

LA KINGS REMAIN WELL-REPRESENTED BY PROSPECTS AT WORLD JUNIORS

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Photo credit: Dave Abel/Toronto Sun/QMI Agency

With the round robin wrapped up (say that 10 times fast), the **2017 World Junior Championship** rings in the new year with its medal round as the remainder of the tournament focuses solely on Montreal.

Entering this year's tournament, there were three **Los Angeles Kings** prospects taking part. However, by the time the tournament officially kicked off on December 26, there were just two as **Sweden** had cut defenseman **Jacob Moverare** from their final roster along with two others.

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The decision left this writer very disappointed as he had been covering Moverare this season — his rookie season — with the **OHL's Mississauga Steelheads**. Of course, in fairness, the decision wasn't a detriment to Moverare but rather a testament how deep Sweden's defensive corps was. Sweden breezed through the round robin, finishing atop Pool A with a flawless 4-0-0-0 record while outscoring their opposition by an 18-6 margin.

For the host Canadians, the Kings have a prospect in defenseman **Kale Clague**, who dons the maple leaf for the first time at this tournament.

The **Brandon Wheat Kings** blueliner — drafted in 2016 by the Kings; just two rounds before Moverare — brought speed and offensive punch to this year's Canadian squad as he hoped to help his country to a better finish in 2017 (**Canada** finished a lowly sixth in 2016) and it has been so far, so good.

Despite falling to the **United States** on New Year's Eve, Team Canada had a solid round robin, finishing 3-0-0-1 with Clague registering three assists. Canada will now host the **Czech Republic** in the quarter-final on Tuesday.

night.

The Kings' other prospect at this year's tournament, though, is more seasoned at the World Juniors. For defenseman **Erik Cernak**, this is his fourth time at the tournament, but unlike Canada, his native **Slovakia** doesn't get the same type of attention on hockey's international stage.

Nevertheless, Cernak, who is the captain of his country's squad this year, has showcased his raw ability at this tournament despite Slovakia's 1-0-0-3 finish in the round robin.

With excellent reach and superb defensive abilities, Cernak is arguably the brightest spot in the future of Slovakian hockey. In addition, he isn't afraid to use his 6-foot-3 frame. Despite playing in just his second year in North America (with the OHL's **Erie Otters**), we could see the 19-year-old playing professionally next season whether it would be with the **AHL's Ontario Reign** or even the **Manchester Monarchs** of the **ECHL**.

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Following Slovakia's 4-1 win over **Latvia** on Friday night, I spoke with Erik Cernak about how he feels in this year's tournament as opposed to previous years.

"I feel stronger at this tournament because, you know, I have more skill than ever," the Slovak captain said. "Every World Juniors has been different and right now, that's good because we beat Latvia [which clinched a spot in the quarters] and we're really good now."

Before we parted, though, I was able to ask Cernak about his experience at Kings rookie camp last September and what advice the coaches gave him before he was sent back to Erie.

"They wanted me play a lot of minutes on the ice," Cernak said. "That was better for me because every game, I play full minutes and so, that's good for me because if I go on to play in Ontario, I may play 10 minutes every game or something like that. But right now, I feel like 25 minutes every game and that's good for me. I think Erie has a great coach [**Kris Knoblauch**] and I'm really happy."

They may not have as many prospects at this tournament than they had, say, 10, or even five, years ago but the Los Angeles Kings' future is no less important now than it was then. After all, watching the likes of Cernak, Clague and even Moverare in the tune-up to this year's World Juniors is something to feel positive about when looking down the road.



For over 25 years, the World Junior Championship has been a Canadian holiday tradition that has since been celebrated by other nations who have developed some of the game's finest talent. So, whether there are Kings prospects involved or not, the World Juniors is always an exciting time of year and that should be no different in 2017.
