

WJC Day 2: Czech Republic-Denmark

Written by Matt Bugg

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(Team Denmark watches from the bench. Photo courtesy IIHF)

DobberHockey senior prospects writer Matt Bugg is covering the 2012 World Junior Championships live from Edmonton and Calgary. He'll be posting updates throughout the week.

“Denmark, Denmark, Denmark!”

The chants are fast and furious. And, you have to believe, welcome.

Never mind that they're coming from Canadian fans who can't pronounce half the names on the Danish national team roster. Never mind that the shot deficit is 31-7 after forty minutes, the score only a little less lop-sided at 3-0.

No, Team Denmark will take what it can get at the 2012 World Juniors.

Led by 2011 first round selection Nicklas Jensen and a motley crew of skaters that play in cities from Herning- in the homeland- to Frolunda, Sweden to Kamloops, the Danish national program

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has done an admirable job of preparing for the biggest stage in junior hockey. Starting with an August summer camp that helped acclimate the team's European-based majority to North American ice, head coach Todd Bjorkstrand has treated this sojourn across the Atlantic as anything but a rote exercise, instilling pride and respect in his young charges.

Losing 11-3 the first day of the tournament to the United States, it's enough to send a lesser group of young men home. But as their second game of the round robin wears on, the Danes prove they're capable of giving it as good as they get it. Along with some genuine scoring opportunities- besides Jensen's frequent solo sorties into the Czech zone, Patrick Bjorkstrand manages a couple of strong chances- there's also some physical payback in the third period as the Czechs begin to widen the gap on the scoreboard.

Undrafted forward and former Flyers camp invite Thomas Hyka is calling for the puck on a break-in- his eyes anywhere but around him- when a streak of white catches him unawares. In the blink of an eye, 6'1 179 lbs defenceman Anders Thode puts every inch and pound to work on a mammoth check that sends both #27s to the ice- albeit Hyka worse off.

Although the hit garners even more admiration from the crowd, the check has the effect of waking up the Czechs. St. Louis Blues prospect Dmitrij Jaskin gracefully juggles the puck through two, three, four Danish skaters before notching his first of the tournament, and just over a minute and a half later, defenceman Jiri Riha snaps a textbook wrister into the farthest reaches of the top of the net. The game mercifully ends shortly afterwards, 7-0.

Despite the final score, it's goaltender Sebastian Feuk who garners Player of the Game honors for the Danes. Afterwards, in the media scrum, the affable and even charming keeper will draw a crowd- an even bigger one than that afforded to Jensen. A back-up goalie in Swedish junior, Feuk went undrafted this past summer and likely will remain so into next year. But his reception indicates that he's poised to be one of the endearing underdog stories of WJC 2012.

But even if Feuk- or any other of the members on the Danish squad- fail to succeed as professional hockey players, they'll carry with them the memory of playing to over 12,000 cheering Canadian fans. "Denmark, Denmark, Denmark" they'll tell their grandchildren. It's worth almost as much as its weight in gold.

Drafted Player Grades- CZE

RW Dmitrij Jaskin, STL- B+

Had four shots on goal and created havoc with his soft hands when so inclined. Still, while most of the Czech team looked disinterested, Jaskin looked especially so- a trait that plagued him last year in even the biggest games. Skating has progressed, but only slightly.

Upside: Top-nine winger, 25-20-45+

LW Jakub Culek, OTT- B+

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Picked up three points- all assists- to lead the Czechs in that category. Had a single shot on goal, but this was a result of him consistently drawing on a now-trademark move in which he bucks up after crossing the blueline and hits the trailer with a perfect pass.

Upside: Playmaking winger, 20-30-50

D David Musil, EDM- B-

Held his zone well and treated Danish forwards to an up-close view of the boards at every opportunity, but had a tendency to go for the big hit- and still miss, despite the weaker competition. Will have to weed this habit out to avoid being burned against Canada.

Upside: #4 defender, 5-20-25

Drafted Player Grades- Denmark

RW Nicklas Jensen- A-

While clearly the most talented player on the Danish roster, had just one shot despite numerous rushes facilitated by his teammates getting him the puck and getting out of the way. Other players- most recently, Nino Niederreiter- have been in the same situation and produced at a higher rate. Still, maintained Denmark's only consistent possession and finished an even on a night when most of his teammates were in the red.