

WHC: Canada will count on defence

Wade Redden

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CALGARY (CP) - It appears the Fab Four has parked itself on Team Canada's blue-line for years to come.



Ed Jovanovski, Robyn Regehr, Wade Redden and Scott Hannan will be hard to knock off any future editions of Team Canada, and they'll be counted on heavily at the April 30-May 15 world hockey championship in Austria.

All four star defencemen played in last September's World Cup of Hockey, marking the official changing of the guard on Canada's blue-line.

For years, the same reliable names filled out the roster on the back end, the likes of Al MacInnis, Adam Foote, Rob Blake, Scott Stevens and Ray Bourque.

Chris Pronger and Scott Niedermayer remain part of the mix, but the Fab Four is also in for the long run.

"Those four have the right amount of experience now to be able to expect that they should be able to run with the next step here," Team Canada GM Steve Tambellini said Thursday after practice. "You look at them - they've played in World Cup games, some have played in the Olympics - they've felt the pressure of the world's best coming at them and the pressure of playing for their country.

"I think the coaching staff looks at those players differently now than what they did before the World Cup. They're expected now to see the meat of the tournament coming at them."

That all four played in the World Cup may not have been the original plan from Hockey Canada, but with Pronger's late withdrawal and MacInnis still recovering from a serious eye injury, the door opened for all four to play.

"I remember being part of that team, there was a lot of doubt, a lot of press that was focused on the fact that we had so many inexperienced or young players," said Regehr, whose stellar play with the Calgary Flames in the post-season got him on the team. "But the results speak for themselves. And I think the management team has done a good job of bringing in young guys but still having older guys around to provide leadership."

Jovanovski is the veteran of the four, having played on the Olympic champion team of 2002, but he too realizes the importance of the transition on the Canadian blue-line.

"It was nice to bring in the youth," said the 28-year-old Vancouver Canucks star. "The Olympics are around the corner and some of the older guys might not be around again, especially with this lockout. It's nice to bring in the younger guys and have them experience this, make them feel more comfortable."

Redden, 27, has been knocking on the door for years, just barely missing out on Salt Lake before finally cracking the World Cup roster. He patiently waited for his chance.

"There's some guys on their way out obviously, MacInnis, Bourque, Stevens - those guys aren't around anymore," Redden said. "You look at Hannan, Regehr and Jovo - that's a real good group of D-Men that could be around for quite a while here."

Regehr and Jovanovski skated together as a pairing in practice Thursday, and that's likely going to remain the case, the two forming the top pairing on the team. Regehr, however, isn't ready to anoint himself as a permanent fixture on Team Canada.

"I guess it just depends if we keep winning, that really helps," Regehr, who turns 25 next week, said with a laugh. "But a lot of it depends on the management and coaching staff, they have the final say in what future Canadian teams are going to look like. If that doesn't change a whole bunch, I can't see this team changing a whole bunch but if you have a new (management) group in there they may want to see things in a different way.

"But if you keep winning, it's like Wayne Gretzky said: `If it's not broke, why fix it?'"

Hannan, 26, had never played for Canada at any level before getting invited to the World Cup. He wouldn't mind sticking around, either.

"I hope so, I really hope so," said the San Jose Sharks star. "It was a lot of fun getting invited to the World Cup. And unfortunately some guys got injured, I got to play and those were good memories and great times for me.

"This is a great group of young D, guys who can play offence and defence."

Sheldon Souray of the Montreal Canadiens, Dan Boyle of the Tampa Bay Lightning and Chris Phillips of the Senators complete a talented and mobile blue-line for the world championship, taking advantage of the absence of Niedermayer, Foote and Pronger.

"There's no shortage of depth," said Redden. "There's young guys coming up, too. I don't think Jay Bouwmeester is even 21 yet, is he?"

He is.

Bouwmeester, who played well at the World Cup when given a chance, is another probable staple on the Canadian blue-line but he's tied up with the AHL's Chicago Wolves and won't be available.

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