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USA vs. Canada: The greatest rivalry in team sports

An international exhibition is often called a friendly, but that's misleading considering the intensity when these teams meet.

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By John Conley



The greatest active rivalry in team sports continues in St. Paul at 3 p.m., on Sunday, Dec. 3, when the U.S. Women's National Team hosts Canada in a pre-Olympic tilt at the Xcel Energy Center. An international exhibition is often called a friendly, but that's misleading considering the intensity when these teams meet. A 2009 skirmish has been called a donnybrook. An October 2013 game in Vermont closed with a line brawl, only to be topped by an infamous end-of-game melee two months later in Grand Forks, N.D. In the words of now-retired Canadian legend Hayley Wickenheiser, "I guess we have one every Olympic cycle to get it out of our systems."

All 18 IIHF World Championships have found these two countries pitted against each other in the gold medal game. Canada has won 10 times, including the first eight. The Americans have won the other eight, including the last four. Overtime and shootouts have been common, as these teams have been so evenly matched that 60 minutes often isn't enough to settle things.

For all of their success at Worlds, the Olympic Games have brought heartbreak and disappointment for the United States, only winning gold the first time women's hockey was contested in 1998 at Nagano, Japan. Since then, Team Canada has won all four Olympic golds, none more dramatic the last one in Sochi, Russia.

You can watch what many consider the all-time greatest big game comeback in hockey on YouTube here. The highlights, or lowlights for Americans, are that Canada trailed 2-0 late when a shot banked off the leg of an American defender to cut the lead in half. A clearing shot would hit the post of an empty Canadian net when only 1:24 remained, denying the U.S. an insurance goal that would seal things. An incredibly calm Canadian bench drew up some 6-on-5 strategy during a timeout with 1:14 left, which paid off less than 20 seconds later with a tying goal. Canada would go on to win in overtime.

Canadians Hayley Wickenheiser, Caroline Ouellette and Jayna Hefford were part of all four gold medal teams. They've all moved on, replaced by younger players including the Minnesota Gophers' Sarah Potomak. North of the border, they cling to hopes that Marie-Philip Poulin isn't done providing heroics. Great players make great plays on the biggest stage, and Poulin certainly meets the criteria. Not resting on her laurels after being the star in Vancouver (2010) where she scored both goals in a 2-0 gold medal win over the U.S., Poulin tied the game with under a minute left in regulation and then stuck a dagger to the Americans with a "golden goal" in sudden death in Sochi (2014).

For the competitors, it is especially satisfying when these teams meet because there is a significant drop off after the "big two" in women's hockey. Players vacillate between respect and animosity in describing the other side. American defender Kacey Bellamy says what makes it great is, "the respect we have for each other on and off the ice. A lot of us played with and against each other throughout the last couple years in college. It's been us and them a long time and it's just a battle every time."

Canadian power forward Jennifer Wakefield is more to the point. "We've always had that huge rivalry. We don't like each other. We don't like them; they don't like us."

Gigi Marvin of Warroad, Minn., is an elder stateswoman entering her third Olympic Games, continuing in quest of the elusive Olympic gold where Canada remains a permanent obstacle.

"I love playing them. I think a lot of people misconstrue it and think we should hate them. I have no hatred in my heart for them. You want to play the amazing players, because it brings the best out in yourself as well. You're pushed past your potential almost. It's remarkable to be able to watch those games. It draws even more out of each one of us to be the best we can be for our teammates and for the team to succeed. I enjoy playing in these games, we only get to play them every now and then. It's very rare and very special and I'm very appreciative."

Wakefield offers the final word on why you should attend this installment of their rivalry. "It's one of those things that you have to experience firsthand. I think you'll be drawn to the game from there. Come out and see what we can do and the talented women we have on both sides."

Click here for tickets. Prices are \$28 for adults, \$15.50 for kids 12 & under. Group discounts available.

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