



ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

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Olympic news

Decision on U.S. Netminders remains wide open

By Kevin Allen, USA TODAY

Any goaltending discussion for Canada and the Czech Republic heading into the 2002 Olympic Games centers on multiple options. The Canadians could start Patrick Roy, Martin Brodeur or Curtis Joseph in net. If the defending champion Czechs doesn't have Dominik Hasek, they will have Philadelphia sensation Roman Cechmanek. Any goaltending discussion for the USA heading into the 2002 Games centers on multiple questions.

Is Mike Dunham ready to be the USA's No. 1? Will Mike Richter's recovery from a ripped anterior cruciate ligament be complete enough to allow him to be in top form? Can a youngster, such as St. Louis Blues' Brent Johnson or **New York Islanders' Rick DiPietro**, suddenly develop into **another Jim Craig**?

"When we were at our first meeting, I think we all felt that the goaltending was wide open," says St. Louis Blues general manager Larry Pleau, who will be the assistant GM on the U.S. team. "Obviously, guys like Richter or Dunham we have to look at, but we have asked ourselves who is going to surface over the next couple of months, or in the (NHL) playoffs, or early next season."

The USA must name eight to 12 players by March 25, though goaltenders aren't expected to be announced as part of that first wave.

Richter's injury has added another layer of uncertainty to the situation. Until that point, Richter and Dunham seemed like co-favorites, with Richter perhaps having the edge based on experience. He won a Stanley Cup with the New York Rangers in 1994, and in 1996 he was crucial to the USA winning the World Cup — its most significant international tournament win since coach Herb Brooks' young heroes won the 1980 Olympics. Dunham is playing in his fifth NHL season and hasn't been in a playoff game.

Given that Richter is 34 and facing his second major knee rehabilitation in two seasons, Dunham now appears to be the goalie to beat, although his status is far from certain.

"The biggest question is always: Can you handle the pressure?" says Dunham, already a two-time Olympian. **"To me, there is no pressure because hockey is a fun game. You can't play if you put too much pressure on yourself."**

That lesson was learned in 1994 when he played for the USA in Lillehammer, Norway.

"I remember going into the first game against France nervous and feeling like there was tons of pressure," Dunham says. "I struggled and we tied 4-4, and I struggled because I put so much pressure on myself. I remember walking out of the rink thinking if I ever get this chance again, I'm going to just go out and play."

His lesson was reinforced when he was Brodeur's backup when the Devils won the Stanley Cup championship in 1995.

"My experience watching Marty was that he never felt any pressure at all because he was having a great time," Dunham says. **"He was enjoying himself.** Some people look at playoffs or Olympics and say it's a pressure-packed situation, and some look at it and say it looks like it will be a lot of fun."

Trying to choose the right goalie involves more angst than fun for the U.S. braintrust that will include Brooks, GM Craig Patrick, Pleau and USA Hockey's Art Berglund. Because the USA won the gold medal when the Games were in the USA in 1960 (Squaw Valley) and 1980 (Lake Placid), expectations will be high. Also, the USA has a batch of elite-level forwards, including Mike Modano, **Jeremy Roenick, Bill Guerin,** Doug Weight and Brett Hull.

Of the six major hockey powers, the USA and Finland seem to be the only countries with goaltending concerns. Sweden will undoubtedly have Tommy Salo, and Russia presumably will use Nikolai Khabibulin, even though he hasn't played in the NHL since 1998-99 because of a contract squabble.

"The door isn't closed to anyone," Pleau says. "We can't afford to close the door to anyone."

Although it's difficult to imagine Dunham not making the squad, the USA probably will name only skaters by the late March deadline. It will be just easier to name eight or nine forwards that are locks, plus Rangers defenseman **Brian Leetch,** and possibly Dallas Stars defenseman Derian Hatcher.

The expectation is that the USA will name two veterans to the team, and probably one younger goaltender to serve as the No. 3. The hunch picks in the U.S. goaltending roulette could be Johnson or **DiPietro.** At 23, Johnson is four years older than DiPietro and full of potential. He's the grandson of former Detroit Red Wings great Sid Abel.

But DiPietro is a prodigy, possessing the blend of confidence and tools that show up only once or twice in a generation. DiPietro is a former member of the U.S. National Development program and likes the thought of "USA" across his chest again.

"Trying to be on that team is one of my long-term goals for the rest of this year and the beginning of the next," he says. **"The fact that I've grown up in USA Hockey and have so much national experience, I think, is a great benefit."**

This is a rookie with the moxie of a veteran. To appreciate how much confidence DiPietro has, consider that *Sports Illustrated* quoted his former teammate Wendell Young as saying about his NHL promotion: "Ricky's going to need two seats on that plane: one in coach for his body and one in first class for his ego."

DiPietro says the comment was made in jest during dressing room banter.

"Teammates jab me once in a while," he says. "They are just trying to keep me on an even keel."

But DiPietro won't apologize for believing in himself. "When you talk to veteran goaltenders, confidence is always huge to them," he says.

He is concerned about being misread. "I don't want people to confuse confidence with arrogance or cockiness," DiPietro says. "I want to be known as a player with a lot of confidence to get the job done, not being overly cocky."

Berglund won't discount the youngsters.

"I remember in 1984 we brought in (18-year-old) Tom Barrasso in the Canada Cup and won the round robin," Berglund says.

But with Richter out, Dunham is the early-line favorite to start in Salt Lake. Says Nashville coach Barry Trotz: "If he is in the zone for the Olympics and pumped up, he could be the best goaltender in the Olympic tournament."