

By Harry Thompson

# FROM THE GROUND UP



## → GOLDEN HOPES OF U.S. TEAMS ARE ANCHORED IN USA HOCKEY'S GRASS-ROOTS EFFORTS

T

O THE CASUAL SPORTS FAN, Olympic competition is what USA Hockey is all about. But for those who know, the international success achieved by U.S. teams is the result of the hard work of dedicated grass-roots volunteers who go about the business of hockey in anonymity, spending countless hours in local rinks helping young girls and boys become better hockey players and even better people.

Thanks to the financial support of the NHL and the hard work of countless volunteers around the country, innovative growth and skill development programs have bolstered USA Hockey's medal hopes at international tournaments.

"I had a plethora of coaches that helped me, from the time I was a Mite who taught me how to skate and all the life lessons I learned growing up playing the game," said long-time NHL and two-time Olympian David Backes, who grew up playing hockey in the Minneapolis suburb of Spring Lake Park, Minn.

"All those guys were a huge impact in my life and if I started naming them you'd run out of tape before I was done. But they know who they are and I'm still grateful for them and try to acknowledge them at every point possible."

For a select few, it means having the privilege of wearing the USA crest on an Olympic Team jersey. And whether it's an NHLer, women's team player or member of the national sled hockey program, these people wear the jersey with pride, and they do so because they are part of something bigger than themselves.

"USA Hockey is doing a really good job of developing the player pool and the coaching pool," said Brian Burke, the president of hockey operations for the Pittsburgh Penguins who has helped form numerous U.S. National and Olympic Teams over the years.

"You look at the World Juniors, Under-18, all of it, and there has just been explosive growth and explosive improvement. Decisions get harder but that's a nice problem to have."





As USA Hockey continues to grow, the potential for more success in international tournaments is likely to follow.

Those tough decisions know no gender bounds, either. Joel Johnson and his staff agonized over the player decisions they made in Blaine, Minn., the site of the U.S. Women's National Team residency program, trimming the final Olympic roster down to 23.

"Every single person that we've invited to our residency program is deserving of being an Olympian," said Johnson, who has worked with U.S. National Teams at various levels.

"So it's not a decision that I take lightly. It's a decision that our staff spends hours and upon hours of trying to figure out what we think is the best puzzle piece to put in that last spot or the last two spots.

"We don't know if we're right, to be candid with you. You win a medal and it's the right color, you look like you made the right decision. If you don't, people can argue you made the wrong decision."

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. With the renewed emphasis on membership growth, particularly at the 8 & Under level, and the groundswell of support for the American Development Model that promotes skill development in a fun learning environment, the talent pool looks to get deeper and the decisions made by coaches and general managers in the future will be that much tougher.

"The quantity and especially the quality of U.S. hockey players is growing at a fantastic rate," said David Poile, the general manager of the Nashville Predators who has been closely involved with USA Hockey for decades.

"People of the ADM program and all the things that have happened and will continue to happen to the growth of USA Hockey, the competitiveness of USA Hockey for years to come is going to be there."

Gone are the days when the U.S. enters a tournament hoping for a good result. The bar has been set high, and the programs implemented at the grass-roots level will only push the bar even higher in the future.

As one former USA Hockey executive put it, "We're no longer in the miracles business. These days we're in the expectations business." ☆





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