



*"This is all about our country right now. I love the USA. I love my teammates. The USA hockey brotherhood is so strong...I'm SO proud to be American today...So proud..."*

"We're so proud to be Americans... We're so proud to win for our country," Jack Hughes said in a live NBC interview moments after scoring the sudden death overtime goal to secure the Olympic men's hockey gold medal for the United States. By the time the 97-second exchange with reporter Kathryn Tappen ended, Hughes had clearly revealed his heart to the world.

He emphatically used the word "proud," over and over again, to explain how being American makes him feel. He unambiguously declared his love for his country before he said anything else. He twice declared that his team delivered for "all of the country." He spoke his words through the space in his mouth where his front teeth had once been, gums colored with his own blood. Several times, he ran his hand through his sweaty hair, as though pushing the tears beginning to well in his eyes back into his head.

When Jack Hughes blasted the puck between the Canadian goaltender's splayed legs and into the back of the net in northern Italy, and in the unscripted minutes that followed, he established himself as an American hero for the ages. I cried as I watched, and Jenna did, too.

Later, I began to see an emerging trend that shocked me. People criticized Hughes and his teammates for fielding a post-game phone call from the President and accepting invitations to the antiquatedly-inconsequential ritual that has been rendered quaintly irrelevant by continuous media feeds: "The State of the Union" address. Apparently, USA hockey is "too MAGA" for some.

If you didn't feel a degree of pride and joy when Hughes and his brothers (including his teammate and actual brother Quinn) frantically rushed the ice to celebrate, you have stripped yourself of something basic and precious, and the void that remains is a you-problem and nothing more. You have chosen to frame every thought and emotion that you have through a lens of political preference. You have robbed yourself of important components of the human experience. You probably ought to lighten up. You can't fix all the world's problems with your melancholy, and your stridently monolithic world view runs counter to your self-claimed empathy.

But let's get back to Jack Hughes. You think he fits

into some predictable box? Like a knuckle-dragging unsympathetic country boy? He was born in the hockey hotbed of...Orlando, Florida...a long way from Winnipeg or Northern Michigan. He grew up in Toronto, the biggest city in Canada, the home country of the team he and his mates beat. He went to Catholic high school, though he celebrated his bar mitzvah as a Jew. It's a close call between him and his brother as to which man is the smallest member of Team USA 2026. He's a voracious reader and an active advocate for youth literacy, evidenced by his Hughes Brothers Pucks-and-Pages program. He has openly supported NHL Pride Nights, saying of his New Jersey Devils organization, "We are a really welcoming organization...with how we grew up, my family really supports that too."

As much as we want to distill every person, every action into a piece of indisputable evidence supporting our confirmation biases, doing so misses much. People, systems, nations, are complex, dynamic, evolving things, imbued with flaws and imperfections inherited from Adam and Eve.

Jack Hughes is a man, a young one, of 24. No doubt, he has made mistakes in his life and he will make more. And he is a hero and a patriot, and I will never forget what he did and then said on the morning of February 22, 2026. Because all the truths in this paragraph can coexist.

Rooting for your country isn't a sign of jingoistic impulses. It's not sinisterly nationalistic. Rather, it's natural and it's fun. Why did I cry when the USA beat the Soviet Union in Lake Placid in 1980 and again when we topped Canada a week ago? Because, as Jack Hughes said, "I love my country." It's as simple as that. Perhaps my soul could have been sent elsewhere on Earth, but somehow it landed here, and I am thankful every day for that random reality. I do what I can to make my little piece of my town, my country, my planet better for my efforts. And I will always unabashedly cheer for the Red, White, and Blue.

*Scott A Laurer*



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