

Let's go! Olympic year begins in Malmö



Photo: Andre Ringuette / IIHF-Images

Team USA celebrates its second gold medal at the 2013 U20 World Championship. 2014's event in Malmö promises even more action as parity among the top U20 team grows closer.



■ As the leaves fall and the weather gets cold, we turn the page to 2014 and a new hockey season.

RENÉ FASEL EDITORIAL

And what a season it will be. Beginning in Malmö, Sweden, the 2014 IIHF Ice Hockey World Junior Championship kicks things off with a bang the day after Christmas. This tournament is easily one of our most competitive each year, and we are pleased that for the second year in a row more Europeans will be able to enjoy watching these highly skilled young athletes competing for gold.

■ The tournament will showcase the excellent development program built by the Swedish Ice Hockey Association, a co-operative effort with the club teams and leagues around the country that is producing some great talent on the ice. You can read more about the program in this issue.

Cooperation amongst all stakeholders is the key to building a successful program, and the results will no doubt show up when the Swedes, winners of the 2012 tournament and runners-up last year, take to home ice in December.

■ The World Juniors provide an ideal setup to the greatest international ice hockey tournament on Earth: the Olympic Winter Games. At press time, we have just passed the milestone of 100 days left before the official opening of the Games in Sochi, and the excitement continues to build.

I am happy to say that, for the fifth time in a row, the National Hockey League and its players will participate in the Olympics. The tournament taking place in Sochi is, like FIFA's World Cup, the one event in the world that provides an opportunity for all national teams to ice their best players.

It is important for all countries, not just the top teams but also the smaller nations, to be able to showcase their top talent.

For ice hockey fans the Winter Olympics are a real treat that only come every four years, and to have the best in the world competing truly makes this tournament the greatest event in the hockey calendar.

■ Back in September, the IIHF wrapped up the 2013 Semi-Annual Congress in Cascais, Portugal. During this Congress we discussed our plans for the World Championship, the European club competition, and the Olympic Games, among other matters. You can read a brief on major Congress decisions on page 3.

So as we prepare to go into an Olympic year, I wish all of you hockey fans a wonderful holiday season, and I share your excitement for what will be a memorable hockey season.

René Fasel
IIHF President

Two applicants for 2018

Latvia, Denmark aiming to host Worlds

■ ■ Denmark and Latvia have formally applied to host the 2018 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship.

Both countries have already applied in the past, most recently with a joint bid for Copenhagen and Riga that lost against another joint bid – Cologne, Germany and Paris, France – for the hosting rights in 2017.

Denmark, 12th in the 2013 IIHF World Ranking, is the best-ranked nation that has never hosted the IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship in the tournament's long history. But the country that has been playing at the top level since 2003 is eager to get the event onto Danish soil.

The 12,000-seat Copenhagen Arena (bottom, left) in the country's capital, which is expected to open in 2015 and was part of the 2017 bid, is proposed as the main venue and the 12,500-seat Boxen Arena in Herning that opened in 2010 as the secondary arena.

But representatives of the Danish Ice Hockey Association have not excluded reaching out to neighbours Sweden

(Malmö) or Norway (Oslo) as an option for the second venue. The decision regarding the second venue must be submitted to the IIHF latest on 10 January, 2014.

Latvia, ranked 11th and famous for its fans travelling around the world to support their national team, has hosted the World Championship once and has been playing in the top division since 1997.

Same as in 2006, Latvia proposes to host the World Championship in two venues in its capital of Riga.

The country's premier venue is the Arena Riga (bottom, right) that was built for the 2006 IIHF World Championship. The 10,600-seat arena has since then hosted several other international tournaments and is home to the KHL team Dinamo Riga.

The 2014 IIHF Annual Congress, held 22-24 May 2014 in Minsk, Belarus, during the 2014 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship, will vote on the allocation of the 2018 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship.



NEWS & NOTES

BRAZIL: The Brazilian inline hockey national team returns to the IIHF Inline Hockey World Championship as the only team entered in the Rest of the World Qualification to determine which team outside of Europe would replace Argentina, the team that was relegated last summer. Brazil most recently played in the IIHF Inline Hockey World Championship in 2010. In its most successful era, the Brazilians won the Division I competition in 2007 and six Division I medals between 2003 and 2009.

LATVIA: Latvia will also be represented at the IIHF Inline Hockey World Championship for the first time after winning the European qualification event. Latvia will replace Bulgaria in the 2014 IIHF Inline Hockey World

Championship that will be played in Pardubice, Czech Republic, 15-21 June 2014. The Bulgarians were relegated this summer.

GREAT BRITAIN: Ice Hockey UK has announced that **Doug Christiansen** will be the new head coach of the Great Britain senior men's national side. The 35-year-old, who has been assistant coach for Great Britain since 2012, replaces Tony Hand. Christiansen will combine the role with his new job as coach of Elite League side Sheffield Steelers. He was born in Milwaukee, USA and played in both the American Hockey League and East Coast Hockey League in North America.

The former forward first arrived in the UK as player-coach of Edinburgh Capitals in 2007-08. In his third year in Scotland he was named as Coach of the Year before moving to the Belfast Giants. He spent three seasons with the Giants, winning the Elite League title in 2011-12.

IIHF: **Olesya Müller** has begun to work for the IIHF as Marketing and Event Coordinator. Olesya was born in Russia and is currently living in Stäfa, Switzerland.

Before joining the IIHF, she worked as an Assistant to Management and Executive Board of a family company, worked as a guide in tourism and was also an English-Russian translator.



OBITUARIES

Matti Murto: Former Finnish national team forward lost his battle against esophageal cancer on 19 August at age 64. Murto was one of the best Finnish centres in the '70s when he represented his country in two Olympics and six World Championships. He played for HIFK Helsinki for 18 years, winning five championships. Murto played 158 games for the national team and 490 games in the Finnish league. He was inducted into the Finnish Ice Hockey Hall of Fame in 1991.

Vladimir Vikulov: Former Soviet national team player passed away at age 67 on 9 August. Vikulov played internationally in the '60s and '70s and formed a line with Viktor Polupanov and Anatoli Firsov under Coach Anatoli Tarasov. He only started to play ice hockey at the age of 15 with the CSKA Hockey School but thanks to his extraordinary skill level he earned his spot in the Soviet league and later on the national team. Vikulov won Olympic gold in Grenoble 1968 and Sapporo 1972 along with six IIHF World Championship titles between 1966 and 1975. He was on the All-Star Team in 1971 and 1972 and played for the Soviets in the 1972 Summit Series and the 1976 Canada Cup. He scored 58 goals and 43 assists in 85 international games and won 12 national championships with CSKA Moscow before ending his career with SKA Leningrad.



Vasili Tikhonov: Russian hockey coach, 55, son of legendary Soviet player/coach Viktor Tikhonov, died in an accident in his Moscow apartment on 6 August. He coached at various levels in the '70s in Riga where the family was staying when father Viktor Tikhonov was the head coach of Dinamo Riga of the old Soviet hockey league. His first major coaching assignment came in 1990, when he at the age of 32 became the head coach of Ässät Pori of the Finnish league. Later jumped at an offer from the NHL's San Jose Sharks and assumed the position of assistant coach in 1993 and he stayed with the NHL club for three seasons before becoming head coach of the Sharks' farm team Kansas City Blades. Later he coached in Finland, Switzerland and Russia. His son Viktor plays for SKA St. Petersburg.



Anatoli Yegorov: Former hockey player and coach passed away on 7 October. He was 82. Yegorov played for Dynamo Moscow and Spartak Moscow and won the Soviet championship with Dynamo in 1954. He later became a coach of Spartak, Dinamo Riga and Sokil Kyiv and was on the coaching staff of the Soviet national team in 1967. His longest tenure as a coach, however, was outside of the Soviet Union. Between 1969 and 1975 he led the Polish national team during one of its most successful eras. Under Yegorov, Poland finished in sixth place at the 1972 Olympic Winter Games and placed fifth in three consecutive IIHF Ice Hockey World Championships (1973, 1974, 1975) – a placing Poland has not reached since.

Viktor Zinger: Former Soviet goaltender Viktor Zinger passed away at age 72 on 24 September. Zinger was a member of the Soviet team which won the 1968 Winter Olympics in Grenoble. Having won three consecutive World Championships as a backup, in 1969 Zinger was the main goalkeeper of the Soviet national team which won the World Championship in Sweden. At the pro level he was a three-time USSR champion with his club Spartak Moscow (1967, 1969, 1976).

European club competition moves forward

Infront chosen as commercial partner, 40 clubs projected

■ ■ The Board of the European Club Competition (ECC) has appointed the international sports marketing company Infront Sports & Media as the exclusive commercial partner for the new pan-European club ice hockey competition.

The cross-season, international league format will start as of the 2014-2015 season and determine the European club ice hockey champion out of 40 top-tier clubs and national league winners.

"The time is now right to establish a pan-European league for top club ice hockey," said Anders Ternbom, Chairman of the ECC and representative of the clubs within the board. "We all believe in the potential of this project and we are positive that with all stakeholders closely involved and having Infront as proven marketing partner, we will put in place a successful, competitive and financially viable league."

The inaugural season will see 40 clubs from the national leagues in Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland take part, including the respective national champions and regular season winners. Discussions with the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) regarding the participation of KHL clubs are still on-going. Out of the 40 teams in the Preliminary Round, 16 will advance to the 2nd knock-out stage playoff round.

The new brand name of the international league, which will stretch out from August to February each season, will be communicated in early 2014.

■ The ECC's commercial partner was selected following an international tender process and will see Infront exclusively



149 games are planned for the inaugural 2014/2015 season.

handle all commercial and media-related areas of the new competition, which is being launched and fully backed by all relevant stakeholders in national and international ice hockey. The decision to enter the all-encompassing partnership was made at an ECC Board meeting taking place in Berlin on 16 October

"Ice hockey is part of our company's DNA and the partnership with ECC is a key priority for Infront," said Philippe Blatter, President & CEO of Infront. "Our experience within the commercialisation and promotion of ice hockey makes us strongly believe in the sportive and marketing potential of the new competition and we are fully committed to help develop an impactful pan-European league."

"Our target from day one will be to ensure maximum exposure producing and giving fans access to each and every ECC game played during the season. The new league has

the potential to become a must-have property for commercial partners in all core and adjacent ice hockey markets in the world."

■ Infront will be responsible for the worldwide distribution of media rights, the centralised marketing rights, merchandising rights as well as the high-quality multimedia production of all 149 ECC games in HD format. In addition, Infront will provide substantial support to the ECC rights holders in the overall development of the new competition, delivering services in the area of digital media, branding, promotion and rights delivery.

The new competition, which will start in August 2014, is fully owned and operated by the European Club Competition (ECC), which includes – as its shareholders – top European clubs, six national leagues and the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF). This means that all levels of national and international ice hockey are represented in the planning and implementation of the annual event.

"With the new European Club Competition we will create additional value – sportive, financial and emotional – for the European clubs, leagues and fans," said Gernot Tripcke, Managing Director of the German Ice Hockey League (DEL) and representative of the leagues within the ECC Board.

"Infront's comprehensive and very detailed approach provides a perfect fit for the needs of the new league and its stakeholders. We are very confident to have the best partner on our side to develop a new, strong ice hockey property over the next coming years."

Recapping the 2013 IIHF Semi-Annual Congress

World Championship, IOC presidency, European competition discussed

■ ■ At the beginning of the fall season, the IIHF's member national associations gathered in Cascais, Portugal for the 2013 IIHF Semi-Annual Congress.

President René Fasel opened the 137th IIHF Congress with a speech on 19 September. He confirmed that the IIHF World Championship will continue to be played annually and also reported on the development of the new European club competition slated to start in 2014/2015.

Fasel referred to discussions in the IIHF Council (board) in Cascais where the executive body of the IIHF agreed on principles regarding four major areas.

"We will continue to play the men's World Championship every year including Olympic years, and this especially to give the younger players an opportunity to showcase their development on an international stage."

"The tournament will continue to take place in the first week of May, with the exception of Olympic years where necessary timing adjustments will be made."

"We will continue to play with sixteen teams. Most likely in two groups of eight, but this is still subject to discussions with our commercial partner. And lastly, for sportive reasons, the quarter-final games will be played with the cross-over format."

■ Fasel also gave an update on the efforts in re-launching a European club competition, still under the working game "ECC".



Fasel: An annual World Championship helps player development.

"Together with officials from the European top clubs and leagues, a board has been founded which is now responsible for this project."

"We all believe in the potential of this project and we are positive that with all stakeholders closely involved, we will put in place a successful, competitive and financially viable league."

■ Fasel went on to report on the IOC Congress in Argentina, which he attended, and how the presidential change within the IOC may have any influence on the IIHF.

"Apart from the allocation of the 2020 Summer Olympics to Tokyo, also the new IOC President was elected," said Fasel.

"Thomas Bach, now the former President of the German Olympic Committee, will succeed Jacques Rogge as the new head of the International Olympic Committee."

"Future will show how this change will affect our sport, but I will do my best to ensure that hockey keeps the superior position it currently and duly enjoys amongst all Olympic Winter Sports."

■ Finally, the IIHF President thanked his counterparts with the NHL and the NHLPA for ensuring a best-on-best Olympics in Sochi 2014, the fifth consecutive with NHL players' participation.

"And very shortly after Sochi, we would like to sit down with our friends and partners with the league and the players' union to discuss NHL participation also in PyeongChang, Korea in 2018."

Another IIHF Council decision approved by congress involved the women's game. The women's Olympic tournament in Sochi 2014 will also be used for the purpose of determining which team will be relegated to the women's second tier, the 2015 Women's World Championship Division I, Group A.

This decision will ensure that the full women's 2014 World Championship program (six divisions, 36 teams) will take place during the Olympic year, with promotion and relegation at all levels.

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2014 WORLD GIRLS' ICE HOCKEY WEEKEND

Going global: Girls' annual weekend takes ice hockey on world expedition



Over 340 events in 31 countries were organized as part of the 2013 IIHF World Girls' Ice Hockey Weekend in October.

2013 marks the third year for the annual initiative, which continues to grow with events taking place for the first time in countries such as Georgia, Hong Kong, Poland, and Serbia.

The initiative started in 2011 to grow women's ice hockey, create awareness about the sport and help recruit players with the help of national and regional ice hockey bodies, leagues, clubs and teams. Events have taken place in many non-traditional hockey nations such as Argentina, Australia, Malaysia, Spain, and Turkey.

Prior to the start of the weekend, organizers receive suggestions from the IIHF Sport Department for a training plan where girls and women can come and try to play hockey in a fun and safe environment. Resources and contacts are also made available for participants wishing to learn more about women's hockey in their community and country and about joining a hockey school or team.

The weekend began on Saturday 12 October in Australia and Asia before the events moved over to Europe and from there to the Americas.

Activities and events held throughout the weekend were tracked by IIHF.com:

Georgia: Kutaisi

In many cities the World Girls' Ice Hockey Weekend helped form new girls' teams and increase female participation. In the tiny nation of Georgia the weekend event was the launch pad for an all-new women's program.

In the country's second-biggest city Kutaisi where ice hockey has been introduced only recently, the first female hockey players ever in the country hit the ice. Ten girls between the age of 11 and 14 years with figure skating experience took part in the program on Saturday. Although not big in quantity, the event was a remarkable premiere organized by one of the youngest IIHF members.

"The event was really fun. They really enjoyed it. I hadn't expected before that it would be so fun for the girls," the Georgian Ice Hockey Federation's General Secretary Alexander Vashakidze said.

"In Georgia like in other southern countries people are skeptic about women playing a so-called 'men's game' but these girls had a lot of fun and their parents were happy."

China: Hong Kong

Women's hockey in Hong Kong is a new phenomenon. And despite only recently forming a national team, the women are aiming high.

The World Girls' Ice Hockey Weekend held at the Mega Ice centre in Kowloon Bay is where the next crop of players is hoped to be sourced – both for the national team and the newly created women's-only league, which held its first-ever game on October 4.

"Everybody had a lot of fun," event organiser Jeremy Hutchins told IIHF.com. "It was a great platform for our women's national team, the women's league and girl's hockey in general."

Ninety girls aged from three to 60 attended the Hong Kong event, with national league players helping to coach and mentor the beginners.

One end zone was used for first time or beginner skaters, while the area in between the blue lines and other end zone were used for more experienced skaters practicing skating and puck handling.

"Having the national team players coach created a really positive and fun experience for everybody," said Hutchins.

"There were a lot of laughs and a lot of falling down for some, but everybody had a great time!"

Japan: Kushiro

This year the Japanese Ice Hockey Federation together with the Japanese Women's Ice Hockey League organized an event in the hockey hotbed of the country, the northern island of Hokkaido.

42 girls came to the event in the city of Kushiro where ice hockey was introduced to them in an enjoyable and fun way and with the help of the local women's teams. The timing was good, with the Japanese women's national team qualified for the upcoming Olympic Winter Games.

Korea: Seoul

It's five years left until the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics. Therefore Korea didn't want to miss out on the opportunity to promote women's hockey during the World Girls' Ice Hockey Weekend.

At the ice rink of the Korea University in Seoul, 30 participants came to play hockey with 13 women's national team players. The participants ranged from kids to teenagers to women who were students at the university or office workers. But they all had the same slogan: "We love hockey!"

The participants got used to the hockey equipment and the national team coaches joined and shared their hockey stories, knowledge and skills.

"I am from another city which is two hours away from Seoul. I came here to participate in the Girls' Ice Hockey Weekend. It wasn't a tough decision for me to come because I was so excited to join hockey and I am so happy now," one of the girls said.

During two hours of ice time the participants practised together with the national team and the coaches. The event was sponsored by the presidents of the two most famous men's club teams in the country, the Asia League's Anyang Halla and High1 teams.



A rink located in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia held one of the girls' weekend events.

Snapshots from around the world



About 50 girls aged between 4 and 17 years hit the ice at Vancouver's Killarney Community Centre.



Mexico held for the first time a female hockey weekend and kicked off the Mexican women's hockey league's third season.



Spain's event organized by CH Jaca also involved participation from the national team.



40 girls and women had the chance to try hockey for free in the Dallas region with skating, passing, and shooting drills.



Women's hockey is picking up steam in Russia.



With no registered female players, could Georgia's participants be the first?



The Serbian Ice Hockey Association organized a cross-ice tournament as part of the IIHF Learn to Play Program.



The Malaysia Ice Hockey Federation again hosted two events during the World Girls' Ice Hockey Weekend, both of which saw increased participation numbers.



Japanese girls learn to play ice hockey from the local women's team in Kushiro.



90 girls aged from three to 60 attended the Hong Kong event, with national league players helping out the beginners.



For many Aussie participants hockey was a totally new experience. Some were figure skaters who wanted to try something new.

players mainly from the area of Mexico City.

"The league has now five teams from four states," said Claudia Téllez, player and Operations Manager for the Mexican Ice Hockey Federation. The teams are called Agaves, Bandidas, Osos, Stars and Tigres and come from Mexico City, the State of Mexico, León and Jalisco.

"We have more players and from all around the country. We are very happy with the evolution of women's hockey both in quantity and quality," she added.

Not only the five clubs assembled for the first games but also the women's national team and the U16 selection. That's where most of the new players were recruited.

"The U16 national selection is totally new," explained Téllez. "They started training for the first time and will go to the Female Hockey Festival in Calgary next month."

"I've never seen so many little girls playing hockey in Mexico. That's nice and means hockey is growing."

Serbia: Belgrade

The first ever girls' weekend in Serbia took place at the Pingvin ice rink in Novi Beograd at the outskirts of Belgrade.

With 11 registered female ice hockey players in the country there's room to increase this number and the event with 30 participants between the age of 3 and 13 could be a

big boost.

The girls had a 90-minute on-ice session focusing on positioning, balance, skating stride, stopping, turning, stationary stick-handling and passing followed by an off-ice session. On the second day the Serbian Ice Hockey Association organized a cross-ice tournament as part of the IIHF Learn to Play Program.

"All participants were happy and had a good time. They enjoyed the fun and safe environment. Parents were satisfied with the program and club members present had positive reactions on this event. They offered their support in organizing similar events in the near future," said Nemanja Ivošević, Development Program Administrator of the Serbian Ice Hockey Association.

"We sincerely hope that the final outcome of this event will be bigger interest of girls for ice hockey that will enable us to form girls' teams in the near future. Also, we hope for even bigger interest of girls for the next event we plan to organize."

Slovakia: Zilina

One of the largest events during the World Girls' Ice Hockey Weekend was again the one in Zilina with 300 people present at the arena to open the door for new female players in the Slovak city.

First girls and women had the chance to play a game with the local women's hockey team, then in late afternoon it was time for the core part of the "Kids Day on Ice". In total 300 people were either on or off the ice during the try-hockey session that covered all the ice sheet for skating and hockey skills.

Among the star guests who helped the kids were Slovak women's national team player Jana Kapustova, who plays for Europe's strongest club team Tornado Moscow Region, and 15 players from the local men's professional team MSHK Zilina who came back to the ice after their league game earlier that day.

Spain: Jaca

"Hockey hieló para chicas" was the slogan in Jaca during the weekend at the ice rink Pabellón de Hielo.

40 female players came to the event organized by CH Jaca divided into the age groups 5-14, 15-30 and 30-40.

On Saturday there was a promotional event for women's hockey and a camp of the women's national team before a game of the men's league between Jaca and Majadahonda in the night.

On Sunday during the promotional event girls and women new to hockey had again the chance to hit the ice after a practice of the women's national team.

"The participants were very happy," said Karlos Gordovil of the Spanish Ice Sports Federation. "They are interested in participating ice hockey in the future. The parents of the youngest girls were very interested in the continuation of this event."

"Events like this contribute to the continuous promotion of women's ice hockey in Spain," Gordovil said. "In addition, it helps to increase the Spanish clubs' motivation to introduce women's ice hockey within their activities."



2014 IIHF WORLD JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIP PREVIEW

Staying on top: Sweden banks on young talent

Turnaround of country's development program puts Tre Kronor on strong foundation

2014



WORLD JUNIOR
CHAMPIONSHIP
SWEDEN
Malmö

By Risto Pakarinen

■ ■ When Sweden's under-20 team was forced to play in the relegation round in the World Juniors in Halifax in 2003, the rest of the world may have been slightly surprised, but not the Swedes.

Just a few months prior to the tournament, Tommy Boustedt, then a newly-appointed director of development at the Swedish hockey federation, had put out the Bat-Signal, and gathered over a hundred hockey people - coaches, scouts, agents, managers - to Bosön in Stockholm to discuss the grave situation of player development in the country.

Flash forward to the present. Sweden has played in three World Juniors finals within four years, and won the title in 2012. Sweden produces more NHL players than any other European nation. Last season over 60 Swedes played in the NHL. About the same number are competing in the league this year, while another 30 are in the AHL trying to break into the league.

"You have to give credit to the federation for taking the initiative and making it a priority. The real work is then done at the clubs, of course, not in an office in Stockholm," says Gunnar Svensson, one of the participants at the Bosön meeting over ten years ago, and father of Magnus Pääjärvi-Svensson, who won two silver medals in the World Juniors and now plays with the St. Louis Blues in the NHL.

"Also, Torgny Bendelin was a big part of the process. He took over the under-20 team after the Bosön meeting, and was the head coach for the next four years, while also traveling across the country as a hockey evangelist. Pär Mårts took over the team from him," he adds.

These days, it's hard for any rough diamond to slip through the cracks unnoticed. Every year, over 800 under-15 and under-16 players - 400 in each age group - attend development camps across the nation. All in all, about 2,000 players attend the Swedish development camps in all age groups, both boys and girls. Every year, the following season under-17 and under-18 national team hopeful get invited to a summer camp where the focus is on off-season tests, individual skills, and nutrition.

"The federation invested money and other resources in the program, and they had good partnerships with sponsors and the Swedish Olympic Committee," says Svensson.

The coaching material has been updated, each district has its advisor to help and support the coaches and players in their region, and there are programs to improve the recruitment of new players.

■ Another important aspect was the willingness to look elsewhere for inspiration and advice. In 2004, Erkkä Westlund voiced concern over the future of Finnish hockey because "in the 1990s, you never saw any Swedes in the coaching seminars, and now, you don't see any Finns."

"One of the things Sweden did was to look for other countries, and admit that we didn't have



Sweden's efforts at the junior level have led to a haul of one gold medal and three silvers at the U20 and U18 World Championships in the last three seasons. Will Tre Kronor add more hardware on home ice?

all the answers. We've also had more exchange with North American hockey," says Svensson.

"The NHL has become a good carrot for us when trying to recruit people to our programs and keep them there," Boustedt told NHL.com in 2011.

"The NHL is something to aim for. The only problem today is that some of the kids go to the NHL too early; they aren't NHL-ready. The NHL is not a development league; it's a league to perform," he added.

■ But with NHL dreams in their heads, the kids attending the summer camps are in a hurry. And so are the agents wanting to represent them. According to the rules, agents can't approach the players until January 1 of the year they turn 16.

"On January 1, and a few days after that, the kids in the under-16 national team and the ones who have impressed

in the TV-pucken [an annual tournament among district teams] are contacted by most of the 38 licensed agents in Sweden," says Svensson, one of those licensed agents.

Svensson represents, for example, Nicklas Bäckström and Henrik Zetterberg, two Swedish NHL stars.

"Do the kids need agents? No. A kid playing in Leksand, going to a hockey high school there doesn't need an agent for contract negotiations. Maybe it'd be good to have somebody as a mentor, as an advisor to help him navigate his career the right way ... whatever that is."

Svensson does know what the wrong way is.

"Unfortunately, sometimes the agent calls up the coach or the GM about his client not getting any powerplay time. That's when he's just being a poor hockey dad. Sometimes you see a kid go from one team to another in the middle of the season, and when that carousel starts, the end is hardly ever a good one," he says.

■ The Swedish federation recently announced a savings program of over half a million Euros annually for the next five years. Half of that will come out of the national team and development programs.

Coming through the pipeline

Top Swedish prospects to watch for in Malmö

■ ■ It has been more than a few years since Mats Sundin became the first (and so far only) Swedish native to be selected No. 1 overall in the National Hockey League Draft.

But since then, Sweden has grown to become the top producer of European NHL talent, with names like Peter Forsberg, Markus Naslund, Daniel and Henrik Sedin, Nicklas Backström, and Erik Karlsson going from the first round of the draft to becoming NHL All-Stars.

Here's a look at players taken in the top two rounds of the 2012 and 2013 NHL Draft, who could make an impact on the ice at the World Juniors in Malmö.

André Burakowsky: Drafted 23rd overall by the Washington Capitals in 2013, Burakowsky's ties to the city of Malmö run deep. Son of former NHLer and Malmö native Robert Burakowsky, André's professional career began when he suited up for the Malmö Redhawks in 2011-2012, playing for the first time in Sweden's Allsvenskan at just 16 years old.

He has represented Sweden twice at the U18 level, winning silver at the 2012 IIHF U18 World Championship in the Czech Republic and finishing in fifth place at the U18s in Sochi last year. He was left off Sweden's World Junior team last year, and will be hoping to make his mark at the U20 level on home ice.

Sebastian Collberg: Since winning silver at the 2011 Ivan Hlinka tournament, Collberg has been a steady producer on the international circuit for Sweden. Drafted by the Montreal Canadiens in 2012, Collberg has potted four goals in all three IIHF tournaments he has played in, most recently the 2013 World Junior Championship in Ufa where he recorded six points in six games. Him and Burakowsky combined for nine points in seven games during the World Juniors summer camp held last August in Lake Placid, USA. The Mariestad native was on a tear at the tournament, registering four points in two games before going out with an injury.

Elias Lindholm: Considered to be among the more NHL-ready players of the 2013 Draft, where he was selected 5th overall by the Carolina Hurricanes. Skating for Brynäs last season, Lindholm led all junior players in the Elitserien with 30 points, scoring 11 goals with 19 assists in 48 games. He made Carolina's opening day roster this year, scoring a goal in his fourth NHL game. At the international level, Lindholm has won silver twice at the U18 level (Czech Republic 2012) and the U20 (Ufa 2013).

Hampus Lindholm: Chosen sixth overall in 2012 by the Anaheim Ducks, Hampus Lindholm (no relation to Elias) played last season with the AHL's Norfolk Admirals but has joined the Ducks for the start of this season. He had four goals in six games to go with a silver medal at the 2012 U18 World Championship, but missed out on the 2013 U20 World Championship with a concussion. Time will tell if he will participate in the 2014 World Juniors, having carved out a role for himself playing on Anaheim's top defensive line with NHL veteran François Beauchemin.

Filip Forsberg: In the final rankings done by NHL Central Scouting, Forsberg was the highest rated European forward available in the 2012 NHL Entry Draft, where he was selected 11th overall in the 2012 NHL Entry Draft by the Washington Capitals. He was later traded to the Nashville Predators and made his NHL debut late last season. Forsberg has been a regular with team Sweden since a breakout performance at the 2011 Ivan Hlinka tournament.

Forsberg captained Sweden to a silver medal in the 2012 World U18 Junior Championship, registering five goals and two assists in six games while being named the tournament's best forward.



Burakowski



Collberg



E. Lindholm



H. Lindholm



Forsberg

Photo: Andre Ringuette / HHOF-IIHF Images





The World Juniors in Malmö could likely draw many fans from not only Sweden but Denmark as well. The Öresund Bridge (above, centre) connects Malmö to the Danish capital Copenhagen.

By Risto Pakarinen

■ **Gunnar Svensson has done it all in hockey. Before becoming an agent in 1996, he was a player, coach, and a general manager. He became the GM of Malmö in 1995, and still calls the host city of the 2014 IIHF World Junior Championship his home.**

Malmö's hockey past is a chequered one, with the local team going up and down in the divisions, often with creative financial planning in the background. Latest version of that was having their import players live in Copenhagen, only a bridge away from Malmö, so they would get preferential tax treatment.

Also, the local soccer team, Malmö FF, has won seventeen league championships and fourteen cup titles in its 103-year history, and can also boast with being the alma mater of Zlatan Ibrahimovic, one of the best football players in the world today.

But, Svensson says, Malmö is a hockey town, too.

"You hear often people say that there's no hockey culture in Malmö, but that's not really true. The local team played in the highest league already in the late 1950s," he says.

Back then, called Division I, the Swedish highest league had two groups of eight, and they played a home-and-away

round robin. Malmö FF, still under the same umbrella with the soccer team, won just one of its 14 games, finished last in the Southern group and was relegated to Division II after the season.

Malmö was back in the top division in 1964-66, but was relegated again, and by the time it made it back to the top division, it had become "Elitserien", and it was 1990.

"Things turned around when (building tycoon) Percy Nilsson took over. They won the title in 1992, and in 1994," says Svensson.

■ These days, Malmö is back in the second division, trying to fight its way back to the top. Meanwhile, the league has changed its name again, now to Swedish Hockey League.

"You can't talk your way up, you have to play your way up," says Svensson.

And the team is trying to play their way up to the SHL in one of the nicest arenas in Europe. Malmö Arena, also one of the venues during the 2014 World Juniors, with a capacity of 12,500 spectators, opened in 2008.

"It's one of the best arenas in Europe, with the arenas in Berlin, Cologne, and Helsinki. They've also renovated the old rink in which Canada and the U.S. will play their preliminary round games, and its capacity is now 5000," says Svensson.

■ Malmö is one of the three big cities in Sweden, together with Stockholm and Gothenburg. Even though it's smaller than the other two, with a population of about 300 000 - behind Gothenburg's 900 000 and Stockholm's 1,4 million - it's the hub of Scania, the southern-most region of Sweden.

"I think about 25 percent of Sweden's population lives in Scania, and Copenhagen is just 20 kilometres away from here thanks to the Öresund bridge, and there's another 1,5 million people there," Svensson says.

Hockey in Sweden has been a tough sell for the Danes, though.

"They have tried to get the Danes to come over, but with little success. Their local teams have small, but loyal attendances. The ones who come, want to mostly see the arena," says Svensson.

And yet, Svensson believes the World Juniors has all the makings of a success.

"You can already tell that there will be a World Juniors tournament in town, they advertise it around the city. If Sweden makes it to the semi-final, well, they might pack the arena," he says.



Croatian sensation

Medvescak Zagreb brings exotic flair to KHL – and wins

By Andy Potts

■ **Medvescak Zagreb entered the KHL as rank outsiders – but two months into its debut season the team has already established itself as a formidable opponent, especially on home ice.**

With a hastily assembled roster and a strong North American influence, the team from the Croatian capital has placed itself among the leaders in the Western Conference, offering a serious test for established forces such as SKA St. Petersburg and the Moscow clubs CSKA and Dynamo.

If pre-season ambitions were to secure a play-off place, sights are now being raised as the Bears start to believe that they can make a run into the KHL post-season, having now made a hugely successful transition from the Austrian league.

Admittedly, it hasn't all been smooth sailing. The opening night – a 7-1 win home win over CSKA – was almost too good to be true: seven successive defeats followed as the team grappled with enhanced expectations and the nuances of KHL refereeing.



Wins in Moscow and St. Petersburg have put Zagreb on the KHL map.

But then it all started to come right, as seven defeats followed by eight wins. Ilya Kovalchuk's SKA was dispatched in a shoot-out win – Kovi himself missing a crucial shot in the decider – in front of a delirious home crowd. Eastern Conference high-flyer Barys Astana also fell in Zagreb, and goalie Barry Brust put up three successive shut-outs along the way as the team climbed into the top four, leaving some high-profile rivals in its wake.

■ It all adds up to something of a roller-coaster start to life in the KHL, but that's something that head coach Mark French – himself a newcomer to European hockey after working with the Hershey Bears and lifting the Calder Cup – wouldn't have changed.

"The CSKA game was a great win and a great start for us. I wouldn't give that back for a second – it was such a special night.

"But oftentimes when you're getting points or not getting points there's not much difference in your play. We're still getting more comfortable with each other, we've got a lot of new players, new coaching staff and new systems. We're still learning how to win as a group. Sometimes it turns out that in adversity you learn more."

Learning has been the Medvescak mantra throughout the season to date. After losing out agonizingly in Moscow when Dynamo grabbed a controversial winner with four seconds to go in the game, French rose above the anger of some of his players to take a more cautious view.

"Nobody likes to let go of the lead in the way we just lost it, but we're going to analyze the reasons why that happened and work on it."

The learning curve has been all the steeper for a roster where just three players – Charles Linglet, Ryan Vesce and Matt Murley – arrived with previous KHL experience. Few of this season's line-up had previously been at the club as well, so long-serving captain Alan Letang and his team-mates had to do their homework from day one.

"It's been a huge step. Just getting to know players on the other teams and their systems before we play them is a big challenge," said Letang, a Canadian with Croatian roots who has spent four previous seasons with Medvescak. "In the Austrian league I knew which players I needed to focus on. Here we're all relying on the coaching staff, who are doing an incredible job preparing us. The guys who've played in this championship also have a lot of good information."

■ An entirely new set-up inevitably led to struggles at first, but two months into the campaign those early glitches are becoming a rarity.

"[Our game] is starting to come on instinct now, without having to think and react," Letang added. "Thinking for



Enthusiastic hockey fans in the famed "Sektor B" make the Croat capital of Zagreb a tough venue for opposing teams.

an extra second is a lot in this league. We knew it would take time with the new guys but we're getting there. It's nice to be winning games."

With capacity crowds lending vocal support to home games at the club's lively Dom Sportova arena, there's already a real sense that Medvescak is proving a valuable addition to the KHL – both on and off the ice.

Conquering the East

■ **Medvescak isn't the KHL's only newcomer this season. Way out East, Admiral Vladivostok has set sail on its maiden voyage. The club was formed from scratch over the summer with head coach**

Hannu Jortikka benefiting from a special KHL-wide expansion draft to form the basis of his roster.

That roster, with former Metallurg Magnitogorsk man Enver Lisin leading the team in points, has been augmented by some astute imports. German international Felix Schütz has caught the eye on offence this season, while October saw the arrival of the aptly-named Stanley Cup winning D-man Mike Commodore.

■ Off the ice, meanwhile, the Vladivostok authorities – and in particular political representatives of the Primorye Region, including one Vyacheslav Fetisov – have provided concrete backing for the new team. A 5,500-seat arena, named after Fetisov, sprung up on the edge of the Pacific port over the summer, and city hall is now talking about building a light rail link to connect it more easily to downtown.



The team is bolstered with import players like USA's Bill Thomas.

Even without that, though, attendance has been good, and results have also been encouraging. An opening shoot-out win at Amur Khabarovsk, the Far East's other hockey representative, set the tone: Admiral is a hard-working, competitive team, reminiscent of the Amur roster which Jortikka took to the play-offs two seasons back. And, as a 3-1 win in St. Petersburg showed, it can pull off an eye-catching result as well.



No shortcuts for Kekäläinen

First European NHL GM will also be in Sochi

By Risto Pakarinen

■ Eight months ago, history was truly made in the NHL. Only, it wasn't a scoring record, or a new champion, but instead, an off-ice move in which the Columbus Blue Jackets made Jarmo Kekäläinen the first European GM in the league's history.

At the time, Kekäläinen was in the third year of his five-year contract as the GM of Jokerit Helsinki in the Finnish league, back on home turf after over a decade of traveling around Europe scouting for the Ottawa Senators and the St. Louis Blues.

"My dream has always been to become a GM in the NHL, and I never gave up that dream when I moved back to Finland to become the GM of Jokerit," Kekäläinen told Ice Times.

A teen star, Kekäläinen made his men's league debut at 17, a Finnish league debut at 19, and played at the World Juniors for Finland. Determined to get to the NHL, he went to Clarkson University - where he studied business - and played well, making the Eastern College Athletic Conference first all-star team, before signing an NHL contract with the Boston Bruins.

In the fall of 1991, the speedy winger found himself on the Finnish national team roster in the Canada Cup - even though he played the following season back in KalPa Kuopio, his alma mater. He got another stab at the NHL, and played 28 games with the Ottawa Senators in 1993/1994 before injuries forced him to retire after one last season in Sweden in 1995. He was 28 years old.

It was time to put the business degrees - bachelor's from Clarkson, master's from Tampere, Finland - to work. After a year as a player agent, Kekäläinen was hired as the GM of Helsinki IFK, while also scouting for the Senators. In his first year, HIFK missed the playoffs, the second year they won the Finnish title, and in his third year, they lost the final to TPS Turku.

■ In the next ten years, Kekäläinen made a name for himself as a super-scout in both Ottawa and later in St. Louis. Last winter, John Davidson, the President of Hockey Operations in Columbus, said in an interview that "Jarmo saved our bacon" in St. Louis.

While he was a good scout, and a respected one, there was an itch that Kekäläinen had to scratch. He wanted to be a part of a team. Also, when he was passed over when the Blues shuffled their executive chairs, the decision to go back to Helsinki became all the more easier.

"The biggest reason for me to take the job as Jokerit GM was that I wanted to build a team again. I missed that part of the job, and I figured that if I didn't make that break now, I'd be scouting for the rest of my life," he says. "It didn't matter that I had a good reputation as a scout, I just wasn't ready to make that my life's work. I have a good education, and have been a GM in Helsinki which is a great hockey town, and I knew that being a GM was the closest thing to my heart, after playing the game," he adds.

Early 2013, the stars aligned just right. His former boss, John Davidson, had been named President of Hockey Operations in Columbus a few months earlier - and when he removed Scott Howson from the GM's chair, he turned to a familiar face. Now Kekäläinen is finally doing the thing he loves the most, building a championship NHL team in Ohio.

"I'm sure my reputation as a scout helped me. I don't think



Kekäläinen became the Blue Jackets' GM last February.

anything I did in the Finnish league mattered as much as what I showed in my work with the Senators and the Blues. And of course, John Davidson knew me well," he says.

■ Kekäläinen has lived over 15 years, most of his adult life, in North America. He knows everybody who's anybody - one of his best friends is the Pittsburgh Penguins GM Ray Shero, Kekäläinen's former agent, and as assistant GM of the Senators, the man who hired him to Ottawa - and having patrolled the rinks of the world for years, he had paid his dues.

One of the advantages of his scouting career is that he's now seen an entire player generation from their draft year to their retirement.

"My first year, I was scouting players born in 1977," he says.

That class includes players like the Bruins Zdeno Chara, and the Lightning's Finnish defenceman Sami Salo, whom Ottawa drafted in the ninth round, as the third last player of the draft. The oldest player on the Blue Jackets right now, is Derek MacKenzie, born in 1981.

"I have watched most of the current players since they were drafted, except the 2011 and 2012 draft years, when I only followed players coming out of Finland. Players like Teuvo Teräväinen," he says. "Of course the players have matured as players and as people, but at least I have some knowledge of their fundamental character traits," says Kekäläinen.

■ Signing players and putting a team together is only a small slice of a GM's job description, he says. A GM is also the coach's boss, and a sounding board, and besides signing players, he builds the entire organization around them, from the trainers, to equipment managers, to scouts.

"That's the part of being a manager that I enjoy. There are surprises in this job every day, things happen. I talk to people to see how things are, and how the team is moving along. Sometimes the coach needs someone to talk to. I won't interfere with the coach's job, but I'll give him my opinion," he says.

Last year, when Kekäläinen took over as the GM, the Blue Jackets had won just five of their 19 games. Most people expected him to step in, fire the coach, trade some players, and start building a new team for next season. Instead, Kekäläinen

en stepped in, and said he wanted to get to know people.

"I didn't know much about Todd Richards when I got here, but when I did learn to know him, I found him to be hard-working and organized, a good coach. I think his reputation made a 180-degree turn last season," Kekäläinen says.

The Blue Jackets responded, goaltender Sergei Bobrovski got hot, and the team won 19 of their last 29 games, and were left without a point just five times the rest of the season. They were tied in points with Minnesota Wild, and ended up missing the playoffs because they had two fewer wins.

"That's the beauty of a team sport. I can't explain it, and I don't think anybody can. How could the Bruins sweep the Penguins in the playoffs? How could Ässät Pori, last in the standing in January, win the Finnish championship in April?

"When the players believe in each other, and work together, that's what makes this so great. The power of a team working together is beautiful. Somebody who runs a 2:15 marathon can't beat a 2:06 runner, but a team of good players can do wonders," says Kekäläinen - who ran a 2:58 marathon in Boston a few years ago.

■ One European GM can't tear down all the walls, and Kekäläinen doesn't want to be a flag-bearer for all European hockey people everywhere.

Then again, Kekäläinen naturally draws from the talent pool he knows, and many of his hires are people he's known for a long time. Bill Zito was Kekäläinen's partner in the agent business, and now an assistant GM at the Blue Jackets. Ville Sirén, a Kekäläinen hire in St. Louis in 2003, left the Blues to become the Blue Jackets director of scouting. Basil McRae, a former Blues scout had a three-week stint as Jokerit assistant coach and is now scouting for the Blue Jackets. Another new scout, Bob Halkidis, played on the 1998 HIFK team that won the Finnish championship.

"I'm proud to be the first European GM, and I hope it'll open doors to other great people out there, but it won't help me in my work. The best way for me to have a long career here is to build a winning team, and once we have a team that's continually challenging for a championship, then maybe I have enough influence to help others, but right now, I'll just focus on the Blue Jackets," says Kekäläinen, who was named Assistant GM of the Finnish national team at the Olympics on Monday.

"Being involved in the Olympics is anyone's dream in ice hockey. I didn't have to think much about my answer when Erkka [Westerlund] called me," Kekäläinen says.

But for now Kekäläinen's focus is on the Blue Jackets. Getting close last year has made Columbus fans hungry for more. Right now, Kekäläinen says, Columbus is a great sports town, but he'd like to make it a hockey town.

"There's a lot of potential, but the popularity of the Buckeyes in college football and basketball is gigantic. The way to get people interested in hockey is the same here as anywhere else. You have to win," he says.

"There are no shortcuts," he adds.

And even if there were, he probably wouldn't take it. It wouldn't be as much fun.



Antarctic hockey dreams

Enthusiasts build program in southern Chile

By Martin Merk

■ Following Argentina and Brazil, Chile became the third IIHF member from South America in 2000. In a country where mostly inline hockey is played, ice hockey is taking off far to the south at the Magellan Strait just above Antarctica.

The country has yet to appear in an IIHF ice hockey event. From 2000 until 2002 Chile competed in the IIHF Inline Hockey World Championship but after a traffic accident involving the national team it has never attempted to qualify for the event.

Although there are recreational ice rinks in the Chilean capital of Santiago there hasn't been organized ice hockey there. However, if you go further south - much further - you will get a different picture.

Punta Arenas is the capital of Chile's southernmost region, Magellan and Chilean Antarctica. The region is an important point to reach Antarctica. 130,000 people live in the city founded in 1848.

Its geographical situation with maritime trade, gold, sheep farming and later oil made the city prosper and attracted settlers mainly of Spanish but also of Croat origin.

The rough climate makes the region perfect for winter sports. Many ski and snowboard enthusiasts from the northern hemisphere travel to the southern part of Chile and Argentina between June and August when it's cold there.

Now ice hockey is on the map too since the city got its new ice rink.

"Ice hockey didn't use to

be popular in our region or in Chile but I started to play when I was a child on a frozen lake," says Alejandro Traba, one of the hockey enthusiasts from the Magellan Strait.

Later he also played inline hockey but his love was playing on the ice surface and he even moved to the United States to improve his skill and chase the dream of playing hockey for a living. He played for the Jack Rocks in Oakland, California, where he was inspired by former NHLer André Lacroix, but returned to his native country after three years.

"When I returned I was thinking of my friends who played with me when we were children," he remembers. "I started the project to play hockey at the ice rink in a mall and to offer the youth possibilities I unfortunately never had."

He convinced the rink management after some time that hockey is a good fit for the rink that's 40 metres long and

15 metres wide after increasing the boards. It opened in 2010 in the duty-free zone Zona Franca and since last year hockey is played there.

Last July with ideal winter temperatures in the area an international invitational tournament was played. It was won by the Ghetto Blasters with North American and German players that competed with Los Nordicos, the local team Traba plays for, and the Club Andino Ushuaia from Argentina.

"Punta Arenas is the first city in Chile to have ice hockey and it has become popular here," said Traba. After the news spread through the internet and newspaper some inline hockey players also tried it out at the rinks in Santiago, he said.

The distances in the long-stretched country are big. In the north of the country you can find deserts and just outside of Punta Arenas penguins.



The Chilean hockey players of Los Nordicos pose for a team photo at the tournament in Ushuaia, Argentina.

Due to the topography there's no surface connection between the southern part of Chile and the rest of the country. The only roads from the region go to Argentina. Via the neighbouring country it's possible to get to the capital of Santiago if you don't mind driving 3,400 kilometres - twice the way than to the coast of Antarctica. By plane it takes three-and-a-half hours at costs of \$400 for a return ticket - a rather high price for most Chileans.

Still, Traba hopes that next winter players from Santiago will join for a tournament now as word has begun to spread.

"During the tournament we attracted 800 people to our hockey games, setting a record for the rink," the 42-year-old said.

His team Los Nordicos got a local rival with the Killer Pucks. And as more players try to play the sport a third team might be formed. Traba has big dreams after the promising start. One is an

international-size ice rink that could be built in collaboration with the municipality and the region. That would make Punta Arenas a hockey and ice sport centre for the country.

"Our goal is to give young people the opportunity to be part of this sport so that a new generation can form professional players and a team at the Olympics," he said.

But Traba is not just looking within the borders of Chile or the Magellan region. The closest ally in this southern part of South America is the hockey community in Ushuaia on the Argentine part of the Tierra del Fuego island. It's a half-day journey by car and ferry to the other side of the Magellan Strait or a bit less if there's a flight connection.

Ushuaia is even further south and usually regarded as the world's southernmost city. Also here people used to play on frozen lakes but in 2010 an international-size outdoor rink opened.

In July the annual invitational tournament Copa Fin del Mundo ("End of the World Cup") was staged at the rink for the ninth time. Five competitions were played - one for men, one for women and three junior categories.

In the eight-team men's tournament there was also a team from Brazil and for the first time one from Chile, Los Nordicos, which finished in sixth place.

"It was an extreme experience in every way," Traba said. "The hockey rink is outdoors, and rough weather and the constant snow can interrupt practices and games."

But his team enjoyed the experience of playing on an international-size rink in the region. And he knows the next step to take after introducing ice hockey in Punta Arenas will be to create more formal structures and a league.

"One idea is to also include teams from Ushuaia and make a cross-border ice hockey league that links the two cities," Traba said.

After so many years of struggle in playing the sport he loves, Traba is living his dream by introducing ice hockey in his hometown and hopes that many more steps will follow for Chilean ice hockey.



Asterix's revolt: Tiny Ambri finds magic potion, surprises in Swiss league

By Martin Merk

It's getting colder and colder in the Leventina valley. Most people in Switzerland and the rest of Europe pass through this region thanks to the 16-kilometre Gotthard tunnel that links the German-speaking part of Switzerland with the Italian-speaking region of Ticino.

For most people it's just an alpine transit route that links northern with southern Europe. Once leaving the tunnel by highway or train, few people notice the tiny villages of Ambri and Piotta on the east side. Maybe some do, in the nights when the biggest building shines from the dark hillside. The landmark building is not a church, it's an old ice hockey rink.

Soon the sun will be hidden behind the steep hillsides for two months. That's where the village has its name from, the legend says. From *ombra* (shadow).

Despite the creeping cold, fans' hearts have warmed up at the Valascia rink as Ambri's players of the team made a sharp turn from losers to heroes. Prior to 2013 the club missed the playoffs for seven straight years and had to battle for its place in the league in many relegation-rounds. But on 1st November, after a 4-3 victory in shootout against SC Bern, the club claimed first place in the National League A – for the first time in nine years.

Only a few times in the past did the club have as much success. In 1999 and 2000 it won two IIHF Continental Cup titles with victories over teams like Avangard Omsk, Ak Bars Kazan and against Metallurg Magnitogorsk in the European Super Cup. It called itself Europe's best team but has actually never won the Swiss championship.

In the 1998/1999 season Ambri came closest to the Swiss trophy by winning the regular season but it lost the final series to rivals HC Lugano of all clubs. The regional derby between these clubs is the most heated clash in Swiss hockey and mirrors a kind of class struggle. On one side the "farmers, mountaineers and leftists" from northern Ticino, on the other side the "townies, millionaires and bourgeoisie" from southern Ticino where palm trees adorn the lake shore and the team has had much more success thanks to decades-long backing of a billionaire.

Until the '90s Ambri stayed with its leftist image and looked to the east for import players. Oleg Petrov, Pyotr Malkov and for a short period even Valeri Kamenski were some of the biggest stars, but this changed later with ice hockey becoming more international.

This leftist image is symbolized with flags carrying portraits of South American revolutionary Che Guevara and Apache leader Geronimo but also fundraising campaigns of the fans not just for the club when it's close to bankruptcy every few years but also for the poor in the world. The unusual portraits haven't scared off players like Richard Park, a former American NHL forward of Korean descent who is currently one of the most recognizable international players in the Leventina valley.

5,846 fans have attended the games on average this season, more than ten times the number of inhabitants in the village and the biggest number in 20 years.

They celebrate homegrown heroes like captain Paolo Duca or Inti Pestoni who are the heart and soul of the

club. But the team is quick to embrace players from further away, often it's players who had minor roles with big clubs or players discovered in the B-league hoping for a breakthrough that find a home with the team.

In Ambri they get the chance to shine and sometimes they do – this season more often than the years before. Quebecer Alexandre Giroux is the team's scoring leader followed by Daniel Steiner, a gifted forward who has been at the verge of making the national team for ten years but has yet to play his first IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship. He uses his chance to convince hockey people of his offensive talent as do players like Alain Miéville, Marc Reichert and other players whose names might be unheard of outside of the country.

The hopes are high for the playoffs, as offensive-minded blueliner Maxime Noreau and forward Jason Williams have mostly been injured during the great start of the season and could give their team a boost later on.

The club is also in the fortunate situation that it has two goalies in great shape with Swiss-Canadian Nolan Schaefer and Sandro Zurkirchen, who joined during the off-season. Schaefer leads all starting goalkeepers with a 95.1% save percentage, while Zurkirchen is not far behind with 93.9%.

The builder of the recent success is Serge Pelletier. The Montreal-born coach masters Italian and has acquired Swiss citizenship after many years in the country. He coached Ambri for three years making the playoffs every time but was replaced in 2005 because the club wanted more.



Like Asterix's village, Ambri is withstanding the hockey powerhouses.

Ambri has never reached the top-8 again since. Leventina became a valley of frustration for many years and the club chaired by Ticino's most famous politician turned back to Pelletier. Since returning in 2012 is the technical competence centre being also the sports director at the same time. As a coach he released the team from its tactical corset and focuses on individual skills. After all, there's no money around in one of the least prosperous regions of this well-off country to buy every player the coach would wish to have on his team.

Ambri is only one of two clubs in the 12-team league coming from the alpine regions where Swiss hockey history once started. Several clubs have gone while clubs in the big cities have become stronger. Multiple-champion Arosa left the league at the end of the '80s to be replaced



The fanbase of HC Ambri-Piotta is one of the most dedicated and passionate to be found across Europe, with supporter clubs dotted all over the continent.

by SC Bern, now the best attended club in Europe. Another club from that canton, Chur, was replaced by Geneva-Servette about a decade ago and last spring Langnau – where the famous Emmentaler cheese with its holes comes from – was relegated and replaced by Lausanne.

HC Davos is the only other mountain club. But Davos is a well-off resort town with a bigger population. In Ambri there are no five-star spa resorts, just a simple *albergo*, or guest house. There are no boutiques for the players' wives, just a small grocery store and four restaurants.

The railway station was once shut down and the waiting room rebuilt to serve as the club's office. After 15 years without a regular train stopping at the station the club managed to convince the Swiss railways to make regional trains stop there before and after the games. After all, HC Ambri-Piotta is not only kind of a cultural treasure in Swiss hockey but also the biggest employer of the district.

There's not much Ambri has to lure players to sign with the club and fans to freeze at the old rink. Only sympathy. But that's something the club has to a high extent.

Whoever comes to the Valascia rink wants to see honest hockey and hard-fighting players with no fanciness needed. Like in the old days when Ambri players were farmers, butchers, lumberjacks or herders.

That has of course changed although fans of archrival Lugano like to remind their counterparts of their rurality by calling them *contadini* – farmers.

At Valascia there are few super stars. The only thing that counts is hard team work. And sometimes like these days the club shows that hockey is a team sport and success

can't be bought. That's what makes the players, the club and its fans proud – when the team succeeds against all odds while rich clubs such as Bern, Lugano or Zug struggle heavily.

It's moments like the recent 1-0 victory over Lugano or the shootout win over Bern that makes it special to be a supporter of the club that sometimes seems to be the biggest underdog of all professional hockey leagues one could imagine. And Ambri has many supporters with fan clubs also outside of Ticino and many fans travelling to the cult site from the German-speaking part of the country.

The fans appreciate the team and what the players do for the region that has no other figurehead than its hockey club. They infect the team with their passion although it can be burdensome when the performance is amiss. Case in point: once the current coach's predecessor saw a suitcase with his name written all over it being thrown onto the ice shortly before he was eventually released. And that's one of the wittier stories during the yesteryears of frustration.

But that's *tempi passati*. During the last derby against Lugano, Ambri fans had one of their great choreographies depicting the Swiss map with a small Gaul village and two fans in Asterix and Obelix costumes climbing at the plexi glass of the Curva Sud, the standing-room area of the passionate die-hard supporters.

It depicts an often-used anecdote about the club being compared with the Asterix comic where the last Gaul village successfully withstands the conquest of Caesar's mighty Roman Empire thanks to its brave people and a secret, magic potion that makes them invincibly strong. Whatever this potion is, Pelletier seems to be the druid who has found it.

However, not too long time ago during the years of struggle many people asked whether the end of HC Ambri-Piotta was approaching.

Hockey has changed in Switzerland. The times when players were amateurs chasing the puck after calling it a day in their regular profession have long been gone. Salaries have risen in the last 20 years. Many clubs managed to increase sponsoring money and to build new arenas or refurbish old ones to find new sources of income.

In Ambri, however, the clock seems to have stood still. Going to an Ambri match is like a journey through time to watch hockey in an old-school arena that's partly open and hasn't changed much since getting a roof in 1979.

The Valascia ice rink has as much cult status in Switzerland as the club. Here fans don't have to fear that their beer will become warm – rather that the hot dog will be cold before it's eaten. *Marroni*, roasted chestnuts, are anyway the more local specialty that helps keeping hands heated for a while.



Ambri's Inti Pestoni is one of the local players still with the team.

Extending the Valascia rink at the current location hasn't been approved by the regional authorities due to the danger of avalanches at the hillside where it is currently perched. Therefore the club and the community plan a new arena not far away at a hangar of Ambri's disused military airfield that serves as a parking lot on game days. Because the club will move away from the avalanche-endangered area it will be eligible for federal funds for such projects. The club has until 2018 for a new, more contemporary project. After that the league will not license clubs with old infrastructure.

The club welcomes the pressure and even voted for the regulations because it's hard to generate money in a 500-soul village with harsh winter conditions being omnipresent in an arena with little amenities for sponsors. Expenditures of roughly €10 million need to be covered somehow, preferably without regular fundraising or capital increase campaigns to cover losses.

In this aspect Ambri is like the bumblebee that doesn't look like it's supposed to fly – but currently it's flying high and resists any logic. The mere existence of this club in the top Swiss league is a miracle both sport and business-wise. It can be compared to seeing Slovenia at the Olympics in Sochi despite having just 148 senior players and only one professional club team.

Both cases show that sometimes miracles happen and hard work and enthusiasm can pay off – especially in a sport that's more of a team sport than many others.

After losing in Kloten the day after climbing to first place, Ambri fell down to second place before the November international break. But even this placing is much better than its own fans might have expected, and it's six positions better than archrival Lugano's placing.

In ten home games Ambri had seven wins. That's when *La Montanara*, the Song of the Mountains, can be heard at the end of the game. There are few moments in hockey worldwide that are more goosebump-causing than hearing what has become Ambri's winning anthem soulfully sung out by thousands of fans at Valascia. And this season one can hear it more often. If the players' or spectators' blood runs cold in these moments it's definitely not just because of the temperatures.

Now Ambri sympathizers all around the country hope that the great start of the season will bear fruits when it comes to making the playoffs and succeeding in the post-season like in the good old days.

"Il Ticino e biancoblu!" the Ambri fans chant. For once they're right. This season white and blue are the colours in Ticino hockey and few people in Switzerland bear a grudge against the unique mountain club for its recent success.



Fact file: HC Ambri-Piotta

- Founded 19 September, 1937
- Also known as "Biancoblu" (English: white and blues)
- More than 40 fan clubs all over Europe
- Represents the villages of Ambri and Piotta, located in the Quinto municipality of Ticino, Switzerland.
- Approximate population of both towns combined is 500.
- La Valascia rink (pictured) was built in 1954, later renovations added a roof, although one side of the arena remains open to the elements.
- Club has not yet won a championship, but has not been relegated to National League B since earning promotion in 1985.



Crossing the pond: NHL-Europe transfers

Numbers steady through three years, Sweden top talent producer

The number of European players signing with NHL teams has remained constant in the last three years. 62 Europeans signed contracts with organizations from the National Hockey League prior to the start of the season.

The number of Europeans transferring to the NHL peaked after the 2010 Olympics with 61 Europeans signing with NHL teams for the first time. This number fell to 53 the year after, 54 in 2012, and 55 in 2013.

For the seventh consecutive year, Sweden is Europe's biggest producer of NHL talent with 20 players who signed an NHL contract for 2013-14. Among the top European nations this was actually the biggest decrease though, as 25 Swedes had signed the year before.

Finland follows in second place for the third straight year with 13 players going to the NHL, three more than last year. That's their highest number since 2006.

Russia went up from six to ten players going west and remains third among European talent producers. The number of moving Russians has gone down in the last two years with the emergence of the Kontinental Hockey League.

Seven players from the Czech Republic signed with NHL teams – the highest number since 2007. The Czechs contributed with most rookie players in 2005 (13) from Europe but the number has gone down dramatically since then.



Michael Raffl (left) is the first Austrian player to play in the NHL since 2008.

The reason is that many Czechs leave their home country earlier (as 16 or 17-year olds) to try their luck in Canadian junior hockey where only few players succeed to go all the way to the NHL. This in comparison to players like Jaromir Jagr, Dominik Hasek, Tomas Plekanec or Tomas Kaberle who first became professional in their native country in the old days.

Of the seven Czech players, four made their way via Canadian teams and one via U.S. college hockey while two join directly from the Czech Extraliga.

Similar effects can be observed for neighbour Slovakia. Presov native Martin Gertan, via the WHL's Edmonton Oil Kings, is the only new Slovak player signing with an NHL team this year.

NHL - European Transfers

EUROPEANS TO NHL

AUSTRIA-1				
Michael Raffl	F	AUT	Leksand	Philadelphia
CZECH REPUBLIC-7				
Dmitrij Jaskin	F	CZE	Slavia Prague	St. Louis
Andrej Sustr	D	CZE	HC Plzen	Tampa Bay
Richard Nedomlel	D	CZE	Slavia Prague	Detroit
Petr Straka	F	CZE	HC Plzen	Philadelphia
Lukas Sedlak	F	CZE	HC Ceske Budejovice	Columbus
Marek Mazanec	G	CZE	HC Plzen	Nashville
Tomas Hertl	F	CZE	Slavia Prague	San Jose
FINLAND-13				
Erik Haula	F	FIN	Ässät Pori	Minnesota
Juho Olkinuora	G	FIN	HIFK Helsinki	Winnipeg
Markus Granlund	F	FIN	HIFK Helsinki	Calgary
Miikka Salomäki	F	FIN	Kärpät Oulu	Nashville
Frans Tuohimaa	G	FIN	Jokerit Helsinki	Edmonton
Ilari Melart	D	FIN	HIFK Helsinki	Columbus
Mikko Vainonen	D	FIN	HIFK Helsinki	Nashville
Antti Raanta	G	FIN	Ässät Pori	Chicago
Karri Rämö	G	FIN	Avangard Omsk	Calgary
Rasmus Ristolainen	D	FIN	TPS Turku	Buffalo
Aleksander Barkov	F	FIN	Tappara Tampere	Florida
Christopher Gibson	G	FIN	Espoo Blues	Toronto
Teuvo Teräväinen	F	FIN	Jokerit Helsinki	Chicago
FRANCE-1				
Tim Bozon	F	FRA	HC Lugano	Montréal
GERMANY-1				
Tobias Rieder	F	GER	EV Landshut	Phoenix
ITALY-1				
Thomas Larkin	D	ITA	Varese	Columbus
LATVIA-2				
Ronalds Kenins	F	LAT	ZSC Lions Zurich	Vancouver
Kristers Gudlevskis	G	LAT	Dinamo Riga	Tampa Bay

RUSSIA-10				
Andrei Pedan	D	RUS	Krylya Sovietov Moscow	NY Islanders
Anton Zlobin	F	RUS	Spartak Moscow	Pittsburgh
Nikita Nesterov	D	RUS	Traktor Chelyabinsk	Tampa Bay
Anton Belov	D	RUS	Avangard Omsk	Edmonton
Alexei Marchenko	D	RUS	CSKA Moscow	Detroit
Valeri Nuchushkin	F	RUS	Traktor Chelyabinsk	Dallas
Maxim Kitsyn	F	RUS	Torpedo Nizhni Novgorod	Los Angeles
Denis Grebeshkov	D	RUS	Yugra Khanty-Mansk	Edmonton
Sergei Tolchinski	F	RUS	CSKA Moscow	Carolina
Nikita Zadorov	D	RUS	CSKA Moscow	Buffalo
SLOVAKIA-1				
Martin Gertan	D	SVK	HC Presov	Edmonton

SWEDEN-20				
Alexander Fällström	F	SWE	Djurgården Stockholm	Boston
Tom Nilsson	D	SWE	Mora IK	Toronto
Ludwig Blomstrand	F	SWE	Almtuna	Vancouver
Carl Söderberg	F	SWE	Linköpings HC	Boston
Henrik Tömmernes	D	SWE	Frölunda Gothenburg	Vancouver
William Karlsson	F	SWE	HV71 Jönköping	Anaheim
Sebastian Collberg	F	SWE	Frölunda Gothenburg	Montréal
Niklas Lundström	G	SWE	AIK Stockholm	St. Louis
Magnus Nygren	D	SWE	Färjestad Karlstad	Montréal
Mattias Backman	D	SWE	Linköpings HC	Detroit
Stefan Warg	D	SWE	Västerås IK	Anaheim
Anton Forsberg	G	SWE	MODO Örnköldsvik	Columbus
Petter Emanuelsson	F	SWE	Skellefteå AIK	San Jose
Joachim Eriksson	G	SWE	Skellefteå AIK	Vancouver
Elias Lindholm	F	SWE	Brynäs IF	Carolina
Ludwig Karlsson	F	SWE	Linköpings HC	Ottawa
Erik Nystrom	F	SWE	MODO Örnköldsvik	Montréal
Viktor Svedberg	D	SWE	Frölunda Gothenburg	Chicago
André Burakowsky	F	SWE	Malmö Redhawks	Washington
Axel Blomqvist	F	SWE	Rögle	Winnipeg

SWITZERLAND-6				
Tanner Richard	F	SUI	Rapperswil-Jona	Tampa Bay
Reto Berra	G	SUI	EHF Biel	Calgary
Sven Andrighetto	F	SUI	ZSC Lions Zurich	Montréal
Joel Vermin	F	SUI	SC Bern	Tampa Bay
Mirco Müller	D	SUI	Kloten	San Jose
Simon Moser	F	SUI	Langnau	Nashville

New, in fifth place as player exporter, is Switzerland, which hit the headlines for winning the silver medals at the 2013 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship. This time three Swiss rookies signed with an NHL team by mid-August and three additional players in the weeks leading up to the start of the new season. Switzerland will have a record number of players in the NHL this year.

Same as last year, two new players from Latvia signed NHL contracts. One player each comes from Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Slovakia.

Michael Raffl, who most recently played in Sweden for Leksand, is the first Austrian player since Andreas Nödl in 2008 to go to the NHL. As Nödl did five years ago, Raffl signed with the Philadelphia Flyers.

Photo: Richard Wobowicz / IIHF-IIHF Images

French players have not been sought after either. Ottawa's Stéphane Da Costa and Dallas' Antoine Roussel were the only ones since Philippe Bozon and Cristobal Huet when he transferred two years ago. But now Tim Bozon, Philippe's son who debuted with the French national team at the 2013 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship, was signed by the Montreal Canadiens.

Even less frequent are signings of Italian players. Thomas Larkin could become the first Italian-trained NHL player ever. Larkin started to play in Varese in northern Italy before he left for the U.S. as a 14-year-old where he played in high schools and the last four years for Colgate University.

FROM NORTH AMERICA TO EUROPE

Jochen Hecht	F	GER	Buffalo	Adler Mannheim
Tom Wandell	F	SWE	Dallas	Spartak Moscow
Roman Cervenka	F	CZE	Calgary	SKA St. Petersburg
Wojtek Wolski	F	CAN	Washington	Torpedo Nizhni Novgorod
Emil Molin	F	SWE	Dallas	Brynäs Gävle
Anton Babchuk	D	RUS	Calgary	Salavat Yulayev Ufa
Leo Komarov	F	FIN	Toronto	Dynamo Moscow
Alexei Kovalyov	F	RUS	Florida	EHK Visp
Mike Lundin	D	USA	Ottawa	Barys Astana
Tomas Vincour	F	CZE	Colorado	Ak Bars Kazan
David Ullström	F	SWE	NY Islanders	Lokomotiv Yaroslavl
Henrik Karlsson	G	SWE	Chicago	Skellefteå AIK
Ruslan Fedotenko	F	UKR	Philadelphia	Donbass Donetsk
Sergei Kostitsyn	F	BLR	Nashville	Avangard Osmk
Alexander Burmistrov	F	RUS	Winnipeg	Ak Bars Kazan
Bobby Sanguinetti	D	USA	Carolina	Atlant Mytishi
Éric Bélanger	F	CAN	Edmonton	Avtomobilist Yekaterinburg
Ilya Kovalchuk	F	RUS	New Jersey	SKA St. Petersburg
Marc-André Bergeron	D	CAN	Carolina	ZSC Lions Zurich
Antti Miettinen	F	FIN	Winnipeg	Fribourg-Gottéron
Colby Armstrong	F	CAN	Montréal	Växjö Lakers
Tim Brent	F	CAN	Carolina	Torpedo Nizhni Novgorod
Kurtis Foster	D	CAN	Philadelphia	Medvescak Zagreb
Olexi Ponikarovsky	F	UKR	New Jersey	SKA St. Peterburg
Chris Mason	G	CAN	Nashville	Ritten Sport
Aaron Gagnon	F	CAN	Winnipeg	HV71 Örnköldsvik
Nikolai Antropov	F	KAZ	Winnipeg	Barys Astana
Lennart Petrell	F	FIN	Edmonton	Genève-Servette
Guillaume Latendresse	F	CAN	Phoenix	ZSC Lions Zurich

BACK FROM EUROPE

Jesse Winchester	F	CAN	Jokerit Helsinki	Florida
Rob Davison	D	CAN	Red Bull Salzburg	San Jose
Pascal Pelletier	F	CAN	Langnau	Vancouver
Mark Flood	D	CAN	Lokomotiv Yaroslavl	Carolina
Colin Stuart	F	USA	Iserlohn Roosters	Vancouver

Festival Spirit in Sofia

U14 players from Balkan region get together

The U14 Balkan Festival of Ice Hockey was held in September in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia with 194 participants from nine countries in the growing hockey region.

Young players came from nine countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, FYR Macedonia, Greece, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey.

The camp was part of the Balkan initiative that won the Peace and Sport Award last season as it brings together players from countries in a previously troubled region and because the program promotes friendship between the nations in the area.

"The primary purpose of the Balkan Festival of Ice Hockey is to operate a true festival of hockey with all the Balkan nations coming together in a pre-season celebration, while encouraging all members of the family to be involved and participate in this unique once-a-year event," said IIHF Project Manager Darryl Easson.

"The program is very important especially in this region where people with different mentalities and passion have suffered through conflicts for hundreds of years, but sport has always brought them together even in hardest times during last twenty years."

Unlike the parents in some of the countries, the players luckily grew up during a peaceful era for the region and visibly enjoyed coming together in an international festival.

"We were talking but not arguing. I felt great here," said Vedran Mikic from the green team. "For me it was the best camp ever. It was well organized and it was nice to meet



The festival was the first chance for some of the kids to play on ice.

Photo: Tsveti Krasheva

other people from different countries."

His team eventually won the camp tournament and his teammate Ivelin Angelov echoed the sentiments not just because of the wins. "The camp was great and I met a lot of new friends. I'm very happy for the opportunity," Angelov said.

Anze Prostor couldn't hide his enthusiasm after scoring the final game-winning shot. "This is my first step to the NHL!" he said. The Slovene's idol is not difficult to guess – his namesake Anze Kopitar.

The new initiative has included several camps and now for the second time a festival. The core part was a tournament in which the 152 players born in 1999, 2000 and 2001 from nine countries were mixed in eight teams. Games were played and the youngsters also participated in a skills challenge and cross-ice games during four days.

For many players it was a new experience, far from home in an international environment.

IIHF CALENDAR OF EVENTS

IIHF U20 World Championship Division III		
2014	TURKEY, Izmir	12 - 18.01.14
IIHF U18 World Championship		
2014	FINLAND, Lappeenranta & Imatra	17 - 27.04.14
IIHF U18 World Championship Division I Group A		
2014	FRANCE, Nice	13 - 19.04.14
IIHF U18 World Championship Division I Group B		
2014	HUNGARY, Székesfehérvár	13 - 19.04.14
IIHF U18 World Championship Division II Group A		
2014	GREAT BRITAIN, Dumfries	24 - 30.03.14
IIHF U18 World Championship Division II Group B		
2014	ESTONIA, Tallinn	14 - 20.04.14
IIHF U18 World Championship Division III Group A		
2014	BULGARIA, Sofia	24 - 30.03.14
IIHF U18 World Championship Division III Group B		
2014	TURKEY, Izmit	13 - 15.02.14
IIHF Women's World Championship Division I Group A		
2014	CZECH REPUBLIC, Prerov	06 - 12.04.14
IIHF Women's World Championship Division I Group B		
2014	LATVIA, Ventspils	06 - 12.04.14
IIHF Women's World Championship Division II Group A		
2014	ITALY, Asiago	06 - 12.04.14
IIHF Women's World Championship Division II Group B		
2014	ICELAND, Reykjavik	24 - 30.03.14

IIHF Women's World Championship Division II Group B Qualification	
2014	MEXICO, Mexico City 19 - 22.03.14
IIHF U18 Women's World Championship	
2014	HUNGARY, Budapest 23 - 30.03.14
IIHF U18 Women's World Championship Division I	
2014	GERMANY, Füssen 29.03 - 04.04.14
IIHF U18 Women's World Championship Division I Qualification	
2014	POLAND, Krynica-Zdroj 18 - 23.03.14
IIHF InLine Hockey World Championship	
2014	CZECH REPUBLIC, Pardubice 01 - 07.06.14
IIHF Challenge Cup of Asia	
2014	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, Abu Dhabi 16 - 22.03.14
IIHF Challenge Cup of Asia Division I	
2014	KYRGYZSTAN, Bishkek 24.02 - 02.03.14
IIHF Women's Challenge Cup of Asia	
2014	CHINA, Harbin 09 - 13.03.14
IIHF Women's Challenge Cup of Asia Division I	
2014	HONG KONG, Hong Kong 26 - 28.12.13

Olympic Winter Games

Olympic Winter Games	
2014	RUSSIA, Sochi 07 - 23.02.14

IIHF Congresses

IIHF Annual Congress	
2014	BELARUS, Minsk 22 - 24.05.14
IIHF Semi-Annual Congress	
2014	SPAIN, Tenerife 18 - 20.09.14

National Team Breaks

2012/2014 Season	
1st International Break	26.08 - 01.09.13
2nd International Break	04 - 10.11.13
3rd International Break	16 - 22.12.13
4th International Break	03 - 09.02.14

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Defending champions?

Rookie Team USA U20 head coach Lucia going for gold with new cast

By Ryan O'Leary

Minnesota Head Coach Don Lucia has the Golden Gophers off to a fast start yet again in 2013, topping the early season National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) polls while targeting a fifth national championship in program history.

This season also brings about a unique challenge for Lucia: coaching Team USA at the 2014 IIHF World Junior Championships in Malmo, Sweden. Lucia took a few minutes to discuss a variety of topics with IceTimes, including: his balancing act between coaching duties, road trips with college kids, and of course, defending gold.



Lucia takes over a USA team that could have just two returning players from last year's championship squad.

How will the 2014 version of Team USA be different from the 2013 team?

We are still going to try to forge our own identity. The difference this year is that we will probably be without some candidates that could be on this team. Obviously, we do not have some of the guys that could have come back and been a part of this group, so what this team is going to end up looking like and being like is still unknown at this point and time.

We have to forge our own identity with a new group, so I do not know quite yet what it is going to look like regarding what is our high end skill, what our defensive corps is going to look like, who our goaltenders

What was your reaction to being named head coach of the 2014 U.S. Junior National Team?

I was excited because it was something that I have always wanted to be a part of. I have had some opportunities in the 1990s helping out with the U-16 and U-17 teams in some tournaments overseas, but anytime you have a chance to represent your country whether it is as a player or a coach, it is a tremendous honor, and I am really looking forward to having the opportunity to lead our team this year.

How much does your college coaching experience prepare you for this international opportunity?

I think it helps just with the experience I have had over the years with coaching colleges for as long as I have and coaching this age group of players. One of the things that helps is that I have been coaching for the last twenty years, so I am used to the game on a bigger sheet, on an international level, and some of the nuances involved. Dealing with the players this age has a great benefit knowing how they think and they act.

What is the biggest difference between coaching college hockey and international hockey?

I guess I am going to find out this winter. I think both have the notoriety and media attention, but especially in our market, the amount of radio, television and print we deal with every day will be similar at the world junior tournament. It has become such a big event. In many ways, it is like the Olympics for the U-20s, and it has become a focal point for so many teams around the world in the IIHF and also within our own country. The world junior team has become important, and that is one of the reasons why they developed the U.S. National Development Team Program to have better success at the world junior level.

What is the best part about coaching young players?

The most fun part is that they are here to learn, and they want to be players. Having the opportunity to watch them mature at the ages of 18 to 22 and to watch them grow not only as a player, but as a person is fun.

How are you balancing your coaching duties at Minnesota along with your Team USA responsibilities?

For the most part, my focus right now is on the Minnesota Gopher hockey program, and the focus in the summertime was the world junior team. I do have frequent phone calls with Jim Johansson from USA Hockey, who works as a general manager talking about player personnel. I will get a chance to see some of the candidates for the team. I also have a great group of assistant coaches who will certainly assist in what we are doing. For the most part, this fall up until probably December 7th or 8th, my attention will be with Minnesota. After that weekend is over, my attention will turn back to the world junior team.

Are you feeling pressure to defend the USA's gold medal or is it simply an honour?

Well, I think it is an honour. I look at our team this year, and we are not defending anything because our team did not win it. That is the beauty of the world junior team – there is such a big turnover year to year, and we may only have a couple of kids that played on the team last year, so I do not look at our team as defending anything. It was a proud moment for our team to win the gold medal, for USA Hockey to have that achievement, but last year is over, we met this summer, and it is a completely new team of guys who are trying to forge their own success.



Fact file: Don Lucia

- Born: 20 August, 1958
- Current head coach of Minnesota Golden Gophers
- Coached Minnesota to back-to-back NCAA Championships in 2002 and 2003
- Three-time Western Collegiate Hockey Association Coach of the Year
- Prior to his 27th season as a collegiate head coach, compiled a 623-337-88 record
- NCAA Division I National Coach of the Year in 1994

will be – there are a lot of question marks that need to be answered. Part of the coaches' responsibilities, and Jim Johansson's responsibility, is to make sure that we have the right people at camp and that we choose the right group that is going to give this team the best chance at success. What that identity is going to be? I do not know, so we will have to adapt to how we want to play based on our personnel.

Why has Team USA had so much success at this tournament in recent years?

A big part of it has been goaltending. When you are going to have success at any championship level, whether it is college, junior, Olympics, or world juniors, you have to have good goaltending. Certainly, the goaltending was outstanding last year and they won a gold medal with Jack Campbell a few years back. It has gone on to show that USA Hockey has good goaltending. We have produced quite a few good goalies, and we are seeing some of the rewards of the U.S. National Development Program.

The competition that they play and the success that they have had internationally at the Under-18s is impressive, and they have played against those players internationally. They don't go into the tournament with a sense of awe because they have competed against these players their whole lives.

As a college coach and international coach, how important is it to have veteran returners help the younger players prepare?

It is invaluable, and that is why a couple of the staff members that have been held over from last year's team can help give some insight on what to expect. Same with a player – they have been through it, whether it is at our level or not, the freshmen come in and the older guys have to teach them the way it is done. Riley Barber will be back and Jon Gillies, who was the backup goaltender last year, will be too. It is the returning guys that have to set the table, and they have to be the leaders in showing and teaching what is required to have success in that tournament.