

Yes, Greece Does Have a National Hockey Team!

<http://members.shaw.ca/constadina/articles/greekhockey.htm>

By: Constadina Zarokostas, September 1999

When you're sitting on a beach in Greece, the last thing you ever think about is a hockey rink or hockey season for that matter. However, if you're an avid hockey player and fan, you may actually have dreams of hockey in your head all the time. This may be the case for many of the members of Greece's National Hockey team, whose members have come from around the world. This includes players from Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver (Canada), Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Moscow (Russia). This illustrates the statement 'Greeks can be found in every corner of the world' holds true.

Hockey is not a completely new thing to Greece. It began in 1984 by players that returned to Greece from abroad. Teams were formed in Athens, Pireus, Salonica and Chalkida. Their first official Greek Championship was held in 1989, at the Peace and Friendship Stadium in Athens. This was considered a treat, since all practices were, and still are, conducted in an arena half the size of a regular rink. After a few years of training, improvement, and experience in World Junior Championships, the Greek National team finally won the Bronze Medal in the South African, 1992 World Championships Pool C. Not only did they win a medal, but they also beat the odds by winning a medal in their first appearance at a World Championship.

Unfortunately the year following the team's win, (despite their excellent display of achievement) the Greek Undersecretary of State for Sports pulled all funding for Hockey in Greece. This left all expenses to be paid by players. Practice ceased from 1993 until 1995, and by then many players had quit. Once the National team was reformed in 1995, they again took part in the World Championships. Unfortunately lack of practice forced them to lose the Bronze title they had won in 1992.

Since then, the team has participated in European as well as World Championships, but the lack of funds prevents them from performing at the level they are capable of achieving, which is medal-status. Three of the Greek National team members have left for higher status European teams, yet they plan on making it back to the Greek National team by next year, to try qualifying for the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City. These players are considered the "superstars" of the Greek National team. One of these superstars is Czechoslovakian born Igor Apostolidis, who is the top scorer in the Austrian B league. The second is Marius Konstandinidis, also

Czechoslovakian born, who is the top scorer in the French league. Having chances to qualify for the Olympics.

For now, the team members which have stuck together and maintained the existence of a Greek National team, have done so through their love of the sport, respect for their fellow team-mates and drive to educate the Greek public on the challenging sport of Hockey. When I asked the team Captain, Dimitrios Kalyvas about the team spirit and their dedication, he responded with the following, *"We could have just quit the sport and gone to the cafes to hang out, but we didn't. We respect each other and love each other too much to do it. We are a family. We've known each other since we were kids. Loving hockey helps, and the fact that all these problems have brought us closer together helps too. You can't turn your back on a family member right? Well, that's how we feel. We're all brothers, we're family. The nice thing about it is that we can count on each other for everything."* This connection among each of the team members has also helped produce a harmony amongst themselves, including the front line, who have been playing hockey together for almost ten years. Some of these players are George Kalyvas, Orestis Tilios, Ioannis Ermidis, Ioannis Ziakas and Dimitrios Kalyvas.

What's a team without a great coach? Not much in my opinion, but the Romanian born coach of the Greek National Hockey team, Mirel Dumitrake, has been faithful to the team and the existence of hockey in Greece since 1987. He and his Greek wife have become part of the team's family. Mirel is what they describe as another father figure, not only showing them proper hockey skills, but also helping to develop their minds, self-respect and perceptions of life. He is a coach that really cares.

The Greek National team is now turning to donations from companies and individuals from both Greece and the diaspora to purchase equipment and ice time to maintain a high standard of performance. Donations helped purchase a Zamboni last year. Previous to that, the players had to shovel the snow off the ice to practice. (Makes you think how lucky we are in Calgary). Without a good arena they can not progress. The arena they currently practice on is privately owned, forcing each player to pay \$15.00 per person, per practice. The generous South African omogenia allowed the team to borrow money to purchase equipment that they needed.

In the mean time, Greek interest in Hockey is increasing. So far the Greek National team has gathered around 120 young hockey players, between the ages of eight to sixteen, all born in Greece. One of their goals is to start

an atom and pee-wee league. Again, part of the problem is getting use of an arena. The privately owned arena they are using charges them \$400.00 per game to use during public skating hours. Otherwise they are charged \$200.00 per game after 10:30pm. This is not the best time of day to be playing a competitive game of hockey, especially at the pee-wee level. The pee-wees practice twice a week, from 9:00pm-10:30pm, while the National team practices three times a week (weekdays) 10:45pm-12:30am(\$45/week/player).

So the search is still in full force for sponsors and donations for the National Greek Hockey team. Without this help, there will be a delay in any improvement in performance, as well as an ability to make it to the 2002 Olympics.

If you would like to give a donation, be a sponsor, be part of the Greek National Hockey team, or simply like to get more information on Greece's National Hockey team, see their website at:<http://www.icehockey.gr>

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