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Team U.S.A.? More Like Team Minnesota

By PAT BORZI FEB. 23, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — Practically the entire population of Minnesota was functioning on about four hours of sleep on Thursday. And happy to be doing so.

This is the land where hockey rules, curling is coming up fast on the outside and cross-country skiing claims a prized niche in the state's Scandinavian heritage.

From Warroad, the little town near the Canadian border with a lengthy Olympic hockey heritage, to the Twin Cities and farther south, lights stayed on well into Thursday morning as the United States women's hockey team, with seven Minnesotans on the roster, beat Canada, 3-2, in a shootout for the gold medal to end 20 years of Olympic frustration.

"We probably woke up the neighbors about 1:30 or 2 o'clock," said Mark Manney, who coached goaltender Maddie Rooney on the Andover High School boys' team.

It capped a whirlwind 48 hours of Minnesota success at the Pyeongchang Olympics. It began with Lindsey Vonn, who learned to ski as Lindsey Kildow on the slopes of Buck Hill in the Minneapolis suburbs before moving to Colorado as a

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gold with Kikkan Randall in the team sprint. Theirs was the first medal by American women in cross-country skiing, and the first gold by an American in that discipline.

And just a few hours after Rooney stopped Canada's Meghan Agosta in the sixth round of a shootout to secure the hockey gold medal, the United States men's curling team, led by John Shuster of Chisholm, up on northern Minnesota's Iron Range, stunned Canada, 5-3, to advance to the gold medal game. That guaranteed the best finish by an American team in Olympic history.

Given Shuster's poor finishes at two previous Olympics (10th and ninth) and the 2-4 start by his team at this one, the unexpected run thrilled the Minnesota curling community, along with others who wouldn't know a curling stone if they tripped over one.

"Nobody brags on their own the way Minnesotans do," said Manney, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Air Force who flew Air Force One for six years under Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush and works in security at the high school. "If you go to other places, somebody famous might live down the street, and they never get talked about. Not here. We all know Jessie Diggins today."

That Minnesotans are leading American success in these sports should not be surprising. Minnesota produces more girls and women hockey players than any other state by far, according to U.S.A. Hockey, and the second-most curlers after Wisconsin, per U.S.A. Curling. And Minnesota, with a thriving cross-country community, is one of the few states where Nordic skiing is a varsity sport.

Diggins won three state titles skiing for Stillwater High School. Her finishing kick in the team sprint mirrored her dramatic victory in the 2010 state championship, overcoming about a 10-meter deficit with 150 meters to go. The morning after her Olympic victory, when Ahvo Taipale, owner of Finn Sisu, a Nordic skiing outfitter in Lauderdale, Minn., opened his store, he replayed the final moments of Diggins's race on a monitor over and over for customers. Some wouldn't leave.

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the day needling Finnish coaches he knows by text. “I rub it in,” he said.

The women’s hockey victory likewise thrilled folks in Warroad, a town of about 1,700 that has put eight hockey players on Olympic teams since 1960, including Gigi Marvin on the last three women’s teams. All but T.J. Oshie, in 2014, brought home medals. (Oshie can be forgiven; his four goals on six shots in an opening-round shootout against Russia still inspires awe.)

Izzy’s Lounge and Grill, a popular local restaurant owned by Marvin’s uncle and aunt, stayed open late for a viewing party, drawing what owner David Marvin described as “not packed but a good crowd.”

Marvin relied on Snapchat photos for that assessment because he wasn’t there. He also coaches the Warroad High girls team, which travelled seven hours by bus to St. Paul for the state high school tournament.

Players watched the game in a couple of rooms at the team hotel, then crammed into one to celebrate the victory, Marvin said. Many know fellow Minnesotans like Lee Stecklein, Hannah Brandt and Dani Cameranesi as well as Gigi Marvin, once a Warroad High star and the granddaughter of the Warroad hockey icon Cal Marvin.

“My team was just jacked up about it,” Marvin said Thursday morning, shortly after finishing a practice at a St. Paul municipal rink. “We had our best practice of the year today.

“I texted Gigi before it started — you win the gold, and we’ll win the state tournament. She said, ‘You’re on.’ So we’ve got some work to do.”

Just across the state border in Hudson, Wis., the 1998 women’s hockey gold medalist Karyn Bye Dietz watched the final minutes with her children, Tatum, 14, and Brody, 12.

“My kids went to bed, but they both told me to wake them up,” said Bye Dietz. “It was exciting. It brought back so many memories. I knew exactly how they felt. Then they showed Canada, and Marie-Philip Poulin was crying uncontrollably. I’ve been

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Dick Wicklund, curling manager of the Duluth Curling Club, where Shuster and his team practice, said about 35 hard-core fans gathered at the club at 5 a.m. Thursday for coffee and sweet rolls to watch a livestream of Shuster's game. The club will hold a viewing party for the gold medal game early Saturday morning, he said.

John Benton, a 2010 curling Olympian who manages the Four Seasons Club in Blaine, also skipped the hockey game after watching curling live at home Thursday morning, though he caught the hockey highlights later. A teammate of Shuster's in 2010, Benton applauded Shuster's determination to bounce back from two heavily criticized Olympic performances and lead his team to the brink of a gold medal.

When Benton arrived at work Thursday, he said, the phone was "ringing off the hook" from people eager to learn how to curl, so much that Benton scheduled more time for lessons. Curling is booming all over the country, and especially here. As recently as 2010 there was only one curling club in the Twin Cities, in St. Paul. Now there are five, with a sixth set to open in June. Pete Fenson of Bemidji led, or skipped as it is known in the sport, the United States to a bronze medal in 2006.

"We've spent a lot of time being a novelty," he said. "Our niche has gotten pretty legitimized."

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