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Greek hockey - against all odds

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Efforts by leaders like Kalyvas bring the Greek national team back to IIHF competitions.

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Team Greece in Sumperk, Czech Republic, Sept. 2007

If there was a gold medal awarded for perseverance and determination to overcome severe hardships, the national hockey team of Greece would be a richly deserving winner. The story of the players' inspiring fight to keep their team together – and keep the sport of ice hockey alive in their homeland – has all the makings of a Hollywood film.

For most of the last fourteen years, the Greek team has persevered in the face of long odds. In the 1990s, the Greek government cut off all funding to the hockey program. Since 2003, Greece has been just one of one two European member countries without a viable hockey rink in the country.

Through it all, the Greek hockey players found ways to persevere. Under the leadership of team captain Dimitris Kalyvas, the players have gone to extraordinary lengths to stay together on and off the ice. The players pooled their own resources to continue playing, even self-funding trips to practice and play in the Czech Republic.

All the while, they lobbied anyone who would listen about the need for a rink in their country. The team also applied to the IIHF for permission to compete internationally for the first time since 1999.

The players' tireless efforts have paid off. The Greek government has approved construction of a rink and the team now receives funding from the Hellenic Ice Sports Federation. In September, at the IIHF's semi-annual congress in Vancouver, the Greek national team received approval to participate in the 2008 Division III World Championship qualification tournament taking place in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, from February 15-17, 2008.

Best of all, the sport of hockey has not only managed to survive in Greece through the trials and tribulations. It has actually grown.

"All these years, there has been an increase in the number of players," said Kalyvas. "We have six teams that play inline hockey in Greece since there is no ice rink yet, or travel to Bulgaria to play games against other. Most of the teams have their own websites. And the national team continues to travel to the Czech Republic to prepare for the World Championship qualifications."

Throughout the entire process, Kalyvas and the other team members have drawn inspiration from an unlikely source: turn of the 20th Century African-American political leader, educator and author Booker T. Washington. A quote from Washington adorns the front page of Team Greece's website: "You measure the size of an accomplishment by the obstacles you had to overcome to reach your goals."

The story of the Greek ice hockey team starts in the mid-to-late 1980s. In 1989, the first Greek ice hockey championships took place on an Olympic-sized ice surface at Peace and Friendship Stadium, marking the first time organized hockey games were played on an International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) regulation-sized rink.

With growing youth participation in the sport, the Hellenic Ice Sports Federation formed the first Greek national junior hockey team in 1990.

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The team participated in the IIHF Pool C World Junior Championships in Yugoslavia. The next year, Team Greece took part in the IIHF Under-20 tournament held in Italy.

In 1992, the first adult-level version of Team Greece took shape shortly before the upcoming IIHF Pool C World Championships in South Africa. Despite having only two weeks of serious training, the squad won the bronze medal in the tournament.

While the Greek ice hockey community remained small (about 500 registered players of all ages), the sport seemed on its way to gaining a niche in the country. But in 1993, there was a change in political power after the Greek elections. For the next 13 years, Greek hockey received no public funding.

Government help or not, the national team members remained determined to play on wearing the Hellas crest. The players took over funding their sport themselves, pooling their money to rent ice time, purchase their own equipment and travel to tournaments abroad. Meanwhile, the rest of Greece's hockey-playing community supported their comrades any way they could.

Team Greece found a way to send entries to the 1996 European Junior Championships, winning one of five matches. In March 1998, the men's national team went to the IIHF Pool D World Championships in South Africa. They, too, managed to win one game. The following year, the team played in the Worlds for the final time.

Despite the financial and organisational problems of Greek hockey, the players clung stubbornly to the sport they loved. But the events of the next several years brought hockey in Greece to the brink of extinction.

In 2001, the lease ran out on the land where Greece's main rink, called Moschato, stood. The National Bank of Greece, which owned the land, wanted to put it to potentially more profitable use. The rink was closed permanently. Despite the players' efforts to save it, the facility was later torn down.

"The younger players, the ones that learned the sport of ice hockey in Greece, all quit or switched to inline hockey," says Kalyvas. "The number of Greek ice hockey players went from about 500 down to 40 within a few years."

The remaining players soldiered on as best they could. The death of Greek ice hockey seemed inevitable when, in 2003, the last remaining rink in Greece closed.

Somehow, the national team players found a way to regroup. Kalyvas led the fight for survival along with assistant captain Orestis Tilios, the only player who has suited up for every version of Team Greece (both junior and senior team) and Czech-born defenseman Ionnis Ziakas, the other remaining player from the 1990 team.



Team Greece captain Dimitris Kalyvas with Yannis Ioannidis, Greece's national Minister of sports.

After the rink closures, Kalyvas and company showed remarkable resolve and creativity. Under the captain's leadership, the players tied the traditional rout of writing letters to influential Greek politicians, including the prime minister. They contacted newspapers. They appealed for help to IIHF.

In between their lobbying efforts, Team Greece found time to do what they loved most – play hockey. In Greece, they assembled to play inline hockey. More ambitiously, they organised trips to the Czech Republic two or three times a year, scraping together the funds to pay all of their own expenses.

By 2005, there was little tangible progress in the players' drive to get a new rink built in Greece. The remaining players, already a close-knit bunch, relied on each other to keep spirits from sagging. Leading by example, the team leadership group tried to make sure of it. Nevertheless, Greek hockey seemed to be living on borrowed time.

"Each trip to the Czech Republic cost us approximately 900 Euros each. It was a lot of expense for us to absorb, but we need the place to play," says Kalyvas.

Just as it appeared the final buzzer would sound on Greek hockey, the very thing that nearly destroy the sport — budgetary quibbling between rival political politics — helped save it. With another party change in parliamentary control in 2004, there was a renewed push to fund Greek ice hockey.

Team Greece has received some desperately needed help to continue the national team hockey program. The Ice Sports Federation put up the funding for two yearly national team trips to the Czech Republic. In March 2006, the national team formed a new tournament called "the Acropolis Cup" held in the Czech Republic. The team has since returned twice to the Czech Republic and will return again this month to play in Zlin. Meanwhile, Kalyvas intensified his efforts to get the Greek team back into IIHF-sanctioned competitions.

"At the IIHF Annual-Congress in Riga, Latvia, in March 2006, I heard the IIHF Council talk about Mongolia and their effort to keep the sport alive in their country," said Kalyvas. "When I came back to Greece, I sent a very long e-mail detailing all our trips and the efforts taken by the team since 2000. The reply by the IIHF was amazement — they didn't know that ice hockey still existed in Greece."

Subsequently, the IIHF sent two Council members to Athens to investigate the progress of the sport. The officials were satisfied that, despite the current lack of a rink in Greece, the sport and national team remain viable.

At the semi-annual congress in Vancouver the Greeks received permission to take part in the Division III World Championship qualification tournament in Bosnia & Herzegovina. The Division III World Championships will be held in Luxembourg in March.

"We're hockey players, and our goal is to play hockey," said Kalyvas. "It's gratifying that our team and our sport will continue in Greece, but the work has only just begun. We're determined to succeed."

BILL MELTZER

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