

Canada's men's volleyball team eyes Olympic spot at qualifier

07/01/2016



Canada's men's volleyball team is primed to bump, set and spike its way to its first Olympics in 20 years at a qualifying tournament in Edmonton this weekend.

- [WATCH LIVE: Olympic men's volleyball qualifier](#)

Team Canada is the top-ranked team in the tournament, which also features the national teams of Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico. They have home court advantage and have beaten the other three teams regularly in the past. Plus, they've been on the losing side of this situation before.

The winner of the round-robin tournament, which runs Friday through Sunday, secures a spot at this year's Games in Rio de Janeiro — and it appears to be Canada's to lose.

"It's like a perfect storm of results," said Charles Parkinson, a former national team member and longtime play-by-play commentator for CBC Sports. "My money would definitely be on Canada followed by Cuba as the second possibility."

One curve ball

Parkinson, who once captained Team Canada, says Canada's performance will come down to three things: first, whether or not the team is healthy; second, whether they've been able to come together as a team (since most players play professionally overseas) and, finally, whether they have learnt from past experiences.

Parkinson would place a checkmark next to each of those factors. But there is one hurdle.

Gavin Schmitt of Saskatoon, a six-foot-10-inch outside hitter and team leader, is out with injury.

Schmitt, 29, requires surgery on stress fractures in his right leg as soon as possible in order to maximize recovery time this spring, according to head coach Glenn Hoag.

"It changes our game serving wise, attacking wise, but we'll try to make other adjustments and use different tactics," Hoag said. "It takes us a little bit out of our comfort zone, but we have no choice."

While it's not an ideal situation, Canada's depth keeps them in a good place.

"In the last NORCECA [North, Central America and Caribbean Volleyball Confederation] tournament Gavin didn't play and Steve Marshall came in on the right side, who's a completely different player but was super effective," said Parkinson. "They're in a good spot in every position on the floor."

"The key for them is going to be for every player to be able to be in the moment on this weekend."

Harnessing experience

Stepping up to the occasion may be easier said than done. The last time Canada's men's volleyball team went to the Olympics was 1992. There are players who have been on the team for 14 years, still unable to call themselves Olympians.

"When the dream is right in front of them, the question is can they play with the discipline and the patience and the discipline to secure that win," said Parkinson.

That means execution, execution, and more execution. Canada is known to lose their handle on their serving from time to time. But their serve block approach will be where Canada needs to shine.

"They can all execute. I've seen them time after time play some superb volleyball," said Parkinson. "They're just on. When that's the case, it's very difficult even for the top teams in the world to stop them."

"What you have to do is harness that experience and bring it to bear for three matches. That's it."

Coaching to tie it all together

The coaching plan will be what will put Canada in the position to harness all the positives they bring into this weekend. Coach Hoag, who's been with the team since 2006, will have to reel in the men's emotions during this high pressure tournament.

"If you look at all those technical, tactical, physical and mental [aspects], the Canadian coaching staff will have made sure they've covered every base they possibly can," said Parkinson.

"The only thing they can't do is play the match."
