Canada and the United States are favorites once again, but as always Europe- and one particular country who handed the red and white an exhibition upset- are potential spoilers at the IIHF World Under 18 Hockey Championships in Minsk, Belarus.

Team Sweden

Like Canada, Team Sweden has the individual pieces to be a dominant U18 squad. Adam Larsson spent most of the year chasing the Elitserien U22 points record, while Gabriel Landeskog is projected to be a top fifteen pick in 2011 thanks to his rugged style of play. However, offense- usually a non-issue for Tre Kronor- could be a problem as few of the team's forwards possess elite skill.

Who to Watch:

LW/RW Victor Ohman- Forgotten for most of the year due to a less-than-plum assignment in the Allsvenskan, Victor Ohman finally gained some notice when- imagine this- the talented winger was given a spot on the top line. Ohman finished both the Allsvenskan and J20 (27 points in 21 games, 2-0-2 in two playoff games) seasons strong and is once again on the radars of NHL clubs. A reckless winger who drives the net with abandon, the 6'1, 203 lbs winger will see prime ice-time on a team that is all-together large but lacking pure skill.

C Ludvig Rensfeldt- The best all-around talent on the J18 roster, 6'3, 196 lbs pivot Ludvig Rensfeldt is set to have a star-making tournament. After quietly netting 21 goals and 50 points in SuperElit play with Brynas, the large pivot finally gets a large audience- much to the chagrin of the teams that watch Sweden closely. With a pedigree as more of a puck distributor- he had as many goals this past year as he's had all together since 2007-08- Rensfeldt could surprise at the Draft; a strong skater with excellent to elite vision and a reputation as a winner and vocal leader (J18 and J20 Champion), this Anze Kopitar clone is a darkhorse to be picked in the middle of the first round.

G Johan Gustafsson- A 6'2, 203 lbs goaltender with a last name strikingly close to Gustavsson? You know who the Leafs will be drafting at some point. Gustafsson with an 'f' is a draftable prospect even without that pedigree. Like Ohman, Gustafsson spent most of the year playing in a league with little chance at exposure- Division 1. As a true 17-year-old in a men's league, he didn't fare too poorly, racking up a 2.86 GAA and 0.894 Sv%. Gustafsson wouldn't have been in the league if he didn't have a strong resume, and he does: tops in GAA and save percentage last year at the U18 level, he was also named Top Goalie at the prestigious Tv-Pucken tournament.

Gustafsson would have done his draft stock better to play in J20, but he'll still be taken in 2010- how high depends on how strong he is in net against his peers.

Team Finland

Littered with names largely unknown to North Americans, Canadian fans may soon learn to rue them following a stunning 5-4 win in which players like Petteri Halinen and Miika Salomaki lit up goalies Calvin Pickard and Kent Simpson. Still, the Finns don't lack name talent.

Who to Watch:

C Teemu Pulkkinen: Called the Finnish Sidney Crosby three years ago after an historic debut as a 15-year-old in U20, the years have not been kind to mega-talent Teemu Pulkkinen. Seemingly stalled development-wise for two years, the 5'10 center didn't grow and didn't improve his skating- two major issues early in his career. An ankle injury early in 2009 didn't help matters and by the time he finally did return, Pulkkinen was as good as forgotten. That's too bad. Now a stocky 5'11, 183 lbs and both quicker and stronger, Pulkkinen netted 41 points in just 17 U20 games.

C/RW Petteri Halinen- Every year, the U18s produces a handful of surprises- many of them of the power forward or power defenseman variety. This year's early favorite for 'drafted based on strong U18' is Petteri Halinen. A 6'4, 187 lbs beast who bounced between Finnish U20 and U18 throughout the season, Halinen recorded twelve goals and 27 points in 42 combined games. In Belarus, Halinen is playing on a line with playmaking wunderkind Joonas Donskoi and 5'7 dynamo Teemu Rautiainen- a very similar situation to Teemu Hartikainen's draft year U18 where he first rose to prominence. Halinen looks to be on the same path; the winger netted a pair of goals in a 5-4 exhibition win over Team Canada. An August-born player, Halinen doesn't turn 18 until after the Draft.

G Sami Aittokallio- Finland's goalie factory has slowed, but it hasn't shuttered its doors completely. Instead of churning out two or three elite talents a year, just one makes its way off the assembly line a year. 2010 is no different; 6'1 goaltender Sami Aittokallio didn't have the greatest numbers during the Jr. A season- a hefty 3.20 GAA and a 0.899 save percentage- but Aittokallio played behind one of the most anemic offenses in Finnish U20. However, when it counted, Aittokallio came through. In nine games, he posted a 2.26 GAA and 0.925 save percentage as he led Ilves to a Bronze medal- a color he may get used to it another clutch performance.

Prediction: Finland has the right mix of character, skill and goaltending to be a semi-contender. While they're likely not good enough for Gold or Silver, they're the best of the remaining teams and should face Sweden for **Bronze**.

Team Canada

International hockey supremacy isn't just one tournament; a country's true dominance can only be measured by looking at the results from best-on-best tournaments at every level. As it stands now, it's Canada, 1 (Olympic Men's Gold) USA, 1 (WJC Gold) with two tourneys to go: the U18s and the oft-derided World Hockey Championships.

While TC is, as always, missing some potential key components due to the CHL playoffs, the roster is a veritable who's who of 2010 Draft talent.

Who to Watch:

C John McFarland- All-world skill, ten-cent head and attitude. That's the book on John McFarland. Or is it? No one can argue with a disappointing regular season that saw McFarland net fewer points in his draft year than he did as a 16-year-old rookie, but he has a chance to lessen the damage with a strong Under-18. So far, so good. McFarland scored three of Canada's four goals in their exhibition loss to Finland last night, and afterwards spoke of cohesiveness and learning from mistakes. McFarland has the skill to dominate the tournament and head coach Guy Carbonneau is the guy to get it out of him.

RW/LW Brett Connolly- No one on any roster has more riding on the U18s than Prince George Cougars star Brett Connolly. Appearing in just sixteen games spread over three separate comeback attempts, Connolly nevertheless put on a courageous and admirable performance by scoring ten goals and adding nine assists. Over a full season, that's 49 goals and 93 points- numbers likely good enough for a spot in the top three.

However, therein lies the problem; constant complications from a hip flexor injury suffered last summer have made speculating about a full season a moot point. Connolly has the skill, size and speed to be an impact winger in the mold of Patrick Marleau, but the missed year also meant he missed a year to bulk up and improve his overall game. A spot in the top fifteen is assured, but he could still be a top five pick with a dominant U18 and a clean bill of health at the Combine.

D Erik Gudbranson- Another mega-talent whose story of the season has been illness rather than statistics, Erik Gudbranson's string of strong performances throughout the month of February hinted that the 6'3, 194 lbs rearguard had completely recovered from a bout with mono. However, Gudbranson seemed to hit the proverbial wall in March with zero points and a -1 rating in six games. Although he had three points and Game Star during a hard-fought seven game series against the Brampton Battalion, Gudbranson's game was still littered with mistakes ranging from small to devastating. As one of only two TC defensemen over 6'2- the other being Alex Petrovic- and the quicker, more skilled of the two, Gudbranson has a chance to shine in Belarus.

However, Canada's friendly against Finland was a microcosm of what's wrong with Gudbranson's game. On the second goal, the big defender left his man to come to the aid of his partner- inexplicably down on one knee in his crease- only to have the aforementioned 5'7 forward Teemu Rautiainen victimize the two with a spin-o-rama pass to the open man.

Prediction: It's not surprising that on paper, Canada has perhaps the strongest team in the tournament; but therein lies in the rub- team. Canada struggled to play together in their first and only exhibition match, each playing their own man in a bubble rather than the puck and the play. Adding to their troubles was a smaller and inexperienced defense; once the Fins realized they could use their speed to go from the wing to the middle of the ice without punishment, the rout was on.

Canada likely makes to it to the final game on talent, but that may be the highlight of the tourney. **Silver.**

Team USA

Say what you will about the USNTDP's failures in the past, both on and off the ice; with NHL

teams promoting high draft picks at a higher rate than ever before, the fact that the U18 NTDP squad plays a season or more together gives them a continual advantage over competing countries that must find chemistry in the span of a few weeks. It doesn't hurt that arguably the best goalie at the World Juniors will also be between the pipes. Those reasons and more are why Team USA is our favorite to win the U18 crown- even with a roster that is one of the youngest in the tournament.

Who to Watch:

C/RW Austin Watson: Which was the anomaly in Austin Watson's season? 20 points in ten stretch run games for Peterborough, or cold showings both with Windsor earlier in the year and with the Petes in the playoffs? The U18s is one more chance to figure out exactly what the burgeoning power winger is.

The good: Watson got on the board in Team USA's exhibition win over host team Belarus. The bad: that goal was his only point in a 13-2 win in which seven different players recorded multi-point games, two of them being late-born 1992 linemates Rocco Grimaldi (five assists) and Austin Czarnik (3-2-5).

Watson's big body was an asset no matter who he played with this season, but there will be fewer questions about his consistency if he can be one of Team USA's top three players from here on out.

D Derek Forbort: Another big man plagued by the ‘I’ word, 6’4 Derek Forbort was over-shadowed yesterday by strong performances from offensive dynamos Adam Clendenning and Frankie Simonelli, both 5’11 or smaller rearguards not eligible until 2011.

Unlike Erik Gudbranson, Forbort is on a defense filled with both smooth puck movers and nasty big men capable of doing the so-called heavy lifting, meaning he has the ability to show off both sides of his game no matter who his partner his.

G Jack Campbell: Easily the player with the biggest name recognition in the tournament- even more than some Belarussian players to the home crowd- IIHF U20 Top Goaltender simply has to not lose any games for Team USA to maintain his lofty stock.

Prediction: Team USA for **Gold**. They simply have the best all-around roster with the best goaltending.