

# Breaking down Rangers goalie guru's legendary influence past 2 decades

*By: Spencer Davidson*  
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When the 2023-24 NHL regular season begins in less than two months, it'll take the New York Rangers more than just a "whisper" to benefit from the Hall of Fame-worthy coaching of long-time goalie guru Benoit Allaire.

After 20 years as goalie coach with the Rangers, Allaire stepped aside from those day-to-day duties, though he remains Director of Goaltending for the organization. He was officially replaced as goalie coach last week by Jeff Malcolm, who worked under Allaire in the same position with Hartford of the American Hockey League for the past several seasons.

While the 60-year-old will remain with the organization, Allaire will no longer be with the team every day, ending a nearly unprecedented two-decades run of success in the Big Apple.

Since joining the Rangers, Allaire's been one of the most well-respected teachers of hockey's most crucial position, earning the nickname "The Goalie Whisperer." He helped shape the careers of Vezina Trophy winners Henrik Lundqvist and Igor Shesterkin, developed once unheralded Rangers backups into bonafide NHL starters (see: Cam Talbot, Antti Raanta, and Alexander Georgiev), and most recently helped revitalize the previously sputtering career of three-time Stanley Cup champion Jonathan Quick.

## **Benoit Allaire's amazing 20-year run as 'Goalie Whisperer' with Rangers**

Allaire's incredible run of success will be a tough act for Malcolm to follow this season.

Let's take a look at some of Allaire's biggest hits since 2004.

### **Legend of Lundqvist**

Lundqvist is the greatest goalie in Rangers history. And he played his entire NHL career with Allaire as his position coach.

He won the Vezina Trophy as top NHL goalie in 2011-12 and was a finalist four other times in his career, voted the runner-up in 2012-13. His No. 30 hangs in the rafters at Madison Square Garden — no Rangers player will ever wear it again.

Holding nearly every franchise goaltending record, Lundqvist's line of work as the sixth winningest goalie in NHL history (459 wins) speaks for itself. A first-ballot Hockey Hall of Famer, you could make the argument that whoever had the pleasure of working alongside "The King" for 15 seasons in New York would benefit from his consistently elite play.

However, Lundqvist's career began without much fanfare. Selected in the seventh round (No. 205 overall) in the 2000 NHL Draft, the Rangers took a chance on what they saw as untapped potential from the three-time Honken Trophy-winning goalie (Sweden's Vezina equivalent) from Frolunda HC.

After arriving in New York in 2005, it was Allaire whom Lundqvist credited with tapping into that potential and creating the finished product that stood on the podium accepting election into the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto on his first year of eligibility last November.

"There's one coach I want to thank a little extra tonight, my goalie coach for 15 years, Benoit Allaire," said Lundqvist during his Hall of Fame induction speech. "He's incredible. Thinking back, every day, you inspired me in so many ways and you made it fun. The best coach and best friend you could ask for."

### **Statistical supremacy**

While one could attempt to make the Belichick-Brady style argument regarding whether coach or player deserves more credit when it comes to Lundqvist, Allaire's body of work beyond his star pupil solidifies his own case as a Hockey Hall of Famer, and demonstrates his incomparable impact in Rangers history.

Since his first full season on the Blueshirts' staff in 2005-06 (no season in 2004-05 due to lockout), the organization has enjoyed a consistent place among the League's top goaltending units year after year.

In 20 seasons with Allaire, the Rangers have finished within the top-10 in the NHL for goals-against average 13 times, including in the top-5 nine times, and top-3 three times. This includes a second place finish as a team with a 2.49 GAA in 2021-22.

Similarly, the Blueshirts have finished top-10 in save percentage 13 times, including top-5 eight times, and top-3 twice — finishing first in Shesterkin's Vezina winning year of 2021-22 (.921).

In today's world of advanced stats and analytics, Allaire's ability to get the most out of his goalies is even more evident.

According to [MoneyPuck.com](https://www.moneypuck.com), which began tracking analytics in the 2008-09 season, Rangers goaltenders has been top-10 in the League for Goals-Against Above Expected 12 different times, in the top-5 seven times, and top-3 once as the second best in the NHL with a whopping 22.38 goals-against below expected in 2009-10.

These rankings are similar when looking at save percentage above expected on unblocked shots as well, where the Rangers were top-10 12 times, including top-5 eight times and top-3 once — coming in second in 2009-10 with a 0.65 percent above expected.

In fact, there have been just three seasons in Allaire's entire tenure when the Rangers were sub-average when it comes to these categories, and it all came between 2017-18 and 2020-21 in the immediate aftermath of "The Letter," a self-imposed rebuild era.

### **Benoit's backups**

With seven different head coaches behind the bench since Allaire's arrival in New York, his reliable approach and consistent impact has allowed him to withstand six prior coaching changes.

On the ice, many Rangers backups who worked with Allaire have gone on to have stable careers as starters elsewhere. Most notably is Cam Talbot, whose play in 2014-15 helped carry the Rangers through a potentially disastrous stretch without Lundqvist, who sustained a vascular injury after being hit in the neck with a shot.

Talbot's 34-21-9 record in 36 games that season helped the Rangers win the Presidents' Trophy and propelled him into a starting role with the Edmonton Oilers the following season. He has since gone on to play for the Philadelphia Flyers, Calgary Flames, Minnesota Wild, Ottawa Senators, and most recently Los Angeles Kings. The two-time NHL All-Star who has 245 career wins and a lifetime .914 save percentage will play for the Detroit Red Wings this season.

Not bad for an undrafted free agent.

"If I didn't sign with the Rangers out of college, I don't know if I would have made it to the NHL," Talbot told the Los Angeles Daily News in July 2023. "[Allaire] helped rebuild me, honed what skill I already had but also kind of took me back a little bit. I played a lot more like Jonathan Quick coming out of college than Henrik Lundqvist, so he kind of found that happy medium."

Unheralded Steve Valiquette became a serviceable backup under Allaire's guidance. Raanta was solid as a backup and then successfully took on a larger role with the Carolina Hurricanes. Georgiev was the first to replace Lundqvist in New York and is now the No. 1 for the Colorado Avalanche.

The common thread in their time with the Rangers? Benoit Allaire.

"[Allaire] deserves all the accolades," Talbot told Forever Blueshirts at the 2024 NHI All-Star Game. "You see all the goalies he's produced through the pipeline that spring-boarded to starting jobs around the NHL. It's pretty crazy how many guys he's been able to develop under Hank that moved on and became a No. 1 somewhere else."

## Quick revival

Allaire's latest masterpiece was on display just this past season, as the previously dominant Quick was coming off a years-long slide from his All-Star form of the mid-2010s.

In 2022-23, the former Team USA Olympic starter finished at 16-15-6, with career lows in save percentage (.882) and goals-against average (3.41). In March 2023, he was shipped from his only NHL home in Los Angeles, and served third on the depth chart behind Adin Hill and Laurent Brossoit during the Vegas Golden Knights' postseason run to the Stanley Cup.

With rumors swirling about the potential for retirement, the Milford, Connecticut, native joined his favorite childhood team on Broadway. With Allaire's help, Quick turned back the clock to post an 18-6-2 record with a .911 save percentage and 2.62 GAA with the Blueshirts, his best showing in both categories since 2017-18. It earned him a one-year, \$1.275 million contract extension before the 2023-24 campaign was even completed.

"[Allaire] does a great job of simplifying things so that they don't come across in a confusing way," Quick said in November. "It's very clear-cut in what he wants to see out of his goalies in different situations. The communication's been great."

## Rise of The Czar

While Quick kept the Rangers afloat during Shesterkin's mid-season struggles, the Blueshirts' "Czar" eventually regained his form and finished 2023-24 at 36-17-2 with a respectable .913 save percentage and 2.58 GAA before elevating his game to backstop an incredible run to the Eastern Conference Final, when he was 10-6 with a .927 save percentage and 2.34 GAA during the postseason.

The turnaround in Shesterkin's season came when he spent extra time working with Allaire around the NHL All-Star break. Shesterkin followed by playing his best and most consistent hockey the rest of the season.

Coincidence? Not likely.

Going from Lundqvist to Shesterkin shows just how spoiled the Rangers have been in goal over the past two decades, and Allaire has his fingerprints all over that success.

His ability to help goalies reach their potential and find their game during times of struggle is a major reason for the Blueshirts long-time prosperity at the position. His adaptability to different styles of goaltending is also key. As is his ever-present smile and cheerful approach to his job.

“[He’s helped me with] everything,” Shesterkin told *The Athletic*. “He can always find a way to help you. I still don’t speak English so good, so sometimes I don’t understand something. But he always finds a way to explain things to me, he always wants us to be having fun, smiling. When your mood is good, everything should be OK.”

That fun-loving style has given Rangers fans many reasons to smile as well over the years.

While Allaire may not desire the spotlight, largely staying behind the scenes to conduct his work, he has given numerous goaltenders the opportunity to steal the spotlight in their careers.

This can be traced back to even his pre-Rangers days, when Allaire helped turn Sean Burke, a Phoenix Coyotes goalie with a career .895 save percentage and 3.21 GAA over 500+ NHL games, into a Vezina Trophy finalist in consecutive seasons. Burke, himself, is now the Director of Goaltending for the Golden Knights.

It’s just part of Allaire’s lasting legacy. One that leaves a massive void and huge shoes for Malcolm to fill.

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# **Former Colgate Captain Serdachny Scores Golden Goal in Overtime Thriller to End Team USA's Bid for Repeat on Home Ice, Lift Canada to IIHF Women's World Championship Title in Utica**

*By: Spencer Davidson*

Apr. 15, 2024

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UTICA, N.Y. -- Over the past 12 days, players from 10 countries all over the world came to Utica to compete in the IIHF Women's World Championship at the Adirondack Bank Center.

At the end of the 29<sup>th</sup> and final game of the tournament, it took one player who has spent the past five years living just 30 miles away to decide who came away from Utica with a gold medal.

Danielle Serdachny, who played her collegiate hockey career for Colgate University in Hamilton -- spending five seasons with the Raiders and serving as team captain for the past two -- scored the golden goal in overtime to end a wild contest and lift Canada over the United States for the world title, Sunday.

In front of a raucous crowd of 4,142 at the Adirondack Bank Center -- a new building record, breaking the previous one set in the preliminary round contest between these teams just six days ago -- the two biggest rivals on the ice squared off in a game that seemed to be inevitable to conclude the tournament.

It was the fourth straight year that the U.S. and Canada met in the gold medal game, 21<sup>st</sup> time in the last 22 years these sides squared off with a world title on the line.

With Serdachny's goal, Canada got revenge on the U.S.—after the stars-and-stripes won gold over Canada in Brampton, Ontario last year—and put the neighbors to the North back on top with its record 13<sup>th</sup> gold medal at the Women's World Championship.

From the opening faceoff, Canada held an early advantage. The more experienced Canadian side controlled the pace of play for the first few minutes, getting on the board 6:32 into the contest thanks to a shot from the point from Erin Ambrose.

With Team Canada striking first, loud “Can-a-da” cheers rang out, drowned out immediately by louder encouraging chants of “U-S-A.”

Team USA responded to that encouragement in a big way as Laila Edwards continued her hot stick with a huge goal less than two minutes later—her sixth of the tournament on ten shots—8:12 in to even things up and settle the defending gold medalists a bit. Kirsten Simms and Taylor Heise assisted on the equalizer.

Canada outshot the U.S. 13-6 in the first. Aerin Frankel was strong early on, stopping 12 shots, with the United States killing off a penalty in the latter stages of the frame to send the teams to the locker rooms still tied at one.

The stars-and-stripes seemed to come out with a bit more jump to start the second, but just 3:08 in, the tides turned again as Julia Gosling -- cousin of actor and Saturday's SNL host Ryan

Gosling – snapped a shot from the face-off dot passed Frankel to give Canada its one-goal lead back at 2-1.

There was a bit of a lull from there for a few minutes, with a nervous energy from the heavily USA-favored crowd.

However, the United States kept pushing.

Then 10:10 into the middle frame, Megan Keller got the place rocking once again as she put a shot from inside the faceoff circle past Ann-Renee Desbiens for her first of the tournament to knot the game back up at 2-2. Keller's goal was assisted by Hannah Bilka and Abbey Murphy.

Team USA then took the momentum and skated with it. The hosts would take their first lead of the game 16:32 into the middle frame with Alex Carpenter scoring her sixth of the tournament, in the slot off a centering feed from Kendall Coyne Schofield. Britta Curl also assisted on the goal, and the Adirondack Bank Center was rocking.

However, that wouldn't last long. Just 2:26 later, Canada captain Marie-Philip Poulin would knot the game back up with her first of the tournament, unassisted, to even the game back up at 3-3.

In the third period, with Poulin in the penalty box, Captain America Hilary Knight – who broke Hayley Wickenheiser's record with her 14<sup>th</sup> medal at the Women's World Championship, Sunday – put Team USA back on top 8:56 into the final frame, sending a rebound off the end boards past a diving Desbiens. It was her fourth of the tournament, assisted by Caroline Harvey and Edwards.

Again, Team Canada would respond shortly after. This time with two straight, as Emily Clark pulled Canada even once again just 1:50 after Knight's go-ahead goal. Then, less than two minutes later, at 12:19, Poulin jammed home a rebound in front for her second of the game to give the Canadians another lead at 5-4.

The seesaw continued though, as the United States would then respond with Harvey ripping a one-timer past Desbiens off a centering dish from Lacey Eden to send Utica into a frenzy, knotting up the contest one more time at 5-5 with 5:02 remaining in regulation. The dramatic tying goal was Harvey's second of the tournament, also assisted by Hayley Scamurra.

With no more goals the rest of the way, the teams would head to the locker room one final time for an ice cut as the record crowd in attendance caught their collective breath.

In overtime, Team USA was penalized with a too many players on the ice call, served by Kirsten Simms – overtime hero of Monday's preliminary round game played between these teams.

With Simms looking on and the penalty winding down, Ambrose took a shot from the high slot that hit Serdachny in front. The former Raiders standout then quickly sent a backhand past an outstretched Frankel 5:16 into the extra frame to end the stalemate and begin the gold medal celebration for Canada. Desbiens, who started the play with a breakout pass to Ambrose, earned the secondary assist on the golden goal.

Frankel finished the night with 19 saves for the United States, while Desbiens had 25 stops for Canada.



During the medal ceremony, fans who remained in the building again rung out in a loud “U-S-A” chant to show their appreciation for the thrilling ride the U.S. women’s national team took them on over the past couple of weeks.

With six thrilling wins, including an overtime victory over Canada in the preliminary round, and a final that came down to one shot, Team USA won over the hearts of the fans in Utica.

While it wasn’t the ending they were hoping for, there are a lot of positives to take away from a national program undergoing a youth movement that seems to be poised for many more gold medal runs moving forward.

Overall, it was the 12<sup>th</sup> silver medal for the United States in the IIHF Women’s World Championship. Team USA has still medaled in every tournament since it began in 1990. It’s also played in every gold medal game in the history of the tournament.

So ends an exciting couple of weeks in Utica, one that may not have wound up the way that fans in the community were hoping for, but that certainly gave everybody who came out to a game memories to last a lifetime.

Next year, the tournament moves back overseas as it will be hosted by Czechia from April 9-20, 2025.

Expect the United States to be back in the gold medal game competing for redemption in that one.

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# **Simms' First Career Goal at IIHF Women's World Championship Lifts Team USA to Thrilling Overtime Win Over Rival Canada to Capture Top Spot in Group A**

*By: Spencer Davidson*

Apr. 9, 2024

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UTICA, N.Y. -- Despite its toughest challenge of the 2024 IIHF Women's World Championship, the defending champion Team USA would not be eclipsed in a battle of cosmic proportions against rival, Canada, on Monday.

In about as even a game as you could have, the United States prevailed 1-0 in overtime in front of a record crowd of 4,017 at the Adirondack Bank Center to complete the Preliminary Round unbeaten, earning the top seed in Group A heading into Thursday's quarterfinals.

"There's a team of unbelievable players over there, and we've got some players on the cusp of greatness," said Team USA head coach John Wroblewski. "The skill that's on display, it's one mistake, one blown edge. I did like our energy in overtime, and I liked our energy in the third period and the first period. I thought we were very motivated and had a great energy and aura on the bench."

It was a game in which the score did not reflect the action and excitement level. Despite being 0-0 heading into overtime, the game was physical and chippy from the opening puck drop.

Each team generated opportunities with the United States controlling much of the play in the first period, outshooting Canada 12-6.

However, it was a different story in the second, with the Canadians finding their footing and outshooting the U.S. 11-6. Canada then held the advantage again in the third, outshooting Team USA 9-6.

However, the defending gold medalists—in front of the home crowd this time around—seemed to have more high danger chances.

Either way, both goalies would be spectacular with neither blinking.

Ann-Renee Desbiens would make 29 saves for Team Canada, while Aerin Frankel stopped 26 shots for the U.S.

As to be expected when these rivals play, the game was extremely tight and evenly played. In 34 previous meetings in the IIHF Women's World Championship, each team had won 17 and lost 17, with goals for and against essentially even at 98-97 in favor of Canada.

However, thanks to Kirsten Simms' first career goal in the Women's Worlds, that number is now even, too.

With 1:22 remaining in the 3-on-3 overtime frame, the United States came down the ice on a 3-on-1 rush.

Simms got a feed from Caroline Harvey, and put a quick shot through a screen that went five-hole on an unsuspecting Desbiens, who didn't even have time to react before the Adirondack Bank Center erupted in celebration of another instant classic for this rivalry.

"Obviously it was pretty surreal," said Simms. "It still doesn't feel like it happened, but at the end of the day it just comes down to how our team played. I think we played our game through the whole 60 minutes, and really showed up in overtime. It's an insane moment I still can't put into words, but I'm super excited."

For the U.S. it was a bit of revenge after dropping the last four to their rivals to the north in the exhibition Rivalry Series, most recently a 6-1 drubbing in February on home soil in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Some players in this game did not participate in that series, but the core of the roster for each were involved.

Now, with the United States locking up the top spot in Group A and heading for a quarterfinal clash with one of China, Denmark, or Japan—depending on Tuesday's Group B Preliminary Round results—the bragging rights in the rivalry now shifts back to Team USA, at least for another few nights.

While another date with Canada could be on the horizon as the U.S. goes for back-to-back golds, this time on home ice. Yet no matter what happens from here, the United States women's national team has given the Adirondack Bank Center perhaps its biggest moment, and one nobody will ever forget.

"It's incredible," said Frankel, a Westchester, N.Y. area native. "We're so excited to be here playing in front of our home fans, and there's just so much support that we can feel since day one being in Utica. So, I think tonight maybe we won over some more of those fans, and they are going to be excited for us going into the medal round.

"That's what we want, we do it for all the fans, as well as our country, and the young ones that are going to come after."

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[https://www.wktv.com/sports/simms-first-career-goal-at-iihf-womens-world-championship-lifts-team-usa-to-thrilling-overtime/article\\_f58ff0a0-f643-11ee-b68d-93dc41425b9c.html](https://www.wktv.com/sports/simms-first-career-goal-at-iihf-womens-world-championship-lifts-team-usa-to-thrilling-overtime/article_f58ff0a0-f643-11ee-b68d-93dc41425b9c.html)

## Comets reflect on "mixed bag" 2022-23 season as team disperses for summer

*By: Spencer Davidson*  
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UTICA, N.Y. -- The Utica Comets completed the 2022-23 season, the tenth in the organization's history, with a Game 4 loss to the Toronto Marlies in the best-of-five North Division Semifinals, last Friday. That ended a year that was a roller-coaster campaign from start to finish.

During the regular season, Utica went 35-27-6-4, finishing fourth in the North Division while struggling to find consistency in their game, and a true rhythm throughout the year.

The lights went out during the team's home opener on October 17 against the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins, causing the game to be suspended and eventually completed at a later date on January 24th. When it did resume, the Comets came away with a 5-1 win, which was a microcosm for their year. Even a win came with hurdles to get through.

It was a season best described as a "mixed bag" by head coach Kevin Dineen, as there were many peaks to go along with the valleys. It was a very resilient group, one with a strong leadership core and young players who seemed to take strides throughout the season.

Even when trailing late, you could never count Utica out of a game, as evidenced by multiple comeback wins in the playoffs alone. This included Game 2 of the North Division First Round against the Laval Rocket, where the Comets tied the game with two seconds remaining in regulation before winning in overtime to clinch the best-of-three series victory. Games like that gave Utica fans a lot to cheer about, and became instant classics that will be remembered for years to come.

"At the end of the day you'd like to still be playing and we feel almost to a player and a coach that that was a distinct possibility," Dineen said. "Toronto didn't agree and they were the ones that went out and made the difference on the ice. We really have a solid veteran leadership base, guys that have been around a little bit.

"One area that we are excited about moving forward is the progression of our guys on and off the ice as far as maturity and understanding what it takes to be a real consummate pro. So that's a good step."

Goaltender Akira Schmid, in just his second professional campaign, is perhaps the best example of young players quickly learning how to be a pro. The 22-year-old split time between the Comets and parent club New Jersey Devils during the regular season, eventually bursting onto the scene as a bonafide NHL goalie during the Devils' first round playoff series against the New York Rangers.

Players like Schmid, and defenseman Kevin Bahl, who spent almost the entire year as a regular in the New Jersey line-up, with a brief return to Utica after playing here last year, show that the development process organizationally is working.

However, despite fulfilling its role in helping to move the future of the Devils in the right direction, the Comets coaching staff and front office understand that the passionate fan base here in Utica wants success at this level as well. The Comets haven't been beyond what equals the North Division Semifinals since the Calder Cup Finals run in the 2014-15 campaign.

"It starts with the passion of the hockey community," Dineen said. "You look at how many rinks we have within 15 miles: you have Hamilton College, the rink in Clinton, obviously the Nexus Center, and Whitesboro. You can keep going - New Hartford's got a rink - and it's really amazing for an area this size to have the number of sheets of ice available

"The quality of our fan base, they're passionate about hockey. They've grown up with it and they love to come and support us, the universities - both the men's and the women's teams. It's just a great place to play."

Dineen still has one year remaining on his contract with the Devils to coach the Comets, and barring any new developments, is planning on returning to the Utica bench next fall.

Speaking with media, Wednesday, before heading down to Newark along with the eight Comets players recalled to New Jersey to serve as black aces with the big club, Dineen addressed feeling as though there is unfinished business here.

He said that preparations for next year are already underway with initial roster evaluations to see how they can improve the organization's AHL roster to give the fans in Utica a year to remember.

"The investment is there from the New Jersey Devils to put a really good team in your American [Hockey] League city and that's not always the template for every NHL team to follow," Dineen said. "You take that, and you take the leadership of [Comets President] Robert Esche and his passion for the game and the Comets, and we feel like we'd like to take the folks here for a little bit of a run next spring."

Sign us up.

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[https://www.wktv.com/sports/comets-reflect-on-mixed-bag-2022-23-season-as-team-disperses-f  
or-summer/article\\_9089a8f2-efc0-11ed-a18a-2322eaaec0aa.html](https://www.wktv.com/sports/comets-reflect-on-mixed-bag-2022-23-season-as-team-disperses-for-summer/article_9089a8f2-efc0-11ed-a18a-2322eaaec0aa.html)

## **After memorable season, Comets head home for summer saying team ultimately underachieved**

*By: Spencer Davidson*  
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UTICA, N.Y. -- The dust has settled from the shocking Game 5 defeat to the Rochester Americans, which cut the Utica Comets season short at the Adirondack Bank Center in the first round. However, that doesn't take the sting away from how it ended.

The Comets began the ninth season in franchise history - their first under the new affiliation with the New Jersey Devils - by setting an AHL record with 13 straight wins out of the gates.

Utica was one of the top teams in the league throughout the regular season, finishing at 43-20-8-1, tied for third in the league with the Springfield Thunderbirds in wins, and fourth in the league overall with a points percentage of 0.660 in 72 games played.

The team won the North Division regular season title, and finished with the best record in the Eastern Conference.

However, after being bounced by the late-blooming Rochester Americans, who were red hot coming into the playoffs, they are now left wondering what could have been.

"A lot of great memories came out of the last eight months here," said head coach Kevin Dineen. "We felt that at the end there, we underachieved and felt like we should still be playing hockey right now.

"But, it's sports and your opponents always have a say. We ran into a tough one in Rochester, and you learn and move forward."

Dineen, who signed a three-year contract with the New Jersey Devils to coach the Utica Comets, said he wants - and fully expects - to be back at The Aud next season, and that plans for the 2022-23 campaign will begin right away.

"I love coming to work here every day, and to be part of this organization, and I speak on behalf of all of our staff working here in Utica," he said. "I think there's a good rapport between management and hockey operations here.

"The game plan is to keep in touch with the players over the summer, and make strides to keep building on the foundation that we put in place this season."

Despite the season ending abruptly, Dineen emphasized that he felt the team improved and grew over the course of the year - both as a whole, and as individual young players.

Dineen said that many will be back, and he is looking forward to picking up where they left off. As for those that won't, he looks forward to following their career paths, whether it be up in New Jersey with the Devils or in another organization.

According to the bench boss, a primary focus next season will be to improve the team's defense, making sure that all five skaters on the ice commit to playing cohesively and consistently in their own zone.

This year was Dineen's first experience coaching with the defensive style that the Devils organization has implemented. He said that learning this new structure helped him add more to his repertoire, making him a better coach, and that he would like to continue to improve upon that as a team.

As for the bitter feeling the team had while leaving the locker room for the final time, he wants that to be used as added motivation for next year.

"We feel like there was (sic) a lot of good things that did go on here," Dineen said. "At the end of it, the whole goal is to win the Calder Cup, to win the Stanley Cup - organizationally to have that success. [The Devils] organization has seen that before, and that's what you strive to get to."

With all of the adjustments that come with entering a new organization, the thing that Dineen said made his first year in the organization so enjoyable from the start was the fanbase that packed The Aud each and every night.

"I had heard stories, and this is not an exaggeration," he said. "To play in front of our knowledgeable fan base here, and to have the atmosphere that we had at our home games was just such an enjoyable part of the job, and the part that, for me, you don't take for granted."

So the ninth year of Utica Comets hockey - and first under affiliation with the New Jersey Devils - has come to a close.

It was a fun ride from the start, but ended sooner than the team, or its fans, would have hoped. Now, we all get ready to do it all again for year ten in October.

See you then.

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## New-look Comets prepare to drop puck on tenth season this weekend

*By: Spencer Davidson*

Oct 14, 2022

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UTICA, N.Y. -- The Utica Comets are less than 48 hours away from puck drop on the 2022-23 regular season, and Friday, the team practiced for the final time at the Adirondack Bank Center before Saturday's opener.

Utica opens its tenth season in existence, on the road, in Hershey, PA against the Bears, Saturday.

Following practice, Friday, the Comets assigned forward Garrett Van Whye to the ECHL's Adirondack Thunder to start the season, giving them 23 players on the opening night roster.

Ryan Schmelzer will wear the "C" on his jersey for the second straight year, remaining captain of the team. On Thursday, head coach Kevin Dineen announced defensemen Tyler Wotherspoon and Robbie Russo as the alternate captains who will wear the "A's."

Last year's goaltending duo of Akira Schmid and Nico Daws will return to the Comets goal, likely rotating as they did much of last year. Dineen confirmed that Schmid will get the start in Saturday's season opener and that they will "go from there."

This year's team will have a bit of a different look as their main sources of offensive production have moved on - either by making the New Jersey Devils' opening night roster, or through free agency in the offseason. That leaves the Comets entering this year with a slightly different game plan, but one they say they're confident will be effective.

"We feel like our defense[men] are going to be more involved in our offensive side of the game," said Dineen. "There's some real dynamic play that comes from our points."

"[If] you look at the guys we had last year between [Alexander] Holtz, [Fabian] Zetterlund, A.J. Greer and Chase De Leo, that's a lot of goals missing. So, instead of pointing out one individual, we feel that it's going to be a lot of offensive production by committee. We feel we have four lines that can all score, that can contribute on that side."

Joining the Comets' defensive core at the start of the year is 18-year-old prospect, Simon Nemec. However, it's no guarantee he will remain in Utica for the whole season.

Nemec was the second overall pick in the 2022 NHL Draft by the Devils, out of Slovakia, and will make his highly anticipated North American professional debut with the Comets.



Though he is new to the pro game on this side of the world, he did play parts of the last three seasons in the top pro league in his native Slovakia for HK Nitra.

Now, he will look to continue to develop his game while adjusting to the North American style of play, which is played in a smaller rink and tends to be a bit more physical than the European style.

"I came to Utica yesterday - I think it's fun here, and I really like to be here," said Nemec after his first practice with the Comets. "I try to develop myself like I know [I need to]. I need to understand our system and defensive zone coverage, play around the boards, maybe the physical game.

"I still need to improve everything in my game. I don't feel pressure on myself. I want to play a lot right now and that's all."

The Comets will look to replicate the success they saw last year throughout the regular season, where they went 43-20-8-1, winning the North Division regular season title before being bounced in the North Division semifinals in five games by the Rochester Americans.

The season gets underway at 7 p.m., on Saturday, in Hershey.

The Comets then return to Utica for the home opener on Monday, October 17, against the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins.

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## **Herkimer College's Aragon shares fond memories of Pelé highlighting Brazilian legend's impact here at home**

*By: Spencer Davidson*  
Dec 30, 2022

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WKTV -- The sports world, and beyond, mourns the loss of an icon with the news of Brazilian soccer legend, Pelé's, death at age 82 in Sao Paolo on Thursday, after a more than year-long battle with colon cancer.

Through his efforts - both on and off the field - the three-time World Cup champion became beloved on the global scale, and has remained an inspiration for soccer fans of every generation, including those too young to have watched him during his playing career.

His superstardom during his time on the field reached a level never seen before for a soccer player in the United States, and his world-wide influence could be felt right here in the Mohawk Valley.

Pepe Aragon, the current Herkimer College head men's soccer coach, and a Herkimer alum himself, idolized Pelé as a young soccer fan.

Aragon told NEWSChannel 2 that Pelé brought the world together - both through his play on the field at the international stage, and his kindness demonstrated off the field with his approachable nature, and his involvement with many humanitarian efforts.

When Aragon was a freshman playing for Herkimer in 1990, he was named a National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA) All-American. Upon arrival at the NSCAA banquet in Cincinnati, Ohio, he found out that Pelé would be the special guest of honor, handing out the awards to the 500 All-Americans that converged for the celebration.

Aragon recalled the moment of finally meeting his idol, and how the genuine generosity of the renowned athlete has had a lifelong effect on him as a fan, player, coach, and person.

"For me to shake Pelé's hand was unbelievable," he said. "He saw me. He didn't look past me, he looked me in the eyes, said 'congratulations' and shook my hand. That impacts you not just for a day. That impacts you for a lifetime.

"I'm 52 years old right now and I still remember it like it was yesterday, that's how much he touched me with it. It helps shape you as a person to see somebody that famous and that successful be that humble, and care about people."

The Herkimer Generals bench boss recalled Pelé doing the same exact thing for all student-athletes in attendance, smiling graciously the entire time.

"I can't tell you what that meant to all 500 of us," Aragon said. "He knew that meant the world to all of us. He's just a class act to do something like that."

Pelé is the only male player boasting three World Cup titles on his resume, as he led Brazil to the top in 1958, 1962, and 1970.

He accumulated 12 World Cup goals - making him sixth all-time - and he remains Brazil's all-time leading goal scorer with 77 goals in international play, coming in 92 caps with the national team.

Regarded as "the greatest" player of all time by FIFA, the governing body of international soccer, and named FIFA's Player of the Century for the 1900s, Pelé's 1,279 goals in 1,363 games between club and country (including friendlies) is recognized as a Guinness World Record.

After playing in 636 matches for Santos in his native country, Pelé arrived in the United States in 1975, where he would appear in 64 contests over three seasons for the New York Cosmos, of the North American Soccer League, between 1975-77.

It was then that his influence on the popularity of the sport in North America truly began.

"He wanted badly for the United States to pick up soccer and to become big into professional soccer," Aragon said. "That was a big goal of his, he loved it over here. He was just an ambassador in our country for the game of soccer, so every one of us idolized him."

Aragon added that he believes Pelé continues to inspire and impact the sport of soccer in the United States to this day.

Following the legend's playing days, he remained an ambassador to the game, and led many humanitarian efforts with multiple organizations such as UNESCO and the United Nations.

He even became involved in politics to promote togetherness through sport, serving as the Minister of Sports for Brazil from 1995-98.

While Aragon, a multiple national title winning coach for Herkimer, has many fond memories of watching the Brazilian legend play - including his heroics in the World Cup - perhaps none stick with him more than watching his final match in the U.S., live, and in-person.

"When I first saw Pelé, it was October 1, 1977," he said. "My dad took me to the game, and I'll never forget it. It was a sold-out crowd of like 77,000 people at Giants Stadium, and it was cool because he played for both teams. He played one half for the New York Cosmos, the team he played for in the U.S., and then he played for Santos, the team he played for in Brazil prior to coming to the U.S. It was really cool to see.

"It was an exhibition game and I can't remember which half he played for who, but at the end of the game, I'll never forget, they took him off the field on their shoulders and carried him around. It was just a magical experience.

"Imagine that, 77,000 people there and they are all there to see Pelé. That'll tell you what an icon he is. That's what he was."

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## Baseball Hall of Fame Class of 2020 members prepare for long-awaited induction ceremony

*By: Spencer Davidson*

Sept 2, 2021

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WKTV -- It's a day that the three living members of the Baseball Hall of Fame's Class of 2020 have waited more than a year for, but the wait is nearly over.

The four-man class is set to be enshrined during the induction ceremony on Wednesday, Sept. 8, at the Clark Sports Center in Cooperstown.

Former New York Yankees captain Derek Jeter, former Utica Blue Sox outfielder Larry Walker, Ted Simmons, and the late Marvin Miller were all due to be honored last year until induction weekend was canceled amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"There were so many things going on in the world [last] year so I really didn't think about it much early on," said Jeter, a 14-time all-star and five-time world series champion. "I was getting excited for it and then it was canceled and then your mind goes in other places. So, I am looking forward to getting up there next week. It's been a long time coming."

Jeter is the 57th first ballot hall of famer in baseball history. He received 396 of 397 votes cast by the Baseball Writers Association of America, which is 99.7% of the vote.

That's the highest percentage of votes cast behind his former Yankees teammate Mariano Rivera, who became the first unanimous hall of famer in Hall history in 2019.

Previously, Jeter said that he isn't focused on the one vote he didn't get, but rather the 396 that he did.

He was in Cooperstown in July 2019 to celebrate his good friend Rivera's historic induction, and said he is looking forward to going back to spend time at the museum on Main St., which he hasn't done in years. He also said that is looking forward to rubbing elbows with the current members of baseball's highest fraternity.

As for how Jeter wants to be remembered in the baseball world as a player...

"I want to be remembered as a Yankee, that's it," he said. "That was the only team I ever wanted to play for since as far back as I can remember. So that's what I wanted my legacy to be. Baseball has been a big part of my life and it will continue to be. I think that any time you talk about legacy post-playing career, I'm still working on it, but during my career it was just to be a Yankee."

Former Montreal Expos and Colorado Rockies outfielder Larry Walker got in with 76.6% of the vote in his tenth and final year on the ballot.

He's going into the Hall as a Rockie, the first to do so. He's also the second Canadian to be enshrined along with Fergie Jenkins.

Despite this, he still has a hard time believing that he is about to join this highly exclusive club.

"I take everything in my life as a just an average guy," Walker said. "I don't put myself on a pedestal – and never have in anything – and I don't recall any time in my career where I could actually look in the mirror or sit there and think of myself as a Hall of Famer."

A five-time all-star, three-time batting title champion, and seven-time gold glove winner, Walker began his professional career with the Utica Blue Sox, then of the New York-Penn League in 1985.

He hit .223 with two home runs in 62 games during that time before moving on within the Expos organization.

Speaking with media on Thursday, Walker recalled a memory from his time in Utica.

"I stayed in a house with five other guys, and I remember I got stuck to the basement," he said. "There were a couple of nights when the rains fell so much that water leaked and would be dripping onto my bed. It was just like 'wow, this is my first year in professional baseball' and I didn't mind it one bit. I thought it was all great and I got to meet a lot of nice people."

"I have nothing but good things there. I wish I could've played a little better, but it was a good start for me into my career with Utica."

Simmons played 21 years in the bigs, the first 13 of which were with the St. Louis Cardinals.

A switch-hitting catcher, Simmons retired in 1988 with a career .285 batting average, 483 doubles, 248 home runs and 1,389 RBI.

Getting in through a veterans committee vote, Simmons said that his excitement for the event has made the wait tough, but that it's worth it.

"The wait has been good and bad," he said. "Bad in that you've had to wait an extra year for this thing to kind of come to a head, but good in that it's extended an additional year,"

"It's like nothing's really going away. So you walk in and you think you're kind of going to turn around and walk out. And it's been a real pleasure to have walked in and been able to stay really twice as long in the room, but next week I'll finally get in."

Miller will be inducted posthumously following his death in 2012. He was a baseball executive who served as the Executive Director of the MLB Players' Association from 1966 to 1982.

The four members of the Baseball Hall of Fame Class of 2020 will be enshrined on Sept. 8 at 1:30 p.m. on the grounds of Clark Sports Center in Cooperstown.

Tickets for lawn seating are free, and the induction ceremony will be broadcast live on MLB Network.

For more information, visit [baseballhall.org](http://baseballhall.org).

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