



The World Junior Hockey Championships got underway overnight in Russia, with the United States Under-20 World Junior team waiting until Thursday to play. This is one of the best annual tournaments in the hockey world and features some of the most promising prospects that the world has to offer. The tournament is littered with high draft picks and the top of the 2013 draft class.

This is hockey in its purest form. The World Juniors are always a display of skill, especially with the strict international rules regarding hitting. Players are selected from development camps and based on how their college or junior hockey seasons are going. Some of the NHL's best players have suited up for this tournament. Future superstars are suiting up for this year's event and the state of Ohio is extremely well represented on the U.S. team.

Three native Ohioans and one Michigander playing at Miami of Ohio are on the U.S roster, which also features Ohio State University head coach Mark Osiecki as one of the assistant coaches. One of the Ohio-born players, J.T. Miller, from East Palestine, OH, is making his second straight appearance at the World Juniors. Connor Murphy, from Dublin, OH, and Sean Kuraly, also from Dublin, OH, are there for the first time, along with Livonia, MI native Riley Barber.

In total, 11 of the 24 players who made the roster were drafted in 2011, with 10 others being selected in 2012. Only two draft-eligible players made the tournament this season, possible #1 overall pick Seth Jones of Plano, TX and Ryan Hartman. Last year's draft-eligible player, Jacob Trouba, was the ninth overall pick in the 2012 draft. In total, five former first-round picks are on the roster, including last year's third overall pick, Alex Galchenyuk. Galchenyuk undoubtedly would have made last year's squad, but was injured most of the season.

The United States will rely heavily on World Juniors veteran John Gibson in net. Gibson,

Anaheim's second-round selection in 2011, is a very promising goaltender. He will be backed up by 6'5" newcomer Jon Gillies, a third-round selection in 2012.

As usual, the American roster shows the way that hockey has branched out over the last 20 years. A majority of the roster still comes from hockey hotbeds like Michigan and Minnesota, but the team still has players from Florida, Texas, California, and New Jersey.

The team is coached by long-time NHLer and U.S. Hockey Hall of Famer Phil Housley. Housley played for the 2002 U.S. team in Salt Lake City that won silver under coaching legend Herb Brooks. The St. Paul, MN native is joined by the aforementioned Mark Osiecki, former NHLer and current Minnesota Golden Gophers assistant coach Grant Potulny, and Denver Pioneers assistant coach David Lasonde.

The U.S. team opens play on December 27 against Germany at 9 a.m. EST. The remaining schedule features Russia on December 28 at 9 a.m. EST, Canada on December 30 at 4:30 a.m. EST, and Slovakia on December 31 at 5 a.m. EST. After that, the quarterfinals are on January 2, the semifinals on January 3, and the medal round on January 5. All games will be streamed on NHL.com or seen live on the NHL Network.

At first glance, the U.S. team looks very top-heavy talent-wise. A lot will be asked of the five former first round picks – J.T. Miller, Alex Galchenyuk, Tyler Biggs, Jacob Trouba, and Connor Murphy. The U.S. team was easily handled by Finland 5-1 in a preliminary game, which is definitely a cause for concern, as the Finns tend to have solid, but not dominant teams. From what the roster looks like and the relative strength of the other teams in the tournament, especially those who got help from the lockout, an appearance in the bronze medal game would have to be considered a good tournament for the U.S. squad. Canada rocked Germany 9-3 in their opener, so the U.S. team should begin 1-0. The game with Russia almost always seems to be a toss-up and the Canada game will likely be closer than it should be, with such a strong rivalry between the two countries. The U.S. should escape pool play with at least a 2-2 record and will have to see who they draw in the quarterfinals.

The Columbus Blue Jackets are well represented in Finland for the World Juniors. Of their prospects, five were selected to play for their countries. Boone Jenner, Columbus's second round pick in 2011, was suspended for three games for an illegal hit in a preliminary game against Sweden. The others playing in the tournament are Mike Reilly for Team USA, Lukas Sedlak for the Czech Republic, and goaltenders Joonas Korpisalo for Finland and Oscar Dansk

for Sweden, both 2012 draft picks.

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A brief update on the Lake Erie Monsters, who turned things around last week by sweeping all three games at home. The Monsters beat Toronto in overtime last Wednesday and took consecutive games over Houston on Thursday and Saturday to get back on track and snap out of a bad slump. Despite winning three straight, the Monsters are listed ninth in the Western Conference, in a four-way tie for sixth place. The first tiebreaker is regulation/overtime wins, and four of the Monsters' 15 wins are in shootouts. Hoc