



UNITED AT LAST

ON THE ROAD TO THE GOLD: Kelli Stack (left) and Brianna Decker talk during the U.S. women's hockey team practice last month at Belmont Hill. Team USA opens Olympic play this morning against Finland.

STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN WILCOX

By KAT HASENAUER CORNETTA

In early November, the U.S. Olympic women's hockey team was in a slump.

They opened their autumn-long, pre-Olympic game schedule in Burlington, Vt., by losing to arch-nemesis Canada, 3-2. At their next significant stop, the Four Nations Cup, the U.S. put on a clinic against Sweden, but then lost again to Canada, and then to Finland, regulating them to the third-place game in the tournament. It marked the first time the Americans wouldn't finish first or second in the important international event.

This morning, the U.S. women will look to get their revenge, as they open Olympic Games tournament play against Finland. What has not changed for the Finnish is their brick wall in net, former University of Minnesota goaltender Noora Raty. But things have changed for the United States.

"November is where

Women's team gets their game in shape

I look at us making big changes," said U.S. head coach and Arlington native Katey Stone. "We became a much better team in our own end, defensively. We didn't have a tremendous amount of responsibility back then. We didn't have that sense of urgency. We didn't work as hard as we could for each other."

Defense is a facet of the game where familiarity plays a substantial role. For a team made up of 21 players from eight different college programs and still more club and semi-professional teams who only started playing together in September, more time together was the biggest solution to their autumn defensive woes.

"It comes down to trusting each other," said Taunton-born defenseman Michelle Picard. "In the

beginning, we would run around because we didn't know where each other was. Now we communicate a lot better. I know the other four or five are going to do their jobs, and if I do my job, and I make sure to support my teammates, we should be all set."

Added Stone, "That is where we have to put our best, in our defensive end. We certainly have people who can score goals, but if you can't keep the pucks out of your own net, you have a problem."

Goalscoring is not an issue. Former Boston College center Kelli Stack has a playmaker's vision that does not show any rust from a nine-month lay-off due to an ACL injury. Also on the comeback trail from injury is Minnesota superstar Amanda Kessel (younger sister of former

Bruin Phil Kessel), who has been out since last spring's World Championships due to hip issues. Kessel will pair with Northeastern dynamo and first-time Olympian Kendall Coyne, whose puck movement makes all of her linemates goal-scoring threats.

The Lamoureux sisters, Monique and Jocelyne, will be factors as physical, defensive forwards. North Reading native Alex Carpenter will make plays happen when her teammates might be struggling.

In net, the U.S. has few issues. Two-time Olympian Jessie Vetter will lead the way against Finland today, and Natick's Molly Shaus also will see time.

Unfortunately for Olympic forwards throughout the Sochi Games, this may be the strongest goaltender lineup in the history of international women's hockey, with Raty and former Providence goaltender Genevieve Lacasse capable of playing lights out for the defending Olympic gold medal winning Canadians.

WINTRY MIX

YESTERDAY'S HIGHLIGHTS



AP PHOTO
TRETIK AND RODNINA

Tretiak, Rodnina fire up the Games

One of the greatest goaltenders of all time and an innovative figure skater who won three straight Olympic pairs titles lit the cauldron together at the opening ceremony. Vladislav Tretiak and Irina Rodnina were given the honor of sparking the cauldron that will burn throughout Russia's first Winter Olympics.

They were handed the torch by Alina Kabayeva, a former Olympic champion gymnast who has been linked romantically with Russian President Vladimir Putin, although the Kremlin has denied it. Other torchbearers in the final group were wrestling great Alexander Karelin, pole vaulter Yelena Isinbayeva and tennis star Maria Sharapova.

TODAY'S FOCUS

Not in seventh heaven

Hoping to climb out of a huge hole, the United States turns to its world champions in the team figure skating competition as Meryl Davis and Charlie White will skate in the short dance team. The silver medalists at Vancouver and two-time world champions are the Americans' best hope for a figure skating medal in Sochi. Ashley Wagner will skate in the women's short program for a U.S. team that's in seventh place. Only five teams advance to the free skate after today.

TV SCHEDULE

TODAY/EARLY TOMORROW MORNING

■ **CH. 7 — 2:30-6 p.m.:** Men's Ski Jumping — Individual K-95 Competition; Men's Biathlon — 10km Sprint Gold Medal Final; Men's Speedskating — 5000 Gold Medal Final; Women's Cross-Country — Skiathlon Gold Medal Final; **8-11:30 p.m.:** Figure Skating — (Team Event: Ice Dancing Short Dance, Ladies' Short Program, Pairs' Free Skate); Men's Snowboarding — Slopestyle Gold Medal Final; Women's Freestyle Skiing — Moguls Gold Medal Final; **Midnight-1 a.m.:** Figure Skating — Team Event; Men's Luge — Singles Competition.

■ **NBCS — 5:30-9:30 a.m.:** Women's Cross-Country — Skiathlon Gold Medal Final (LIVE); Men's Speedskating — 5000 Gold Medal Final (LIVE); **9:30-11 a.m.:** Figure Skating — (Team Event: Ice Dancing Short Dance-LIVE); **11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.:** Figure Skating — (Team Event: Ladies' Short Program-LIVE, Pairs' Free Skate-LIVE); 6-8 p.m. — Game of the Day: Hockey; **3-5:30 a.m. (Sun.):** Women's Hockey — Sweden vs. Japan (LIVE).

■ **MSNBC — 8-10:30 a.m.:** Women's Hockey — Canada vs. Switzerland (LIVE).

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