

Pass It On®...

Behind the Broken Smiles: USA Hockey Honors One of its Own with the Gold.

When Team USA won an improbable gold medal in hockey after a 46-year drought, players carried two young children onto the ice for the celebration photo. Who were these toddlers, and why did they mean so much to the team?

Miraculous wins bring out miraculous stories we wouldn't have known otherwise. Stories of perseverance, courage, sacrifice and love among teammates that cannot be properly understood unless you have bled together. The more physically demanding, the deeper the sacrifice, the more transcendent the wins are. And that is the story of USA Hockey.

Toiling away in the shadow of the big three sports in America – basketball, baseball, football – hockey draws passionate fans who bypass the glitz for the sheer competition. Hockey in America is an import of sorts. Ice-covered countries like Canada, Finland and Russia have dominated the sport for decades. Even the rules of Olympic hockey long seemed unfair, excluding professional players to preserve the amateur status of the games.

But odds are meant to be overcome. First, it was the Miracle on Ice in the 1980 Winter Olympics, when a collection of college kids wrote their way into history with a gold medal. And then, the drought. Gold is hard to come by.

To be good at hockey is almost a miracle in itself. The skill on skates takes years to master. The cutting, sprinting, instant change of direction requires unimaginable skill. Add the eye-hand skills of handling a puck moving at an average 90 mph across the ice and the physicality of the game, and it's a wonder anyone plays. But they do.

Kids like Johnny Gaudreau were practically born on skates. As a toddler, Johnny learned to skate by tracking a trail of Skittles candy laid out on the ice by his father, Guy, who was the hockey director at a rink in Sewell, New Jersey. He would grow to become the best player in the NCAA, skating for Boston College. In 2013, his team won gold at the IIHF World Junior Championship before Gaudreau was picked up in the NHL draft by the Calgary Flames.

At 5-foot-9, 157 pounds, Gaudreau would seem too small for such a physical sport. But he was lightning fast and dynamic to watch, with a fierce competitiveness. He often outskated multiple defenders, tapping the puck with the heel of the blade, then the toe, then a change of direction and a flip of the wrist, and it feels like watching Hermes, the god of speed among mortals. At every level, Gaudreau was best in his class, but he was also a gentleman of the game, a good sport and a beloved teammate.

Two years before the 2026 Olympics, Gaudreau was looking forward to playing with the best players in his country for Team USA. The longer a drought lasts, the more impassioned the hunger for a win becomes. As Gaudreau lived his dreams as a professional hockey player and the father of two small children, one goal stretched out in front of him: Olympic gold.

Then, on a bicycle ride with his brother, Matthew, hours before the two were to be groomsmen in their sister's wedding, a drunk driver struck and killed the two men near their hometown in Salem County, New Jersey. The hockey world mourned with Gaudreau's family, including his wife, who was expecting their child. And for the next two years, every international competition was dedicated to Johnny.

In 2026, when Team USA won the gold in the second overtime, pent-up joy was released in a celebration that even non-hockey fans felt. And then the moment: Matthew Tkachuk, Zach Werenski and Auston Matthews carried Johnny Gaudreau's No. 13 jersey onto the ice and placed Gaudreau's two toddlers in the front row of the team photo.

In a later interview, Jack Hughes, with a wide smile that featured broken teeth and a bloody lip, honored the brotherhood of USA Hockey. Captain Auston Matthews put the final note on the event by addressing the emotional moment of being photographed with Gaudreau's jersey and two kids. "The impact he's had on so many guys in our room was special. He was with us here in spirit the whole tournament."

Brotherhood... PassItOn.com

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