

Team USA Gives Gold the Old College Try

COLLEGE SPORTS ARE SYNONYMOUS with the American post-secondary experience so it's not surprising the 2010 Olympic hockey roster is loaded with NCAA veterans. A full 75 percent – 26 of the 34 players invited to Team USA's summer orientation camp – spent at least one season on college rinks.

Americans have long stocked the Olympics with university talent, the most famous example being a rag tag group of kids Herb Brooks coached to gold in 1980.

Since 1998 when the International Ice Hockey Federation gave NHL players the OK to participate in the Olympics, the composition of American squads has altered; they are stacked with former, not current, NCAA players.

Ryan Miller has parlayed an outstanding three-season career with the Michigan State Spartans, where he set the record for NCAA career shutouts (26) and earned the Hobey Baker Memorial Award in 2001, into consistent improvement at the pro level. Through 13 games this season he has amassed 10 wins, a .938 save percentage, three shutouts and a league-leading 1.82 GAA. Miller will be looking to become the second member of his family to compete in the Olympics, as his cousin Kevin played on the 1988 U.S. Olympic Team.

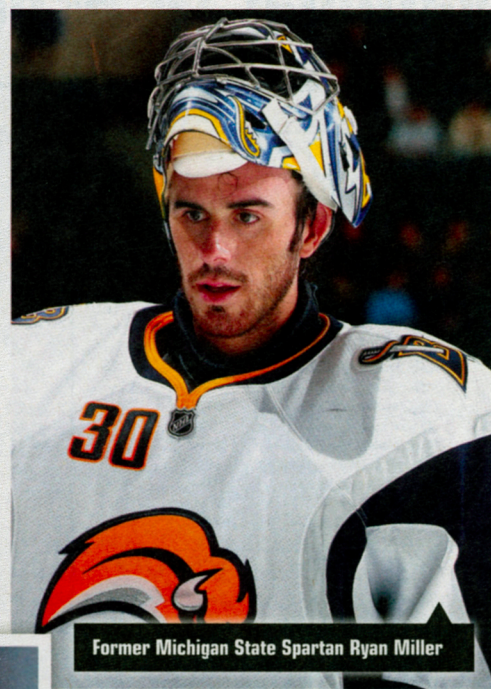
Challenging Miller for the starting spot on Team USA will be former Vermont Catamount and two-time All American Tim Thomas. Thomas, nicknamed "The Tank", was the 2008-09 Vezina recipient and led the Bruins to the No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference.

The blueline is going green, with an influx of younger, fresher legs. Defense stalwart Brian Rafalski will likely get the nod, but the University of

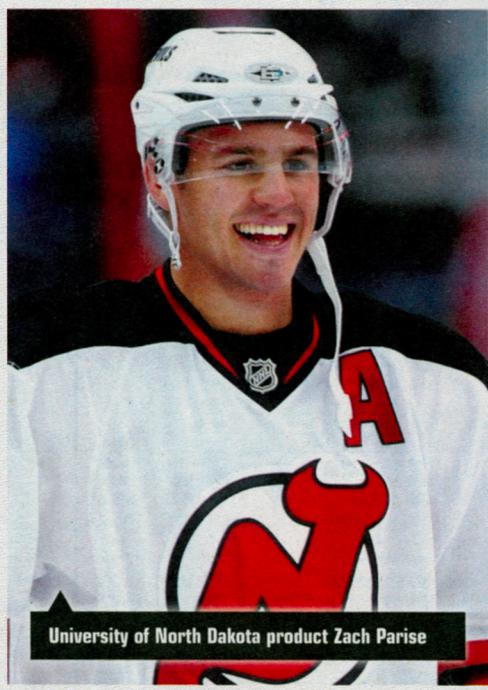
Wisconsin grad will be mentoring Olympic rookies.

Two of those young defensemen could very well be two Johnsons (not related). Erik Johnson of the St. Louis Blues played one season at Minnesota and was the No. 1 overall pick in the 2006 NHL Draft. Jack Johnson of the Los Angeles Kings played a pair of seasons at Michigan.

While the two Johnsons are considered to be explosive



Former Michigan State Spartan Ryan Miller



University of North Dakota product Zach Parise

defensemen, former UMass Lowell River Hawk Ron Hainsey will be a young defenseman that can provide stability in the defensive zone for Team USA.

Up front, Zach Parise is emerging as the quintuple ring-leader. He heads all American born players with 19 points. The University of North Dakota product's 2004 World Junior Championship gold medal and Most Valuable Player honors make him a potential offensive

leader for the Red, White and Blue.

Hot on Parise's skate blades is Ryan Kesler, no stranger to the US hockey program. Kesler has won gold three times with the US National Team Development Program, once each with the U-17, U-18 and World Junior squads. He earned a scholarship to Ohio State and while his stint with the Buckeyes was brief, lasting only one season it was long enough to be named Rookie of the Month once. Kesler's international experience and energy will pair well with that of Parise.

Chris Drury has an Olympic silver medal in his trophy case but the former Boston University Terrier is set on gold this time round. The New York Rangers captain has been a champ at many levels, winning the Frozen Four as a freshman and capping his final college season with the Hobey Baker Memorial Award. The pivot provides strength, dependability and the ability to mix things up without drawing undisciplined penalties when he's at the top of his game.

Team USA is pinning its hopes on players who were at the top of the class during their collegiate careers and while it might take more than good report cards to score a gold medal, never underestimate a team loaded with those who learn their lessons well. ■