



## BALDY'S PUCK DROP

Weekly E-Newsletter February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2026

Dear Great Falls Americans Enthusiast:

Where to start with this edition? Might as well stick with the hockey as last Friday night was not our finest effort. Not catastrophic by any means – just sloppy in a lot of areas and played to the Bighorns strengths in an 8-4 loss. Provided our players and staff use it as a learning opportunity heading into the playoffs, we will be just fine and look forward to a heck of a playoff series versus Helena as it looks like that is where we are headed. From that perspective, it was probably a good thing to get this one out of the way now.

And if the weekend couldn't get any worse, our bus driver Rex arrived at the bus barn on Saturday afternoon for our trip to Bozeman for our game that night and found a flat tire on the bus. For those not familiar, buses don't carry spare tires, so we were able to get a service call to get the tire fixed and hit the road about 30 minutes late only to drive about 40 miles down I-15 to have the left side air suspension system fail and bring us to a halt. Fortunately, Rex was able to pull into the rest area, but the bus was not going anywhere, and we scrambled to get Plan B in motion to be able to arrive in Bozeman at about 8:30 and just start the game late. However, after talking to Bozeman and the League office and taking Bozeman's ice conflicts into consideration (we would not have been able to start warm-ups until about 11:30 PM) it was determined it was best to postpone the game. At the time of this newsletter, the tentative plan is to play the game next Tuesday (March 3<sup>rd</sup>) at 12:00 Noon in Bozeman.

Time to leave the negative vibe behind and touch on the positives since last week's edition. On Thursday afternoon, AJ Prioli was named NA3HL Frontier Division Player of the week for the week of February 9-15. AJ tallied 3 goals and 4 assists on the weekend of February 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>. The announcement came out a little late due to the Top Prospects Event, but wanted to make sure we give AJ his due recognition.



Then there are the exciting results from the Olympics since our last edition. I am hoping everyone is aware that both Team USA Women's and Men's Hockey teams won Olympic gold medals in Italy. I won't relive the details, but I do want to take this opportunity to talk about the significance and the history. I have no doubt everyone is at least vaguely familiar with the 1980 Olympic Gold Medal Team – I recommended a couple of documentaries a few weeks back. My guess is very few are aware of what has been called the "Forgotten Miracle" when our 1960 team also won gold in Squaw Valley, California. There is also a documentary you may want to watch out about that team, as well.

When you look at it solely from a history and hockey perspective, the 1980 team was what allowed USA Hockey to drastically grow the game in remote areas of the country. The 1980 team inspired a bunch of kids who later represented USA Hockey and stunned the world by winning the 1996 World Cup of Hockey defeating Canada in a best of three series. That team and their success played a huge role in inspiring this 2026 group and included the likes of Chris Chelios, Mike Modano, Bill Guerin (this team's GM), Keith Tkachuck, Mike Richter, Brian Leetch and slew of other great American players. It was during this time that the percentage of Americans playing in the NHL increased from 8% in 1980 to 20% in 1996 to the 30% it is today. The growth was also accelerated with expansion of the NHL into non-traditional hockey areas in the south, which also then exploded the number of youth players. Women's Hockey being implemented in the 1998 Olympics and USA's Gold Medal in Nagano resulted in similar growth and development of the Women's game. Growth is certainly an important part of success as there are more boys and girls playing the game than ever before in all areas of the country.



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The second area of significance is the development of skilled players and the culture in which they play. USA Hockey took a huge step in this area back in 1996 with the creation of the National Team Development Program. The NTDP provides an opportunity for the top 17- and 16-year-old players to maximize their development and play the absolute best competition throughout the season. Twenty-two players in each age group come together to train and



play under the USA Hockey NTDP banner. The 16's play a schedule of games versus the NAHL (Tier II) and USHL (Tier I) junior teams plus a handful on international games. They are playing against competition that is often 2-3 years older. The 17's play games versus USHL teams and NCAA Division I teams, often playing against players that are 4-7 years older. They also then represent USA Hockey at the U18 World Championships each April. Seventeen of the recent Olympic players are

products of the NTDP program. Since the inception of the NTDP, USA Hockey has had considerable success on the 18U and 20U International levels winning as many championships as any other country over the last several years. This success has finally trickled up to the Senior level with Team USA winning their first World Championship last May and now the Olympic Gold.

Why is this important? The fact is the NTDP has developed more high-end players who are better prepared to compete at the highest levels. The depth of American players has never been deeper. At the same time, USA Hockey implemented the American Development Model in 2010 that focuses on the continued growth of the game and the development of all players through the adherence to long term athlete development principles and age-appropriate skill training – which promotes enjoyment – which leads to more development and growth which leads to depth. But the other thing the NTDP has done is establish a culture where the players take a lot of pride in representing the USA and form a brotherhood with these players so when they do get together for these international events the locker room culture is second to none. The European countries have always had that (see Finland) and the pride of it being “their game” has always carried Canada and, right now, I can suggest that Team USA has caught up in this regard. I have been around many of these players – there was nothing fake or insincere about how they included Johnny Hockey’s (Gaudreau) family during these Olympics and the on-ice celebration. It will not be another 40+ years before their next Olympic Gold. They are a family and brotherhood, and I’ll finish by saying that is very much the type of culture we are trying to develop with our group of Great Falls Americans. It is also why we still believe this group can accomplish something special in the coming weeks.

Next up in the Paralympic Games with our six-time goal medal winning Sled Hockey Team taking place from March 7-15<sup>th</sup>. I’ll touch more on them and share their schedule next week.

I have a quick alumni update for you. Former American player Dmitri Kuleshov (2023-24 season) has been named to the Australian National Senior Team that will compete in the IIHF Division IIA World Championship in the UAE at the end of April. Dmitri scored 30 goals and added 23 assists in 41 games with the Americans before heading back to Australia to play professional hockey.



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The Americans are home this Saturday (7:35 PM) and Sunday afternoon (1:05 PM) as they take on the Gillette Wild. Saturday is the return of the **Gills Point S Tire & Auto** tricycle race during the first intermission while we are partnering with **Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Central Montana** to provide a special experience for their members on Sunday afternoon. Sunday is also our annual "Skate with the Americans" after the game, so bring your skates (rentals are also available), as the Americans' players hit the ice with our fans for a post-game social and skate. Of course, join us at **Old Chicago Pizza + Taproom** after the game Saturday, and skate on Sunday, for some great food and drink with our players and fans.

I would also like to give a quick shout-out to our partners at the Ice Plex in the **Great Falls Figure Skating Club**. They are hosting their annual Great Falls Open Figure Skating Competition this weekend (hence the slightly adjusted Americans schedule) with over 60 participants from throughout Montana and the Northwest. The competition will run from 8:30 AM-5:30 PM on Saturday and 8:30 AM-10:30 AM on Sunday and is open to the public. Stop by and support our local Figure Skaters during their biggest event of the year.

Thank you to all of those who participated in **\$10 DASH** Day on Tuesday and congratulations to Steve Boettger from Cascade who's purchase also resulted in the winning drawing for a special edition military appreciation jersey.

**Player Profile – #2 Carson Sears (Great Falls, MT) 6'2" 180 lbs. DEF – Shoots Left DOB 12/28/2008**

**Favorite Team:** Tampa Bay Lightning **Favorite Player:** Victor Hedman

**Favorite Movie:** Lego Movie **Favorite Actor/Actress:** Johnny Depp

**Favorite Food:** Chicken Alfredo

**Favorite Pre-Game Meal:** Strawberry Banana Smoothie

**If you were animal:** A Lynx – they seem pretty cool.

**Musical Group You Won't Miss in Concert:** Nickelback.

**Pre-Game Hype Music:** CDM or Rock

**One Person to be stuck with on a deserted Island:** Alex Leaf

**Hobbies other than Hockey:** Mountain Biking, Working.

**Three People you would like to invite to Dinner:**

Robert Downey Jr, Cale Makar, Victor Hedman

**College/University of Choice:** Army-West Point

**Like Most About Great Falls:** Smaller city but big enough for something to do.

**How would you define a successful season:** Win the Frontier Division!



### Here are the upcoming dates to add to your calendar:

- February 28<sup>th</sup> – Home game versus Gillette. **Special 7:35 PM Puck Drop** and featuring the **Gill's Point S Tire & Auto** tricycle races.
- March 1<sup>st</sup> – Home game versus Gillette. **Special 1:05 PM Puck Drop** and "Skate with the Americans" after the game! **Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Central Montana**
- March 6<sup>th</sup> – Away game at Butte. 7:30 PM Puck drop and join our fans at **Buffalo Wild Wings** for our official Watch Party.
- March 7<sup>th</sup> – Home game versus Butte. 7:05 PM puck Drop. **Toyota Fan and Billet Appreciation Night!**



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- March 11<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> – First round playoffs. Dates, times, locations TBD.
- March 18<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> – Frontier Division finals. Dates, times, locations TBD.
- March 25<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> – Fraser Cup Finals in St. Louis, MO.

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Tammy Quintrell-Stubbs

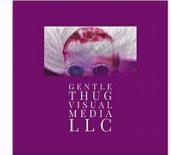


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Thank you for being a part of our hockey family!

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