



THE COUNTDOWN IS ON



Canada's national hockey teams *get ready* for Vancouver

By Kristen Odland

There are lofty, yet similar, goals set for the national men's, women's, and sledge hockey teams at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver. One of the biggest tests for all three will be fulfilling the nation's expectations on Canadian soil. But, embracing the challenge is something all three teams also have in common.

"There are two ways of looking at it," reasons Mike Babcock, ChPC, head coach of the Men's Olympic Team. "There is going to be pressure, without any question. But, I think the pressure is going to be a great thing and, obviously, give us impetuous to play as well as we possibly can. The other thing that I am a big believer in is that knowledge defeats fear.

"There are over 33 million people in Canada," he continues. "That is how many people should be watching the games. We understand there are going to be a lot of people supporting us and cheering us on to victory. We want to perform and play like that is the case ... the hockey part alone, the men's, the women's and the sledge teams — it should be a very exciting group to be around."

Jeff Snyder, head coach of the National Sledge Team, is preparing his team to face its share of distractions. With the Paralympic Games also being held in Vancouver, the team will draw larger crowds and more media attention than usual, as Canada begins defence of its 2006 gold medal.



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"Bob Nicholson (Hockey Canada's president and CEO) made it pretty clear," says Snyder. "He wants three gold medals, from the men, women, and our team. We feel pressure from that, but I think it is a good thing.

"We know Canada is a great hockey nation," he adds. "We will have great fan support and it is going to be loud in the arena. We have to deal with that too because we do not always play in front of large crowds, so that will be different for us."

For the moment, however, the clock is counting down and each team is taking steps toward finalizing their rosters.

August's four-day orientation camp in Calgary set the tone and built a foundation for the men's team. While the 46 players at camp returned to their National Hockey League clubs, the Canadian team brass — including executive director Steve Yzerman, Hockey Canada executive vice-president of hockey operations Johnny Miskey, and associate directors Doug Armstrong, Ken Holland, and Kevin Lowe — will be watching them until they select a team which has to be finalized by December 31.

"I don't think they made it any easier on anyone during (the orientation camp), I can tell you that," says Babcock, whose Canadian team will attempt to re-establish itself after a seventh-place finish at the 2006 Olympics in Turin. "Obviously, to have success we are going to have to rely on our depth. So, it is going to be really important to make those decisions throughout the line-up. That will be an ongoing process."



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The next time the Canadian crew will get together is February 15 for its one practice before the Olympic tournament.

“The real evaluation is based on their body of work,” says Babcock. “What they have done in the Stanley Cup playoffs, what they have done at world championships, and what they are going to do for the next three months.

“You were always evaluating players anyway. You will just watch some guys with a little more interest.”

The Canadian National Women’s Team operates a bit differently. As part of centralization in Calgary, it has embarked on a 50+-game schedule to prepare for the Olympics. The games include the Hockey Canada Cup in Vancouver in early September, where the team took home silver, the 4 Nations Cup in Finland in early November, and a number of games against Alberta Midget AAA boys teams.

Currently, it is carrying a 26-player roster, but only 21 will be selected for the Games this February. Head coach Melody Davidson, ChPC, however, has not decided when the final group will be named.

“When we are ready to do it, we will do it,” she says. “It is just day-to-day. At some point, it will come up that players are not ready to play or we will move ahead without some people; when that time comes, we will make those decisions. But, we are not looking to set any timelines on that.

“We want to make sure everybody has an opportunity to show what they can do.”

While there are certain deadlines — for example, February 13, when Canada begins defence of its 2006 gold medal with its first clash against Slovakia in Vancouver — Davidson knows the group is under pressure every day.

“We have to create an environment here where people can play,” she adds. “We do not want people that say, ‘When I make the team, I’ll be able to perform.’ We want people that can perform every day, regardless of the situation they are under.”

As for the National Sledge Team, 29 players attended the team’s August selection camp, which got the roster down to 18. But, by early January, Snyder expects to trim the roster down to 15. That group will be the chosen ones who will suit up for Canada at the 2010 Paralympic Winter Games in Vancouver.

The first cuts were made following the selection camp in Milton, ON, and the 18-man roster faced the United States during a two-game series in Toronto, which was split.

Snyder will continue his evaluations in another two-game set against the Americans in Rochester in October, while Charlottetown, PEI will host the 2009 World Sledge Hockey Challenge from November 17 through November 21.

There, Canada will face the US, Norway, and Japan — the top four teams in the world.

“That will be a good test for us there,” says Snyder. “We feel confident in our team. We have strong competition with Norway and the US, our two biggest opponents, but we feel that, if we play well, we have a good chance to win (at the Paralympics).”