal a game and Martin Necas is doing his best to make up for the lack of production from other NHL stars by netting three goals and seven points in four outings. He's been awesome for the Czechs.

8. Germany (2-0-2-0, 6th seed) Germany may be ranked eighth here, but there is certainly a path to the semis in front of them. Basically, it's continued excellence from stud forwards Leon Draisaitl (two goals and six points in four games), Tim Stutzle (four goals and six points) and defenceman Moritz Seider (averaging nearly 26 minutes per game), while Philipp Grubauer — who's having a good NHL season — stands tall in the crease.

You have to think the Germans can sense a moment here, as they face a beatable opponent in Slovakia with an opportunity to be in the semifinal of a best-on-best tournament up for grabs.

They'll be just one of eight hockey countries laying it all on the line Wednesday in Milan.



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The Hockey News

Carolina Hurricanes Return To Practice; Eric Robinson Rejoins Team

By: Ryan Henkel

Olympic break ends as Hurricanes hit the ice. Eric Robinson returns for the Hurricanes as they hope to get fully healthy for the final push.

NHL teams all across the league returned to the ice Monday afternoon, as the Olympic break came to a close for all non-Olympian players.

Carolina skated with nearly their full group at Invisalign Arena, the only absences being the five players currently in Milan.

There were no surprises in terms of line rushes as most of them looked like they did in the team's last few games outside of the missing Olympians.

So leaving everything the same with just Slavin being out

The only change up front was that Andrei Svechnikov — who was without linemates Sebastian Aho and Seth Jarvis — joined Jordan Staal and Jordan Martinook — who were without linemate Nikolaj Ehlers.

On defense, Jalen Chatfield was joined by Mike Reilly in place of Jacob Slavin and in goal, equipment manager Jorge Alves manned a net in place of Frederik Andersen while freshly extended Brandon Bussi took the other.

Most notably, Eric Robinson was back on the ice, taking part in his first practice since sustaining an injury on Jan. 19.

Robinson suffered an upper-body injury after absorbing a late hit right into his shoulder from Buffalo Sabres captain Rasmus Dahlin.

It's a good sign for him and the team and hopefully he'll be ready by the time league action gets back underway.

Carolina has eight more days of practice available to them as they don't play again until Feb. 26 when they host the Tampa Bay Lightning and we'll see how long it takes Ehlers and Andersen to rejoin the team now that Denmark has been eliminated from the Olympics.

Nikolaj Ehlers, Frederik Andersen's Olympic Runs End With Loss To Czechia

By: Ryan Henkel

Czechia ends Denmark's Olympic dream. Ehlers dazzled and Andersen battled valiantly in a historic tournament run.

The Carolina Hurricanes saw their first set of players eliminated from the 2026 Winter Olympics as Team Denmark fell at the hands of Team Czechia Tuesday morning.

Frederik Andersen and Nikolaj Ehlers saw their Olympic journey come to an end, but they have a lot to be proud of.

They were part of the second ever men's ice hockey team from Denmark to qualify for the Olympics and each had a solid showing.

Ehlers was one of the most impactful players on the ice for the Danes, generating tons of offense, without really giving much up.

The Hurricanes' star winger had a goal, three points and nine shots on goal through four games, averaging 20:13 per game.

These are the top forward scoring chance creators from the preliminary round of the 2026 Men's Olympic Hockey tournament.

1. CA Connor McDavid
2. DE Leon Draisaitl
3. SE William Nylander
4. CZ David Pastrnak
5. CZ Martin Necas

Andersen finished the tournament with a 1-2-0 record, with losses to Germany and Czechia, but a win over Latvia.

Across the tournament, the Hurricanes netminder posted a 0.914 save percentage and a 2.67 goals against average, all while on a team with zero NHL defenders and just four NHL forwards.

He performed well for his team and hopefully he can bring a bit more confidence in his game back to Carolina.



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The Athletic / U.S. men's Olympic hockey team reacts to lighter boards, plus Auston Matthews vs. William Nylander

By Michael Russo

MILAN — For the first time since 2014, a hockey game will take place that features Toronto Maple Leafs teammates Auston Matthews and William Nylander playing against each other.

The last time they played against each other was in the Under-18 World Championship 12 years ago; Matthews scored a goal and Nylander had an assist.

When Matthews' Team USA and Nylander's Team Sweden played against each other in last year's 4 Nations Face-Off, Matthews missed the game with an injury.

This time it'll be in the quarterfinal in the Olympics, meaning the loser heads back to Toronto and won't have a chance to medal with their respective United States or Sweden.

"It'll be a lot of fun," Nylander said of facing Matthews. "I think 12 years ago, I probably didn't even know that we were going to be teammates. So now after playing, I don't know, 10 years together, it's going to be very special and a lot of fun."

Matthews leads the Americans with three goals and five points in three games, while Nylander scored a goal and an assist Tuesday night in a Sweden win over Latvia to lead the Swedes into the quarters. He has scored two goals and four points in four games.

"I'm sure it'll be interesting," Matthews told TSN's Mark Masters. "Obviously he's a good friend and teammate of mine for 10 years now. He's a special player, a great guy, a great friend."

Matthews has been one of the United States' best players, clearly challenged after a subpar opening game where his line with Jake Guentzel and Matt Boldy wasn't clicking at even strength. But coach Mike Sullivan "exercised patience" with the line and now has spent the past two games raving about how Matthews' game is building.

"He does a lot of things really well, even when he's not producing, that people might not notice," U.S. teammate Zach Werenski said. "Everyone's always focused on his goal-scoring and rightfully so. He's one of the best goal scorers in the world. But since we've been here, he's been such a leader for us the way he plays the game."

Added GM Bill Guerin, "There are a lot of different ways to lead. He's not a man of many words, but he puts it out there every night. Auston's two-way game and his ability to strip pucks and check and play defensively when he needs to ... is elite. And that, going along with his offensive capabilities, makes a pretty good player. He's a pretty special kid."

Connor on outside looking in ... again

Just like the 4 Nations Face-Off, where he was scratched in the final against Canada, it appears as if the United States will start the knockout round with Kyle Connor out of the lineup.

After having no shots in two games on the third line with Dylan Larkin and Tage Thompson, Connor sat in the final prelim game against Germany and was the 14th forward during line rushes at Tuesday's practice in preparation for Wednesday's quarterfinal.

Clayton Keller looks like he'll get a second game in a row on the left of Larkin and Thompson.

"He has good offensive instincts," coach Mike Sullivan said of Keller. "I think he has good instincts away from the puck, also just his ability to play within structure. His panic threshold with the puck is really high. He hangs onto pucks down low. For a guy that's undersized, he's pretty stiff on the puck, and his ability to create separation, to make the next play, is really good. His lateral agility in tight space, he's not easy to handle. I thought he made an impact on that line."

USA PK perfect

One of the best parts of the United States' game at this juncture has been its penalty kill. They are a perfect 9-for-9 on the PK.

The sets up front are J.T. Miller-Vincent Trocheck, Larkin-Brock Nelson and Jack Eichel-Boldy, with Jake Guentzel working in. The defense pairs are Jacob Slavin-Brock Faber and Jake Sanderson-Charlie McAvoy, with Noah Hanifin worked in.

"Obviously, we come here with a role that's been placed upon us," Trocheck said. "Me and J.T., the penalty kill's a really big part of that. Obviously it helps when you have elite D back there."



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What's also been huge for Team USA is that they are winning most draws. The Americans are smoking the competition in the faceoff circle with Larkin winning an Olympic-best 79.1 percent of his draws, Trocheck winning 66.7 and Nelson 61.5.

"I think (assistant coach John Hynes has) done a good job organizing them," Sullivan said. "I think the guys that have been on it are really buying into it. They pride themselves on that element of our overall team game. One of the things that we've tried to do is cast these guys in roles where they know what the expectations are and the contribution that they can make to help us have success. And I think these guys, they can hang their hat on that."

Nelson and McAvoy trade full cages

For the first time since sustaining a fractured jaw in November after taking a slap shot to the face, McAvoy abandoned the "fishbowl" to protect his face in Tuesday's practice. He is expected to play without one Wednesday.

McAvoy told The Athletic before the Olympics that he had always planned to take the fishbowl off to start the Olympics, but the hit he took to the jaw from Florida's Sandis Vilmanis before the tournament meant he'd have to keep on a little longer.

Nelson's uncle and grandfather won Olympic hockey gold. Now they're watching Nelson on his own quest for the medal with Team USA in Milan.

Coincidentally, Nelson suddenly wore a full cage in Tuesday's practice due to some kind of facial injury sustained.

"Charlie gave him some advice on how to play with it," Sullivan joked.

Lighter boards attached

As expected, the banners that cover the boards at Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena had lighter green areas for Tuesday's qualifying games. The dark green colors were replaced after the NHL and Team USA pointed out to the IOC that dark colors can affect a goaltender's ability to see the puck, something that could have affected Jeremy Swayman's ability when he allowed a goal from beyond center ice against Denmark.

"I know there was discussion. There was discussion about that," Sullivan said. "Obviously, the dark boards, sometimes it's hard for the goalies to pick up the puck coming off that. So I know that there was a discussion. How that decision was made, I'm not aware of."

Lukáš Dostál, who backstopped the Czech Republic to a win over Denmark on Tuesday to advance to the quarterfinals to face Canada, said he didn't even realize the banners were swapped out.

"In Anaheim, we have really dark seats," Dostál said. "Some of the NHL rinks, they have dark seats, so the background sometimes — I don't want to say you lose the puck, but you've got to stay focused a little more. Obviously it's just better for us, for the goalies, (that they changed it)."

Hugheses excited for Mom

Ellen Hughes is a development consultant for the United States women's hockey team, which plays Canada for the gold medal Thursday. The team is 6-0 in the tournament, has recorded five consecutive shutouts and outscored teams by a combined 31-1.

"I'm excited," her son Jack Hughes said. "Went to that game (against Sweden in the semifinals) yesterday. Had a lot of fun just watching it. Their team snaps it around pretty good. They got a great team so it should be fun. Hopefully (we'll) win the quarterfinals, then (brother Quinn and I) can go to that gold medal game."

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.

While Quinn has been the United States' most offensive defenseman with four assists, Jack has been solid in a fourth-line role with three points in three games.

"It seems like he's got the puck on a string," Matthew Tkachuk said of Jack. "He's always been an incredible player. Seems like he has the puck each and every shift. He's really good along the boards and in the D-zone, especially not being a winger. Making that adjustment really easy. He's an incredible player. Sees the ice so well, skates well just like his brother. He's been really good for us."

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The Athletic / Olympic men's hockey quarterfinals: Breaking down the matchups for Canada, USA and more

By Arpon Basu, Pierre LeBrun and Mark Lazerus

MILAN — The quarterfinals at the Olympic men's hockey tournament are set following Tuesday's qualifying-round action. Here's a look at all four of Wednesday's matchups.

No. 7 Sweden vs. No. 2 USA

There's no shame in silver. But for the world's greatest hockey players, particularly those from one of the world's greatest hockey countries, there's not exactly a ton of pride in it, either.

"I've got a silver medal at home," Sweden's Gabriel Landeskog said. "And I guess it's something that sits there. Doesn't mean as much as if it would have been a gold medal. If it's a gold medal, it's very different. We all want to win; that's what we were kind of bred to do."

Sweden's road to gold starts in earnest Wednesday night against the United States, a gold-medal-level matchup that's happening in the quarterfinals thanks to Slovakia's surprising Group B victory. After three round-robin games and Tuesday's perfunctory 5-1 rout of Latvia, the real do-or-die games start now. And while Canada and the United States — the other two gold-medal favorites — cruised into the quarters with three easy wins and a bye, Team Sweden has scuffled and shuffled its way here.

And they might be better off for it.

"You can cruise through it and then all of a sudden you're tested in a way you weren't prepared for," Sweden coach Sam Hallam said. "It gives you a better feeling now that we've had these small things go wrong every game and had to look at things, adjust small things."

It's something Landeskog is getting a taste of with the Colorado Avalanche this season. After one of the best starts in NHL history — 31-2-7 — the Avs have lost nine of their last 15 games. Hardly a crisis, but potentially beneficial in the long run.

"That's the same as over there, same as in the NHL," Landeskog said. "You're going to run into adversity at some point, and how you manage that is how you're going to define yourself as a group, and how you handle that is up to us in the locker room. We've stumbled in the tournament so far. We've also shown some really good things, so for us, it's just a matter of continuing to build, understanding that hopefully we've



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got another week to go here and understanding that we need to be playing our best hockey at the most important time, which is right now."

The U.S., meanwhile, caught something of a bad break by virtue of Slovakia's group win. Instead of facing a second-tier team, the second-seeded Americans get a seventh-seeded Swedish team full of NHL stars.

"(Wednesday) could be our last day," U.S. defenseman Quinn Hughes said. "So we've got to be prepared. Playing a really good team."

Based on Tuesday's practice, U.S. coach Mike Sullivan seems to have locked his lines in place, with Jack Eichel centering Brady and Matthew Tkachuk, Auston Matthews centering Jake Guentzel and Matt Boldy, and Dylan Larkin centering Clayton Keller and Tage Thompson. Keller replaced Kyle Connor in the last group-stage game, as the Winnipeg Jets star finds himself a healthy scratch on the international stage for the second time in 12 months, following last year's 4 Nations Face-Off.

The Americans certainly have an edge in goal. Connor Hellebuyck is sharp and rested, while Hallam will have to either go with Jacob Markström for the second time in 21 hours or with Filip Gustavsson (who was a little shaky against Italy and Finland) or 23-year-old Jesper Wallstedt (who has yet to play in this tournament).

The U.S. hasn't yet been at its best — at least, what should be its best given the talent on the roster — in this tournament. The Americans' game has been a little inconsistent, a little scruffy. But they feel they're getting closer to their ceiling. No time like the present to find it.

"I think we're just continuing to find our game," said Jack Hughes, on the fourth line with Brock Nelson and J.T. Miller. "Getting more comfortable with each other, more comfortable with the systems. Obviously now it's the quarters, so you've got to really lock in. But it's such a short tournament. You've got to find your game early. Play each game with the same intensity and play hard."

Added Dylan Larkin: "It's nerve-wracking. It is. It gets you going, and I think that's what brings out the best in guys. I'm excited for it. Every play, every puck's going to matter."

After the Swedes' win over Latvia, their attention turned immediately to the Americans. The last time these two teams met, at the 4 Nations, Sweden eked out a 2-1 victory.

"We've got to stay out of the box," said Swedish defenseman Victor Hedman, who noted that "selfishly" he was glad to get an extra game in as he works his way back to midseason form after missing nearly two months with an injury. "They've got a phenomenal power play, a lot of weapons on it. It hasn't been too long since we played them in 4 Nations, but obviously some different personnel, Quinn Hughes is back. We've just got to make sure that we're physical on their skill, try to stay out of the box, and play a patient game."

No. 8 Czech Republic vs. No. 1 Canada

It is a rematch of the Olympic opener for both teams after Team Canada trounced the Czech Republic 5-0 last Thursday.

"I think last time we actually had a decent start against Canada, we had some chances, we know what we need to do, we have to play simple, put (pucks) behind, get a good forecheck, get to the net and find a way to score at least some goals," Czech center Tomáš Hertl said after his team's 3-2 win Tuesday over Denmark in the qualifying playoffs. "We can't be scared. If we wait and wait, we know what they can do. They have the best player on the planet on the team. They can destroy you."

"You have to just play with confidence," continued the Vegas Golden Knights center. "We can't think about who is on the ice, because all four lines are good for them. You have to enjoy it and play hard. It's one game, you know? You never know what can happen. We can get some bounces, we can score early, and it can go our way."

But Hertl stressed again that what the Czechs can't do is just sit back.

Besides, Hertl joked, it's all part of their plan right now, playing Canada twice in six days.

"That was our plan because we said we probably can't beat Canada in the same tournament twice," he said, smiling. "We gave them the first win so now it's our time!"

Veteran defenseman Radko Gudas said staying out of the penalty box against the No. 1-ranked power play in the tournament (44 percent) is paramount.

"They have some unbelievable players on their power play," Gudas said. "Then putting pucks in areas where we can get it back, make sure that we make them turn every time. It's going to be a great challenge for us. It's going to be fun."

"Anyone who can't get motivated for that game tomorrow, there's something seriously wrong with them. They shouldn't be playing hockey. So it's going to be a great challenge for us but we're looking forward to it. If we want to get a medal, we have to beat the best teams."

The Czechs were a little too cautious and looked nervous early on in their win over Denmark on Tuesday. It wasn't a very convincing performance. They'll need a much better effort Wednesday.

Canadian captain Sidney Crosby was asked Tuesday after practice what significance, if any, there would be to play the Czechs again for the second time in six days.

"Maybe a bit more familiar," Crosby said. "But at this point, you've got to go out there and play the game and execute. So regardless of how many times you played each other, I think you still got to go out there and do it."

Added Bo Horvat: "I obviously expect them to play us hard again. They played us hard the first game. You know, they've continued to keep getting better throughout the tournament, and we got to be ready to go, for sure."

The Czechs did try to set a noticeable physical tempo in the opener, but it didn't produce the desired results. Canada didn't back down on the physical stuff.

"I thought we matched that really well," Horvat said. "We try to match anybody that we play. They came out hard and they came out strong and I thought we matched that really well. So we expect them to come out harder. Playing us hard again. So we've got to match that again."

Team Canada veteran Brad Marchand could be back in the lineup Wednesday and may get another crack at facing former Bruins teammate David Pastrňák, with whom he says he's remained close.

"I love Pasta," said Marchand. "... I've loved where his game has gotten. He's such a competitor. He was always a great player, but he was streaky early on. He'd get really hot and then really cold. He works extremely hard at his game and he's become one of the top-five players in the game. He's incredible, the way he controls the play every time he's on the ice. His consistency level is at the top of the league. It's really incredible what he's done. And it doesn't matter who he's playing with. You could put him with the top guys on the team or some younger guys who are just learning the game and he's going to affect the game the same way. He's a very, very impressive player."

Pastrňák had an assist in Sunday's game but overall, still not the kind of play expected from a star of his caliber.

"Honestly, I haven't played my best here yet, so just waiting, and hopefully I saved it for tomorrow," Pastrňák said after the game Tuesday.

Martin Nečas of the Colorado Avalanche scored again Sunday on a blistering slap shot to the top corner. He's been carrying the Czechs so far.



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"His ability of skating and escaping in the tight spaces, he's an incredible skater and he's becoming a star year by year," Pastrňák said of Necas." Every year he's getting better. It's fun to see. Really happy for him, and glad I can help him out, and he knows I'm here for him. He's fun to watch."

No. 5 Switzerland vs. No. 4 Finland

This has upset potential, although Finland has rebounded strongly ever since opening the Olympics with a 4-1 loss to Slovakia, beating rival Sweden 4-1 and smoking Italy 11-0.

"Amazing team and amazing players," Swiss captain Roman Josi said after the game Tuesday of Finland. "Every time the Finns play a tournament, whether it's world championships or Olympics, they are always one of the favorites. They play really good as a team, so we will have to be at our best."

Still, the Swiss are back-to-back silver medalists at the IIHF World Championships and have won three of their four games following Tuesday's 3-0 win over Italy in the qualifying playoffs.

The Swiss also got a boost against Italy with the return of defenseman Andrea Glauser from a suspected concussion. Though he only played a little under 11 minutes and did not start the game with Josi, his regular partner, the fact that he was in uniform bodes well for his availability against Finland.

The Finns would be wise to stay out of the box; Switzerland has the third-ranked power play in the tournament at 31 percent after scoring two more with the man advantage Tuesday. The Swiss also have the second-ranked penalty kill (92 percent) in the tournament.

But, as Josi noted, Finland is always a medal threat — the country has failed to medal at only one of the five Olympics that included NHL players — and this year is no different.

Finland is always defined by team play and defense; the Finns have allowed two five-on-five goals at these Olympics.

"(The) win against Sweden showed for ourselves how we have to play to be able to win. It's going to be like that in the next round," Finland captain Mikael Granlund said after the win against Italy. "It's going to be a highly skilled game where we have to be at our best all the time. (We're) a really experienced group. We know what we need to do to be able to win games. That's what we have to focus on."

No. 6 Germany vs. No. 3 Slovakia

Just 21 hours after beating France to advance to the quarterfinals, Germany will be playing Slovakia in a win-or-go-home game. It'll be Germany's third game in four days, and fifth in seven. Slovakia, meanwhile, will be coming off three straight off days.

Can adrenaline make up the recovery gap for Germany? This is the Olympics, after all.

"It'll help for sure," German captain Leon Draisaitl said after an uneventful 5-1 victory over France on Tuesday. "It's a big game, it's a do-or-die game, right? So adrenaline will be going. We'll make sure we'll be ready to go."

Thanks to Slovakia's group win, eighth-ranked Germany won't have to face any of the traditional powers in the quarterfinal. In fact, with Draisaitl, Tim Stütze, JJ Peterka, Moritz Seider and Philipp Grubauer in net, Germany could be seen as the favorite, despite their unremarkable group-stage performance. (And were Germany to win, and the other favorites prevail, the semifinals would be Canada-Germany and U.S.-Finland, meaning a vastly tougher road to a gold medal for the Americans than the Canadians.) But Slovakia won that group for a reason. Juraj Slafkovský and the Slovaks are rested and riding high. It won't be easy.

"It's always a great game against them, always hard," Germany's Nico Sturm said. "Especially when we play them, it's always a battle. I expect a grind from start to finish."

Neither team was considered a serious contender coming into this tournament, yet one of them will be playing for a medal. And both have good reason to think it'll be them.

"It's in your head, but you don't want to focus on that, you want to focus on the game and just play your best game and then we will see how it ends up," Slovak defenseman Šimon Nemeč said. "We just have to play our best game, just put 100 percent effort and we will see. But yeah, we know we have a big chance to win."

"We're one game away from it, so we think about it and prepare the best way we can for (Wednesday)," said forward Dalibor Dvorský. "The people (back home) are really happy. The whole nation is watching. We just love playing good for our country and hopefully we can make our fans even more happy in the next two games here."

Sturm said Slafkovský is becoming one of the elite goal scorers and playmakers in the NHL. His 10 goals in 10 Olympic Games since 2022 is the stuff of legends. So Germany better rest up.

"It's important what we do now for the next 20 hours," Sturm said. "Probably not going to have a ton of beers."

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The Athletic / Macklin Celebrini's Olympic lessons will benefit Sharks — and Canada — for years

By Arpon Basu

MILAN — Macklin Celebrini looked a bit sheepish at first, the look on his face suggesting that if all things were equal, he probably would have preferred his famous dad didn't share a moment of young vulnerability and doubt he displayed before leaving for the Olympics.

Rick Celebrini, the Golden State Warriors' vice president of player health and performance, told The Athletic's Marcus Thompson II about a phone call he received from his 19-year-old son, wondering whether he was traveling all the way to Italy to simply watch Team Canada play.

"You just look at this roster and look at the guys we have here, obviously I wanted to do my part and be here, but I was just more curious," Celebrini said with a big smile after practice Tuesday. "You never know until you get here. I wanted to make an impact, but it was just more uncertainty seeing what they were going to do."

Of course, it didn't take long for Celebrini's curiosity to be sated, finding out he would be playing on Canada's top line with Connor McDavid and Tom Wilson the same evening he arrived in Milan on Feb. 8.

But since that moment, Celebrini has also taken shifts with McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon, the two best players in the world, even though MacKinnon has openly wondered if it's Celebrini, and not him, that should be in that top pairing of the world hockey order. The line has become a national obsession every time head coach Jon Cooper has decided to use it, but really, it is Celebrini's place on it that is the most fascinating element of not only that line, or of this team, but perhaps the entire tournament.



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

Celebrini doing what he is doing at 19 for Team Canada is probably neck-and-neck with what 21-year-old Juraj Slafkovský is doing to lead Slovakia into the knockout rounds as the biggest revelations of this tournament. Both have shown, to varying degrees, they had this in them this season in the NHL — Celebrini is fourth in NHL scoring for the San Jose Sharks, and Slafkovský has been a point-a-game player since Dec. 1 for the Montreal Canadiens. But it would have been impossible to predict that Celebrini would achieve his goal of having an impact on Team Canada, a team with far more accomplished options than Slovakia, to this extent on this big a stage.

It is his partnership with McDavid that has brought Celebrini here, and it is truly a partnership. Celebrini is not riding anyone's coattails and has left his Canada teammates in awe of what he's been able to do at such a young age.

McDavid has used the word "impressive" every time he has talked about Celebrini, and the fact that the partnership has gone as smoothly as it has might just be the most impressive thing Celebrini has done here.

McDavid plays at an inhuman pace; he sees things no one else sees, and Celebrini has done more than just keep up. He is facilitating McDavid's greatness in a way that is nowhere near as easy as Celebrini is making it look, and he is doing that because he is studying McDavid every chance he gets.

"All my linemates I try to talk to a lot — he's probably getting a little annoyed — but I just try to talk to see if we're seeing the same thing," Celebrini said. "We try to read off each other, and especially at a tournament like this, there's not a lot of time we get to spend together, so the more we talk and the more we work off each other, the more we'll create. ...

"It's just trying to spend a little bit of time talking to each other, trying to figure out what each likes. Every guy's different, but especially him. He's one of a kind. So I'm just trying to make it easy on him."

Celebrini's learning has not been limited to picking McDavid's brain. Before practice Tuesday, Celebrini had a long conversation with Bruce Cassidy, an assistant to Cooper here, but head coach of the Vegas Golden Knights in the NHL. Cassidy and Celebrini were having an exchange; it was not simply a coach lecturing a player, with both pointing to different areas of the ice at various times.

Celebrini's hockey brain is highly developed for anyone, but especially so for a 19-year-old, and it is scary to think just how much more developed it will be when he returns to the Sharks after this experience.

"I think just watching these guys play and the different systems, getting exposed to different coaches and systems helps me better understand other options and better avenues," Celebrini said. "It's just every practice there's something new, and in games just talking to guys, learning from them."

The learning does not stop there, because Celebrini has a front-row seat to a passing of the torch in terms of the leadership of Team Canada. Sidney Crosby might be playing his last Olympics — though absolutely nothing should be put past him. Crosby will be 42 when the 2030 Olympics begin — and McDavid is playing his first.

Celebrini has been watching the two of them operate for more than a week now, the present and future captains of Canada, and he's taking notes.

"It's amazing," Celebrini said. "Those two, it's kind of Sid, and then Connor, who's kind of filling in his shoes and kind of taking on that role. It's really cool to just be around and be a part of."

"They're different in the way that they carry themselves, but both of them are awesome people and awesome teammates."

The Sharks don't have a captain this season, but Celebrini will one day have a "C" on his sweater in San Jose, and his exposure to Crosby and McDavid and MacKinnon and all the great leaders on Team Canada should be very exciting for Sharks fans.

But there's also a possibility that one day, perhaps in eight years, Celebrini will be filling the shoes of McDavid as the leader of Team Canada, and four years from now the interplay between the two might be very similar to what Celebrini is witnessing between Crosby and McDavid this year.

"Yeah, I mean," Celebrini said with a nervous laugh, "I'm not really focused on that."

And he shouldn't be. He has an immediate task at hand, an incredible challenge of being a top-line forward for Canada at the first Olympics to have NHL participation in 12 years, a challenge Celebrini is meeting every time he steps on the ice for a game or even a practice.

But the rest of us can appreciate and acknowledge the extent to which the future of Team Canada already appears to be in excellent hands, and the lessons Celebrini is learning in Milan only make that future look that much brighter.

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The Athletic / What we saw at Canada men's Olympic hockey practice: Lineup hints, injuries and more

By Arpon Basu and Pierre LeBrun

MILAN — Team Canada went the full hour at practice Tuesday on the eve of the medal round.

In fact, head coach Jon Cooper was seen chatting with the Zamboni driver, negotiating a couple more minutes past the hour as Team Canada wrapped up its last drill.

They were all business on this day. Notable by their absences were Nathan MacKinnon and Sam Bennett, both taking maintenance days and both deemed available to play in Wednesday's quarterfinal.

One thing no one ever does is question MacKinnon's toughness. He plays through a lot.

"I don't think I've ever questioned it once," Sidney Crosby said Tuesday of his fellow Nova Scotian. "I know how much he loves the game. He'll play through anything. That's never really in question."

In MacKinnon's absence, Nick Suzuki skated on that line between Brandon Hagel and Sam Reinhart at practice. It sure seemed like Suzuki was MacKinnon's placeholder and that perhaps Reinhart would be getting elevated in the lineup for Wednesday. That might result in dropping Suzuki to the fourth line or the 13th forward. During special teams drills, Suzuki was on the penalty kill with Hagel, while Bo Horvat and Seth Jarvis were paired up on the PK as well.

Whatever the case, based on Tuesday's practice, Connor McDavid was back between Macklin Celebrini and Tom Wilson. So that appears to be how Team Canada will start the game Wednesday. Whether or not Cooper reunites the Mach3 line at some point during the game remains to be seen.



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Morrissey back at practice but still no confirmation

Josh Morrissey was a full participant at practice, skating alongside his normal Team Canada defense partner, Colton Parayko. After leaving the Olympic opener with an undisclosed injury, Morrissey appears to be on the mend based on watching him in practice Tuesday. There was no hesitation in anything he did on the ice, and he did not appear limited in any way.

Neither Cooper nor Morrissey himself was ready to commit 100 percent to him playing Wednesday. That requires one last conversation between both of them.

"Just taking it day by day," Morrissey said after practice. "Had a good practice here. Just trying to get ready for the rest of the tournament the best I can."

Said Cooper: "That was a big thing for him to get out here today. In my opinion, he looked great. But (no confirmation) until after I talk to him."

Thomas Harley was back with Drew Doughty at practice Tuesday, while Travis Sanheim skated alongside Shea Theodore. If Morrissey is back, we would venture to guess Sanheim is the scratch.

Wilson doing what comes naturally

It was a calculated Tom Wilson who lined up for an offensive zone faceoff with a little more than seven minutes left in regulation time against France on Sunday night.

He knew who was on the ice for France. He knew what that player had done to Nathan MacKinnon a few minutes earlier. He knew how much time was left. He knew the rules.

He saw Pierre Crinon lining up for that faceoff and waited for an opportunity, and once one presented itself, he took it, drilling Crinon into the boards and triggering the fight that got Wilson kicked out of the game, and Crinon kicked out of the Olympics by his own national hockey federation.

"It was kind of a dirty hit, and it's a little bit different in the Olympics, how you have to go about it," Wilson said. "I obviously ended up with the same guy who had done it. And hockey is an emotional game. It's a competitive game, and when you come together with a big guy, you kind of have to make the decision quickly, and the gloves came off and got thrown down to the ice."

While much was made of zero-tolerance policy on fighting in the Olympics, Wilson knew he wasn't risking anything more than the automatic game misconduct that is applied in this tournament to both combatants, as long as both are willing.

"I was aware of the rules; if you fight, you get thrown out," Wilson said. "But generally speaking, that's it. There's five minutes left in a 10-2 game, and I was aware of the rules. I was aware that as long as I didn't take it too far, or he took it too far, that you should be good to play in the next game."

"So, obviously, when it started to get a little crazy there, he wasn't stopping. There's a certain level of having to defend yourself. And then once I kind of got around on top, I was like, OK, time to stop. It's gone on far enough, and the linesmen were trying to do their job, and you just don't want to get carried away. So, I decided to stop at that point. I think it was a good decision."

So, in other words, this was not a heat-of-the-moment situation for Wilson. It was the exact opposite. He knew what he was doing, he knew the situation allowed for it, and he did it within reasonable limits.

"I just wanted to stick up for our team," he said.

In so doing, Wilson further ingrained himself in the fabric of Team Canada. His teammates and coach have raved about his presence in the

room and just how good a teammate and player he has been. This only added to what they already thought of him.

"It's amazing," Celebrini said. "Getting to know him, being his linemate; I'm definitely happier that he's on my line and not someone I'm playing against. We've got along really well, and it's been really cool to get to know him."

Marchand is ready and available

Brad Marchand missed the last two games healing up a little something that's been nagging him. But he's ready to go for Wednesday if called upon.

"Yeah, yeah. It was just a little maintenance. We talked about it as a group and made a decision. Feeling good here now," Marchand said after practice.

We asked him if his issue was related to what kept him out for some games last month in Florida.

"Um, yeah, part of that, but part of it is old age," he said with a smile. "Sometimes you've got to just take care of the body. Big picture, make sure you're ready for the important times."

Somewhat revealing and perhaps simply his humility showing through, Marchand claims he wasn't sure before the Olympics if he'd play at all in this tournament.

"I mean, you always want to be in to play," said Marchand. "But the goal is to be here and be part of this team. It's an incredible group. You know, to be honest, coming in I didn't think I would be in the lineup. I thought I would be an extra guy and be a voice and try to be loud and obnoxious in the room. So I mean, I'm just so proud and honored to be part of this group. It doesn't matter if you get in the lineup or not. Everybody is just as important and has a role to play."

Marchand sounded somewhat nostalgic as he talked about soaking in every moment of his first Olympic experience.

"It's what you want to make of it," he said. "Obviously when you're at the rink and on the ice, there's a job to do. But it's an incredible opportunity to be here. Especially in this environment in Milan, it's a beautiful place. A place you want to take in, a lot of different athletes you want to meet and speak to and hear their story."

As far as the dressing room dynamic, the two loudest voices by far are Marchand and Drew Doughty. As was the case at 4 Nations.

Which begs the question, who gets the last word between the two of them? They were seen laughing together at practice Tuesday.

"It depends on the conversation, but typically he likes to have (the last word)," said Marchand, again with a smile. "But I'll just say something under my breath as he skates away."

Details matter at Team Canada practices

The first time Team Canada took to the ice for practice in Milan back on Feb. 8, Cooper ran the team through a forecheck drill where he very deliberately, and slowly, had players move to spots on the ice where he wanted them to be. Assistant coaches Bruce Cassidy and Rick Tocchet played the role of an opposing defenseman with the puck in the corner, and forwards skated to their instructed spots and stopped.

There was no detail spared, and no room for confusion.

This is a quick tournament, and at practice Tuesday, with Canada's next game having the potential to be their last, there was a lot more detail and a lot more situational instructions in the drills Cooper and his staff decided to run.

One drill was a breakout from a won puck battle along the boards at the hashmarks in the defensive zone. Another was a box out and breakout



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drill off a point shot. They worked on six-on-five situations in case they trail late in a game (it looks like it will be Mark Stone who will be used alongside the top power-play unit if Canada ever needs this). They worked on four-on-three situations in case they get a power play in overtime.

But the system stuff Canada worked on comes from issues the coaching staff had identified and seen as issues in three games they won by a combined score of 20-3.

"I think it's great," Celebrini said. "I mean, it's all stuff that we've given up in games, or (the coaching staff) is not really happy with our structure in games. Especially going into this next game, it's do-or-die now, so we have to make sure everything's perfect."

Cooper was asked after the game against France that if he had to nitpick, what would be an area he would like to see improvement in Canada's game. He refused to answer.

"Honestly, you guys are the ones that nitpick," Cooper said. "I try to defend our guys. You guys are the ones making this stuff up."

As it turns out, Cooper does have the ability to nitpick. He showed it in practice Tuesday.

Tocchet flashback to '87 Canada Cup

We wrote Sunday about Team Canada's nuclear option when they move MacKinnon up with McDavid and Celebrini.

There's some interesting Canadian hockey lineage to it all when you consider that assistant coach Rick Tocchet played in the 1987 Canada Cup when Mario Lemieux and Wayne Gretzky were put together rather famously in the final.

"I've talked to the coaches about it," the Philadelphia Flyers head coach said Tuesday after practice. "It kind of gave me a little flashback. When those guys go out together, it gives the whole team a bit of a jolt. And you see the play pick up. Same thing happened with Mario and Wayne."

It is rather amazing to think about, 39 years later, that Tocchet has a tie-in as a player on that '87 Canadian team watching No. 66 and No. 99 work their magic and now seeing MacKinnon and McDavid, and don't forget Celebrini, providing a spark when needed.

"I had a front-row seat to it in '87," smiled Tocchet. "It was unbelievable. It's funny how it was almost like Wayne and Mario had been playing all the time together, but they never had until that tournament. It's just the way they saw the game. Wayne had the puck and Mario would find the lanes; their instincts took over."

And now, when the world's two top players, McDavid and MacKinnon, play on the same line, it's mesmerizing.

"At the end of the day, if you look at McDavid, he attacks as good as anybody, but he's looking for Mack especially in the one-time slot, he knows he's a shooter. I can feel that," Tocchet said. "There's a couple of times he could have probably shot it but he waited to give it to MacKinnon. So I think he knows there's certain points where he wants to give it to him in a shooting position."

Kind of like 99 looking to feed 66 ...

The Athletic LOADED: 02.18.2026

1379589 Websites

The Athletic / Are the Olympics headed for men's and women's U.S.-Canada gold medal games?

By Sean McIndoe

Good morning to everyone except anybody who books a mandatory work meeting for Thursday afternoon. Seriously, go check your calendars right now. Did you do that? There's still time to apologize and reschedule, because absolutely everyone's got something better to do that day ...

🏆 Gold Showdown

It's happening

Dread it. Run from it. Destiny still arrives. And now, it's here. Or should I say, we've got Team Canada vs. Team USA for women's hockey gold, baby. Puck drop is Thursday at 1:10 p.m. ET. (Full Olympics schedule, customized to your time zone, is here.)

Full credit to Team Switzerland, which absolutely made Canada sweat it out in yesterday's 2-1 win, but the (almost) inevitable gold medal matchup is here. And while we all knew this was probably coming, the path to get here has seen some surprises.

Most notably, this matchup no longer feels quite like the coin flip it usually is. If we're stealing lines from Avengers movies, it's Team USA that's been playing Thanos for the last year, earning the role of favorites along the way. The Canada-USA rivalry has been uncommonly one-sided recently, with the Americans sweeping the four-game rivalry series late last year and then smoking the Canadians 5-0 in their round-robin matchup. Forget beating the Americans, hardly anyone can even score a goal on them.

So, is this one an easy call? Not so fast. For starters, Canada didn't have Marie-Philip Poulin in that round-robin game; she's back in the lineup now, and she's one of the few players in the sport who can single-handedly tilt the odds. She also became the Olympics' all-time leading goal scorer in yesterday's win. And despite all of Team USA's well-earned confidence, this is still Canada, winner of five of the last six gold medal showdowns between the two teams, including the most recent in 2022.

And maybe the biggest reason to play wait-and-see before simply handing gold over to the Americans: These two teams always seem to find a way to surprise us. Remember the utter madness of 2014? If we get even a fraction of that on Thursday, all bets are off.

Meanwhile, Sweden faces Switzerland for bronze at 8:40 a.m. ET on Thursday. Sweden has medaled twice in women's hockey, including a surprise silver in 2006 that remains its most recent podium appearance. The Swedes were blown out by Team USA yesterday but will look to rediscover some of the momentum from their upset elimination of the Czechs. Switzerland has one medal in its history, a bronze in 2014, and should have some confidence after taking Team Canada to the brink.

🔪 Chopping Block

Let the eliminations begin

We have a few extra days to wait for the gold medal game on the men's side; that doesn't come until Sunday morning. But the path to get here is already in motion, with the playoff phase of the tournament starting today. From here on out, everything is an elimination game.

(Well, technically the two semifinals aren't, because the losers of those games still get to play for bronze. But nobody came all this way after all these years to play for third place.)

To get you caught up, all 12 men's teams make the playoff phase, with the top four getting a bye to tomorrow's quarterfinals. The four teams with byes are Canada, the U.S., Finland and, in a mild surprise, Slovakia. Those teams aren't in action today, but they'll be watching to find out who they'll play tomorrow.



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The other eight teams are playing for their tournament lives. Two of those games are already over, and let's pour one out for the tourney's two underdog teams: Germany beat France, and Switzerland advanced against Italy. We'll preview the other two games down below. (As a reminder, our forecast page is constantly updating as the tournament goes on. It's glorious. Don't miss the women's page, either.)

The bigger picture: This tournament is wide open, but we're still on track for the Canada-U.S. men's final that everybody is rooting for, and by "everybody," I mean the NHL's marketing department. Those two teams came into the event as the favorites, and so far neither has stumbled enough to change that perception.

That said, seeding could matter more than we thought: A Team Sweden win this afternoon means it'd face the Americans in a battle of powerhouses worthy of a semifinal or even gold medal showdown. Instead, one of those teams would be knocked out of the medals entirely. Sweden still needs to take care of business to make it happen, but that's where a lot of the attention will be today.

For more thoughts on the men's tournament, including subplots such as the bridesmaid taunt, Quinn Hughes and his ghosts, the Tom Wilson quasi-fight and lots more, be sure to check out my all-Olympics weekend rankings.

💡 Trivia Time

We'll do this one "Who am I?" style.

I'm a Hockey Hall of Famer who had a long and successful NHL career. I played in two Olympics and represented two different countries in the process. I also competed in an additional best-on-best tournament, where I represented a third country. And my son, a successful NHLer in his own right, went to two Olympics of his own — and did so representing a fourth country. Who am I?

A few hints: While not quite a generational superstar in the Mario Lemieux/Wayne Gretzky mold, this player is hardly obscure; he made the NHL's all-time top 100 list, as well as The Athletic's vastly superior NHL99 ranking. He's the answer to at least one other reasonably famous trivia question. And finally, this player was mentioned in a couple of my recent columns, so you should be able to figure this out as long as you read everything I write.

📺 What to Watch

The spotlight is on the men today, with the start of the elimination round. Germany and Switzerland are already through in the early games. That leaves us with two games on the day's schedule, and both will be of interest to fans of Team Canada or Team USA.

📺 Denmark @ Czech Republic men

🕒 10:40 a.m. ET

us USA Network (joined in progress), Peacock

ca CBC (joined in progress), Sportsnet, CBC Gem

This one will be ongoing or over by the time you read this newsletter. Don't sweat it: You can catch up with our live coverage. Anyway, both teams finished the group stage with one win, although Denmark hung tough against Team USA for most of their meeting. The winner gets Team Canada tomorrow, which would be a Group A rematch for Czechia, which fell 5-0 in the first meeting.

The Danes will presumably turn to veteran Frederik Andersen to steal one here, or at least hold them in long enough to get the offense going; they've scored just eight goals so far, with three of those coming from ELH star Nick Olesen. The Czech offense has been largely driven by Martin Nečas, while David Pastrňák has just one goal in the tournament

and Tomáš Hertl has been held pointless. Lukáš Dostál should get the start in goal.

📺 Latvia @ Sweden men

🕒 3:10 p.m. ET

us USA Network (joined in progress), Peacock

ca CBC, TSN (joined in progress), Sportsnet, CBC Gem

It's been a tough tournament so far for the Swedes, who came in as a medal favorite. Their loss to Finland put them at the bottom end of a three-way tie for Group B and produced a tougher path through the elimination phase. That said, they'll still be heavy favorites over Latvia, which managed a win over Germany but should be out-gunned here. Only four different Latvian players managed to score in the round robin, so they're likely to need a big game from goalie Artūrs Šilovs to have a chance.

The winner gets Team USA tomorrow. And while you never want to look too far ahead or count out an underdog, it's OK to start penciling in some plans for a monster Sweden/USA clash that we didn't think we'd see this early.

Coast to Coast

🗣️ Wait, the guy from Team France who fought Tom Wilson got kicked out of the tournament by his own federation for egging on the crowd afterwards? Huh.

😄 Shayna Goldman is back with an Olympic vibe check, including the mystery of why Filip Forsberg's ice time is so low.

🏆 Your two favorite newsletter guys teamed up to rank all 14 realistic gold medal matchups that are still in play for the men.

😞 A 40-year-old trying to create a legacy. A 40-year-old trying to cement a legacy. A 38-year-old trying to add to a legacy. Mark Lazerus talked to three aging captains chasing different kinds of glory.

👤 Meet the coach with his fingerprints all over the U.S. women's and men's Olympic hockey teams.

📖 The Athletic's Julian McKenzie has an excellent new book out called "Black Aces: Essential Stories from Hockey's Black Trailblazers," and we're running excerpts this week.

😄 My close personal friend and co-worker Chris Pronger is back with another column, and he thinks there are five teams left on the men's side that can win gold.

🗣️ "The Athletic Hockey Show" is going live on YouTube every day after the games are done, so make sure you're subscribed on YouTube, or listen anytime wherever you get your podcasts.

😄 No Dumb Questions

We believe that in hockey, as in life, there are no dumb questions. So if you have something you've always wondered about the sport, ask away by emailing us at redlight@theathletic.com.

You have one job

What does "FOGO" mean? I've heard the term used in NHL games and again recently at the Olympics, and I assume it stands for something, but they never explain what it means.

FOGO is a relatively recent addition to the hockey lexicon, and it does indeed stand for something. Specifically, it's an acronym for "face off, get off." In other words, a FOGO situation happens when a player is sent out to take a faceoff, with instructions to immediately come to the bench for a line change afterwards.



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These days, you tend to hear it most often in the NHL at the start of three-on-three overtime. Strategy for the extra session has become far more structured over the years, with most teams choosing to focus on possession, including that annoying thing where they'd rather regroup in their own end than risk giving up the puck on a poorly chosen shot attempt. That's made winning the opening faceoff especially important, as the team that wins might have the puck for several minutes.

The problem, for at least a few teams, is their best faceoff guy isn't really someone you want out there in the sort of wide-open, end-to-end hockey that overtime can turn into. So, they send out the faceoff guy, with orders to win the opening draw and then get off the ice so somebody with a little more offensive flair can get out there.

Outside of overtime, the same concept can apply, although it's a little trickier. You'll sometimes see a team use the strategy on a defensive draw, although that really only works if it wins the draw. It could make sense on a neutral-zone draw late in a game, too.

Basically, if you see a guy take a faceoff and then vanish, you can assume he's been FOGO'd.

Trivia Answer

The player we were looking for was Peter Stastny. He was on the Czechoslovakian team in his first Olympics back in 1980, then was able to represent Slovakia by the time he returned in 1994. In between, he was part of Team Canada at the 1984 Canada Cup, as seen in the photo above. And his son Paul, despite being born in Canada, represented Team USA at the Olympics in 2010 and 2014.

(Stastny's other trivia claim-to-fame is that he was the guy who ranked second to Gretzky in NHL scoring in the 1980s. He's also one of the only players to score eight points in a game and made the cut in last week's Olympic roster-building game.)

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The Athletic / Georges Laraque was an NHL enforcer, but his 26-year-old hat trick lives on: Excerpt

By Julian McKenzie

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.

Georges Laraque is defined by many as one of the premier NHL enforcers of the 2000s. Hockeyfights.com, a website that tracks fights and allows fans to rate how good they were, says he's participated in 159 career fights — including preseason games.

"When I think of heavyweights, I think of a few guys, and you're at the top of the list," former NHL enforcer John Scott told Laraque on an episode of his "Pound for Pound with John Scott" podcast.

"I see you around on the circuits, and you're always this likable, loveable, big teddy bear. But when I played against you, I was terrified."

But sometimes, Laraque would rather push against that persona whenever asked by fans.

"I didn't like fighting," Laraque said. "But (even) if I didn't like it, I have to be the best at it, so I don't have to do it as much. Because people will fear me. That was my attitude.

"Am I proud that I beat people up? No. There's nothing to be proud of. The goal of hockey is to put the puck in the net. But that's the job. This is what I had to do to make the NHL."

Fighting an opponent clearly paled in comparison to the joy and jubilation he felt on the night of Feb. 21, 2000. One specific moment saw his physicality overshadowed by his finesse — a spin move — that led to him flying up the ice at Skyreach Centre after scoring his third goal of the night.

Read that again: His third goal of the night.

"Nobody's asking about it because nobody thinks that I've ever done one," Laraque said. "When somebody asks me what is my proudest moment in the NHL and I say I scored a hat trick, they're like, 'What? You scored an NHL hat trick?'"

Laraque beat Los Angeles Kings defenseman Aki Berg with that move before scoring past goaltender Stéphane Fiset, sending the big enforcer and the Edmonton Oilers' fan base into pandemonium. The Skyreach Centre goal siren in Edmonton blared as the Oiler skated in celebration, arms pointed to the sky. Not long after, the catchphrase of wrestling legend Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson echoed throughout the arena:

If you smell what the Rock is cooking?

"I skated faster than (Connor) McDavid ever did," Laraque said. "I was screaming. I was going nuts. I was yelling so much. I couldn't believe it."

The Oilers were coming off back-to-back losses against the rival Calgary Flames when the Kings came to town that February night. Laraque spent the game on the fourth line with center Jim Dowd and fellow forward Boyd Devereaux.

The enforcer's fists were needed in the opening period, but not to fight. Dowd unleashed a shot from near the blue line after taking a pass from Devereaux. Fiset made the initial save, but Laraque, parked in front of the net, whacked at the puck with his backhand and scored his fourth goal of the season.

After Kings forward Luc Robitaille tied the game in the second period, Laraque sprang into action again. Oilers defenseman Roman Hamrlík found the puck from the slot after it was lost in a pair of skates unbeknownst to a Kings defenseman. Hamrlík spun around and fired the puck on net, hitting Laraque before beating Fiset.

"Then I started to think about the impossible, something I would never thought I could achieve in the NHL: a hat trick," Laraque wrote in his autobiography. "I wanted that third goal, and so did my teammates. The crowd started chanting my name."

Late in the third period, the Kings pulled Fiset from their net in favor of an extra attacker. But Oilers head coach Kevin Lowe opted for more defensive-minded players to preserve the team's lead. Then, with 29 seconds to go, Oilers defenseman Janne Niinimaa seemingly iced the game with an empty-net goal. It should have ended Laraque's chances of earning his third goal of the night.

"And then (Lowe) puts the fourth line back out there," Laraque said.

Devereaux fished the puck from the boards with seconds to play and found Laraque, who captured the puck on his stick before spinning around Berg.

"I don't know why I did that," Laraque said. "I did a Denis Savard spin-o-rama in front of Berg.

"In my mind, I'm like, 'Oh, my God. How did I do that?'"



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The moment was so unexpected that Wayne Gretzky called Laraque to congratulate him.

"He said I need 49 more to break his record," Laraque said. "I'll never forget that night. It was unreal."

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The Athletic / Chris Pronger: This is when the Olympics get fun, but things also can flip fast

By Chris Pronger

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

There were a couple of years with Team Canada when we weren't sharp at the start of the Olympic tournament, and went on to win gold. I was also on a team that swept through the round-robin round in 1998 in Nagano, and we fell short of a medal.

This is the thing you have to keep in mind when you're talking about the round-robin stage of the Olympics. It just represents a good start, nothing else.

At this stage of the tournament, I see five teams with a path to winning gold. Canada has dominated. Slovakia looks like a threat. Finland looks gritty and hard-nosed, as usual. The United States and Sweden, though, haven't been as consistent. As a result, they look likely to match up against one another in the quarterfinals.

Sweden has been sleepy and out to lunch. They've honestly looked disinterested at times. They're better than they've played, but they're running out of time to prove that.

For the United States, it's obvious that they're one of the best teams in this tournament, but there were moments during round-robin play when I was watching them thinking they needed everybody to get their s— together.

It looked like they felt their way through the first two games and then really got back to their identity of being in your face, and playing physical with an edge, on Sunday against Germany. After looking slow and deliberate in their first two games of the tournament, suddenly against Germany, the U.S. looked more like the team we saw at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

This can be the tough part about trying to figure out this tournament, because underdog teams do hang around.

When you face some of those nations that aren't counted among the traditional hockey powers, those players have a lot of pride and swagger. They're playing for their country, they're playing for honor, and you can see them doing everything in their power to try and knock off a Goliath on the world stage.

The problem for those teams, and we've seen it over the past week in Milan, is that they just don't have the depth to skate with Canada and the USA, and with Finland and Sweden, too.

Especially Canada and the USA, they just come at you with wave after wave of pace and pressure. It's nonstop. For the countries with less depth and fewer NHL players, they wear down and start to look a bit exhausted toward the latter part of the second period. That's when the

United States and Canada start to put their foot on their opponent's throat.

In the elimination round, it's different. The margins get fine. Think about the game between the USA and Denmark this past Saturday. Denmark got that 4-3 goal on a muffin shot from the point late in the second period, and they were in that game until the midway point of the third.

That's a dangerous scenario once you get into the elimination round. You get a hot goalie, a team that won't go away and a bunch of motivated players who are willing to defend like crazy, and suddenly wild s— can happen when it's a do-or-die, Game 7 environment.

We'll have to see how things come together, and which of these teams can really peak at the right time.

Because it can flip fast. I've been concerned with what I've seen from Sweden in this tournament, but then I see on Monday that they're changing up their lines and defense pairs ahead of the qualification-round game against Latvia.

I find that interesting. These are the best players in the world, but slotting them and pairing them with the appropriate linemate or defense partner matters more than people think.

It's about finding the right fit. Sweden's defense hasn't looked fast enough to handle the dump-and-chase game in the round robin, but if you suddenly have Gustav Forsling and Rasmus Dahlin as your top pair, I think that changes things immensely.

There's also some matchups that players have been identified for. You watch closely now and you'll see players playing in groups of five. So you're looking at matchups and looking at maximizing the talent you've got.

For Sweden, we all know that Victor Hedman hasn't played a ton of games leading up to this tournament, coming off of injury, and he's not 25 anymore. Suddenly in the elimination round, it looks like he's going to start on the third pair.

I can relate to that. I played on the third pair for Canada in 2010 when I was 35.

At that stage of your career, somehow, it still isn't easier to take on a lesser role. Even for your country. You just want to play and that never goes away. You always want to play. Of course, the big difference between me playing third pair in 2010, and Hedman right now, is that I didn't go into that Olympic tournament coming off of a lengthy absence due to injury.

Still, I remember going into the Olympics in Vancouver and I felt like I was recovering from the compressed NHL schedule in the round robin. I was tired. It took me a bit of time to recover and get back up to speed.

Putting Hedman on the third pair doesn't mean that he's not going to be crucial for Sweden. It's just about putting guys into a better position to succeed. He will be a matchup nightmare for the opposition.

Now, going into the quarterfinals, they won't be projecting him to play a ton against Auston Matthews and Jack Eichel. He'll probably be matching up more against Jack Hughes and Vincent Trocheck's lines instead of the top two lines.

They needed to figure something out. Setting up Hedman to play on the third pair, he's going to be fresher and that plays to his advantage. Once he starts feeling the tempo, you can start ramping up his minutes again. They can move guys around situationally, if they want to.

For the USA, if they do meet Sweden in the quarterfinals, there's no question that they're a different beast than the competition the USA has faced so far. That lineup is all NHL players, they've got a system and we'll see how their goaltending holds up. They're a real threat.



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The one thing Sweden doesn't have is a stud center like Team USA has. That Leo Carlsson injury really killed them there. They don't have the centers with the sort of size and skill to really lean on opponents, and I think that's a deficit that'll matter against a team like the United States.

This is where you have to be careful making bold predictions about how the tournament will go based off of the round robin. Canada and the United States look like the best teams, sure, and we should give them their flowers, but we need to temper our expectations just a little bit because they haven't played anybody of substance yet. They haven't played anybody with a roster that's filled with NHL players, and that's going to be the gauge of how ready for prime time they really are.

At this stage of the tournament, teams can switch up their lineup and find another gear. Or teams can get too sloppy.

When you have a blowout game like the one Canada had against France, for example, I have mixed emotions. A game like that can build your confidence, because you get to go into the elimination round having run over an opponent.

Nothing is guaranteed, though. Those games can also make you a bit loose, a bit too comfortable, and you can get away from playing your system.

Canada hasn't been tested yet. So as great as they've looked, we have to be honest that we don't have answers to some of the questions we had before this tournament started. How good is their defense corps, really? How good is their goaltending?

One thing I think we do know is that Canada's top line — when Nathan MacKinnon gets stacked with Macklin Celebrini and Connor McDavid — is going to be a brutal matchup for anybody. I mean, that's just crazy. That line is the personification of speed and skill.

I have been blown away by what we're seeing from Celebrini right now. For a 19-year-old — who was eligible to compete for Canada at the World Juniors this year — to play at that pace and with that doggedness and that level of skill, it's very impressive. He's not getting caught up in the moment or the spectacle of the Olympics. Maybe after the game he can be in awe of the environment around him, but when he's playing, he's just so dialed.

He's so quick that he's making something happen almost every shift with effort, and with how agile and creative he is in the corners. He's taking the puck to the dirty areas and his competitive motor and drive is through the roof.

If you notice, Celebrini is always in motion. If he doesn't have the puck, he's working to get it back. Or he's working to find quiet ice, and that makes space for his linemates because suddenly he's a decoy. Man, I love watching how unselfish his game is.

There's two things I want to say about Celebrini's performance at this Olympics. The first is that this isn't an "emergence."

Maybe he was emerging last year in his rookie campaign, but now he's showing everybody that he has arrived. He's fourth in the NHL in scoring and is already performing like one of the best players in the game. Maybe we need to start thinking of him in that regard. He is a superstar now!

The second thing is that he may be young and humble and he might carry himself like he's just a likable young player, but you have to be a killer to play the way he plays.

He plays like a guy that wants to win every shift, who wants to impose his will on you every time he's on the ice. That sort of mentality, it doesn't just happen. He's clearly working tirelessly in the offseason to hone his craft. It's obvious that he's willing to do whatever it takes, in the gym and on the ice. To match that elite skill level with an elite work ethic, that doesn't come around very often. When it does, you've got a recipe for greatness.

It takes a lot to crack Rick Celebrini's composure after years among the best of the best. His son's Olympics journey is more than enough.

From Celebrini's play — not his "emergence" — to getting the No. 1 seed, for Canada this tournament has gone as well as you could've hoped for so far.

The biggest question mark is their health and their goaltending. I don't know how Josh Morrissey is doing, but his absence means that Canada can't afford to lose another defenseman. Then there's the big goalie question, one that remains even though the play of the Canadian goaltenders wasn't really a story for them at all in the round robin.

I think it should stay that way. For me, Canada has come this far with Jordan Binnington. At this point, you've pretty much already said that we're going to live and die by this guy. He was able to rise to the challenge last year, so why would he not be able to do that now? The guy is a Stanley Cup champion. He's the 4 Nations-winning goaltender. That should be enough.

I know what the data and the analytics say, but it's not as if Canada's other goaltenders have taken the net with a Vezina- or MVP-level season. If that were the case, maybe it would be different. Since it isn't, you've got to stick with the Cup winner who won the 4 Nations for you. I mean, what are we even talking about here?

The truth is, there's five teams that I think have a path to winning gold: Canada, the United States, Sweden, Finland and Slovakia. All of these teams have some question marks between the pipes.

Canadian fans aren't going to feel comfortable with their goaltending until they win, or they don't. That's just how it goes. The Slovakian goaltender has had a couple of great games, but he's untested. I'm not even sure who Sweden will start once the elimination round begins. Juuse Saaras and Connor Hellebuyck haven't been their normal selves for their NHL teams this season.

What it boils down to is how these teams perform when the stakes are highest and when the elite players start to elevate in that elimination-game environment — when one soft goal at the wrong time can kill you.

To this point, we've had a chance to watch some fun hockey. Watching Italy and Denmark and Latvia, playing for their countries and for the opportunity they're getting at the Olympics, I love that part of this tournament.

Now we get to the games that really matter. The United States will probably play the toughest quarterfinal game in these Olympics, and we'll see if they can continue to be the physical aggressor and keep running teams over when opponents are stacked with NHL players.

We'll see if Canada just has too much depth and too much speed with their dump and chase, forecheck, grinding style, even for a team as good as Finland to handle in the semifinal — should that be the inevitable matchup.

Anything can happen in single-game elimination, but the two North American giants have been head and shoulders above the other teams thus far.

I think, for the good of the sport, we're hoping we get to see the United States and Canada play with gold on the line. As the real tournament begins, however, Finland, Slovak

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The Athletic / Tales of Matthew and Brady Tkachuk's adventures at the 2006 Olympics: 'It was a blast'



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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By Michael Russo

MILAN – This is actually the second Olympics that Matthew and Brady Tkachuk remember representing the United States.

In these 2026 Milan Cortina Winter Games, the Mike Sullivan-described “heart and soul” of the U.S. Olympic team have combined for two goals and six assists in three victories, helping to lead the Americans into the quarterfinals Wednesday night against the winner of Tuesday’s Sweden-Latvia game.

But 20 years ago, Matthew and Brady were also in Italy for the 2006 Olympics, only 80 miles away in Torino. As 8- and 6-year-olds covered in red, white and blue, they often had American flags painted on their faces. They were running around the Olympic village, just like they are now.

“Not sure how we got into the Olympic village,” Brady Tkachuk recalled, “but we somehow did.”

Matthew Tkachuk, almost 22 months older than Brady, remembers how it happened.

His dad, U.S. hockey Hall of Famer Keith Tkachuk, was in his fourth and final Olympics. He got two passes for Matthew and Brady and took them to tour the village one day.

“I don’t know if you can even do that anymore,” Matthew Tkachuk told The Athletic. “We buzzed around the whole village and just literally tried to take a picture with every single person we could that we knew of, whether it was hockey or anybody else. I remember we got one with Sasha Cohen, the figure skater. I don’t know why I remember that. We went right up to speed skaters and skiers, bobsledders and lugers and curlers, and of course hockey players.

“We have a really cool picture with (Alex) Ovechkin and (Evgeni) Malkin when they were like 19 or 20 years old. That’s still hung up in both of our rooms back in St. Louis. I know we’re in the Olympics, but that is probably my favorite memory I have of the Olympics. I actually don’t even remember any of my dad’s games. I remember being there and making signs and wearing our flag proudly, but the games, I don’t even remember.”

“The Ovi and Geno picture is the moment right there that stands out to me the most,” Brady added.

This time around, Matthew and Brady continue to go around the village and introduce themselves to every athlete, asking them who they are and what they do.

There are figure skaters and speed skaters everywhere, and of course, hockey players.

“I mean, it brings you back,” Matthew, rooming with Brady in what they’ve dubbed “Club Tkachuk,” said. “I never went to college, but it’s like a college dorm experience and it’s all of us on the same floor. Then we have the men’s and women’s team in the same building. We have a hangout area and then just every American athlete has their own separate lounge area and it’s just been absolutely incredible so far. Trying to meet and say hi to every American athlete that I’ve seen so far. I know a lot of them are competing and stuff, but we’ll try to meet the rest of them for sure. They’ve been amazing.”

It has been a blast for the Tkachuks to get to know the talented women’s national team, who will be going for their third all-time gold medal Thursday night against Canada.

But there was just something special about that time running around Torino as kids.

“I don’t remember what events we went to, though,” Brady said. “But it was a blast.”

“I remember that they had a really cool USA Hockey House that we’d go to after I would say every game and hang out with all the families,” said Matthew. “And it was just a way to celebrate each game. That was really cool. I remember they had video games for the kids. We didn’t get to see our dad a lot, but that was always a way to see him.”

One of the biggest memories Matthew has was actually a scary one.

“My uncle Kevin, my dad’s brother, took me up north a few hours to ski,” Matthew recalled. “My mom, Brady, maybe my grandpa stayed at the bottom. Well, me and my uncle got lost on the slopes and it took us three or four hours to find the base. There was no phone service or I don’t even know if they had phones there, but I remember that was crazy.

The Tkachuk brothers posing with Alex Ovechkin and Evgeni Malkin at the 2006 Games. (Courtesy of the Tkachuk family)

“But also while we were skiing, there was an event going on there, too. So I remember that was just a crazy moment like, ‘Oh my God, we’re lost, but now we kind of found where we are by skiing right next to a slalom event.’ That was pretty insane.

“Finally, we found our way down. I remember being nervous that we were lost, not that I was going to die with my uncle on the mountain though. But thank God we found that Olympic event and basically wound up skiing down the mountain next to it.”

Fittingly, it was Brady, the Americans’ best player at last year’s 4 Nations Face-Off, who scored the first goal of this Olympic tournament for the Americans. Matthew assisted on it, but Brady skated away from him for the celly.

“I was honestly like, ‘Are you really gonna celebrate away from me right now?’” Matthew said. “Then I grabbed him. To assist on your brother’s goal, the first goal, to be the first goal for our team. A memory that’s gonna last a lifetime, that’s for sure.”

“It’s a pretty cool feeling scoring for your country,” Brady said. “You get so much energy from this crowd and feel the support and it’s truly been an amazing experience.”

It’s well known how proud Matthew and Brady are to be American. It was instilled in them as kids watching their dad star for the United States in several international tournaments. Keith Tkachuk also has the second-most goals in NHL history for a U.S.-born player.

“We’ve got some incredible support from people across the whole country. Probably all over the world out here supporting us,” Matthew said. “We hear those USA chants. You can’t ever explain the feeling that you feel on the ice or on the bench. It’s like the most incredible thing you could ever imagine. That’s why we do what we do.”

“It’s truly bigger than ourselves,” added Brady. “We’re playing for the flag.”

Keith Tkachuk, pictured here with his three children in Torino, said he would give up his four Olympic experiences to see his boys with a gold medal around their necks. (Courtesy of the Tkachuk family)

Sullivan said Matthew and Brady “personify what it means to be an American, with their fierce competitive spirit. I thought they were the catalyst for our team becoming the team in that sense of the word (at the 4 Nations).”

There’s a sense of pride that Matthew and Brady are a set of brothers striving for the Olympic gold medal that eluded their father. They live across the hall at the Village from the Hughes brothers, Quinn and Jack, two of their longtime best buddies.



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Before they were NHLers and Olympians, Quinn Hughes and Brady Tkachuk were teenage roommates who soon became inseparable.

Keith says he'd give up his four Olympic experiences to see his boys with a gold medal around their necks by late Sunday afternoon.

First things first: they have to get through the quarters.

"To be able to do this at this high a stage, I mean, nobody ever thought when they were young kids that something like this would be possible," Keith said. "I'm just so proud of the boys. They worked their butts off to get here to this point. And it's really fun to see them doing something they love to do, getting compensated really well and having a positive effect, both on and off the ice. And growing the game, especially for USA Hockey. I just look back at those days at the U.S. National Team Development Program and I just pinch myself how lucky it was for them to grow up in that environment.

"Hopefully they get a chance to win a gold medal."

And how cool would that be? Twenty years after two proud American children got to spend the 2006 Olympics with their dad so close to where they are now in Italy.

"Who would have thought?" said Matthew. "A dream. It really is."

The Athletic LOADED: 02.18.2026

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The Athletic / Norway is a Winter Olympic giant. Why isn't it better at ice hockey?

By Peter Baugh

The Athletic has live coverage of the 2026 Winter Olympics.

As a teenager, Mats Zuccarello travelled from his native Norway to Sweden for a hockey tournament. He stopped in a video store, where he found a VHS tape with highlights from the Colorado Avalanche's 2001 Stanley Cup run.

"I watched it probably 400 times," said the 38-year-old Minnesota Wild forward, who has played 942 NHL games — more than 700 more than his next-closest countryman.

It's fitting that Norway's greatest hockey player found one of his biggest sources of inspiration while away from home.

Norway and Sweden border each other for more than 1,000 miles, together forming the Scandinavian peninsula. The northeastern part of Norway curls around Sweden and borders Finland, too. All three are Nordic countries with populations above 5 million and strong winter sport pedigrees — Norway most of all. Though its population is only 5.6 million people, it is a Winter Olympic behemoth, sitting atop the medal table as of Monday:

Norway also finished first in 2022, 10 medals ahead of Germany, a country with nearly 15 times as many people.

Yet in ice hockey, a quintessential winter sport and one at which Finland and Sweden excel, the Norwegians lag. Only three Norwegian players — Zuccarello, the Tampa Bay Lightning's Emil Lilleberg and Detroit Red Wings prospect Michael Brandsegg-Nygård — have appeared in NHL games this season, compared to 95 Swedes and 46 Finns. Norway failed to qualify for both the men's and women's Winter Olympics hockey tournaments, which Petter Salsten, the general secretary of the

Norwegian Ice Hockey Association, called "a sad thing." The hockey association could have used a big international appearance to promote the sport to younger players.

According to the IIHF, the Finnish and Swedish hockey federations both have at least 65,000 registered players. Norway, meanwhile, has 14,742 licensed players, per its ice hockey association's most recent numbers. Soccer, handball and skiing are all more popular.

"It's a small sport back home," Zuccarello said.

From an outside lens, Norway's lack of hockey success doesn't make much sense, especially considering its status in other winter sports. It's in a region with excellent hockey nearby. Sweden has a larger population, but Finland doesn't. What's stopping Norway from having a larger hockey presence?

Explanations go back decades. The reasons usually are cultural — success in other sports has led to their popularity rising in Norway — and economic. Geography is another factor: Norway is more mountainous than Sweden and Finland, which is conducive to skiing, a sport it dominates.

"In Norway, we have a lot of role models, but (they are in) a lot of other sports: cross-country skiing and stuff like that," said the 60-year-old Salsten, who represented Norway three times in Olympic hockey. "We have maybe a tougher competition in recruiting the athletes."

Perhaps the easiest way to see it all manifest is the country's lack of rinks. Norway has 54 indoor rinks, per its hockey association. There are more rinks within 100 kilometers (about 62 miles) of Stockholm than in the entirety of Norway. Sweden and Finland both have at least 300 indoor rinks, per the IIHF.

By the numbers

Norway

5.652 million

14,742

54

3

Sweden

10.688 million

76,841

366

95

Finland

5.627 million

66,078

300

46

(Sources: IIHF and country federations)

Zuccarello blamed the Norwegian government for the lack of rinks, calling it "poor management" in an April interview with The Athletic. Most of Norway's rinks are in the southern part of the country, many centered around Oslo, the capital. Elsewhere, rinks are far more sparse — especially in the north — which Zuccarello believes leads to the country losing out on players.

Rinks are costly not only to build but also to maintain. Norway has added only seven new rinks in the past 10 years, per its ice hockey association.



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The rink disparity's roots go back to well before the countries' current allocation of resources. The Swedish hockey federation was founded in 1912, more than two decades before Norway founded its own in 1934. Sports pedagogy professor Josef Fahlén, who works at Umeå University in Sweden, said that Sweden's milling and mining companies supported hockey's growth dating back to at least the 1930s. The country's government also invested in the construction of sports facilities to create jobs before World War II, according to Fahlén.

Germany occupied Norway during World War II, which affected the country's economy and likely influenced some of the decisions it made in the war's aftermath.

"They had to focus on rebuilding their country while we in Sweden could focus on less-pressing issues and could perhaps thereby afford to invest in something as mundane as sports facilities," Fahlén said.

In Norway, hockey also had to contend with other popular winter sports, including skiing, for people's interests. In a 2025 article

Published in the journal "Sport in Society," Christian Tolstrup Jensen wrote that in the pre-war period, hockey was limited to only the areas around Oslo and Trondheim. Meanwhile, Sweden and Finland had clubs in cities across their countries.

Both nations got a head start on Norway in terms of infrastructure and cultural relevance. That growth continued in the decades after World War II. Norway, meanwhile, invested more in other sports facilities.

"Of course it is a choice, but it also is a reflection of what's already there," said Ørnulf Seippel, a sociology of sport professor at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences.

Norwegian hockey participation grew in the 1970s when "shorter work hours and an increase in welfare made the number of members and facilities boom," according to Jensen's research. It was too little too late for Norway to compete with its neighbors: Swedish and Finnish hockey was already more established at that point.

Now, Norwegian hockey is much more comparable to that of Denmark, its southern neighbor across the North Sea. The Danes, though, have more recent momentum, at least on the men's side. Denmark beat Norway in 2024 to qualify for the 2026 Olympics. The game still rankles Brandsegg-Nygård, who said he remembers the 4-1 loss "as if it was yesterday." The next summer, Denmark upset Sidney Crosby and the Canadians at the 2025 World Championships. At this year's Olympics, the Danes went 1-2 in group play, beating Latvia 4-2. If they beat the Czech Republic on Tuesday, they'll advance to the quarterfinals, where No. 1 Canada awaits.

The Norwegians still have reasons for optimism. Salsten said Norway's number of total hockey participants is higher than ever, and he views being a team that can compete for quarterfinal berths at international tournaments, much like Denmark, as a realistic goal. He's also encouraged by the country's growth in women's hockey. The women qualified for the top division of the World Championships in 2025 for the first time since 1997. (Norway was relegated back to the Division I World Championships for 2026.) Salsten views the women's hockey ladder as potentially easier to climb than the men's.

"Aside from Hockey Canada and USA Hockey, I think it's reachable in the next five, six, seven years to do something there," he said.

It's a do-or-die scenario on Tuesday as teams — including powerhouse Sweden — face off in the Qualifying Playoffs at the Olympics.

On the men's side, Zuccarello takes pride in his country's 19-year streak of appearing at the World Championships, and two Norwegians — Brandsegg-Nygård (Detroit) and Stian Solberg (Anaheim) — were drafted in the first round of the 2024 NHL Draft. Toronto drafted another Norwegian, Tinus Luc Koblar, in the second round in 2025.

"Hopefully, younger kids back home can look at that and see they can be good even though you're from Norway," Brandsegg-Nygård said.

Brandsegg-Nygård said the average Norwegian person knows only about one hockey player: Zuccarello. With some of the young players emerging, perhaps that can change in the coming years, even if Norway never has as many stars as other hockey hotbeds.

"We're not in a position to challenge the big neighbors here in Nordic countries like Sweden and Finland, but we know our spot in the hierarchy in a way," Salsten said. "We're moving forward all the time."

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The Athletic / Ranking the 14 potential Olympic men's hockey gold medal matchups

By James Mirtle and Sean McIndoe

With all 12 teams technically still alive in the Olympic men's hockey tournament entering Tuesday's qualification games, there are a huge number of possibilities ahead for the medal rounds.

As of this moment, however, there are only 14 gold-medal game matchups, however, that are plausible — which we're defining as odds of 1 percent or greater.

We'll acknowledge up front that a huge upset or two could add some chaos to the bracket and potentially serve up an unexpected outcome. Some of these teams listed below could even get eliminated early in the qualification period, perhaps by the time you read this.

But we're boldly still going to go ahead and rank these 14 possibilities — from most compelling to least — and then cross our fingers that this tournament finishes with a bang.

(For more on how the bracket works in the elimination and medal rounds, see our explainer of the format. And for more projections and odds, Dom Luszczyzyn has a great breakdown here that he's updating throughout the tournament.)

1. Canada vs. United States

Chance it happens: 44 percent

Mirtle rank: 1

McIndoe rank: 1

We don't have to overthink things here. While hockey fans around the world are rooting for their own countries, there's no doubt what the NHL is hoping for at this tournament. And while it took a few years back in the Canada Cup era, it's fair to say that these two teams really do represent the best rivalry in the sport right now, complete with some very legitimate bad blood.

Last year's 4 Nations Face-Off was a success beyond just about anyone's expectations, with Team Canada and Team USA providing a pair of classics. While there's probably some element of fatigue in other countries at having to hear about this rivalry as if it's the only one in the sport, it's still fair to call this matchup the ideal ending of this tournament.

And it's clearly the most likely one to happen, with these countries seeded 1-2 and the brackets lined up for a memorable showdown. — McIndoe



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2. Finland vs. Sweden

Chance it happens: 4.3 percent

Mirtle rank: 2

McIndoe rank: 2

These longtime rivals would be serving up a 20-years-later rematch of the 2006 gold medal game won by Sweden off a Nick Lidstrom winner in the third period. Battles between the Finns and Swedes are always great theater, regardless of their level of NHL talent on paper, as they always find a way to close the gap and play tight, heated games.

Finland's gutsy win over the Swedes during the round robin led to a lot of the bracket chaos that has unfolded, ultimately bumping Sweden down to the No. 7 seed and giving them a grueling path that likely goes through the U.S. and Canada to a medal.

It would be fitting if they then both clawed their way back to play for gold, beating the world's best teams to get to face one another in a big game, yet again. — Mirtle

3. Canada vs. Finland

Chance it happens: 15.7 percent

Mirtle rank: 3

McIndoe rank: 4

You could really take your pick between these next two entries, as both would have similar appeal: tons of NHL talent, an underdog facing stiff but far from insurmountable odds, a North American powerhouse facing a gold-or-failure ultimatum, and most of the rest of the world rooting for Team Finland.

I went with the Canadian matchup over the U.S. one for a couple of reasons. First, I'm a raging homer. And second, in an NHL season in which you could argue that the two best teams have been the Colorado Avalanche and Dallas Stars, this would be a phenomenal appetizer for an eventual playoff showdown. Team Canada has Cale Makar and Nathan MacKinnon, while Team Finland has... well, Team Finland pretty much has the entire Stars roster.

As an added bonus, when the entire crowd is chanting "A-HO," you wouldn't be sure if it was directed at Finland star Sebastian Aho or if it was because Tom Wilson just flipped out again. — McIndoe

4. USA vs. Finland

Chance it happens: 9.3 percent

Mirtle rank: 4

McIndoe rank: 5

We always talk about the Finns as the underdogs, but they also have the most medals (four) of any country during the previous five NHL-attended Olympics, with one silver and three bronze. The U.S., meanwhile, has two silvers total, going home empty-handed three times (1998, 2006 and 2014).

The Finns are also the defending Olympic champs after winning gold in 2022 without NHL players there. Winning gold here, however, in a best-on-best tournament, would be a massive cultural moment for Finland and a monumental accomplishment for one of the most passionate hockey countries in the world. The Americans, meanwhile, are searching for their first Olympic gold since the Miracle on Ice 46 years ago, one of the peak moments in Games history and their own touchstone moment.

That's a lot on the line, to be sure. — Mirtle

5. USA vs. Germany

Chance it happens: 3.7 percent

Mirtle rank: 6

McIndoe rank: 3

Their meeting in the round robin was legitimately spicy, with high stakes and some notable trash-talking. It also wasn't especially competitive, at least after a tight first period. But if we're going to get a David versus Goliath matchup in the final, this would be the best of the bunch.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Hot mic catches Matthew Tkachuk's taunt of Leon Draisaitl: 'Always the bridesmaid'

If there's one thing Tkachuk has learned, it's to throw everything he has at Draisaitl. Including words.

Mix in Leon Draisaitl trying to get his revenge for the bridesmaid thing and the Tkachuk brothers gleefully playing the villain role, and it's not hard to figure out who most of the rest of the world would be rooting for. And while you might assume Germany wouldn't have much chance against a stacked American squad, remember that in this scenario, they've already beaten some very good teams in the elimination phase to get here.

In a single-elimination tournament, sometimes it's just about who gets hot at the right time. Watching it happen to a Cinderella team could be all sorts of fun, especially against a suitable final boss such as Team USA. — McIndoe

6. Canada vs. Germany

Chance it happens: 2.7 percent

Mirtle rank: 5

McIndoe rank: 8

Sure, the odds are going to be heavily stacked against the Germans, given they have only eight NHLers — and that's if we include AHLers Josh Samanski and Lukas Reichel. Canada, meanwhile, has 400 to choose from. But the fact you'll have Draisaitl leading this squad up against his Edmonton Oilers teammate and close friend Connor McDavid with the uber-favorites certainly adds a nice storyline to this one.

If you love an underdog matchup, it doesn't get much bigger in the sport than this. The Germans have been making strides internationally for years and have a vibrant domestic league with passionate fans, but a win in Milan could catapult interest in the sport and player development in the country to the next level. — Mirtle

7. Canada vs. Slovakia

Chance it happens: 3.8 percent

Mirtle rank: 7

McIndoe rank: 9

What more can you say about Juraj Slafkovský's incredible Olympics? The 21-year-old's three goals and six points through three games put him second in tournament scoring and have been instrumental in getting the underdog Slovaks the third seed after the round robin and a far easier path through to the medal games.

Watching him try to lead his team up against powerhouse Canada for the gold medal would be great theater, especially after Slafkovský has arrived as one of the best young players in the NHL this season with a rising Montreal Canadiens club. The Slovaks are a little thin on NHL talent after some lean development years, but there's another wave coming — and it's clear who's going to be leading the charge for the next couple decades. — Mirtle

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT



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Juraj Slafkovský has resurrected Slovak hockey, but is success sustainable?

Is Slovak hockey back? Or is this a fluke, a once-in-a-lifetime group of young stars?

8. USA vs. Switzerland

Chance it happens: 2.2 percent

Mirtle rank: 10

McIndoe rank: 7

As James reminded me, this would be a rematch of the most recent World Championships final. Team USA won that one, but Switzerland took home their second straight silver medal at the event. These guys are the real deal, and having them make an appearance in the gold medal game would be an emphatic way to announce that to the rest of the hockey world once and for all.

Would they have a chance at beating Team USA? Sure. They'd be massive underdogs, but it's hockey, and it's winner-take-all. Cheering for an upset is a cherished part of sports fandom, so you could absolutely get on board here. And we'd also get some nice NHL-themed subplots built in, including Jack Hughes vs. Nico Hischier and Timo Meier, plus Team Switzerland playing for injured teammate Kevin Fiala.

(Plus, if you're a bitter Canadian and you're willing to drink heavily enough on a Sunday morning, you could squint and tell yourself those red-and-white guys are Team Canada.) — McIndoe

9. Finland vs. Czech Republic

Chance it happens: 1.2 percent

Mirtle rank: 12

McIndoe rank: 6

Maybe this is the old man in me talking, but I could live with a matchup between two teams from what we used to call the hockey world's Big Six or Big Seven nations. The Czechs are one of only three countries to ever win gold at an NHL Olympics, and the Finns have won more medals than any other country. (Yes, including Canada.) If you're not familiar with their game, as the kids say, that's on you.

Would this matchup be a tough sell in North America? Maybe. It's certainly not the one Gary Bettman and friends are hoping for. But let's be honest: Most American and Canadian fans would probably admit that if their team isn't in the final, they don't want the other guys to make it either. And in a world in which everyone over here is freaking out about Team USA and Team Canada both getting knocked out early, it might be kind of fun to sit down and watch a classic battle between two teams that feature plenty of elite NHL talent.

There might even still be time to get Jaromir Jagr and Teemu Selanne over to drop the ceremonial puck. Or suit up and play. — McIndoe

10. Germany vs. Sweden

Chance it happens: 1.0 percent

Mirtle rank: 9

McIndoe rank: 11

There would need to be some big upsets for these two teams to link up for gold, with both nations knocking off giants in earlier rounds. But the fact the probability exists at all speaks to how much the bracket has been disrupted already with Germany (along with Slovakia and Switzerland) ranked ahead of powerhouse Sweden after the round robin.

Draisaitl and Moritz Seider would again have their hands full in this matchup, but what adds to the intrigue here is that Germany might be

more likely to pull off the upset given how uneven the Swedes have looked in the tournament. And if they've felled one giant to get to the final, why not another? — Mirtle

11. Canada vs. Switzerland

Chance it happens: 3.8 percent

Mirtle rank: 8

McIndoe rank: 12

We watched this one once already in the round robin, and the results were just OK. Led by Roman Josi and Hischier, the plucky Swiss hung with Canada's star-studded lineup for the game's first half, but the talent gap was evident in what became a 5-1 win for the Canadians.

Plus, Switzerland will be missing a big piece without Fiala, who was forced out of the tournament with a leg injury suffered in that game against Canada when Wilson landed on him.

The underdog story helps give this rematch some intrigue, especially given Switzerland's success at World Championships in recent years, but not enough to bump this one any higher. — Mirtle

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

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

Plus the mystery of Filip Forsberg's ice time, the young stars leading the American women's team, and the Canadian men's nuclear line.

12. Slovakia vs. Sweden

Chance it happens: 1.1 percent

Mirtle rank: 10

McIndoe rank: 13

After everything Team Sweden would have been through to get here, including injuries and the toughest possible path to the final, it would feel weird to see them emerge as the heavy favorites in a gold medal game.

I'm honestly not sure if that helps or hurts the appeal of this matchup, since it would be awfully tough to root against either side. I suppose there's something to be said for just sitting back and enjoying a high-stakes hockey game. And besides, watching Rasmus Dahlin battle it out with Slafkovský will be good practice for the next decade of Atlantic Division finals. — McIndoe

13. Sweden vs. Czech Republic

Chance it happens: 1.1 percent

Mirtle rank: 14

McIndoe rank: 10

Keep in mind the path that each team would have taken to get here, which would include Sweden beating Team USA and the Czechs beating Canada. If this is the matchup we end up with, nobody would be able to say these teams hadn't earned it.

Mix in the star power on both sides, especially Sweden, and a lot of what I wrote about a potential Finland/Czech Republic matchup would apply here, too. And there's probably just enough separation between the two teams that you could talk yourself into the Czechs as a fun underdog story. Or maybe you'd root for Sweden, which has had to overcome some tough injury luck. Or maybe you'd just sit back and remember that the combination of high-stakes hockey without a strong rooting interest can be an amazing watch. — McIndoe

14. Switzerland vs. Sweden

Chance it happens: 1.2 percent



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Mirtle rank: 13

McIndoe rank: 14

Maybe we're not being creative enough, but we both struggled to identify a reason this would make for a compelling final for a global audience.

That said, there is a budding rivalry here in international play. The Swiss consider Sweden a bit of a nemesis, given they've had a lot of crushing defeats against them over the years, including losses in the 2013 and 2018 gold medal games at the World Championships. Perhaps a rematch with Olympic gold on the line would increase the visibility of that rivalry — and further showcase how far Swiss hockey has come in recent years. — Mirtle

The Athletic LOADED: 02.18.2026

1379595 Websites

ESPN / Picks for the 2026 Olympic men's hockey medal round bracket - ESPN

Greg Wyshynski is ESPN's senior NHL writer.

The United States and Canada are on opposite sides of the 2026 Olympic men's hockey tournament bracket, meaning their next battle would have to be for the gold medal.

Will that happen? Now that the qualification round is over, the road there is a lot tougher for one of them than the other.

Here's how I see the Olympic men's medal round shaking out, with one big upset and some great hockey to be witnessed. Stats are courtesy of HockeyStats.com unless otherwise noted.

Let's see if there will be a Canada vs. U.S. party ... or if another country will play spoiler.

No. 1 Canada vs. No. 8 Czechia

Martin Necas had a great comment after the Czechs won their qualification round game against Denmark: "We let them win the first one because we knew we were not going to win two in a row against Canada."

Now that's the spirit!

Necas has been awesome for Czechia. The Colorado Avalanche winger's seven points through four games ties him with Jaromir Jagr (seven in 2006) for the second most by a Czech player in a single Olympic tournament. He's one point behind Martin Straka (eight in 2006) for the record. The question is whether Necas, or any of his teammates, will generate a goal against Canada, because even one would be an improvement over their first meeting.

Canada shut out Czechia 5-0 in the opening game of Group A. The Czechs played them tough for 19 minutes, 54 seconds before Macklin Celebrini scored on that perfect tip of a Cale Makar shot to break their will at the end of the first period. Eventually, it was all Canada, outshooting the Czechs 14-3 in the third period.

It has been interesting to see how the Czechs have evolved since that loss. Coach Radim Rulik loaded up his top line with their three best scorers in the opening game: Necas, center Tomas Hertl (Vegas Golden Knights) and winger David Pastrnak (Boston Bruins). In their qualification-round win over Denmark, Rulik had each on their own line. Pastrnak's line with captain Roman Cervenka produced a goal, as did

Necas' line with David Kampf. Necas also scored his second power-play goal of the tournament with the same one-timer blast from the circle. If nothing else, this Czech team is now better balanced.

Their defense corps is filled with NHL veterans, but not much in the way of offensive potency -- there's a reason why the Canadians hit Filip Hronek every chance they had in their first matchup. Goalie Lukas Dostal made 24 saves against Denmark and held his own against Canada for a good portion. The Anaheim Ducks' netminder has what it takes to steal a game in the Olympics. To do so against Team Canada's preposterously deep group of forwards, which include the tournament's leading scorer in Connor McDavid (nine points in three games), would be the hockey equivalent of robbing the vault of the Bellagio, the Mirage and the MGM Grand on a fight night.

WINNER: Canada. Fans with long memories might shudder at Canada playing the Czechs, who famously eliminated the Canadians in a medal round shootout in 1998, the first Olympics with NHL players. History will not repeat itself, even if Necas & Co. have lulled Canada into a false sense of security.

No. 2 United States vs. No. 7 Sweden

The Swedes have been trending in a scary direction for the Americans over the past two games. They took over their game against Slovakia over the last two periods in the group-play finale, earning a qualification round date against Latvia. And then they dispatched Latvia with relative ease to set up perhaps the Americans' toughest challenge as the U.S. looks to earn a rematch with Canada.

The Swedes have scorers who can be opportunistic if not overwhelming in the same way Canada and the U.S. are. Adrian Kempe (Los Angeles Kings), William Nylander (Toronto Maple Leafs) and Mika Zibanejad (New York Rangers) are all adept at finding the back of the net. Elias Pettersson has been great, in contrast with his regular season with the Vancouver Canucks.

Where the Americans have the advantage is at center, where Sweden really misses having a player such as Leo Carlsson, who missed the Olympics because of injury.

The biggest concern for Team USA in this draw is Sweden's defense, which is second only to the Americans in quality depth. Victor Hedman (Tampa Bay Lightning), Rasmus Dahlin (Buffalo Sabres), Gustav Forsling (Florida Panthers), Erik Karlsson (Pittsburgh Penguins), Oliver Ekman-Larsson (Toronto Maple Leafs), Philip Broberg (St. Louis Blues) and Hampus Lindholm (Boston Bruins) ... is a group that can score and play shutdown and be physical. In other words, it's a group that can very much handle what the Americans can throw at them.

Also concerning: Sweden might have found its goaltender in Jacob Markstrom, who has been solid in their past two games but will be playing on back-to-back days should he get the nod against the U.S.

There are two things the U.S. will need to excel at to beat the Swedes. The first is managing the puck. The Swedes are too opportunistic to turn the puck over in the defensive or neutral zones. The Americans have been pretty good with this during the tournament. The other imperative is physicality and antagonism. This needs to be a game where the line of Brady and Matthew Tkachuk, and center Jack Eichel create chaos in the Swedish zone -- before and after the whistle.

WINNER: United States. As good as they've looked in the past two games, there still seems as if something is off about this Swedish team. Too often the Swedes play like a collection of disparate parts looking for cohesion. If they find that against the U.S., this could be trouble for the Americans.

The key will be the first period: Team USA has started slowly in group play. They can't give a veteran team like this any confidence with an early lead. Ultimately, the Americans' offensive depth wins out. But it would not



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be a surprise to see Sweden ruin the U.S. vs. Canada rematch party, and relish that it did.

play

1:16

USA men's hockey faces challenging road ahead

Greg Wyshynski breaks down the U.S. men's hockey team's potential path to Olympic gold.

No. 3 Slovakia vs. No. 6 Germany

Germany built a 3-0 lead over France in the first period of their qualification-round game, then got bored and played passive the rest of the way, with the French holding a 27-23 advantage in shots on goal in the final two periods. Germany had only one win in Group C play -- over Denmark -- but had the tiebreakers to earn the second-highest seed behind the U.S.

Unlike a lot of midtier teams in the tournament, Germany actually has two lines that might concern opposing defenses. Edmonton Oilers star and noted "bridesmaid" Leon Draisaitl centers Lukas Reichel (Vancouver Canucks, now in the AHL) and Draisaitl's childhood best friend Frederik Tiffels of the Berlin Polar Bears, which might be one of the most adorable combination of words we've written about the tournament. Tiffels has a goal and two assists in four games.

Ottawa Senators star Tim Stutzle centers the other line, and was tied for the tournament lead in goals (four) after four games. JJ Peterka of the Utah Mammoth, who's had a really strong tournament, is on his right and Joshua Samanski, in the Edmonton Oilers' system, is on the other wing.

Defenseman Moritz Seider is a Norris Trophy contender for the Detroit Red Wings, and has been an absolute rock for the Germans on the blue line, the only player over 100 minutes in total ice time through four games.

Seattle Kraken goalie Philipp Grubauer was fourth in goals saved above average (2.14) and sixth in save percentage (.934) through three starts, although he didn't face Team USA. He has been arguably the comeback player of the year in the NHL statistically. Without question, he is one of those goalies who could lead an upset on the right day.

Whether Grubauer can stop Juraj Slafkovsky is immaterial, because no one can stop Juraj Slafkovsky. The Slovak winger has three goals and three assists in three games, giving him 10 goals in his past 10 Olympic games. I angered some Montreal Canadiens fans by saying that Slafkovsky goes "beast mode" in the Olympics because they argued he has been that good lately in the NHL (25 points in 23 games), which is the first time I've insulted a player by claiming he elevates his game on the most important stage. (Insert shrug emoji.)

Slafkovsky and his center Adam Ruzicka are two of three players with multiple goals for Slovakia, the other being third-liner Dalibor Dvorsky. Former NHL player Tomas Tatar, who has played with Slafkovsky, has one assist in three games.

This game boils down to whether Slovak goalie Samuel Hlavaj can keep the dam from breaking again. A minor leaguer for the Minnesota Wild, he made 46 saves against Sweden and 39 saves against Finland. He's third in the tournament in goals saved above average (2.14). Then again, Germany isn't the same shot-attempt generating team that the Swedes and Finns are, at least in this tournament.

WINNER: Germany. I'm underestimating Slovakia at my own peril, I'm sure.

No. 4 Finland vs. No. 5 Switzerland

It's not exactly easy to get a handle on the Finns after group play. They were humbled by Slovakia in the opening game 4-1. They did the

humbling of archrival Sweden (4-1) in a physically taxing game. Then they made Italy briefly regret hosting the tournament with an 11-0 humiliation that saw them pump 62 shots on goal.

So who are the Finns? I think they're the team we saw against Sweden: a pesky, physical group that spreads out its scoring. There were 12 Finland players who earned a point against the Swedes; 14 players had at least a point against the Italians. It's a team that has gotten as many points out of Joel Armia and Kaapo Kakko (four) as it has out of Mikko Rantanen.

Finland has two extremely solid defense pairings, including one of the best in the NHL: Miro Heiskanen and Esa Lindell, as the Dallas Stars score 58.4% of the goals when they're on the ice together. The Florida Panthers' Niko "The Condor" Mikkola and Philadelphia Flyers blueliner Rasmus Ristolainen get the second-most ice time.

Juuse Saros has not had a good NHL season with the Nashville Predators, but he has had a very good Olympics so far for Finland: .946 save percentage and 2.62 goals saved above expected. He stopped 34 of 35 against Sweden, which is no small feat.

But if we're talking underappreciated goaltending performances, then we're talking about Switzerland's Leonardo Genoni. He has stopped 76 of 79 shots for the best save percentage (.962) and goals saved above expected (4.07) through the qualification round. Genoni was the key in allowing the Swiss to rally against the Czechs, which was a critical overtime win that matched them against Italy in the qualification round.

The Swiss generate a good number of shot attempts and high-danger chances with an offense led by Timo Meier (seven points in three games); like Team USA's Jack Hughes, Meier is playing so well that it has made people wonder what's preventing that from happening with the New Jersey Devils. His Devils teammate Nico Hischier (four points) has been good, while the Swiss have gotten scoring from the back end thanks to Nashville's Roman Josi (four points) and Tampa Bay's J.J. Moser (four points).

They will of course miss winger Kevin Fiala, as the Los Angeles Kings star was injured in their loss to Canada and is expected to sit out the rest of the NHL season.

WINNER: Finland. This could end up being the best game of the quarterfinals, but I'll take the Finns' depth advantages and ability to lock it down defensively.

SEMIFINALS

No. 1 Canada vs. No. 6 Germany

Keep in mind that the Olympic hockey tournament is bracketed through the quarterfinals, but then protects its highest seed in the semifinals. Hence, Canada gets the lowest seed still alive in the tournament, which is Germany.

The Germans played the tournament's other hockey superpower, the United States, in Group C play and lost 5-1 after going down 5-0. They played the Americans tough in the first 19:51 of the game until Zach Werenski's disheartening goal late in the first period. But Team USA's depth really took over in the second period, and Germany's lack of quality depth beyond its few NHL standouts really stood out.

Which is to say that this team isn't equipped to be the one that takes down Canada.

This forward group for Canada is one of the greatest assemblages of talent the Olympics have ever seen:

Line 1: Macklin Celebrini-Connor McDavid-Tom Wilson. The tournament's leading scorer flanked by the San Jose Sharks' young superstar and the Washington Capitals' ruffian who earned an Olympic "Gordie Howe Hat Trick" against France: a goal, assist and a fight.



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Line 2: Brandon Hagel-Nathan MacKinnon-Nick Suzuki. Two fantastic two-way forwards surrounding the offensive force of nature from the Avalanche, who has two goals and three assists in the tournament.

Line 3: Mitch Marner-Sidney Crosby-Mark Stone. This team has Crosby on its third line.

Line 4: Whoever-Sam Bennett-Sam Reinhart. Brad Marchand, Seth Jarvis, Bo Horvat ... whoever Jon Cooper decides to slot next to the Florida Panthers' dynamic duo, Canada's good.

And don't even get me started on their power play.

WINNER: Canada. The spoils go to the team with the perfect record and the best goal differential in group play. Canada rolls to the gold medal game.

No. 2 United States vs. No. 4 Finland

How else will the United States get its proper fill of "Miracle on Ice-like" "overcoming insurmountable odds to play for gold" if not by facing Sweden and then Finland, considered the tournament's third- and fourth-best teams?

If they get past the Swedes and Germany in fact upsets Slovakia, then the Americans will face the Finns for the right to play for gold. And based on Olympic history, this is not who they want to face. Finland knocked the U.S. out in the quarterfinals in Turin 2006 and won the bronze medal over the Americans in Sochi 2014 after the U.S. blew its game vs. Canada in the semifinals. (The U.S. did thump them 6-1 in the Vancouver 2010 semifinals scoring six times in the first period.)

To state the obvious: This matchup would be a lot more intriguing if Finland had star center Aleksander Barkov of the Florida Panthers, who has sat out the entire NHL season so far after preseason knee surgery. His leadership, his will to win, his defensive game, the way the rest of the lineup would settle in behind him ... what could have been.

Still, the Finns are going to be a tough out for the Americans. They're a tenacious group that is unfazed by a talent disparity on the roster sheet -- true to form, they welcome it and thrive under those expectations. The Finns have a few defenseman who can handle the American forecheck and some grinding forwards who aren't looking for style points when scoring. They also have Rantanen, one of the players in this tournament who could power his team's offense alone.

There's going to be a moment in the quarterfinals or semifinals when the Americans find themselves trailing in the second half of a game, facing a team with growing belief and a goaltender that is shutting the door. And it's in that moment they will either earn their rematch against the Canadians or squander the chance. Finland always makes you earn it.

WINNER: United States. Unless they're looking ahead so intently that they miss the Finns like Jeremy Swayman facing a shot from center ice, Team USA advances to play for gold.

play

0:39

Jake Sanderson: U.S. men's hockey is improving 'every single game'

Emily Kaplan speaks with Jake Sanderson, Clayton Keller and Brock Faber after the U.S. men's hockey team finishes group play undefeated.

BRONZE MEDAL GAME

No. 4 Finland vs. No. 6 Germany

Finland is really good at two things: Finding time for the sauna and winning Olympic men's hockey medals. Since 1994, no country has collected more of them in this tournament. Finland won gold in Beijing (2022) and silver in Turin (2006). They won bronze in 1994, 1998, 2010 and 2014.

WINNER: Finland. The trend continues here, as Finland's depth and defense handle Germany's two potent lines with Draisaill and Stutzle. Prepare the fountains in Helsinki for dancing.

GOLD MEDAL GAME

No. 1 Canada vs. No. 2 United States

All due respect to the other contenders and the potential Cinderellas, but anything less than the next chapter of this epic rivalry playing out for Olympic gold would be a crime against hockey.

Both teams are different than the ones that battled in that overtime classic to end the 4 Nations Face-Off with McDavid's goal and Canada's celebration. The Canadians didn't have Celebrini, brilliant young scorer, and Wilson -- Tkachuk brothers countermeasure -- on their top line. They didn't have Logan Thompson, giving them a viable goaltending option should their faith in Jordan Binnington wobble.

But the Americans have the greater improvements, starting with a healthy Quinn Hughes, the Minnesota Wild defenseman who missed 4 Nations because of injury. Forward Tage Thompson, who was only an injury replacement at 4 Nations, gives the U.S. a forward with size and offensive punch. They'll have a healthy Matthew Tkachuk, who didn't play in the third period or overtime in the 4 Nations finale because of injury.

Perhaps most critically, they'll have four lines that can match the incredible depth of Canada's forward group. That's thanks to the most important development of group play: the way Brock Nelson and Jack Hughes clicked on their fourth line. Hughes is a center playing the wing. He looked overwhelmed and lost in 4 Nations. He looks like Patrick Kane 2.0 in the Olympics, and has formed a trio with Nelson and J.T. Miller that has been the Americans' best line at times on a team that also features Eichel in between Matthew and Brady Tkachuk and Toronto Maple Leafs star Auston Matthews centering their second line.

A two-piece combo for Auston Matthews. 🐼 #WinterOlympics
pic.twitter.com/vkQzJrWfJb

— NBC Olympics & Paralympics (@NBCOlympics) February 15, 2026

The U.S. path to victory is closing off the Canadian path to the attacking zone. The Americans have the best defense corps in the tournament, filled with great skaters and puck movers like Quinn Hughes, Charlie McAvoy and Werenski. They have forwards who can win the neutral zone and grind out shifts in the offensive zone. GM Bill Guerin built this team not to win gold but to beat Canada, knowing the latter probably had to happen to accomplish the former.

These are two teams filled with stars, but the Americans don't have Connor McDavid or Nathan MacKinnon. (Whether they have a Cale Makar proxy depends on where you are on the Quinn Hughes vs. Makar debate.)

They also don't have Sidney Crosby, who has two Olympic gold medals and went through the Americans both times to win them. When adversity hits, there's a reason Crosby wears the C. Overall, experience is the point of demarcation between these two teams. The Americans have three players with Stanley Cup rings. Canada has 12 of them, along with Olympic gold for Crosby and defenseman Drew Doughty. Of these two teams, there no question which one is more unflappable.

WINNER: United States. This victory has been decades in the making. That's how long it has taken for the Americans to fill their talent pool to Canada's levels.

It happened because of the growth of hockey's popularity -- fueled by the NHL's expansion into "nontraditional" hockey markets -- that produced players such as Matthews (Arizona) and Jack Hughes (Florida) alongside players from hockey hotbeds like Minnesota. It happened because there are better athletes playing hockey, who are being developed through an improved USA Hockey pipeline.



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These aren't players inspired by the Miracle on Ice -- although they like watching Kurt Russell play Herb Brooks on the bus during youth hockey road trips. These are players who wanted to be Patrick Kane and Sidney Crosby, but most importantly be Patrick Kane beating Sidney Crosby.

And so in the gold medal game of the 2026 Olympics, the Americans finally plant their flag for hockey supremacy, justified by world juniors wins and world championship success and, finally and most satisfyingly, defeating the Canadians on Olympic ice for the first time in the medal round during the NHL participation era.

It won't be a "miracle." It won't be an underdog story made into a Disney movie. It'll be a hard-earned win in a battle of equals, a battle that's sure to continue beyond this Olympics.

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Sportsnet.ca / 'No panic': Team Canada's quarterfinal lineup remains a mystery

Luke Fox

MILAN — Team Canada plays its first win-or-go-home game of the 2026 Winter Games, and its lineup remains a bit of a mystery.

While the injured Brad Marchand and Josh Morrissey returned to full practice Tuesday, superstar Nathan MacKinnon and reigning Conn Smythe winner Sam Bennett both skipped the high-paced, hour-long session in the name of maintenance.

"We're all good. No panic," Canadian head coach Jon Cooper assured.

MacKinnon took hard hits to the chin and the knee in garbage time of Canada's 10-2 preliminary-round victory over France on Sunday. He assured he was "fine" afterward, but it is notable that he and Bennett remained off the ice even after a full day off on Monday.

No one sporting a maple leaf doubted that MacKinnon will push through whatever is ailing him.

"I don't think I've ever questioned it once. I know how much he loves the game," Canadian captain Sidney Crosby said. "He'll play through anything."

"Well, he's a bull," Cooper echoed. "To have that much power, strength and skill all packed in one, it's a rarity."

Morrissey has been sidelined since last week's opener versus Czechia with an undisclosed injury. Although he skated alongside original partner Colton Parayko, Morrissey's status for Wednesday's potential rematch (provided Czechia defeats underdog Denmark on Tuesday) is uncertain.

"That was a big thing for him to get out here today," Cooper said. "He looked great. But (I won't decide) until after I talk to him."

According to our eyes and our gut: Morrissey plays.

Cooper confirmed the 37-year-old Marchand is "available" to play, but the winger may have simply skated as a placeholder:

Celebrini – McDavid – Wilson

Marnier – Crosby – Stone

Hagel – Suzuki – Reinhart

Marchand – Horvat – Jarvis

"He's always raring to go. I feel like every time he's on the ice, he's got a ton of energy," Crosby said. "That's just his personality."

Surely, Marchand's Olympic ailment is related to what kept him out of a couple of games for the Florida Panthers before the tournament.

"Um, yeah, part of that. But part of it is old age," he said, smiling. "Sometimes you got to just take care of the body. Big picture, make sure you're ready for the important times."

Marchand has missed Canada's past two games. Naturally, he wants in, but he's happy to support his teammates.

"To be honest, coming in, I didn't think I would be in the lineup," Marchand said.

"I thought I would be an extra guy and be a voice and try to be loud and obnoxious in the room. So, I mean, I'm just so proud and honoured to be part of this group. It doesn't matter if you get in the lineup or not. Everybody is just as important and has a role to play."

Wilson held back in fight with Cronin

Speaking for the first time since Sunday's scrap with France's Pierre Crinon, which got both players ejected, Canadian winger Tom Wilson says he understood the suspension line.

"I was aware that as long as I didn't take it too far, or he took it too far, that you should be good to play in the next game. So, obviously, when it started to get a little crazy there, he wasn't stopping," Wilson explained.

"There's a certain level of having to defend yourself. And then once I kind of got around on top, I was like, OK, time to stop. It's gone on far enough. And the linesmen were trying to do their job, and you just don't want to get carried away. So, decided to stop at that point. I think it was good decision."

Uh, yeah, probably.

Wilson maintained that Cronin's hit on MacKinnon was "dirty" and that decisions must be made quickly when you engage with a big opponent.

"I mean, it's fight or flight," he said. "At that point, you're just kind of figuring out what you have to do. And, obviously, the game was kind of out of hand, so it wasn't a big deal with five minutes left."

"I just wanted to stick up for our team."

Wilson said he was surprised that Team France suspended Crinon after the IIHF had given the combatants a pass.

Let's just say, Team Canada had zero debate whether to ban Wilson for his role in the dustup.

And Wilson maintained that, despite a few rule tweaks, Olympic hockey is the same sport he plays in the NHL.

"Every team is trying to hit us and come after us in their certain way. So, we have to stick up for each other. We have to stick up for our game," Wilson said.

"I'm not focused on changing my style at all. I want to be hard to play against. I want to be up and down the ice. I want to be physical. I want to make space for my teammates. And if I have to stand up for them, obviously, stick up for my teammates and our country."

"It's hockey. It's the greatest sport for a reason. Tensions get high. There's a lot of emotion. And whatever happens out there, happens."

One-Timers: Cooper on treating the quarterfinal like a Game 7: "I hate looking at it like that. Because now you don't want to put any stress on yourself. You don't want players playing the game not to make mistakes. I like our mentality. It's not qualification or quarterfinal or whatever. You gotta win six. This is Game 4. Let's go make the best." ... Marchand on Czech star David Pastrnak: "He's become one of the top five players in



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the game." ... French goalie Julian Junca asked for Crosby's stick in the handshake line following Sunday's blowout, and he obliged because he's Sidney freaking Crosby: "That's part of hockey. You do that over the years, trade sticks and things, and it's part of the experience."

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Sportsnet.ca / Olympic men's hockey power rankings: Finland, Sweden heating up at right time

Ryan Dixon

We're down to the elite eight.

The men's hockey quarterfinals are lined up for Wednesday at the Winter Games in Italy and there are certainly some tantalizing matchups to soak in.

Canada will pay its second game of the tournament versus Czechia, the upstart Slovaks will take on Germany, the Swiss and Finns will get after it, and a hockey heavyweight is guaranteed to leave without a medal when Team USA and Sweden square off.

The four top-ranked teams — Canada, the U.S., Slovakia and Finland — have played three times, while Czechia, Germany, Switzerland and Sweden all played their fourth game of the event on Tuesday during the qualification round and will be competing in a back-to-back situation on Wednesday in the quarters.

While everyone has a seed associated with their team based on the preliminary round, that number — in some cases, anyway — may not completely jive with how these countries seem to stack up as the heat cranks up at the Games.

With that in mind, we wanted to put together an Olympic power ranking on the eve of the quarterfinals. (Team records are win, overtime win, loss, overtime loss).

1. Canada (3-0-0-0, 1st seed): Nothing has happened so far to knock the country that's won the past two best-on-best Olympics out of the catbird seat. Certainly there are questions about how the lineup will roll out versus Czechia, with Brad Marchand set to draw in for his first game since the tournament-opening win. Connor McDavid is the leading scorer in Italy with nine points in three games and his linemate, Macklin Celebrini, is not far behind with six. Canada, though, is still searching for the best way to maximize Nathan MacKinnon's impact — playing wing on a power line with McDavid and Celebrini or finding the most complimentary wingers on his own trio? — and probably needs cerebral defenceman Josh Morrissey — who left the first game with an injury and has not played since — back in the lineup to be at its best.

Still, there's precious little in the way of serious nitpicks with this club.

2. Team USA (3-0-0-0, 2nd seed): The only ding you can really stick with the Americans with is also something that's completely out of their hands. Based on pre-tournament IIHF world rankings, the U.S. wound up in a group with Germany, Latvia and Denmark, meaning they haven't yet seen any country that would be considered in the top half-dozen hockey nations in the world. Now, suddenly, they're facing a Swedish squad that — despite a slow start in Italy — is among the more stacked at the tournament. Still, led by captain Auston Matthews and his three goals, the Yanks have taken care of business. Any notion a goalie other than Connor Hellebuyck would be America's guy has been put to rest and the

Stars and Stripes are in good shape heading into the do-or-die portion of the Olympics.

3. Finland (2-0-1-0, 4th seed): Finland, in a surprising result, lost the first game of the event 4-1 to Slovakia. Since then, they beat their rivals from Sweden by the same 4-1 score, then pumped Italy 11-0 to end up with the same plus-11 goal-differential as the U.S. in the preliminary round. Finland has started Juuse Saros in every game, so there's no doubt who the Lions are riding with the rest of the way. Up front, Finland needs its big boys with loads of NHL playoff experience — Mikko Rantanen, Roope Hintz, Anton Lundell and Sebastian Aho — to really drive the bus. The only guy from that group who has two goals so far is Aho. Still, the Finns have a history of rising to the occasion and certainly have the battle-tested NHLers to do it.

4. Sweden (3-0-1-0, 7th seed) Are the Swedes cresting at the right moment? They finished the preliminary round with a win over Slovakia, though not by enough goals to avoid the qualification round. Sweden took care of business against Latvia, opting to go with goalie Jacob Markstrom in the crease after Filip Gustavsson played two of the preliminary-round games. Sweden will need Markstrom — and everybody in Blue and Yellow — to be at their best versus Team USA, but this is a very strong team that could be finding itself at the right time.

5. Slovakia (2-0-1-0, 3rd seed) Juraj Slafkovsky has been one of the stories of the tournament, netting three goals and three assists for six points in Slovakia's three outings. There's no doubt the Slovaks have a little something going in Italy, even down to scoring a late power-play goal in a loss to Sweden that nailed down top spot in Group B (and a qualification-round bye) based on goal-differential. If they can get past Germany, Slovakia — which won its first-ever Olympic men's hockey medal with a hugely-celebrated bronze last time out in 2022 — will guarantee itself a chance to play for another hockey medal, this time in a best-on-best event.

6. Switzerland (2-1-1-0, 5th seed) Losing Kevin Fiala for the tournament hurts a team that, now that we're really in crunch time, could struggle to score enough goals. That said, Switzerland is a cohesive unit that is getting strong performances from its top guys like Timo Meier (three goals and six points in four games) and captain Roman Josi (two goals and four points). Combine the handful of high-end NHLers on this team with the fact Switzerland — for lack of a better way of putting it — probably gets more from the guys you've never heard of on the roster than teams with a similar roster composition and you have the formula for a club that could certainly end somebody's tournament earlier than anticipated.

7. Czechia (2-0-1-1, 8th seed) You could argue Czechia could be last on this list, largely because two players — David Pastrnak and Tomas Hertl — can't seem to find their best offensive game. Hertl, in fact, is without a point in Italy. That said, Lukas Dostal is the kind of goalie who can steal a game and Martin Necas is doing his best to make up for the lack of production from other NHL stars by netting three goals and seven points in four outings. He's been awesome for the Czechs.

8. Germany (2-0-2-0, 6th seed) Germany may be ranked eighth here, but there is certainly a path to the semis in front of them. Basically, it's continued excellence from stud forwards Leon Draisaitl (two goals and six points in four games), Tim Stutzle (four goals and six points) and defenceman Moritz Seider (averaging nearly 26 minutes per game), while Philipp Grubauer — who's having a good NHL season — stands tall in the crease.

You have to think the Germans can sense a moment here, as they face a beatable opponent in Slovakia with an opportunity to be in the semifinal of a best-on-best tournament up for grabs.

They'll be just one of eight hockey countries laying it all on the line Wednesday in Milan.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks, Rossi poised for healthy finish after Olympic break

Iain MacIntyre

VANCOUVER – For the Vancouver Canucks, the greatest benefit of the Olympic break is simply time.

The mini-training camp that started Tuesday at the University of B.C. should help the team's many young players better understand coach Adam Foote's system. And certainly, a three-week break between National Hockey League games gives older players time to process the Canucks' stunning plunge in the standings, and return with positive attitudes as the franchise undertakes its deepest rebuild this century.

But the biggest benefit to February's NHL hibernation could be seen in the two, small practice groups of non-Olympians who skated Tuesday.

Marco Rossi (lower body), Brock Boeser (concussion) and Nils Hoglander (lower body) were full participants, as were Filip Chytil (neurological issues) and Zeev Buium (broken facial bone), although the latter two wore red, non-contact jerseys that exempted them from media availabilities.

Boeser also did not speak to reporters, a team official citing illness, which is also why winger Conor Garland was not a Day-1-of-the-rest-of-the-season participant.

With five players at the Olympics in Milan, the Canucks' full lineup could be seen only as a projection on paper.

But with these injured players having time to heal and be ready for the resumption of the Canucks' NHL schedule, Feb. 25 against the Winnipeg Jets at Rogers Arena, Vancouver should finally have something close to a full team – albeit with starting goalie Thatcher Demko done for the season due to hip surgery.

More than two months since his inclusion in the biggest trade in Canucks history, Rossi told reporters he is only now fully healthy.

"It feels really good to be back to 100 per cent," the 24-year-old centre said. "That's how I feel right now for the first time since I've been here. So yeah, I feel really good and I'm happy to be back."

Acquired from the Minnesota Wild in the Quinn Hughes blockbuster, Rossi played eight games for the Canucks before leaving the lineup after a Dec. 30 game against Philadelphia.

He revealed Tuesday he was unable to skate anything close to his best during those 16 days.

"That's a huge part, especially for me," he said. "I try to go left, right, left, right, and it's hard when you can't do that."

"But, of course, when you get traded, you're so pumped up, you know? You want to show the team right away that I want to be here and, you know, I just want to play for this team. But sometimes, especially when you're young, you think maybe differently (than you should). You just want to play. And, like I said, looking back, maybe it wasn't the best decision. But I'm good now."

Before the Dec. 12 trade, Rossi hadn't played since Minnesota's game against the San Jose Sharks on Nov. 11. He had been playing hurt before then.

Including what will be an eight-week absence for the Canucks, the second-line centre has played only 25 games this season, managing just 15 points – two of them for Vancouver.

How certain is he that he is ready for the Canucks' final 25 games?

"One hundred per cent," Rossi said. "The last two years before, I played all the games. I didn't miss one game. So that's the same mindset I have now. You know, anything can happen; it's a sport. But the last 25 games, I can't wait to play every game."

"I'm really happy to be back and, you know, to not just show the fans, but also for myself. You want to be back to 100 per cent, and that's how I feel right now."

What he is returning to, however, is profoundly different than what Rossi left behind in Minnesota.

Turbo-charged by acquiring Hughes, the former Canuck captain and Norris Trophy winner, the Wild has gone 17-5-5 since the trade and is fourth in the NHL at 34-14-10. Minnesota is a legitimate Stanley Cup contender.

The Canucks won their first four games after the trade, but are 3-16-3 since then and have plummeted to the bottom of the standings at 18-33-6. Vancouver is on pace for its worst season since 1999.

"Yeah, for sure, it's different," Rossi said. "In Minny, you're trying to go for the playoffs and, obviously, try to go as far as you can. Here, I mean, it is what it is, right? It's a different situation for me; my first time (in a rebuild). But I think it's important that we're together as a group. We just have to keep building our game and try to get better day by day."

"Even as a team, you know, we can't think about the standings and stuff. All we have to (do) is stay positive and just try to play our game and try to learn as much as we can as a group."

ICE CHIPS -- After splitting their small lineup for Day 1 in order to give players more puck touches and coaching support after nearly two weeks off, the Canucks will practise in one main group on Wednesday. . . With Demko out and backup Kevin Lankinen with Finland's Olympic team, the Canucks recalled minor-league goalie Aku Koskenvuo to partner fellow callup Jiri Patera for the mini-camp. The franchise's third-string goalie, Nikita Tolopilo, has been left for now with the Abbotsford Canucks to get in more American League games.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canada, USA showcase superpowers en route to quarterfinals

Adam Vingan

As anticipated, Team Canada and Team USA clinched the top two seeds in the medal round of the men's Olympic hockey tournament. Their paths there, however, were a little different.

Canada demolished its competition, never trailing and outscoring Czechia, Switzerland and France 20-3 to win Group A. The United States, meanwhile, played tighter games on its way to winning Group C against Latvia, Denmark and Germany. Across the Americans' three preliminary-round games, the score was tied or within one goal for 105:50, compared to 69:02 for the Canadians.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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It is not guaranteed that Canada and the U.S. will meet in the gold-medal game. First, the Canadians must get past Czechia on Wednesday, while the Americans will face Sweden in the quarterfinals. But both superpowers flexed their muscles during the tournament's first week.

"We're going in the right direction, but I know for sure we haven't played our best yet," Canada defenceman Drew Doughty told reporters, which is a terrifying thought. Team Canada generated 76.4 per cent of the expected goals at five-on-five and 52 more high-danger scoring chances than its opponents in all situations during the preliminary round.

Through three games, much of the focus has been on Canada's nuclear-weapon line of Macklin Celebrini, Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon. When Canada coach Jon Cooper has called on them to team up, they have toyed with their opponents. Canada has outscored opponents 3-0 in 10:25 of five-on-five ice time when three of the NHL's top four point producers this season have been on the ice simultaneously.

But Team Canada's most consistent line consists of Mitch Marner, Sidney Crosby and Mark Stone. The well-rounded trio has a 4-1 edge in goals, out-chancing opponents 17-6 along the way (8-2 off the cycle).

As Colorado Avalanche teammates, defence partners Devon Toews and Cale Makar are used to heavily tilting the ice in their team's favour. That has carried over to the Olympics, where Toews and Makar have helped Canada record a 79.2 XGF% at five-on-five while also sporting a 7-0 goal differential.

In the lead-up to the Olympics, Team USA general manager Bill Guerin took a lot of heat for leaving many of the country's top scorers at home. Those controversial decisions have not yet haunted the Americans, who are led in scoring by captain Auston Matthews, who has three goals and five points. Matthews' 3.47 expected goals lead the tournament by a decent margin. (McDavid is second with 2.67 expected goals.)

Team USA's highest-performing forward line features Brady and Matthew Tkachuk flanking Jack Eichel. At 35:45 of five-on-five ice time, the Tkachuks and Eichel have played together more than any other forward combination at the Olympics. They have outscored opponents 4-0 and outshot them 15-1 from the slot.

"I think that we'll obviously get better, and I think as the tournament goes on and the games get more competitive, I think we'll rise to the occasion," Eichel told reporters. "We've done enough so far to put ourselves in a good position, but listen, it's do or die now."

On the back end, Quinn Hughes, who missed the 4 Nations Face-Off last year because of injury, leads Team USA in ice time (22:11) and offensive-zone possession time (1:03) per game. He and partner Charlie McAvoy have not been on the ice for a five-on-five goal against in nearly 40 minutes of ice time.

"(Hughes) defends so well with his mobility and his stick, and you watch him both five-on-five and on the power play and how dynamic he is, whether it be with our transition game or jumping off the offensive blue, he's a unique player, and so to have him as part of the group this year, I think, is a huge boost for us," U.S. coach Mike Sullivan told reporters.

Not to disrespect the other countries vying for a gold medal, but Canada versus the U.S. is the matchup most of the hockey-watching world is hoping to see. As long as both teams take care of business, the tournament final could be one to remember.

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TSN.CA / Slafkovsky the story of men's Olympic hockey so far

Travis Yost

It's been a long time since the men's hockey world was treated to best-on-best action at the Olympics, and naturally all eyes have been affixed on the four juggernauts: Canada, the United States, Sweden, and Finland's star-studded rosters all have hopes for gold as we head to the elimination round.

And yet, there may not be a bigger story from the Olympics than tiny Slovakia (shocking Group B winner, I will note) and 21-year-old sensation Juraj Slafkovsky.

Slafkovsky is a former first-overall pick for a reason — he's a freakish combination of size (6-foot-3, 225 pounds) and skill, and the Montreal Canadiens fans have been salivating watching his game round out. The winger found his scoring touch almost immediately, and is pacing for a 30-goal season, health permitting:

Yost1

So maybe it shouldn't be a surprise to see Slafkovsky storm through Group B, but he also has a reputation for elevating his game at the international level — the Slovakian is best known for scoring seven goals at the 2022 Winter Olympics as a 17-year-old!

But this year's run has the chance to top it. His six points (three goals, three assists) in three games are tied with Canada's Macklin Celebrini for second in Olympic scoring, with the young duo only trailing Canadian Connor McDavid and his typical supernova production.

One part of Slafkovsky's scoring surge worth emphasizing is that it's coming on the back of impressive offensive volume. His 15 shots on goal are also near the top of the Olympic leaderboard, indicative of a player spending a lot of time on the attack in the offensive third:

Yost2

Slafkovsky has certainly carried a lot of the load for Slovakia, but winning a group that includes both Sweden and Finland takes a bit more than impressive contributions from one player. It helps playing with skaters like NHL veterans Tomas Tatar and Adam Ruzicka to start. Fellow youngster Dalibor Dvorsky, amidst an impressive rookie season with the St. Louis Blues, has four points of his own.

And it goes without saying that it's hard to write a real hockey underdog story without some goaltending outperformance, and that's what Samuel Hlavaj has given Slovakia in net. His 93.4 per cent stop rate in three appearances is on par with Finland's Juuse Saros, an impressive feather in the cap for a player who might be fifth right now on the Minnesota Wild organizational depth chart.

Perhaps the best part of Slafkovsky's surge and Slovakia's surprise victory of Group B? There is a clear path to a medal game. Slovakia is slated to play the winner of the Germany and France matchup on Tuesday; the Leon Draisaitl-led Germans defeated the French 5-1 Tuesday, but are underdogs against Slovakia. One Slovakia win means they'll be playing inside of the final four, though a daunting matchup against the United States could await them if seeding holds.

Pulling off an upset against a team of that calibre would be a statement of magnitudes. But just days removed from a stunning three-goal upset of Finland, it would be foolish to count Slafkovsky and the Slovaks out.

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TSN.CA / 'Leading by example in every possible way': McDavid gets big compliment from Crosby

Mark Masters

Connor McDavid leads the Olympic tournament in scoring with nine points, but Team Canada's top-line centre is contributing in so many ways beyond just goals and assists.

"I mean, he's doing everything," said captain Sidney Crosby. "Whether it's with the puck, without the puck, [being] physical, he's leading by example in every possible way. He's poised. Guys have taken some runs at him, he just continues to play. He's shown a lot of focus that way. He's been leading the way for sure."

McDavid's laser focus has been evident from the moment he landed in Milan. He landed a big hit on his first shift in the first game.

"It's pretty incredible," said linemate Tom Wilson. "I mean, he's playing on another level right now. He's the best in the world. When he's your linemate you might have to think the game a little bit quicker. You might have to get the puck to him a little bit quicker, but once he has it special things happen."

McDavid seems to be making the most of every play be it in a game or in a practice drill.

"Playing with Connor has been a highlight of my career," said Wilson. "I can learn so much from him ... A day like today, Connor and Sid are the hardest-working guys, executing at the highest level on the ice in practice."

McDavid has recorded three points in all three games he's played here. So, how can Czechia slow him down in Wednesday's quarterfinal?

"I gotta talk to Coop [and tell him] not to play him," said smiling defenceman Radko Gudas, who played for Canada's coach Jon Cooper early in his NHL career. "Just try to be in the middle of the ice as much as possible and don't give him enough speed. Try to clog the middle for him or try to be right on him and not give him space in the neutral zone especially, but it's going to be really hard. He's one of the top players and he's playing with some great players as well. It's one of the big challenges with Team Canada."

Nathan MacKinnon missed Tuesday's practice. The Colorado Avalanche centre seemed to hurt his leg late in Sunday's blowout win over France.

"Zero concern," Cooper said. "He's a bull that kid. To have that much power, strength and skill all packaged in one, it's a rarity. He's a gamer that kid."

In a sign Canada is confident MacKinnon will play, they did not make a significant change to their power play at practice. Instead, Wilson, also a right shot, simply served as a placeholder in MacKinnon's spot on the flank of the top unit.

"They were calling me 'Nate' out there for a couple minutes, but it was just in good fun," Wilson said with a smile. "They needed a guy to go over and play on that side. There was one play where I said Nate definitely would've made that pass to Sid 10 out of 10 times."

Sam Bennett also missed the practice.

"A long tournament, a lot of stuff going on, and maintenance day for guys," Cooper said. "But I expect to have everybody fully healthy [for Wednesday]."

That includes winger Brad Marchand, who missed the last two games to rest a lingering issue that flared up in an NHL game with the Florida Panthers on Jan. 29.

"It's always tough," said Marchand, who picked up an assist in the opening win over Czechia. "You work your entire life to be here and you want to be on the ice so bad."

Although the 37-year-old admitted he didn't think he'd be a regular in the lineup as he boarded the plane for Milan.

"You always want to be in, but the goal was to be here and be part of this team," Marchand said. "It's an incredible group and, you know, to be honest, coming in I didn't think I'd be in the lineup. I thought I'd be the extra guy and be a voice and try to be loud and obnoxious in the room. I'm just so proud and honoured to be part of this group."

Marchand skated on the fourth line beside Bo Horvat and Seth Jarvis on Tuesday. He also took reps on the second power-play unit.

Is Marchand raring to go?

"He's always ready to go," Crosby said with a grin when asked about his fellow Nova Scotian. "I feel like every time he's on the ice he's got a ton of energy. That's his personality."

Josh Morrissey skated beside Colton Parayko on the second defence pair at practice and appears poised to return to the lineup.

"Just taking it day-by-day," the Winnipeg Jet said. "A good practice here and trying to get ready for the rest of the tournament the best I can."

Morrissey sustained an undisclosed injury in the first game of the tournament.

Canada earned a bye to the quarterfinal by virtue of winning its group, which offered them the luxury of a two-day break between games.

"Yesterday was a big day," said Cooper. "It was nice to have a complete day off. Lots of guys went to events [or were] with families and things like that, which we haven't been able to do."

At Tuesday's workout, Canada spent time on 5-on-5 play, 5-on-6 play, the power play, the penalty kill and even did a couple 5-on-3 reps.

"Now we got a couple games under our belt, what's the holes in our game?" Cooper said. "How can we fix them? Special teams is always a big thing, so you always spend a bunch of time on that. But, overall, get our legs under us and get ready for tomorrow."

Wednesday will be Canada's first elimination game in Milan. If they lose, they go home without getting a shot at the medal round. Do they need a Game 7 mentality?

"I hate looking at it like that because you don't want to put any stress on yourselves thinking, 'This is it,'" Cooper said. "You don't want players playing the game not to make mistakes. I want them on their toes not their heels. That's how we have to play it and see how the chips fall. I like our mentality. It's not a qualification or quarterfinal, whatever, we're on game four. You gotta win six. This is game four. Let's go make the best [of it]."

Jon Cooper at the white board during practice

First practice for CA since start of tournament (played three in four and had day off yesterday) pic.twitter.com/emJ4ZcoPJM

— Mark Masters (@markmasters) February 17, 2026



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The Crosby line with Mitch Marner and Mark Stone took the first reps in the 5-on-6 work. That trio is the one forward unit Cooper hasn't tinkered with so far.

"The line's been really good," the coach said. "They kind of check a lot of boxes and smart players. There's just a calmness about that line. Yeah, I'm not breaking them up."

The second 5-on-6 unit was the McDavid line with Brandon Hagel, who plays with Cooper in Tampa Bay, replacing Macklin Celebrini on the left side.

While Canada fine-tuned things, Czechia sweated out a tight 3-2 win over Denmark in the qualification round.

"It wasn't a great game from our side, but it was a playoff game and we advanced," said assistant coach Tomas Plekanec. "There's a lot of things we want to get better at, but we're fighting through it throughout the tournament."

Czechia lost to Canada and Switzerland (in overtime) in the preliminary round and trailed against France in the second period before rallying for a win.

"We're building our game," said Martin Necas, who scored the opening goal on Tuesday. "Obviously a couple tough ones, but it's all about one game. It would be different if it's a playoff series, best-of-seven. This is one game and we're going to give it our best."

What did Czechia learn during the 5-0 loss to Canada last week?

"That even though they have so much skill, they still play the right way," said goalie Lukas Dostal.

"We know what to expect," said Gudas. "Put the pucks in the areas where we can get them back, make their D turn, stay out of the box, those are little things we can improve on."

Dostal is expected to start again on Wednesday even though it's rare for goalies to play on consecutive days in the NHL.

"In NHL you have so much travelling," Dostal, who plays for the Anaheim Ducks, pointed out. "You leave after the game. You just have to always stay on task because you play so many games. Here, you finish the practice, you go back to the Village and you can rest, you can eat some food and just hang out with your family. I would say it's actually more relaxing. You have more energy than actually the NHL games. That's my personal feeling."

The afternoon start on Tuesday also helped.

"The game is 4:40 and then you get back and you don't have to travel anywhere and you can just rest after the game," Dostal said. "You have all the time for the treatment and stuff like that. When you play some games 7:30 somewhere and then you have to travel and you get back to the hotel at 2 am and you fall to sleep at 4 am and then you have to go play back-to-back that makes it much different."

Jordan Binnington pitched a 26-save shutout against Czechia in the preliminary round and is expected to get the call again for Canada. The St. Louis Blues goalie had his own net at practice while Logan Thompson and Darcy Kuemper split time at the other end.

Following Tuesday's practice, Wilson spoke to the media for the first time since taking part in the first Olympic fight since 1998. He dropped the gloves with Pierre Crinon in the third period after the French defenceman hit Mackinnon up high.

"When there's a hit like that made, it gets you on your toes a little bit," Wilson said. "And then I ended up on a shift with him and we got tangled up and I obviously knew it was the same guy. I think it was just more him understanding there was going to be an answer. We're going to stick up for our teammates. I didn't know that necessarily it was going to be a fight, but it turned into that pretty quickly and then obviously more of a wrestling match and a melee and kind of chaos."

At the Olympics, a fighting major comes with an automatic game misconduct unlike in the NHL where it's simply a five-minute penalty.

"I was aware of the rules," Wilson said. "If you fight you get thrown out, but generally speaking that's it. There's five minutes left in a 10-2 game. I was aware that as long as I didn't take it too far or he took it too far you should be good to play the next game."

Wilson was quick to settle down once referee Kyle Rehman got in his ear.

"You feel it out and you realize that sometimes it gets chaotic and then you kind of feel when it's getting too far and you have to stop," Wilson said. "Kyle, one of the refs who we're familiar with in the NHL, was kind of saying, 'Tommy, enough, enough. It's done. It's done.' I make sure I listen to him. I stopped because the linesmen are trying to do their job, the refs are trying to do their job, and you never want to push it too far. You just feel it out and stick up for your teammate and then when enough is enough you kind of move on."

In banning Pierre Crinon for the rest of the Olympics, France's hockey federation cited his "provocative behavior" after being ejected for fighting Tom Wilson, calling it a "clear violation of the Olympic spirit." <https://t.co/Z1uorE8Ybz>

— Chris Johnston (@reporterchris) February 16, 2026

Lines at Tuesday's practice:

Celebrini - McDavid - Wilson

Marner - Crosby - Stone

Hagel - Suzuki - Reinhart

Marchand - Horvat - Jarvis

Toews - Makar

Morrissey - Parayko

Harley - Doughty

Sanheim - Theodore

Binnington

Thompson

Kuemper

Absent: MacKinnon, Bennett

Power play units at Tuesday's practice:

QB: Makar

Flanks: McDavid, Wilson

Middle: Reinhart

Down low: Crosby

QB: Theodore

Flanks: Celebrini, Marner

Middle: Marchand



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Down low: Stone

5-on-6 units at Tuesday's practice:

Marnier - Crosby - Stone

Toews - Makar

Hagel - McDavid - Wilson

Morrissey - Parayko

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