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U.S. Beats Russia in Paralympics Hockey Final

By The Moscow Times

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Lining up on the Sochi ice to receive their gold medals, the U.S. ice sledge hockey team anticipated abuse from the Russian crowd.

It never came. Just cheers and applause.

However serious the Ukraine-related tensions between the U.S. and Russia are in the backdrop of these Winter Paralympics, they were not evident in the Shayba Arena on Saturday.

Not even after Russia was denied the ice sledge hockey gold in the final by the U.S., who sent no official delegation to Sochi in a protest against Moscow's takeover of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula.

"When they announced us as the gold medal I was really surprised that the crowd cheered," U.S. forward Josh Sweeney said.

It was Sweeney's goal in the second period that retained the Paralympic title for the U.S., ensuring it was "The Star-Spangled Banner" playing later in the near-7,000 capacity arena as the team embraced on the ice.

"We all came together and trusted each other, and that is what got it done at the end," defenseman Taylor Chase said.

"Sweeney played out of his mind. He has done that the whole tournament and worked so hard that it spreads throughout the whole team."

The U.S. match-winning moment came in the 25th minute after Sweeney intercepted a mistake by defenseman Alexei Lysov. The former U.S. Marine swept forward before raising the puck past goaltender Vladimir Kamantsev.

"I got it from that defender and I was a little surprised to be able to have a breakaway in the gold medal match," Sweeney said. "I just got fortunate."

It briefly silenced the home crowd's chants just days after they were celebrating a preliminary round victory over the U.S.

"Today was our chance and it is unknown when we will be in the Paralympics final again and whether we will get there at all," said Russian player Vadim Selyukin, who took up the sport after being injured in an explosion in Tajikistan while in the Russian Army.

An explosion also put Sweeney on a path to the Paralympics. It is less than five years since he lost his legs and left arm after stepping on an improvised explosive device while on patrol in Afghanistan.

Now Sweeney, an able-bodied hockey player in high school, has a sporting medal to join the military honor awarded for his courage and bravery.

"Purple Hearts are normally awarded after being injured in the line of duty after a lot of work, so it is a little upsetting," Sweeney said. "I did not have to get injured to win a gold medal."

Sweeney's team succeeded where the U.S. men fell short in the Sochi Olympics last month. The men did not make the podium, although the women's team was second.

Saturday's final gave disability sport its biggest platform yet in the U.S., with NBC making a late change to its schedules to show its first live action from the Paralympics.

"I never thought that would happen," Sweeney said. "I never knew about Paralympics growing up, and hopefully what this will do is get more kids and more adults into sledge hockey so we can grow this sport to be a household sport."

The television exposure enabled Sweeney to show his fellow Marines there was life after being injured in the line of duty.

"It is awesome they can see me doing something amazing," he said. "When I was injured they all took it really hard, so it's nice for them to see my life isn't over."

Far from it.

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