

## **The U.S. Men's Hockey Team Won Gold in Milan, but Returned Home the Biggest Losers**

On Feb. 22, 2026, the U.S. men's hockey team won Olympic gold in Milan. It was the 46<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "Miracle on Ice." But they returned home as the biggest losers in the ongoing fight for respect in women's sports. Their viral locker room call with President Donald Trump turned a once-in-a-generation victory into a punchline at the expense of women's achievements.

After an overtime win against Canada, the men gathered in the locker room to celebrate. Trump called to congratulate them and invite the team to the State of the Union address. On the call, Trump joked that he would "have to" invite the women's team. He added that he might be "impeached" if he didn't — a line that drew laughter from the players. The clip rocketed across social media, overshadowing the game itself. Critics said the men had turned their female counterparts into a political afterthought.

The timing made the slight even sharper. Days earlier, the U.S. women's team delivered their own overtime win against Canada. Women's hockey has spent decades fighting for visibility, funding and serious media coverage. U.S. women have routinely outperformed men on the Olympic stage, winning eight of Team USA's 12 gold medals at the 2026 Games. When Olympic champions are reduced to a throwaway line in their own sport's biggest news cycle, it reinforces a familiar message: Women's achievements are celebrated only when convenient.

The controversy did not emerge suddenly. The Games saw heavy criticism over how the women's gold medal moment was broadcast. Viewers blasted network coverage of the overtime goal as chaotic and inadequate for a play of that magnitude. The women's decision to decline Trump's State of the Union invitation — citing academic and professional commitments — drew intense online scrutiny. Meanwhile, Colorado Avalanche forward Brock Nelson explained his absence from the White House visit by saying he wanted to be with his family before the NHL season began again. He received little to no backlash and heavy praise.

Institutions helped set that frame. Trump's offhand remark that he would "have to" invite the women, instead of leading with both teams as co-champions, positioned the men as the default face of U.S. hockey. Coverage — including segments showing Trump wearing Matthew Tkachuk's medal and joking "I'm not giving it back" — reinforced this idea. Trump painted the men's team as the primary symbol of American hockey success when the women's team has been setting that standard for years.

Repairing this damage will take more than a carefully worded apology. USA Hockey should present both teams as co-champions of the program's success, not as a headliner and an add-on. Two golds. Two teams. One standard of respect.

Celebrities like Flavor Flav are only part of the solution. An avid supporter of women's sports, Flavor Flav celebrated the U.S. women's water polo team in Las Vegas after the 2024 Summer Olympics. On Feb. 23, the rapper invited the U.S. women's hockey team to Las Vegas, offering them a "real celebration." He later confirmed the team accepted his invitation. Others — from California Gov. Gavin Newsom to Seth Meyers to rapper Megan Thee Stallion — have also shown their support.

The players themselves also have the role. The same men who cheered the women's run in Milan should be pressed for answers about their laughter in the locker room — why they laughed at jokes that diminished their peers. They should explain why they accepted Trump's invitation.

After all, it was not an invitation they were obligated to accept. They need to set the standard for young athletes watching from their living rooms — the future of American hockey.

Olympic gold is supposed to represent the highest achievement in sport. But that achievement does not end when the game does. Until men's and women's victories are treated equally, men will keep collecting medals while forfeiting something far more important: the chance to lead a sports culture that inspires both young men and women that they are capable of anything they believe in.