

## Team Search

- Home
- State Of Hockey

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- Assets



## 2018 Olympic women's hockey preview

**Eight teams will descend on PyeongChang, South Korea in search of the gold medal.**

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By John Conley



Canada and the U.S. are the heavy favorites to reach the 2018 Olympic gold medal game.

Eight teams have qualified for women's hockey at the 2018 Olympic Games in PyeongChang, South Korea.

- Pool A consists of four teams; the top two will advance to the semifinals and the other two will be placed in the quarterfinals.
- Pool B also consists of four teams, two of which will advance to the quarterfinals.

### POOL A

#### United States

##### Top Players

- The United States' leading scorer from Sochi returns in Kendall Coyne. Also won the 2016 Patty Kazmaier Award.
- With 3 goals and 9 assists, Brianna Decker was named MVP in April when the Americans won the World Championship. She has also been a standout in CWHL & NWHL professional leagues.
- Just 5-1, Cayla Barnes is being fast-tracked onto the national team after standing out at U18 Worlds. Just turned 19 on Jan. 7.

##### On-Ice Forecast

Emphasizing puck possession while frequently playing back into their own zone will work well on the large Olympic sheet. Carrying an enormous monkey on the back no matter how many times they beat Canada in lesser events due to the past four Olympic Games and late third period debacle from Sochi. There is incredible self-imposed pressure from USA Hockey's obsession on winning gold. As team leader Hilary Knight says, "It's gold or bust for us."

##### Tidbit

Amanda Kessel's brother, Phil, is a two-time Olympian. Both have a silver medal, him from Vancouver and her from Sochi. Another brother, Blake, is in his seventh year of a minor pro career.

#### Canada

##### Top Players

- Marie-Philip Poulin is considered by some to be the best player in the world. Her heroics with two goals in each of the last two gold medal games cements her legacy.
- Policewoman Meghan Agosta has been part of the last three gold medal teams and was named tournament MVP in 2010. Sutton-Youngblood type chemistry with Poulin during Four Nations Cup in November.
- A broken hand kept her off the 2010 Olympic roster, and she was a mere bit player in 2014, but now big forward Jennifer Wakefield poses a matchup challenge to the U.S.

##### On-Ice Forecast

Have never failed to finish first or second in an Olympics or World Championship, and it will be a shock if it happens here. Will look to use superior size and a dynamic power play to overcome speed in games against the Americans. Results of pre-Olympic tune-up contests with the Americans have been mixed.

##### Tidbit

Preparation during Olympic years involves residency in Alberta and playing games that count in standings of the provincial AAA Midget Hockey League.

#### Finland

##### Top Players

- Jenni Hiirikoski has been named Best Defender at the World Championships six times.
- Former Gopher Noora Rätty was in goal for two NCAA championship seasons and has been named Best Goalie at Worlds four times.
- Just 18 years old, Petra Nieminen appears to be a star on the world level for many years to come.

##### On-Ice Forecast

The clear world No. 3, equally situated between the North American teams and the other medal hopefuls. Capable of pulling an upset, as they did beating Canada in a pool game at Worlds last April. Shutouts over Sweden (4-0) and Germany (8-0) secured third place, further indication of their prowess when things go well. All that said, a very disappointing finish at the last Games in Sochi reminds that nothing is a given.

##### Tidbit

Mira Jalosuo calls the Twin Cities home after attending the University of Minnesota and will return from Korea to lead the New Generation AAA program for girls who aspire to play college hockey.

**Olympic Athletes from Russia**Top Players

- Fanuza Kadirova is just 19 and has already competed in three World Championships, scoring three goals in Michigan last April. • Nadezhda Alexandrova played very well in goal at 2017 Worlds, even entering their last game trailing 2-0 and turning the tide for a 4-3 shootout win over Sweden.
- Yelena Dergachyova is a small forward that impressed at the 2017 World Championship after being kept off the game sheet in Sochi.

On-Ice Forecast

The good news is they earned bronze at Worlds in 2013 & 2016, and have risen to their highest IIHF ranking. Bad news is that their position in Pool A, while giving them an automatic berth in the quarterfinals, also means three pool games where they'll be heavy underdogs. Even worse news is they'll move forward without three players, including captain Anna Shibanova, among the six banned for life by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) on Dec. 12, over doping violations. Also punished were Yekaterina Smolentseva, who was set to suit up for her fifth Olympic Games at age 36, and Galina Skiba.

Tidbit

Will compete under a neutral banner without officially representing Russia, as the IOC ruled on Dec. 5, to sanction the country for violations from 2014 in Sochi.

**POOL B****Sweden**Top Players

- In 2006, Pernilla Winberg scored a game-winning shootout goal as a 16-year-old when Sweden upset the United States to earn silver. She remains a top player.
- Johanna Fallman recorded four goals in five games at 2017 Worlds, tops on the team even though she plays defense.
- Maja-Nyhlen Persson is just 17 years old, already used in heavy rotation and likely a fixture of the Lady Crowns for years to come.

On-Ice Forecast

A decade ago, they were a solid No. 3 with finishes in the Olympics and at the World Championships to prove it. Today they have fallen at least a rung below the Finns and enter as medal longshots like Russia and Switzerland.

Tidbit

The Rookie of the Year for Minnesota State's 2007-08 team was Emilia Ramboldt, now a veteran blueliner and the Swedish team captain.

**Switzerland**Top Players

- Lara Stalder completed her UMD Bulldog career and notched an impressive 9 points in 6 games at Worlds in April. This will be her second Olympics.
- The youngest player to ever win an ice hockey medal is Alina Muller, who was just 15 in Sochi when she scored the game-winner against Sweden for bronze.
- Florence Schelling made 252 saves to be named MVP and Best Goaltender at her third Olympic Games in Sochi. She has also played professionally in the Men's Swiss B league.

On-Ice Forecast

A bit of a wild card arriving with a low world rank despite having some of the most talented young players in the world. The Swiss should earn a quarterfinal spot and exit Pool B with some good momentum. A medal repeat is unlikely, but not impossible.

Tidbit

The team is called Eisgenossen, which translates to Enjoyed Ice.

**Japan**Top Players

- Ayaka Toko was named Best Defender at the second division of IIHF World Championship.
- Chiho Osawa was named to the All Tournament Team at Worlds.
- Nana Fujimoto is an elite netminder that played for the New York Riveters of the NWHL, making it to the league's All-Star Game in 2016.

On-Ice Forecast

Hosted the Olympics when women's ice hockey was first contested. A surprise qualifier for Sochi, where they were darlings after giving vastly superior opponents one-goal games. A longshot to advance, but could spoil Swiss and Swede medal hopes.

Tidbit

No player over 5-6 was on their roster for Worlds in April. Several players also on a club team named Seibu Princess Rabbits.

**Korea**Top Players

- Do Hee Han was named Best Goalkeeper for the fourth division of the IIHF World Championship.
- Jongah Park tallied 10 points on 4 goals and 6 assists at Worlds.
- Suyeon Eom has been able to generate points from defense against lesser competition.

On-Ice Forecast

Participating as host nation, a win or a tie in any game will be considered a roaring success. A more realistic goal is using these Olympics as a launching pad that increases participation for the next wave of players.

Tidbit

Park Yoon-jung is also known as Marissa Brandt, sister of Team USA's Hannah.

**Pool A**

	USA	CANADA	FINLAND	RUSSIA
Population	323,995,528	35,362,905	5,498,211	142,355,415
2017 Female Players	75,832	86,925	6,527	2,376
Women World Rank	1	2	3	4
Indoor Rinks	1,535	3,300	268	560
Outdoor Rinks	1,000	5,000	38	2,583
Olympic Finish				
1998 Nagano	1	2	3	DNP
2002 Salt Lake City	2	1	4	5
2006 Turin	3	1	4	6
2010 Vancouver	2	1	3	6
2014 Sochi	2	1	5	6

**Pool B**

	SWEDEN	SWITZERLAND	JAPAN	KOREA
Population	9,880,604	8,179,294	126,702,133	50,924,172
2017 Female Players	5,505	1,349	2,587	319
Women World Rank	5	6	9	22
Indoor Rinks	356	111	117	30
Outdoor Rinks	136	193	50	0
Olympic Finish				
1998 Nagano	5	DNP	6	DNP
2002 Salt Lake City	3	DNP	DNP	DNP
2006 Turin	2	7	DNP	DNP
2010 Vancouver	4	5	DNP	DNP

	SWEDEN	SWITZERLAND	JAPAN	KOREA
2014 Sochi	4	3	8	DNP

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