

Beats Germany to earn date with Sweden

RED FISHER
THE GAZETTE

Team Canada coach Glen Sather, who tap-danced his way through six teams in nine National Hockey League seasons, was talking about rhythm.

CANADA 4

GERMANY 1

"A little more rhythm is what I've seen in the last two games this team has played," said Sather, now that his team's 4-1 victory over Germany gives his happy gang a ticket to Philadelphia, where tomorrow night they'll meet Sweden in a sudden-death World Cup semi-final.

"They're starting to buy into the system," Sather said. "We're not pacing ourselves. We're playing as hard as we can to win, but we're starting to play the way we should."

Sather, you should know, is a generous chap. The reality is that while Wayne Gretzky, a kid of 35, was the best of the Team Canada forwards, a flood of other skaters on this team still haven't brought their best games to the arena.

Eric Lindros, for example, who has emerged with only one assist in the first four tournament games.

"He's working hard," Sather insisted, "but Eric wants to do too much by himself. He's got to learn to play within the system. What he needs more than anything else is a goal or two, and I can't think of a better place to get one than in Philadelphia."

Was Team Canada overconfident last night? It's possible . . . likely, perhaps . . . that too many people imagined this dance with Germany would be easy — but it wasn't.

Translation: it was far too close for comfort. For example, it wasn't until Rod Brind'Amour's early third-period goal provided Team Canada with a three-goal margin that many of the universe's most formidable talents were able to breathe somewhat easier.

It was this close: Gretzky scored Team Canada's only goal of the first period during a manpower advantage. Another power-play goal — by Brendan Shanahan — lifted the home boys into a 2-0 lead in the second period, and Trevor Linden added a third goal after Peter Drasaitl had scored Germany's only goal.

Until the Brind'Amour goal, however, it was tight-collar time for a team that hadn't attracted rave reviews in the three games leading up to the medal



GORDON BECK, GAZETTE

Canada's Trevor Linden (18) tries to backhand puck before German goalie Josef Heiss can smother it.

wasn't a rave in sight. In other words, they got the job done, but only barely despite outshooting Germany 43-16. Mark this down: in a perfect world, the talent on these teams were in different time zones. No contest, right?

So while Canada's best came out of the first period with a 17-5 margin in shots, how is it that the best they could do was Gretzky's power-play goal in the game's fourth minute?

A big reason was a chap named Josef Heiss, whose goaltending was world class when it was needed — early and late in the period. A stop in any language, for example, doesn't come much better than the one he made on Mark Messier from the lip of the crease during a Team Canada power play (Germany earned the only two penalties assessed in the first period).

A bigger reason was that this Team Canada bunch was short on the creativity linked with great talents. Gretzky was just fine. So good, that Sather ordered him on to the ice to kill a penalty.

haven't killed a penalty in the last seven years."

"He's really cooking now," Sather grinned much later. "All he needed was to get his confidence back."

A Team Canada on top of its game should have danced away from a plucky, hard-working German team. Instead, Canada needed the power play for its first two goals, the second coming from Shanahan early in the second period, and a giveaway by goaltender Heiss late in the second provided Linden with an open net after a chap named Drasaitl had lifted his colleagues to within a goal of so many of the world's best players.

Common sense dictates that, talent for talent, Team Canada should have been at least a half-dozen goals better — even on a so-so night. The fact is, though, it doesn't require a giant intellect to understand that Sather's bunch has to lift its game higher if it hopes to get beyond Sweden.

A lot higher.