

Westlake hopes to complete Canadian hockey sweep in Sochi

by Herb Garbutt
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For decades, they were Canada's archenemy on the hockey rink. And while the same rivalry has yet to be built in sledge hockey, make no mistake, the Russians are coming.

And standing on guard to defend Canada's honour is Oakville's Greg Westlake. While the United States remains Canada's biggest obstacle on its path to gold, the captain of the Canadian sledge hockey team welcomes a rivalry with the Paralympic hosts.

"I grew up hearing stories of '72 and the Summit Series. I'm a proud hockey guy," Westlake said. "To me, it's exciting to beat the Russians. Before I got on the ice the first time to play them, I already didn't like them."



Greg Westlake

Despite the fact the sport wasn't introduced in Russia until 2009, the country has poured resources into it as it prepared to host the world's best teams in Sochi. And they've narrowed the gap quickly.

In 2011, Russia finished seventh at its first European Championships. Two years later in Japan, it made its debut at the world championships and earned the bronze medal, finishing behind Canada and the United States.

Last fall in Toronto at the World Sledge Hockey Challenge, Canada beat the Russians on its way to gold, but the 5-3 final was hardly the blowout one might expect from one of the world's best and well-established teams against a five-year-old program.

The spotlight will shine brightly on both teams in Sochi. The Russian team will be the last hope for the hosts to earn a hockey medal after its men's team finished a disappointing fifth. Meanwhile, Canada will be expected to win gold because, well, it's Canada.

And while the Canadian squad is on a good run, having won the big prize at the worlds and the World Sledge Hockey Challenge and a pre-Paralympic tournament in Sochi in the past year, it's unlikely any of that will matter if Canada isn't on the top step of the podium a

week from now. That's OK with Westlake.

"I like Olympic years. I like that all eyes are on us," Westlake said before leaving for Sochi. "Sometimes it seems like four years is a long time. I perk up on years like this."

Westlake's play on the ice backs that up. He scored five goals in five games at the world championships and he was named the tournament's top forward. With the rare opportunity to play at home at the World Sledge Hockey Challenge, Westlake again scored five goals in five games and added five assists to take home MVP honours.

Sledge hockey has become increasingly more competitive with Russia, South Korea and Japan joining the traditional powers, Canada, the United States, Norway and Sweden, who will be Canada's first opponent Saturday. But as the level of play continues to rise, the 27-year-old Westlake isn't slowing down. He's getting better.

A big reason why is the practical approach he takes to his training.

"As I get older, I'm working smarter. I'm not just going to the gym and lifting weights to lift weights," he said. "I have a strategic blueprint of what I want to work on. It's not just in the gym, either. When I'm on the ice, I'm not just shooting pucks. I've got a goal in mind to get better. It's no different than business. You adapt and evolve. You look at things and analyze it and figure out what you can do to get better."

While national pride and challenging himself to reach goals top the list of what keeps Westlake motivated, there is another aspect that it's easy to tell he takes great pride in — helping push a sport forward that is really still in its formative years.

The first world championships for sledge hockey were not held until 1996. Just as hockey was played for decades before the slapshot was introduced and became widely used in the 1950s, sledge hockey is still in its evolutionary stage.

"We're still the first generation after the guys who started this," Westlake said. "We've got guys trying new shootout moves. I played stand up (hockey) until I was 15. I've put in enough hours to learn the (sledge hockey) skills but I'm still only 10 years into the process (Westlake was a goalie for his first two years on the national team). I just developed



Students at T.A. Blakelock High School held a fundraiser yesterday (Thursday) in honour of Blakelock grad Greg Westlake, who is captaining the Canadian sledge hockey team at the Paralympic Games in Sochi. Pictured from left, Blakelock student council executive members Zach Guiton, Ali Daly, Jennie Phillips, Emily Pliteski, Kaitlyn Russell, Meredith Johnson and Gabrielle Martin display the items up for grabs in the raffle. The event raised \$725, which will go towards the Hamilton District Sledge Hockey Association to help offset costs of participating in the sport.

| photo by Nikki Wesley — Oakville Beaver — @Halton_Photo

a good left hand in the last year so this is the first year I'm playing that I feel I'm fully ambidextrous. Doing that has really helped my game."

Adding to his arsenal only makes Westlake that much more dangerous. He enters the Paralympics second all-time in goals (126) and points (250) for the national team, behind only Billy Bridges, who will also be in Sochi.

Canada will be trying to erase the memories of its own disappointing turn as hosts — Canada finished fourth in Vancouver in 2010 after being upset by Japan in the semis and then falling to Norway in bronze medal game — and recapture the gold it last won in 2006 in Turin when Westlake was a 19-year-old rookie.

At that time, he never thought he'd still be playing eight years later. His childhood dream was to play in the NHL. When he realized — as most of us do — that wasn't going to happen, he looked for a sport where he could compete at the highest level and made the switch to sledge hockey.

Since then, Westlake has become the face of not only the national team, but you could argue the sport. He, along with his mom Deborah, became the first Paralympian to be profiled in P&G's 'Thank You, Mom' campaign.

It is a role he never expected to find himself in, but one which he happily embraces.

"The thing that has surprised me is the direction my life has taken. There's no money to be made in sledge hockey. At the beginning you're paying to play and it's just something to do," he said. "Now I'm an advocate for sledge hockey, for the Paralympics and amateur athletes. I've been on George Stroumboulopoulos' show, I've been on *Hockey Night in Canada* a couple of times, I talk to corporate sponsors. My original goal was to play in Vancouver and then move on, but the opportunities kept coming."

For Westlake and his teammates, the next opportunity lies ahead, to be played out over the next eight days in Sochi.

— Herb Garbutt can be followed on Twitter @Herbgarbutt

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