

BEIJING OLYMPICS



GOLD IN WOMEN'S HOCKEY

Team USA, which defeated Canada in a shootout to win the women's hockey gold medal in the 2018 Winter Olympics at Pyeongchang, returns six players with Minnesota ties.

They have repeat golds in mind

◀ OLYMPICS from C1

Olympic title in men's curling. Diggins, the Afton native who won the cross-country team sprint in Pyeongchang, is among the medal contenders in several events. The U.S. women's hockey team returns six players with state ties from the team that beat Canada in the 2018 Olympic final.

The Minnesotans' medals in Pyeongchang all ended long American droughts. The curling and cross-country golds were the first for the U.S. in those sports. The women's hockey team had not won Olympic gold since 1998, when the sport made its Winter Games debut.

As defending Olympic champions, all of them will be in a unique position this time around. While they can't re-create the feeling of their first Winter Games victories, they hope to make winning gold a twice-in-a-lifetime experience.

"In 2018, we had a deep, deep hunger to win, a need to win," said Kelly Pannek of Plymouth, one of 13 women's hockey players who will shoot for a second consecutive Olympic title. "It's different coming off a gold medal. But we still have that desire to win."

Diggins' victory with teammate Kikkan Randall generated one of the viral moments of the Pyeongchang Games. As she chased down leader Stina Nilsson of Sweden in the final meters, announcer Chad Salmela hollered, "Here comes Diggins! Here comes Diggins!" That video clip has been viewed hundreds of thousands of times, but its subject hasn't revisited it in quite a while.

Diggins doesn't keep her gold medal close. It resides in her parents' basement, and Diggins said she thinks about that night in Pyeongchang only when someone else brings it up. Instead, she thinks about some advice a former coach gave her: to view every experience in life as a singular event, unique to that moment.

"I think that's so important to remember," Diggins said. "[Beijing is] not the same as Pyeongchang, and that's OK. It's going to be like the first time I've ever been to an Olympics, because it's different trails, different country, different year, different Jessie."

"I don't have to go in there defending anything. Nothing makes that medal and what I did four years ago disappear. And I don't disappear if I don't do it again."

The U.S. women's hockey team is also not the same as it was in



GOLD IN CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

Jessie Diggins of Afton returns to the Games after helping the U.S. win the women's team sprint freestyle in Pyeongchang. She is a medal contender in several events this year in Beijing.



GOLD IN MEN'S CURLING

Chisholm native John Shuster led his U.S. rink past Sweden in the 2018 gold medal match. He returns to the Games in 2022 and says of his team's medal prospects, "We're in a good place."

Photos by CARLOS GONZALEZ (top, bottom) • Star Tribune and MATTHIAS SCHRADER (middle) • Associated Press

2018, when it defeated Canada 3-2 in a shootout in the gold medal game. That's helping it approach these Olympics with a fresh perspective.

Monique Lamoureux-Morando, whose goal sent the game to overtime, and twin sister Jocelyne

Lamoureux-Davidson, whose shootout goal won it, have retired. So have three-time Olympians Gigi Marvin, a Warroad native, and Meghan Duggan.

Pannek, one of eight current or former Gophers on the U.S. team for Beijing, said young newcomers

have injected energy — and some extra grit — into the roster. And the ongoing rivalry with Canada means neither team can rest on past success. Though the U.S. has the Olympic gold, Canada defeated the Americans 3-2 in overtime in the final at last sum-

mer's world championships.

According to Pannek, that ensured the U.S. will come into the Beijing Olympics with the same hunger it had in 2018.

"After getting silver in the world championships in August, that leaves a bitter taste in our mouth," she said. "When we're at our best, we still play with a chip on our shoulder, like we have something to prove. I think that's kind of what our identity is."

Another former Gopher, Hannah Brandt of Vadnais Heights, said the U.S. has plenty of familiarity with being the team others are trying to dethrone. Before last summer's loss, the Americans won gold at five consecutive world championships from 2013-19.

"We're going into this year with a target on our backs, but we're kind of used to that," Brandt said. "I think we always have something to prove. The goal is to defend that gold medal."

For Shuster, the path to the 2018 gold provides a road map for Beijing. While he agrees with Diggins that each tournament is its own experience, winning in Pyeongchang showed his team what it took to become Olympic champions.

The group had one lineup change when Tyler George took a break from the sport, leaving a spot filled by Chris Plys. Shuster would like to avoid some of the drama from 2018, when the U.S. was on the brink of elimination in the round robin before a late run to gold. But his team has tried to replicate most everything else that led to a victory over Sweden in the final match.

"Our preparation for the last Olympics gives us confidence that that is the preparation we need to be putting in again," Shuster said. "Being successful was a process."

"We haven't rested on our laurels at all. And we've continued to grow, trying to find the little tiny ways to get better."

Several of the Minnesotans said that being a returning gold medalist doesn't generate any more pressure than they felt in 2018. Any time they wear the U.S. uniform, they feel a responsibility to represent it to the best of their ability, and to give American fans something to cheer about.

Striking gold twice would certainly do that.

"Our mind-set just has to be, we're at the point of being the best team we've ever been," Shuster said. "We're in a good place. All we can do is go out and keep working on that process."

"We haven't rested on our laurels at all. And we've continued to grow, trying to find the little tiny ways to get better."

U.S. curler John Shuster, who won gold in Pyeongchang