The Canada/Russia Super Series was thought to finally, truly present a level playing field on which two old foes could fight out a rivalry left relatively cold since the Cold War. But it was just another tease- and another way for Canada to flex its considerable hockey muscles. Caught in its shadow, the annual ADT Canada-Russia Challenge has been largely ignored. But now that the games are actually being played, something very surprising is happening: there's a challenge to be had for the Canadian Hockey League.

The Russian Selects' first surprise came not surprisingly on November 19th against their first opponent, Team QMJHL. A largely no-name squad went to battle against the best our French-Canadian brothers could put together, a team that included Brad Marchand, Angelo Esposito, Claude Giroux, Francois Bouchard and six other NHL draft picks. The Russians took the boots to Team Q early, grabbing a 3-1 lead after just twenty minutes. But it wouldn't hold. 2007 QMJHL MVP Mathieu Perreault showed his stripes, pulling the Q to within one. Offensive defenceman Andrew Bodnarchuk tied it up, and just 39 seconds into the third, Russia found itself trailing 4-3.

In past years, such a collapse would have spelled the end for the Selects, both in the game and the series. But something miraculous happened: Russia dug deep, did a gut-check... and took over. Lower-division scoring phenom and twice-undrafted Maxim Mamin's goal was the tide-turner, a conversion on a big rebound that gave Russia a lead they would hold onto for the

rest of the game.

Facing the prospect of being the first Canadian major junior league to drop two games to the Selects since, well, forever, Team Q pulled out the big guns in their rematch on Wednesday night. While the Q had turned to undrafted second- and third-stringers Nicola Riopel and Rafael D'Orso in their opener, NHL stud Jonathan Bernier got the start in Game 2. 2:22 into the second period, 2007-08 standout Christopher DiDomenico gave the Q a 2-1 lead... which should have been good enough with the aforementioned Kings draft pick in net. Russia instead tied the game up six minutes later, and proceeded to hang in until Bernier shut the door for good in the shootout. Bruins draft pick Brad Marchand, normally an energy forward, popped home the team's first goal of the tie-breaker, and power forward prospect Keven Veilleux sealed the 3-2 victory.

Critics point to Team QMJHL's lack of practice time- one session, to be exact- and Team Russia's relatively older team as the reason for a 1-1 record. But Russia deserves full credit; while Team Q often tried to out-skill and out-dangle, the Ruskies banged, crashed, and sacrificed bodies. With at least four dirty goals in two games, Russia did what needs to be done for wins. And as for age? As John Stossel says, give me a break.

If we're going to use excuses, the Russians had plenty on Thursday night, when they dropped a 3-2 lead to Team OHL in an eventual 5-3 loss. With three games in four nights and two back-to-back, Russia has an excuse for 'only' finishing the spread 1-1-1. And let's be realistic: the schedule is tilted in the CHL's favor. Russia has two such three-in-four circuits; their second starts on November 26th, when they finish off the OHL and then head west to face the Dub. The OHL, in fact, has a stupidly tame two games in five days.