

December is dynasty time

Canada at U20s and Russia in European club events reign supreme



THE NUMBER-ONES TO BEAT: Canada and Russia have reigned supreme on two of international hockey's biggest stages. The Canadians have claimed the U20 crown for the last four straight seasons and have a good chance to make it five in a row on home ice. Meanwhile Russian club teams have shown year-in and year-out that they are best that Europe has to offer. After winning every European Champions Cup, the Russians are poised to win the first CHL title with two of the four teams, including 2008 ECC Champion Metallurg Magnitogorsk (above), in the semi-final.

We started our 100 Year Anniversary celebrations during the 2008 IIHF World Championships in Canada and we are ending the centennial year in the nation's capital as Ottawa hosts the 33rd World U20 Championship, better known on the other side of the Atlantic as the World Juniors



RENÉ FASEL EDITORIAL

■ How big is the World U20 Championship in the motherland of hockey? It has become such an integral part of the holiday season that most Canadians don't remember how Christmas and New Year's was before the 'World Juniors' invaded the collective Canadian consciousness sometime in the mid-80s.

This is the eighth time that Canada hosts the event and, with one single exception, there has been a new attendance record every time. In Vancouver 2006, a phenomenal 325,138 fans attended the 31 games, an average of 10,488 per game. This figure surpasses the average attendance at the men's World Championship and also the Olympics.

■ There is a chance that the record from 2006, when Vancouver co-hosted with Kamloops and Kelowna can be broken. Vancouver's GM Place has an attendance capacity of 18,630 while Scotiabank Place in Ottawa takes in 19,153 fans. On January 5 we will know.

On the same day, at around 21:30 local time, we will also know whether the Canadian junior supremacy stays intact. Team Canada has won the last four U20 World Championships and they are trying to equal the five-in-a-row from 1993 - 1997.

Those who follow junior hockey on an everyday basis say that the biggest challenge will come from the rejuvenated Swedish junior program, whose U20 squad has not won the gold medal in 27 years. Read about how Sweden re-energized its youth program on page 6. Of course, there's always many other contenders, which is what makes U20s great.

■ The same day that we return from Canada, we walk right into the second semi-final games of the Champions Hockey League in Ufa, Russia and Espoo, Finland. Just as Canada dominates men's junior hockey, Russia rules European club hockey.

Russian clubs have won the last six major IIHF European club competitions (swept everything since 1999) and in the group stage of the Champions Hockey League Metallurg Magnitogorsk and Salavat Yulayev Ufa took 21 out of 24 possible points.

In the final, we will have one of the KHL clubs against the ZSC Lions Zurich or the Espoo Blues. But whoever the first CHL champion will be, the inaugural year of Europe's new pan-European club competition has been an unprecedented success.

■ Although, in today's global recession, we don't know where we will be with the CHL in two or three years, but we do know that the start couldn't have been better. People in the business say that the CHL has changed the landscape of hockey in Europe.

I would like to wish the entire hockey family a peaceful Christmas and a prosperous 2009.

René Fasel
IIHF President

NEWS & NOTES

■ **GREAT BRITAIN:** Manchester Phoenix player-coach Tony Hand scored his 4000th career scoring point in British club hockey. The historic point came in the form of an assist on November 29 in the 7-1 win against the Hull Stingrays.

■ **BELGIUM:** Many Belgian ice hockey veterans were on hand for a ceremonial opening of the 100 Years of Belgian Ice Hockey exhibition, which was staged by the Royal Belgian Ice Hockey Federation in the Belgian sports museum Sportimonium. The exhibition, a display of photos, posters, artefacts and memorabilia of a century-long history, lasted through December 15.

■ **CANADA:** Steve Yzerman was inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame in a ceremony in Toronto. Joining the long-time captain of the Detroit Red Wings were such sporting legends as heavyweight boxing champion Lennox Lewis, swimmer Nancy Garapick and speed skater Marc Gagnon.

■ **UNITED STATES:** Angela Ruggiero made history in November as she took to the ice for Team USA for the 206th time, breaking Cammi Granato's previous record of 205 games. Ruggiero broke the record at the Women's Four Nations Cup in a game against Canada during the international break.

■ **SWEDEN:** It seems the Four Nations Cup in Lake Placid was one for records as Sweden beat Canada for the first time ever in women's hockey. The Swedes earned the historic win in a 2-1 overtime thriller.

■ **SWEDEN:** The Swedish Hockey League approved a request from the Frölunda Indians to stage an outdoor game at the Ullevi stadium, the football arena which was Frölunda's home venue until 1966. The game is planned for the 2009-2010 season and will be played against Färjestad. Frölunda's goal is to attract 30,000 fans.

■ **FINLAND:** A decision by the board of directors of the SM-liiga, allows teams to use an unlimited number of 'EU players', but limits the number of players from outside the EU to three. The number of skaters a team can dress for each game was cut to 18, down from this season's 20.

■ **SWITZERLAND:** The Swiss National League A will stay with allowing four imports per team and game. In the second-tier league, two imports are allowed.



IHF World U20 Championship Official Media Guide

The IIHF has once again produced a media guide for the World U20 Championship. If you are interested in receiving a copy, please send an email to media@iihf.com. Please be advised that the media guide supplies are limited and all requests for copies may not be fulfilled.

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Larionov highlights Hall of Fame class

■ Igor Larionov added another honor to his growing resume: induction into the Hockey Hall of Fame. He became only the fifth Soviet-era player so honored, joining Anatoli Tarasov, Vladislav Tretiak, Vyacheslav Fetisov, and Valeri Kharlamov.



Larionov receives his HoF award

Larionov, already a member of the IIHF Hall of Fame, won three Stanley Cups with Detroit in his 14-year NHL career (1997, 1998, 2002). He also was a standout for the Soviet Union during his playing career.

Larionov joined Glen

Anderson, Ray Scapinello, and Ed Chynoweth in the latest Hall of Fame Class.

■ Anderson was a member of the five-time Stanley Cup champion Edmonton Oilers, 'Mork' won a sixth title with the 1994 New York Rangers.

■ Linesman Ray Scapinello joined the NHL's officiating crew in 1971 and didn't miss an assignment until he retired on April 2, 2004. That perfect record endured for exactly 2,500 regular season and playoff games.

■ Chynoweth, passed away in Calgary, on April 22, 2008. After becoming president of the Western Hockey League (WHL) in 1972, Chynoweth was vital to bringing the three Canadian junior leagues together (the CHL) which led to the eventual creation of the Memorial Cup, today's junior Canadian championship.

Continental Cup Super Final is finalized

■ Keramin Minsk and the Bolzano Foxes earned the final two spots in the Continental Cup Super Final after winning their third-round groups. The duo will join the Rouen Dragons from France and Slovakian top team MHC Martin in the Continental Cup Super Final on January 16 to 18, which will take place in Rouen.

Belarusian champion Keramin Minsk won the tournament in Liepaja, Latvia, after defeating the host 5-2 in the deciding game. Keramin, Liepaja and Sokil (UKR) all finished with six points, but Keramin prevailed with one more goal in the head-to-head standings between the three teams. The tournament in Italy was also a close one as host Bolzano, beat British champion the Coventry Blaze a mere 1-0 in the deciding game.



Worlds 2010 and beyond

■ 2010 World Championship host Germany will surely have a tough act to follow after the Olympics conclude in February, but early indications show that the nation is ready for that challenge.



WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP
GERMANY
Cologne - Mannheim

In December, Germany announced that the opening German game would be played in a soccer stadium that can be converted into an indoor venue. The Germans hope to eclipse the previous attendance record set in Michigan in 2001.

The game, which will be held in Veltins Arena, home of the German soccer team Schalke 04, has the potential to hold up to 75,976 fans, and to start the 2010 World Championship in unforgettable fashion.

■ Germany also announced the structure for early ticket sales for the 2010 World Championship.

A four-stage ticketing program will begin in early 2009. Preliminary Round packages for Cologne and Mannheim, event packages for both venues up to the quarterfinals and event packages for all games in Cologne will be on sale.

Tickets will be available on www.iihfworlds2010.com, the arenas in Cologne and Mannheim, regional outlets and ticket outlets of several hockey clubs. Mannheim's SAP Arena is the central ticketing partner for both venues.

■ In 2011 World Championship news, host Slovakia provided a progress report on the construction of the host arena in Bratislava.

The reconstruction of the home arena of Slovan Bratislava with costs of about €60 million is projected to begin just after the 2008-2009 season and should be completed by the end of 2010.

IIHF News

■ The National Hockey League announced a marketing alliance with the Champions Hockey League. The leagues have agreed to form a working group to look at the future of the Victoria Cup, explore other competition formats between the leagues, create joint promotional and sales efforts and develop other cooperative initiatives to foster growth in hockey across North America, Europe and worldwide.

■ Ticketing for the 2009 World Championship in Switzerland has expanded with day tickets for the preliminary round, relegation round and qualifying round as well as event tickets for each venue. 108,000 tickets have been sold so far. Only a few tickets are available for Switzerland games and the medal round.

■ The IIHF, along with FIFA, the International Olympic Committee, and the International Rugby Board hosted the Third International Conference on Concussion in Sport in Zurich. Elite members from the medical community converged to go over the latest data regarding concussions in sport. On the first day there was a conference with top presenters exchanging knowledge about concussion in sport. The following day, a group of medical specialists drafted a consensus statement on concussion in sport.

OBITUARIES

■ **Brian Jopling**, who played for the United States at the 1984 World U20 Championship, passed away after suffering a heart attack. He was 44 years old. Jopling played two games for the 6th-place Americans, sharing the goaltending duties with Alan Perry. Jopling went on to play college hockey with RPI, winning the NCAA championship in 1985.

■ Former Swiss national team player **Gebhard "Gebi" Poltera** passed away at the age of 84. He debuted in 1939 and won seven consecutive championships with EHC Arosa, ending his career in 1965. He was one of the first two-way forwards in that era.

The Final Four: CHL into semi final stage

METALLURG MAGNITOGORSK

RUS
Founded: 1950

Championships: (3) 1999, 2001, 2007

Coach: Valeri Belousov

Notable players: Russia is the giant of European hockey, so it is a bit ironic that the leader of Metallurg is Czech Jan Marek, who paces the team's offense in both the CHL and Russian KHL. Ilya Proskuryakov is getting the job done in net, he ranks third in the CHL in saves percentage (.956) allowing only three goals in the first three games that he started. Good news for Metallurg, which is not a high scoring team with only 11 goals in four games.

The Road to the CHL Semi-Finals: Much like their Russian semi-final counterpart, Salavat, it's all about defense for Metallurg, which allowed only three goals in its first three preliminary round games. The 2-0 win against the top contender in Group A, Karpat Oulu, set the tone for the rest of the preliminary round. Metallurg beat Oulu a second time by two goals, this one a 3-1 decision. The two games against Eisbaren Berlin were basically academic as Metallurg won the first meeting easily, 5-2, but lost its only game of the group stage in a virtually meaningless second meeting, 2-1.

On the homefront: The 2007 champions are not yet in top form, but are hanging tough in the KHL standings. Currently in fifth place, the squad is 12 points off the lead with 67 points in 34 games.

Notes: Metallurg is one of two non-2008 champions to skate in the semi-final. The team was automatically qualified to the CHL as the 2008 ECC title holder, but it was Salavat Ufa that won the 2008 Russian League championship.


**Semi-Final 1
Metallurg-Salavat
1-2**

SALAVAT YULAYEV UFA

RUS
Founded: 1961

Championships: 2008

Coach: Sergei Mikhalev

Notable players: Without a doubt the biggest name on the roster is Alexander Radulov, but highlighting the strength of this Ufa team is the fact that he is only third in team scoring behind Alexander Perezhogin and Alexei Tereschenko. Alexander Eremenko has also been a force in net as Ufa tops the stats in goaltending, allowing an incredibly low three goals in the four preliminary round CHL games.

The Road to the CHL Semi-Finals: With Ufa's 7-1 opening day win against Ceske Budejovice, they made it clear that they were the team to beat in Group C. After downing Slovan Bratislava, 4-2, and shutting out Budejovice in the second meeting, 3-0, Salavat had its place in the semi-finals secure before the last preliminary round game. Now the question is how Salavat will stack up against fellow Russian giant, Metallurg in the semi-final match-up.

On the homefront: Salavat is on a roll back home in Russia, easily owning first place in the league with 79 points in 34 games. In fact, the team has only five regulation losses thus far compared with 23 regulation victories.

Notes: Salavat won last year's Russian league title and seems to be on pace to do the same this year, the team must be eager to meet fellow Russian Metallurg in the semi-finals. Metallurg and Salavat met once this season in Magnitogorsk, with Salavat winning, 5-1.



ESPOO BLUES

FIN
Founded: 1984

Championships: None

Coach: Petri Matikainen

Notable players: The interesting thing about the Espoo Blues is that in the CHL, there has been no individual standout. Austrian goalkeeper Bernd Bruckler continues to improve with his starts, allowing only three goals in four games including a 6-0 shutout in the last group game. Offensively, the team has no star. Canadian Ryan Keller and Finn Stephan Ohman are the go-to guys in the domestic league, but in the CHL games have provided limited fire power... perhaps they're saving themselves for the semi-final round.

The Road to the CHL Semi-Finals: The Espoo Blues made their way into the semi-finals with a 4-0 record. But, burdened by injuries, the team only sparked to life in its final group stage game with a 6-0 win. Before that, they had scored only eight goals in the first three games. The squad had two close wins against HV71 (3-2) and SC Bern (2-1). It's no surprise that with such low numbers, the first Espoo name to appear in the leading scorer's column (Sami Ryhanen - 7th) only showed after the 6-0 game. Before that, the top player was ranked 34th.

On the homefront: Despite their many injuries, the Blues are doing well in the Finnish SM-Liiga. The team is currently in fourth place with 53 points in 30 games. But the fourth-place standing is misleading as the team is four games behind most of the SM-liiga leaders.

Notes: Espoo is the other CHL semi-finalist squad that was a non-champion in their domestic league. The team finished in second place to Karpat Oulu, which has already been knocked out of the CHL and is struggling in the Finnish League standings, ranked sixth.


**Semi-Final 1
Zurich - Espoo
6-3**

ZURICH LIONS

SUI
Founded: 1930

Championships: (6) 1936, '49, '61, 2000, '01, '08

Coach: Sean Simpson

Notable players: The Lions made it into the semi-finals with a total team effort. The top two CHL scorers play for ZSC, Adrian Wichser (9 points) and Peter Sejna (7 points). Linemate Ryan Garder has also been a giant for the Lions with four goals. Quietly getting the job done in net has been Finn Ari Sulander, who will now test his skill against his homeland foes in the semi-finals.

The Road to the CHL Semi-Finals: The D Group was the only one that went down to the wire as Zurich was in a must-win situation against Slavia Prague. And win they did with a four-goal outburst in the third period for a 5-1 win. Before the key game, ZSC opened everyone's eyes early on with a 7-2 win in Linköping, Sweden. The only preliminary round blemish came at the hands of Slavia, which topped ZSC in Zurich in a dramatic seven-man shootout in the teams' first meeting.

On the homefront: Zurich has hit its full stride and its only December. The team near the top of the Swiss National League A with 69 points in 33 games. This is despite the brutal scheduling that they have had to endure through the first few months of the season that saw the squad playing as many as seven games in a 10-day span.

Notes: Zurich is the Cinderella of the semi-final round. Despite its strong play thus far, the team always seems to be on the losing end of the pre-game predictions...but more importantly for the Lions, they have, thus far, proved the talking heads wrong.



World Juniors returns to its

A look at the U20 World Championship numbers in Canada

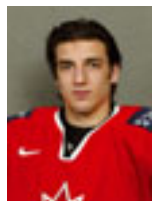
By Andrew Podnieks

As the U20 hockey world prepares to descend on Ottawa for the 2009 World Junior Championship, it is worth noting some of the numbers that surround the championship when it is played on Canadian soil. Of note, of course, is Canada's success on home ice. But there are also several other numbers that surround the event when it moves across the Atlantic ocean. Canada's success on home ice is just one part of the history, here's a look at some of the more interesting numbers when the championship is played on Canadian soil involving team Canada and the rest of the field:

2 Coaches that have won both the Stanley Cup and World U20 Championship gold medal. Mike Babcock led Canada to the U20 Championship title in 1997, and just this past spring took Detroit to the Cup. Mike Keenan is the second man to win the Stanley Cup and coach at the U20 level (1980).

Ottawa should provide hockey fans with great hockey and plenty of drama, but don't expect to see any overtime or shootout games. In all previous World U20s hosted by Canada, there has been only one OT game and no shootouts. The lone exception was the gold-medal game in 1999 in Winnipeg when Russia's Artem Chubarov scored to defeat the hosts, 3-2. In Canada, sixty minutes is all a team seems to need.

1 Because of the NHL lockout in 2004-05, Patrice Bergeron holds a record that might never be equaled. He won a gold medal with Canada at the senior World Championship in 2004 before he won gold with Canada at the World U20 Championship a year later! He was a regular with Boston as an 18-year-old rookie and played in the senior worlds when the Bruins missed the playoffs. During the lockout, with nowhere to play, he joined the team and won gold.



The worst combined record of any country at U20s in Canada. With all due respect to Norway, it is probably a good thing that the Nordic nation didn't qualify for Ottawa. It has played only twice in the U20s in Canada-and is still looking for its first win or tie. In 1991, the Norwegians lost all seven games they played, being outscored by a whopping 75-8 margin, finishing last, and being relegated. In 2006, they again lost all games (six), were outscored 34-6, finished last, and were relegated.

0-13

4 The 2009 U20 Championship in Ottawa marks the start of an unprecedented run of the tournament in North America. In 2010, the tournament remains in Canada, hosted by Saskatoon and Regina, and in 2011 it goes to Buffalo, New York. In 2012, it's right back in the motherland, this time being hosted jointly by Calgary and Edmonton. It will be a total of four years before the World Juniors returns to Europe.

39 Number of years of age World Juniors played at six times has Sidney Crosby. Gretzky's appearance in performance by a 16-year-old in U in scoring with 17 points in just game-playing with and against players older than him. Gretzky was 16 years. The youngest-ever Canadian was years, two months and 28 days old.

19 The most goals scored by a team in a single game on Canadian soil. The Soviet Union made its mark in tiny Cornwall, Ontario on December 22, 1977, when they beat Switzerland, 18-1. Canada also scored 18 goals, on December 27, 1986, defeating West Germany, 18-2. But those two records fell when the Americans came along in 1991 and bettered the spree by beating Norway, 19-1, in Regina, Saskatchewan, the most goals ever scored in a U20 game on Canadian soil. The most recent high score also featured those two teams. On December 26, 2005, in Vancouver, the United States beat the Norwegians by a more modest 11-2 score.

While many would believe that the single-game attendance record must be when Vancouver hosted the 2006 World Junior Championship and shattered virtually every attendance record there was, the assumption is false. In fact, the single-game attendance record has stood for nearly 15 years.

19,465

Surprisingly, it is Calgary's Saddledome that holds the record for the most fans at one game. On December 20, 1994, the Canada-Czech Republic game drew 19,465 fans, a record that could easily fall at this year's event in Ottawa. It is the only game in which Calgary makes the record list for attendance at the World Juniors.

biggest stage



Quinn brings experience to Canada's juniors

■ Canada's coach at this year's U20 is Pat Quinn. The 65-year-old is doing things in reverse. Normally, a U20 coach is young and uses the tournament as a steppingstone to the NHL. From Mike Keenan to Dave King, Mike Babcock, Tom Renney, and Brent Sutter, the tournament is a perfect place for an aspiring coach to earn his wings and move on to the NHL. But Quinn is hands down the most experienced coach ever to make his U20 debut. Consider his resume: after a lengthy playing career in the NHL, Quinn coached the Philadelphia Flyers starting in 1978. He was there for four years during which time his team set one of the game's most amazing records: 35 games without a loss. He then moved on to Los Angeles (three years), Vancouver (five years), and Toronto (seven years). He twice took teams to the Stanley Cup finals—in 1980 with the Flyers and 1994 with the Canucks—and he led Canada to a gold medal in the 2002 Olympics as well as the World Cup of Hockey championship two years later. After he was fired by the Maple Leafs in 2006, he has been one of Hockey Canada's go-to coaches. He led Canada to Spengler Cup victory in 2006 and this past April led Canada's U18 team to a gold medal as well. Without question, Quinn's 30 years of experience will be vital to leading a young Canadian team in Ottawa.

At 65 years of age, Pat Quinn is by far the oldest and most experienced coach to lead a Canadian team. The previous oldest was Brian Kilrea who was a mere 49 years old when he led Canada in 1984.

5 In five of the last six times Canada has hosted the event it set new attendance records, starting in 1986 when Hamilton and neighbouring towns attracted 154,172 fans through to 2006 when Vancouver drew a paid attendance 325,138. Given that many games this year will be played at Scotiabank Place, with a capacity over 19,000, it is a certainty (by ticket sales to date) Ottawa will establish another record crowd.

4 Number of times that the Soviet Union/Russia has won the World Junior Championship on Canadian soil. The nation won the gold medal in 1978, 1986, 1999 and 2003. Some of the notable gold medal wins include in 2003, in Halifax, as Alexander Ovechkin and mates beat Canada 3-2 for the gold medal, and back in Hamilton in 1986, the Soviets beat Canada 4-1 en route to gold. Canada settled for silver. Combined with Russia's 5-4 OT win in the senior World Championship this past May in Quebec City and one gets the distinct impression that they are motivated when playing in Canada.

By contrast Canada has won the World Junior championship three times on home ice. In 1991, 1995 and 2006 the Canadians were the top team. Only Canada and Russia/Soviet Union have won the U20s when the event has been held in Canada.

7 Canada has hosted the U20s seven times, winning gold three times, silver three times, and bronze once. In other words, a hosting has to date guaranteed a medal for Canada. Ottawa will represent the fourth time in the last decade that Canada has played host to the annual event.

15 Of the 7,159 total goals scored at the World U20s, Canada has accounted for 1,068 or nearly 15 per cent of all goals, an average of more than five per game in 210 total games played by Canada since 1977.

times that teams have suited up a player that is 16 or younger. The youngest player to ever skate in a world championship was Kazakhstan's Viktor Alexandrov the age of 14 years, 11 months and 28 days old. Only once a 16-year-old represented Canada: Jay Bouwmeester, who, Jason Spezza, Bill Campbell, Eric Lindros, and Wayne Gretzky in 1978 was the most extraordinary player in U20 history. He led the tournament with six goals—nearly three points a game—by players who were mostly three years younger, 10 months and 26 days old.



12 Since 1982, a Canadian goalie has been named Directorate Award winner for that position an incredible 12 times. Although some have not gone on to distinguished NHL careers, many have, including Roberto Luongo (1999), Marc-Andre Fleury (2003), Jose Theodore (1996), and Carey Price (2007).



9 Canada has had a perfect record nine times in the 32 editions of the World U20s. All other countries combined have had a spotless record only 11 times.



Sweden's juniors step it up



From struggling nation to U20 darlings, what sparked Sweden to life?

■ Six years ago, the Swedish junior program was in disarray and the U20 national team was closer to relegation than winning a medal. Today, the "Junior Crowns" are challenging Canada for gold and the program again produces prospects over whom NHL-scouts are salivating. Tommy Boustedt, the Director of Youth Development within the Swedish Ice Hockey Association explains the dramatic turnaround.

By Szymon Szemberg

■ Sweden has always prided itself in developing good hockey players, who traditionally were competitive on all levels. In the early 2000s this was not the case anymore. Thommie Bergman, the Toronto Maple Leafs' European scout, who in 1972 became the first Swede to play regularly in the NHL, had this to say in 2003:

"It is sad, but the Swedish juniors are not competitive anymore," Bergman said after the 2003 World U20 Championship in Canada. "The players simply don't have the ability to compete at the highest level and the junior national team is behind Slovakia and Switzerland, not to mention the top four. If nothing happens it could be a matter of time before the U20 is relegated to division I."

■ In 2003, they were really close to this embarrassment. The "Junior Crowns" were playing in the relegation round and only a hard-fought but wobbly 5-4 win over Belarus saved their status as a top-pool team. It wasn't much better the next year; relegation round again, but the Swedes at least were better than Switzerland, Austria and Ukraine.

Fast forward four years. IIHF *Ice Times* bumped into scout Thommie Bergman again, this time prior to a Champions Hockey League game in Linköping, one day after he and of other NHL prospect watchers evaluated the U20 Four Nations Tournament in Uppsala, Sweden where the hosts swept Russia, Czech Republic and Finland.

"This is the best class (players born 90-91) of Swedish juniors I have seen so far," said an impressed Bergman, who is never afraid to speak his mind. "The turnaround from the dark years is remarkable and Sweden is a bona-fide challenger for the World Junior gold in Ottawa."

Bergman claims that this team has the potential to be better than last year's group, which defeated Canada in the preliminary round, 4-3, and lost the gold medal game to the same team, 3-2, in overtime.

■ So, what is the reason behind the transformation from mediocre at best, to world class contender?

Tommy Boustedt left coaching at the professional club level in 2002 and accepted the challenge as Director of Youth Development of the Swedish Ice Hockey Association the same year. Although the worst results of the junior national team were still to come, Boustedt realized in 2002 that things were not well with the association's once proud development program.

The same year, Boustedt initiated a Commission of Inquiry on junior hockey in Sweden.

BOUSTEDT SAYS

Ice Times sat down with Tommy Boustedt, the Director of Youth Development of the Swedish Ice Hockey Association, and asked him to give a brief summary of the traditional top junior teams. Here's what he had to say about Sweden's toughest competition in Ottawa and about teams that missed the cut to be among the elite 10 this year:

CANADA:

They have ten times as much of anything if you compare with Sweden. They have more players, coaches, rinks, money. On top of that, the country has great hockey people in their system. Canada deserves everything they have earned because they have worked hard for it. For me, they are the clear favorites.

RUSSIA:

The Russians have a consistently high level of

individual skill and a great practice technique. In this aspect, they are actually ahead of Canada. At this year's U20s, they will be high up as usual.

UNITED STATES

The U.S. has a great development program in Ann Arbor. It's the program with the most scientific approach to almost every aspect of the game. With this program the Americans have been able

"We took an honest and thorough look at the state of our development," said Boustedt. "You could compare it with the hockey summit that Hockey Canada organized years earlier when they had problems in major international competition. Part of the inquiry was a summit meeting with 120 people, junior coaches, club executives and also Swedish NHL-scouts."

"We held workshops, everyone was asked to speak their minds and the process generated in 100 proposals being submitted of how to improve junior hockey in Sweden. We formulated a five-year plan and pledged to implement the 100 improvement proposal within this period."

■ All proposals were aimed to achieve two major objectives:

1. To develop more players for the Swedish top pro league.
2. To consistently have the U20 and U18 national teams compete for medals.

"The commission of inquiry and the hockey summit in 2002 proved to be a turning point, although it took some time before we saw the changes," said Boustedt. "It's like turning the course of a big ship; it takes time before you see the new path."

"In concrete terms, our new vision resulted in improved coaching and player development. We were also happy to see the IIHF implementing the new rule interpretations on restraining fouls in 2005. I believe that the new game enhanced the qualities which Swedish players traditionally excel in."

This all sounds great, but in which tangible qualities are the Swedish juniors of today better than the ones in 2003?

■ Tommy Boustedt lists four major differences:

1. Attitude. "We have too long had a mentality of 'it's great to participate and it's nice to win'. We have tried to get away from this Swedish mentality which is so prevalent in our society. We have taught our players to 'love to compete and to win'."
2. Goaltending. "The concept of goaltending coaches was vastly neglected years ago. Now we want all goalies on all levels have their own coaches. We see the results; our





THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW: Sweden's ascent to the top may seem instantaneous, but for the Swedes it was the result of a carefully crafted development plan that came after the U20 team hit a low at the 2003 U20 Championship (left) playing in the relegation round. It remains to be seen if the Swedes, celebrating their semi-final win last year, can improve on their silver medal this season.

level of goaltending has improved dramatically."

3. The physical game. "We don't back down anymore and the 'Chicken Swede' is dead."

4. Scoring. "We have been working very hard on practicing offensive zone positioning, driving to the net, jumping on rebounds, all things that make you score."

The class of 90-91 is really the first which reaped the benefits of the "Swedish junior revolution".

"I am told by scouts that as many as ten Swedish players from this group can be selected in the first round of the next NHL entry draft," says Boustedt. "Our previous record is six."

■ ■ So, which players will carry the Junior "Tre Kronor" in Ottawa? According to Boustedt, this quintet must be successful if Sweden wants to displace Canada from the top of the U20 world:

□ Mikael Backlund, F. "He has seven points in six games last year as an underaged player and should be even more dominant this year."

□ Joakim Andersson, F. "Plays a regular shift for Frolunda in the Swedish top pro league. Very solid, good playmaker, had six assists in the 2008 World Juniors."

□ Victor Hedman, D. "Only 18, many scouts predict that he will go first overall in the 2008 NHL draft. He was named to the U20 All Star Team as a 17-year old."

□ Jacob Markström, G. "Born 90, but already one of the best goalies in the Swedish league. Sweden's best goaltending prospect in many years."

□ Oscar Möller, F. "Potentially our best forward, playing with the Los Angeles Kings. We are very fortunate that the NHL club accepted our request to release him for the tournament. Oscar badly wanted to play in Ottawa."

If this group will lead Sweden to its first U20 gold in 28 years, we will only know on January 5, 2009. But one thing should be secure - they won't run the risk of being relegated.

to close the gap in skill if one compares the program with Russia and Canada.

FINLAND:

The Finns were incredibly consistent for a long time. But in recent years, they have slipped a bit and they are very much aware of it. The Finns fit a little too easily into their stereotype right now, lacking high-end skill. But I am confident that they will bounce back.

CZECH REPUBLIC:

The Czechs suffer from the migration of juniors to the Canadian leagues. It's a good move for some players, but not for all. This has resulted in them not being as good as they once were.

SLOVAKIA:

The Slovaks are in a similar position as the Czechs and they are even more exposed as they don't have the same depth the Czech Republic. But the

Slovaks are doing well with the U20 team playing in their top professional league.

SWITZERLAND:

The junior development is not at the same point as it was in the early 2000s when they were among the top four in both U18 and U20. But they are slowly coming back and developing some very good talent who get quality time in the top Swiss pro league.

2009 IIHF WORLD U20 RECORD BOOK

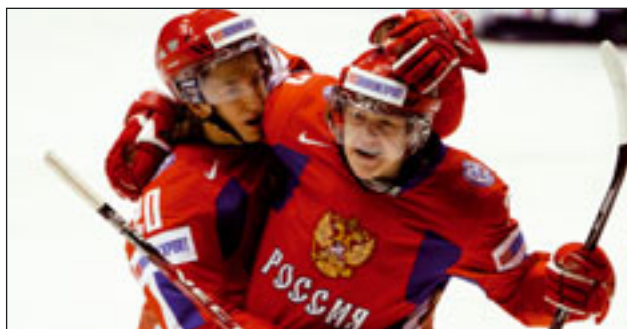
DID YOU KNOW: A few fun facts when the teams start playing in Ottawa include:

■ Russia and Canada are the only two teams to win the gold medal on Canadian soil. Russia has the edge (when including the Soviet era) in total U20 medals with 26 to Canada's 24, but Canada has more gold medals with 14 compared with 11 for Russia/Soviet Union.

■ Latvia and Germany both join the ranks of the top division this season. The Latvians are the least experienced team in 2009 with only one top division appearance, while the Germans have played in 22 top events (West Germany included). Despite the 22 years of experience, the Germans have never won a U20 medal.

ALL TIME IIHF WORLD U20 STANDINGS

Country	Years	Games	Wins	Ties	Losses	GF	GA	Points	Gold	Silver	Brz.
Canada	32	210	149	21	40	1068	516	325	14	6	4
Finland	32	211	115	16	80	933	665	246	2	4	6
Sweden	32	211	119	13	79	945	612	251	1	8	3
United States	32	212	98	11	103	865	817	207	1	1	3
Russia	17	113	79	8	26	488	243	171	3	6	4
Soviet Union	15	99	79	5	15	645	247	163	8	3	2
Czechoslovakia	17	113	65	13	35	603	368	143	0	4	7
Czech Republic	16	99	48	8	43	337	272	104	2	0	1
Switzerland	22	142	33	7	102	354	773	73	0	0	1
Slovakia	13	80	30	9	41	239	245	69	0	0	1
West Germany	12	77	13	1	63	193	522	27	0	0	0
Germany	10	64	10	2	52	121	333	22	0	0	0
Belarus	6	36	5	2	29	68	195	14	0	0	0
Kazakhstan	5	32	6	2	24	66	220	14	0	0	0
Ukraine	4	25	3	1	21	37	150	7	0	0	0
Poland	6	41	2	2	37	69	361	6	0	0	0
Norway	6	39	3	0	36	72	331	6	0	0	0
France	1	6	1	0	5	6	42	2	0	0	0
Latvia	1	6	1	0	5	14	30	2	0	0	0
Austria	2	11	0	1	10	14	99	1	0	0	0
Denmark	1	6	0	0	6	12	34	0	0	0	0
Japan	1	7	0	0	7	9	83	0	0	0	0



RUSSIA ON A ROLL: While everyone talks about Canada's impressive four straight gold medals, another nation has also put together a solid streak at the World Juniors. Russia has won four straight medals (three silver, one bronze) at the U20 Championships. The nation has six medals in the last seven seasons as they won the gold medal in 2002 and 2003. They only missed the podium in 2004, the last time Canada also failed to win gold.

IIHF World U20 Championship

Scoring Records

MOST GAMES PLAYED

26	Bjorn Christen, SUI (1997-2000)
26	Jochen Hecht, GER (1994-97)
25	Michael Frolik, CZE (2005-08)
25	Michel Riesen, SUI (1996-99)
25	Robert Sterflinger, FRG (1981-84)

MOST POINTS, CAREER

42	Peter Forsberg, SWE (10+32=42)
40	Robert Reichel, TCH (18+22=40)
39	Pavel Bure, URS (27+12=39)
35	Alexander Mogilny, URS (19+16=35)
35	Esa Tikkanen, FIN (17+18=35)
34	Vladimir Ruzicka, TCH (25+9=34)
34	Markus Naslund, SWE (21+13=34)

MOST POINTS, ONE U20 CHAMPIONSHIP

31	Peter Forsberg, SWE (1993-7+24=31)
24	Markus Naslund, SWE (1993-13+11=24)
22	Raimo Helminen, FIN (1984-11+11=22)
21	Robert Reichel, TCH (1990-11+10=21)
20	Vladimir Ruzicka, TCH (1983-12+8=20)
20	Esa Keskinen, FIN (1985-6+14=20)

MOST GOALS, U20 CAREER

27	Pavel Bure, URS (1989-91)
25	Vladimir Ruzicka, TCH (1981-83)
21	Markus Naslund, SWE (1992-93)
19	Alexander Mogilny, URS (1987-89)

MOST GOALS, ONE U20 CHAMPIONSHIP

13	Markus Naslund, SWE (1993)
12	Pavel Bure, URS (1991)
12	Vladimir Ruzicka, TCH (1983)

MOST ASSISTS, U20 CAREER

32	Peter Forsberg, SWE (1992-93)
22	Robert Reichel, TCH (1988-90)
19	Eric Lindros, CAN (1990-92)
19	Henrik Sedin, SWE (1998-2000)

MOST ASSISTS, ONE U20 CHAMPIONSHIP

24	Peter Forsberg, SWE (1993)
14	Esa Keskinen, FIN (1985)
14	Doug Weight, USA (1991)
13	Jaromir Jagr, TCH (1990)

IIHF World U20 Championships

Year	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Venue
1974*	Soviet Union	Finland	Canada	Leningrad
1975*	Soviet Union	Canada	Sweden	Winnipeg/Brandon
1976*	Soviet Union	Canada	Czechoslovakia	Turku
1977	Soviet Union	Canada	Czechoslovakia	B. Bystrica/Zvolen
1978	Soviet Union	Sweden	Canada	Montreal
1979	Soviet Union	Czechoslovakia	Sweden	Karlstad
1980	Soviet Union	Finland	Sweden	Helsinki
1981	Sweden	Finland	Soviet Union	Fussen
1982	Canada	Czechoslovakia	Finland	Minnesota
1983	Soviet Union	Czechoslovakia	Canada	Leningrad
1984	Soviet Union	Finland	Czechoslovakia	Norrkoping/Nykoping
1985	Canada	Czechoslovakia	Soviet Union	Helsinki/Turku
1986	Soviet Union	Canada	USA	Hamilton
1987	Finland	Czechoslovakia	Sweden	Piestany
1988	Canada	Soviet Union	Finland	Moscow
1989	Soviet Union	Sweden	Czechoslovakia	Anchorage
1990	Canada	Soviet Union	Czechoslovakia	Helsinki/Turku
1991	Canada	Soviet Union	Czechoslovakia	Saskatoon
1992	Soviet Union	Sweden	USA	Fussen/Kaufbeuren
1993	Canada	Sweden	Czechoslovakia	Gavle
1994	Canada	Sweden	Russia	Ostrava/Frydek Mistek
1995	Canada	Russia	Sweden	Alberta
1996	Canada	Sweden	Russia	Boston
1997	Canada	USA	Russia	Geneva/Morges
1998	Finland	Russia	Switzerland	Helsinki/Hameenlinna
1999	Russia	Canada	Slovakia	Winnipeg
2000	Czech Republic	Russia	Canada	Skelleftea/Umea
2001	Czech Republic	Finland	Canada	Moscow/Podolsk
2002	Russia	Canada	Finland	Pardubice/Hradec Kral.
2003	Russia	Canada	Finland	Halifax/Sydney
2004	USA	Canada	Finland	Helsinki/Hameenlinna
2005	Canada	Russia	Czech Republic	Grand Forks/Thief River Falls
2006	Canada	Russia	Finland	Vancouver/Kamloops/Kelowna
2007	Canada	Russia	United States	Mora/Leksand
2008	Canada	Sweden	Russia	Pardubice/Liberec

*denotes unofficial tournament

Ode to Ottawa: A Canadian hockey hub

By Lucas Aykroyd

■ **OTTAWA** - Political leaders may come and go, but in Canada's capital, hockey is a perennial favourite. Why? Just check some birth certificates.

Dozens of NHLers were born in the host city for the 2009 IIHF World U20 Championship (Dec. 26-Jan. 5), including old-time legends like Alec Connell and Frank Boucher, 1980's stars like Rick Vaive and Doug Wilson, and current aces like Derek Roy, Marc Savard, and Rod Brind'Amour.

■ Yet Ottawa's connection to Canada's national sport, at every level, runs even deeper.

Now, Ottawa wasn't the birthplace of hockey. The IIHF has officially awarded that distinction to Montreal, where the first organized game was played at the Victoria Skating Rink on March 3, 1875. However, the man who codified the rules for that game, James Creighton (1850-1930), brought his talents to the national capital in 1882.

While working as the Canadian Senate's law clerk, Creighton set up a team called the Rideau Hall Rebels, which featured two sons of Lord Stanley, Canada's Governor General. In 1892, Lord Stanley purchased the original Stanley Cup trophy, and on March 22, 1894, the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association beat the Ottawa Generals 3-1 in the first true Cup final game.

■ Only in 1903 would Ottawa celebrate its first Stanley Cup, but that inaugurated a glorious championship run that lasted till 1906. The club, now officially known as the Senators for the first time, earned the nickname of the "Silver Seven," as hockey was still played with seven men per side then.

Defending their title under a challenge system, the tough and skillful Senators boasted such Hockey Hall of Famers as Harry Westwick, Alf Smith, goalie Bouse Hutton, and Frank McGee, a legendary sniper who was blind in one eye. McGee's greatest on-ice feat was racking up 14 goals in a 23-2 win over Dawson City in the 1905 Cup-clincher.

The Senators remained a force to be reckoned with in those early years, winning the Cup in 1909, 1911, 1920, 1921, 1923, and 1927. Front-line scorers on the 1920's squad included Cy Denneny and Frank Nighbor. Clint Benedict not only backstopped the Senators to three Cups, but later made history as the first NHL goalie to wear facial protection after breaking his nose in 1930.

■ After the 1933-34 season, Ottawa sadly relinquished its NHL team. Tough economic times, the loss of star players, and declining attendance saw the Senators relocate to St. Louis. But passion for the game in the National Capital Region stayed strong.

In 1958, the city celebrated its first Memorial Cup, emblematic of Canadian junior hockey supremacy, thanks to the Ottawa-Hull Canadiens. The roster included future mainstays of the 1960's Montreal Canadiens dynasty, like Ralph Backstrom, Bobby Rousseau, Gilles Tremblay, and J.C. Tremblay. Later, coached by 2003 Hockey Hall of Fame inductee Brian Kilrea, the Ottawa 67's of the Ontario Hockey League captured Memorial Cups in 1984 and 1999.

■ The new era of international hockey also brought thrills to Ottawa. The inaugural 1976 Canada Cup kicked off at the Ottawa Civic Centre, one of this year's U20 venues. The host nation, led by superstars like Bobby Orr and Bobby Hull, hammered Finland 11-2 before 9,500 spectators. Canada went on to win the tournament, ousting



SUPER SEVEN Ottawa's 'Silver Seven' won the city's first Stanley Cup in 1903. They got the names as hockey was played with seven per side back then. Below the Canada women's team wins the 1990 Worlds. Photo HHOF

Czechoslovakia in the final. (Ottawa would also host two games in the 1981 Canada Cup, and three in the 1996 World Cup.)

■ The 1990's proved to be a groundbreaking decade. For starters, Ottawa boosted its reputation as a women's hockey stronghold.

Some reports place the first-ever all-female game here in 1889 (although others point to Barrie, Ontario in 1892), and one of the earliest women's hockey photos shows Lady Isobel Stanley, Lord Stanley's daughter, with a puck and stick outside Government House. And a century later, the IIHF organized the first-ever official World Women's Championship in Ottawa in 1990. In this eight-nation showdown, Canada, sporting pink jerseys, beat the USA 5-2 for gold before 10,000 fans at the Civic Centre.



NHL fans, meanwhile, rejoiced over the big league's return to Ottawa in 1992-93. It was a rough start for the new-look Senators, who didn't make the playoffs until 1997. But the leadership of captain Daniel Alfredsson helped turn things around. Despite its recent struggles, the club has frequently emerged as a regular-season powerhouse over the last 10 years, and made it to the 2007 Stanley Cup finals versus Anaheim.

■ Ex-World Junior stars are big for today's Senators. Dean McCammond (1993) and Chris Phillips (1996-97) both participated in Canada's 1990's five-peat. Scoring leaders Dany Heatley and Jason Spezza medaled multiple times in the early millennium, and D-man Anton Volchenkov captained Russia to gold in 2002. This year, hockey fans look forward to seeing more World Junior history made at Scotiabank Place.

To learn more about Ottawa's hockey history, you can also visit a free special exhibit at the City Hall Art Gallery (Dec. 5-Jan. 18, 9 am-6 pm daily, 110 Laurier Ave. West).

TWO ARENAS, ONE CITY

■ For the first time since 2006, the World U20 Championship will be played in two arenas in the same city. This is no easy feat considering that when the World Juniors are played in Canada, two large and state-of-the-art venues are called for to accommodate the thousands of fans that will attend the games. Besides its rich hockey tradition, Ottawa won the bid to host this year's U20s thanks to its two great venues.

Scotiabank Place:

Located about 40 minutes outside of downtown (but still within city limits) the Scotiabank place is the main venue of this year's championship, hosing Canada's preliminary round group in addition to all medal round games Home to the NHL's

Ottawa Senators, the facility holds 19,600. The arena played host to the 2007 Stanley Cup Finals and the 1996 World Cup of Hockey.

Ottawa Civic Centre:

Located in the heart of downtown Ottawa the Civic Center is home to the junior team the Ottawa 67s. With a capacity of 9,805, the Civic Centre is the perfect size for the non-Canada venue. The site will play host to Group B of the preliminary round in addition to hosting the relegation round games. The Civic Centre is no stranger to big events, most recently it host the 2005 Canadian Figure Skating Championships and before that hosted the Canadian national hockey championship (Memorial Cup) in 1999.

OLYMPIC QUALIFICATION TOURNAMENTS FOR 2010

Underdog Slovaks are going to Vancouver

■ ■ ■ There's something about the Olympics that seems to inspire great hockey upsets. And added to the long list of surprises on the men's side is finally a shock from the women's game as 17th-ranked Slovakia came from out of nowhere to claim a spot among the eight elite nations at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver.

What makes the Olympics unique is that every hockey nation has the opportunity to qualify for the Games. Of course, no one really expects that the teams that start the qualification process from the bottom rung of the ladder will actually make to the world's most elite stage, it would be like a group of amateurs beating the top team in the world for a gold medal -- things like that just don't happen, right?

Much like underdogs before them, Slovakia had an unexplainable combination of grit, determination, luck and skill on its long path to the Olympics.

The journey started last May when Slovakia signed up for the pre-Olympic qualification tournament. Any country with a standing national team has the option to participate in the Olympic Qualification process, but unlike World Championships, they have to pay their own way at the events, which often daunts many nations that believe they don't have a chance of making the Games.

But Slovakia believed. The believed despite the fact that they were only the third-highest ranked team at the Pre-Qualification tournament in September. They entered that tournament behind 13th-ranked Latvia and 15th-ranked Italy, only Bulgaria, making its national team debut, was considered more of a long shot.

But the Slovaks were undaunted and opened the tournament with a 2-0 win against host and top-ranked Latvia. They followed up the upset with a 3-1 win against Italy, sealing their spot in the final Olympic qualification tournament. For good measure, they set a world record for the most lopsided score in women's international hockey with an 82-0 drubbing of Bulgaria to close the event.

But despite the success at the pre-qualification, Slovakia entered the final tournament in Germany again as the huge underdogs. After all, it's one thing to win against teams ranked in the teens, but at the final qualification tournament, Slovakia was entering the Big Leagues against seventh-ranked Germany, 10th-ranked Kazakhstan and 11th-ranked France. The bell would surely toll for the Slovaks.

But much like their performance in Latvia, the Slovaks played the final qualification tournament as a team that was destined to go to Vancouver. The Slovaks were far from flashy, in fact, they secured their spot in the Olympics by scoring a mere three goals. But thanks to outstanding defense and goaltender by Zuzana Tomcikova (see page 12 for more on Tomcikova), Slovakia skated to a 1-0 win against Germany and followed with a 2-0 victory against the Kazakhs.

After those two wins, Slovakia had its spot in Vancouver sealed. There was little those in Bad Tölz could do but look on with awe and respect as the Slovaks celebrated after the Kazakhstan win.

The Slovak team left Germany directly after its 3-1 win against France, most of the players had to get home to return to the jobs. But now the real work for Slovakia will



TO VANCOUVER AND BEYOND The Slovakian team listens to its national anthem after beating Kazakhstan, 2-0, and securing its place in the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver.

begin as the nation prepares to skate with the world's best and prove, once again, that the label of underdog doesn't always come with a losing team.

■ ■ ■ Shanghai, China

China's berth in the 2010 Olympics was lost in the drama of Slovakia's surprise in Germany, but nevertheless, the Chinese performance was equally solid.

Unlike the Slovaks, China entered the final qualification tournament as the top-seeded team and the favorite to earn the final Olympic spot. But that label comes with a whole other set of burdens and expectations, as the Chinese women's team has been living on a razor thin edge for the past few seasons. But in the end, the squad prevailed and brought pride to the country as one of its few team entries in the Vancouver Games.

China started strong with a 5-0 win against 14th-ranked Norway, but things got closer when China barely nipped the 12th-ranked Czech Republic, 4-3, in the second game. That win set up a winner-takes-all game against Japan on the final day of the tournament.

It might have been more useful to flip a coin than to guess which of the two Asian nations would earn the spot in the Olympics. On one hand, ninth-ranked Japan was desperate to get back to the Games after skating in the first-ever women's Olympic hockey tournament when it made its debut at the 1998 Olympics in Nagano. But on the other hand, eighth-ranked China was also eager for a strong follow up to the Beijing Olympics with a winter Olympic showing in Vancouver. Both solid motivating factors.

In the end, China decided the game early in the third period, scoring the 2-0 goal 3:57 into the final stanza to seal the victory. Both teams will skate in the top level Women's World Championship this spring in Finland.

MEN'S PRE-OLYMPIC QUALIFICATION SUMMARY

■ ■ ■ GROUP B: Kazakhstan advances

With 31 goals in three games, it was clear that 19th-ranked Kazakhstan was the team that deserved to move onto the final Olympic qualification stage. The Kazakhs set the tone early with a 17-0 win against 36th-ranked Spain. The Kazakhs followed up with a 7-0 shutout against 25th-ranked and host Estonia. On the final day of action the Kazakhs had their biggest test and easily passed with a 7-2 victory against 24th-ranked Netherlands.

Kazakhstan will play in the final Olympic qualification tournament in Norway where they will face Denmark, France and the Norwegians.

■ ■ ■ GROUP C: Hungary advances

Things continue to look bright for Hungary. First the nation earned the promotion up the top level of the World Championship in April, and now they can continue their quest for an Olympic spot after winning the pre-qualification tournament. The 20th-ranked Hungarians dispatched 30th-ranked Serbia, 9-1, and 26th-ranked Croatia, 6-1. Those wins set up a duel against 23rd-ranked Lithuania for the tournament win. While Hungary had its close game, it still won with a three-goal margin, 5-2.

Hungary moves onto the final tournament in Latvia, where it will face Italy, Ukraine and Latvia.

■ ■ ■ GROUP D: Japan advances

Japan is trying to make its way back to the top level of international hockey and took a big step by upsetting host Poland and moving onto the final qualification tournament. Both the 21st-ranked Poles and the 22nd-ranked Japanese were unbeaten going into the final showdown after both defeated 29th-ranked Great Britain and 27th-ranked Romania. In the end the difference was a strong three-goal first period by Japan in the deciding game, which they won, 3-1.

As the lowest-ranked team to advance, Japan will play in the final qualification tournament in Germany where they will face the Germans, Austria and Slovenia.

'Zsuper Zuzana' and the unstoppable Slovaks

By Jenny Wiedeke

■ ■ Zuzana Tomcikova was the driving force behind one of the biggest upsets in women's hockey history. The Slovakian goaltender had four shutouts in five games in the Olympic Qualification process, earning her 17th-ranked squad a spot in the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver (see page 3 for more on the qualification). Tomcikova and her teammates now have just over a year to prepare for the world's biggest stage, when previously the nation's highest level was the Division I World Championship. How did they get so far so fast? And what can fans in Vancouver expect? We asked the spunky goaltender, who plays for Bemidji State University in Minnesota about the key to Slovakia's success.

Q: Did you ever expect when the Olympic Qualification process started at the beginning of the season that Slovakia as the 17th-ranked nation would be going to Vancouver?

At the beginning of the season we said it was a must that we advance to the November final qualification. After the pre-qualification we were talking about how amazing it would be to actually get to the Olympics. Personally, I dreamed of it and thought a lot about the final qualification in the months leading up to the tournament in Germany. I hoped for the wins, but it was something that was so unreal to me. The Germans have a great team, and we lost to Kazakhstan in the championship, 5-1, and they outshot us badly, so it seemed far away.

Q: The Kazakhs said after your game against Germany that this wasn't the Slovakian team that they had seen play in the past. What do you think contributed to Slovakia's sudden improvement?

I don't think we had a sudden improvement, it was a matter of determination and a little luck in Germany. I don't remember when I had two straight shutouts, and these were not easy games. But my teammates played as hard as they could and I did the same and that is why we won. We never wanted anything so badly as to win the qualification. We also have few girls playing in top hockey countries, so they have experience and a lot of talent and that was a small factor as well.

Q: Most of the Slovakian team plays together in Bratislava during the season. Do you see that as a benefit when you play as the national team? Is it difficult to step into the role of starting goaltender when you're not with the team during the season?

I think it is really good that girls are on one team. They get to practice together on a higher level. I was there for one season and can say that many things are provided for the team. They get to play together and spend more time together - get to know each other and build team cohesion. I've been on the national team for seven years, so I know all the girls on the team and I am always excited to come and play. I have a lot of close friends on the team so I don't feel like an outsider at all. I know what my position is and what my role is, so I try to do my job as best I can.

Q: What was going through your mind as the final minutes ticked away in the game against Kazakhstan and you realized that you were going to the Olympics?

I don't look at the clock during the game if it's not in front of me, that is one of my superstitions, so I didn't know how much time was left in the game. I remember when they announced last two minutes in the third period and I was thinking: "We won't score another goal so I just have to 'shut the door'". My mind was focused on not letting anything in. And then the buzzer went off, and it was amazing, I've never felt so much joy and happiness.



OH HAPPY DAY: Zuzana Tomcikova, far right, cheers at the conclusion of the Slovakian national anthem at the Women's Final Qualification Tournament in Bad Tölz, Germany. Tomcikova had two shut outs in the two games she played and was largely responsible for Slovakia's berth in the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver.

Q: A handful of the Slovakian players on your team play in other countries. Why did you decide to go the American university route, and would you recommend it to your other teammates?

We have five players out of country, and I think it's great. It helps the Slovakian national team a lot. They play in better games, and they improve as players, too. I decided to go to an American university because I wanted to get my education and play at a very high level. I think it is a great opportunity for girls, I would recommend it. The practices are hard and the league is very competitive, and at the same time you're getting a great education.

Q: You are only the second Olympian to attend Bemidji State University, what was your teammates' response when you returned to Minnesota? Did they realize what an underdog Slovakia was going into the November tournament?

The girls were amazing, they all congratulated me and were very proud of me. Bemidji is an underdog in our league as well, so they could imagine how much of a miracle it was.

Q: What do you say to those people that still doubt that Slovakia will be able to be competitive in Vancouver?

It is definitely a very big surprise that Slovakia made it to the Olympics, and now the team will work hard so we won't be something to laugh about in Vancouver. Of course we are far away from Canada, USA, Sweden and Finland, but I think we can battle with all the teams. If we play with such a big will and heart as we did in Germany, then we can be a nice surprise. Ultimately my hope is that this success will make women's hockey in Slovakia more popular.

Zuzana Tomcikova Fact File

- Born: April 23, 1988
- ☐ Had four shutouts in five Olympic qualification games this fall, including 1-0 and 2-0 wins against Germany and Kazakhstan, respectively.
- ☐ Played for the Slovakian national team that won gold medal in the 2007 World Championship Division II.
- ☐ Currently plays in the U.S. with Bemidji State University.
- ☐ Went to high school at Caronport High School in Canada
- ☐ Played for the boy's tier II team in the south central minor hockey league in Canada, the team earned second place in provincials.