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Russia Downs U.S. in Sledge Hockey to Secure Semifinal Spot

By The Moscow Times

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SOCHI, March 11 (R-Sport) — Russia's underdog sledge hockey team stunned the United States in a 2-1 win at the Sochi Paralympics on Tuesday amid sporting and political tension between the two countries.

The result ensures Russia qualifies for the semifinals as group winner in its first Paralympics, while the United States, the 2010 gold medalist, faces a tough semifinal against Group A winner Canada.

The game came a month after the U.S. Olympic team beat Russia 3-2 in a controversial match in which a Russian goal was disallowed, sparking claims of a conspiracy among senior political figures in the Sochi host nation.

It also comes as Russia and the U.S. square off over the future of the Crimean peninsula, a region of Ukraine.

The Russians seemed overawed at the start of Tuesday's game, at one stage going 10-0 down on shots, making the near-capacity crowd at the Shaiba Arena restless.

That all changed late in the first period when poor U.S. discipline led to two US penalties and gave the Russians a five-on-three advantage.

As the U.S. tried to keep the puck against the boards, that left space in front of goal for Ilya Volkov, who received a pass from Dmitry Lisov and buried it in the top-left corner.

Another uncharacteristic U.S. stumble led to Russia's second goal, less than two minutes into the second period. Konstantin Shikhov's shot on the breakaway bounced off goaltender Steve Cash's arm and was accidentally knocked into the net by the American's teammate Brody Roybal, at 15 the youngest player in the Paralympic hockey tournament.

The spark of a U.S. fightback was lit five minutes into the third when Adam Page scored off a rebound amid an onslaught on the Russian net as the home crowd roared their heroes on.

In an echo of the disallowed Russian goal against the U.S. at the Olympics, the Americans were left protesting when Taylor Chace put the puck in the net, only to be denied because the whistle had gone for an earlier infringement.

Earlier in the day, Italy beat South Korea 2-1 to end the medal hopes of the Koreans, who beat Russia 3-2 on a shootout earlier in the tournament. Norway, Russia's likely semifinal opponent, then defeated Sweden 2-0.

The last game of the day sees Canada play the Czech Republic, which can qualify for the semifinals in place of Norway with a win.

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