

Experiencing Gold

Experiencing the 2003 World Junior Hockey Gold Medal Game

The 2003 World Junior Hockey Championship in Halifax, Nova Scotia was the most successful Junior Hockey tourney ever. Nova Scotia truly did Canada proud!! It was 11 days of incredible fan support!!

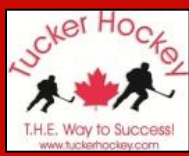
The host cities for the tournament Sydney and Halifax drew a record crowd of 242,173 spectators shattering the old 1999 Winnipeg record of 173,453. Fred MacGillivray, chairman of the Halifax Bid Committee and hundreds of volunteers organized an incredible venue for Junior Hockey!! The tournament was projected to exceed \$14 million in profit and provided major economic spin offs to the local restaurants, hotels, transportation, parking and gasoline services in the area.

Personally, for more than two months leading up to the tournament, I had been exhausting every known avenue and hockey friend /contact in an attempt to secure tickets to this prestigious hockey tournament... Good luck Tuck! The tournament was a complete sell out!! It was the hottest ticket in town i.e. Canada! Finally, on December 28th... I got a break... a ticket to the Gold medal game... compliments of T.R at the will call: booth... sweet music to my ears... Many, many thanks T.R.! After visiting family and friends in my native province of Newfoundland and conducting my Christmas hockey camp in Springdale, Nfld over the holiday season, I was truly "pumped" to cheer Canada on at the Gold medal game! However, extreme weather conditions in Atlantic Canada threw a "monkey wrench" into my travel plans and thousands of others. Unable to fly from St. John's to Halifax on January 4th, my "hockey fix" seemed scattered! Finally, late on January 5th, I caught the last seat on a 5:15 pm flight to Halifax scheduled to arrive in Halifax at 6:30 pm. Game time: 8:10 pm... the flight was delayed! The norm for the week! I arrived in Halifax instead at 7:30 pm. For anyone who has flown into Halifax... it's a good 30 – 40 minute drive from the airport to downtown Halifax. No time to pick up the luggage/hockey equipment at arrivals... just "boot it" to the Halifax Metro Centre... I arrived in my seat 6 minutes into the first period. Initially, I felt exhausted from my traveling jaunt... but after sitting in my seat for just a couple minutes... I felt the energy from the sell-out crowd of 10,594. It wasn't just noise but incredible emotion flowing from the capacity crowd... a sea of Canadian flags and jerseys! What a hockey atmosphere! Go Canada Go!

Setting the stage for the Gold medal game... Canada and Russia battling it out again who could ask for a better match up! An organizer and promoter's dream! Initially, the Russians had an exhausting 20 hour flight from Europe to Halifax and had to adjust to playing the tournament in a smaller rink as well. However, with a roster full of top NHL prospects... a supremely skilled team even by Russian standards and size too... the Russians were up for the challenge. Team Canada head scout, Blair Mackasey admitted prior to the Gold medal match-up that the Russian team was extremely talented and had more talent than Team Canada. For example, Russian sniper Alexander Ovechkin, had a pair of hat tricks in the tournament. Team Canada's game plan going into the championship was to try to pressure the Russians from the start of the game. This approach Canada had used effectively throughout the tournament. To limit space and time of the skilled players ... otherwise giving skill time and it will beat them. The Russians throughout the tourney had humbled opponents with their speed, their pinpoint passing and their seemingly unrelenting ability to attack in wave after wave. It was fun to watch their offensive creativity with the puck. The Canadians weren't nearly as cute with their individual skills throughout the tournament but had been every bit as effective. The Canadians were more physical, more robust and more emotional (with the extremely high energy home crowd). The Russians skated to a 5 and 0 record; as well Canada went into the Gold medal game with a perfect record of 5 and 0.

The partisan crowd backed Team Canada from the start of the game until the final buzzer! "We want Gold"! "Go Canada Go"! "Can...a...da...Can...a...da"! filled the air! The quick flow of the game... end to end action... very few whistles and stoppages in play... and seeing the boys playing hard - hitting entertaining hockey without dropping the gloves at the slightest provocation... was refreshing to watch!

The three periods of hockey seemed to fly by... the game seemed too short for my liking! The Russians scored the first goal in the first period but Canada tied it up less than a minute later. When Canada's spark plug... Jordan Tootoo... who usually ran over and through his earlier opponents...went down after colliding with Russian star Alexander Ovechkin... it was apparent to everyone in the building this Russian team would not be intimidated! When Canadian captain Scottie Upshaw capitalized at 16:22 of the second period, it marked the first time Russia trailed during the 11 day tournament. However, Canada's lead going into the third period was short lived and by the eleventh minute mark of the third...the Russians had a 3 to 2 lead. During the third period, the Russians elevated their play and Canada's goalie Marc – Andre Fleury, Canada's youngest player and a sure-fire first rounder in next June's draft... made several huge saves...to give Canada a chance... but man for man the Russians individual skills were too much for Team Canada to handle. The Russians last two goals were beautiful...tic-tac-toe... passing plays. It was a heart wrenching lost for Team Canada but they were defeated by a more talented team. Canada played with emotion and discipline but the Russian team who



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were bigger than the Canadians had the brawn to go with its incredible skill level. Canada was missing the type of skater who could score the “big goal” when needed... a “go to” type of player.

The Canadian team played extremely hard... they gave everything they had on the ice but came up short. Fleury was named tournament M.V.P., top goalie and to the all-star team. Carlo Carlucci, defenseman and Scottie Upshall, forward were also named to the all-star team. We still produce many skilled players but Canada’s gold medal drought is extended to 6 years. However, let us not forget since capturing 5 straight from 1993 to 1997, Canada has delivered 3 Silver medals and 2 Bronze medals. So I personally don’t feel we should make a lot of changes to our junior program... just continue to select the most skilled players for the team... hope for a couple of good bounces... to put ourselves in a position to win a Gold medal each year... hockey is truly a Global game... we can’t expect year after year to win Gold!! Russia has beaten Canada by 1 goal 3 of the last 5 years! Marc Habscheid, who I met while attending the 1993 NCCP Advanced I Coaching Clinic in Calgary, did a top notch job of leading Team Canada on the ice and Denis Hainault, Director of High Performance for Canadian Hockey did his usual supreme job leading Team Canada off the ice.

TSN’S coverage of the gold medal game drew the largest audience in the network’s 19 year history with a national average of 3,466,000 viewers. The 2004 World Junior Hockey Championship is scheduled for Helsinki, Finland. This year I had the fortunate and great pleasure to attend the Gold medal game... unless there’s a “little divine intervention “, I will be watching next year’s Gold medal game on TSN!

The most successful world junior tourney had a silver lining for Team Canada this year but the atmosphere in Halifax was an incredible feeling... it was “pure Gold”. I had the pleasure of experiencing it first-hand!

Yours in Hockey,
Coach Rex