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Team Greece winning uphill battle for survival

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Without a rink in their homeland, Team Greece travels to the Czech Republic to practice and play.

Most hockey players take their access to an ice rink for granted. The rink becomes their home away from home; so much a part of daily life that they don't even think about their entries and exits. It's only after

someone's playing days are over -- or the real world intercedes -- that the player begins to long for the rink. Suddenly the player recalls the rink as an inner sanctum, the one place where the world makes sense.

In that regard, the members of Greece's national hockey team and the rest of its small, close-knit hockey community were just like players the world over. Once upon a time, they never thought their toughest battle would be to simply have a place to play. But circumstances beyond their control left them without a single viable rink in their country and no funding for the national hockey program.

That's when a determined group of Greek hockey players, driven only by their love of the game and desire to play for their country and for one another, banded together. They fought both for the survival of their team and of hockey in their homeland.

Since 2003, Greece has been just one of one three European countries without a rink in the country, along with Albania and Malta. But the players of Team Greece have gone to extraordinary lengths to stay together on and off the ice. All the while, they've lobbied anyone who'll listen for a place to practice and play in their country.

"We're hockey players. We want to keep the sport alive," says Team Greece captain Dimitris Kalyvas. "We live in a country that hosted the 2004 Olympics. I just can't and won't accept the idea we can't have an ice rink. For the past three years I've done everything I can to make the rink a reality. I won't stop until we succeed. The obstacles on the road only make the goal even bigger. We deserve a rink and I promise that one day all Greeks will be able to skate on a rink in Greek soil."

Related Information

- Official Greek Ice Hockey team site
- Video: Team Greece
- Video: Greek hockey rap song
- Greek rink proposal
- Greek hockey forum
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Around Europe

Sweden -- After three rounds of Elitserien, there are no unbeaten and untied teams left in the Swedish Elites. MoDo Hockey is off to a quick start with two wins, led by three goals in three games from 28-year-old

Early hockey inroads

The story of the Greek ice hockey team starts in the mid-1980s. In 1984, a group of Greek nationals returned home from hockey countries abroad to form the first national league in Greece. Soon the league consisted of five teams of amateur players; two in Athens, one in Piraeus, one in Salonica and one in Chalkida. The first official game was played the following year in Athens.

Over the next four years, the rag-tag league gained better organization and stronger infrastructure for training. 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. 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.

Team members had every right to be proud. While Team Greece competed at international hockey's lowest level, it was still rare for a team to win a medal in its first IIHF tournament appearance, especially given short preparation time.

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. Greek players harbored no illusion of supplanting basketball or soccer as a major national team sport. But they did expect continued

Norwegian Per-Åge Skröder. Defending champion Färjestads BK features the league's top two early scorers, in former Calgary Flames' first-round pick Jesper Mattsson and center Esa Pirnes. Both players have two goals and three assists. Other early standouts include longtime MoDo power forward Magnus Wernblom, now with Skellefteå AIK, who has four goals and former Pittsburgh Penguins and Nashville Predator defenseman Pavel Skrbek. The Czech backliner has one goal, four assists and a +5 rating for Luleå HF.

Finland -- Helsinki-based archrivals Jokerit and HIFK have the early jump in Finland's SM-Liiga. Jokerit enjoys a perfect 5-0-0 record after five matches, holding a five point lead over HIFK and the Espoo Blues. Defending champion HPK Hämeenlinna is in fourth place with nine points, while preseason favorite Kärpät Oulu is a bit slow out of the gates with seven points. Jokerit's Kim Hirschovits, the New York Rangers' sixth-round selection in the 2002 Entry Draft is off to a red hot start. The 24-year-old has already lit the lamp eight times and added a pair of helpers. Veteran JyP goaltender Sinuhe Wallinheimo, a University of Denver alumnus, has been SM-Liiga's top early season puckstopper, with a 1.57 goals against average and .956 save percentage in five starts. Austrian goalie Bernd Bruckler, a former Philadelphia Flyers' draftee and University of Wisconsin standout, is a large part of the reason for Espoo's early success, turning back 94 percent of the shots he's seen and letting fewer than two pucks per game (1.95 goals against) past him so far.

Russia -- Former Pittsburgh Penguins' right wing Alexei Morozov has picked up where he left off last season for Super League champion Ak Bars Kazan. Last season's Russian scoring king, Morozov has come out of the gates by rifling nine goals home in the first seven games.

government support for their program, especially given their rapid progress. They were wrong.

Pulling the plug

In 1993, there was a change in political power after the Greek elections. The head of the Hellenic Ice Sports Federation was a member of the "wrong" party. That spelled trouble for the continued government support of all forms of Greek ice sports, including hockey.

"In Greece, everything has to do with the government, including sports.

Anything one party supports, the opposition party goes against. That's just how it works here," says Kalyvas. "Unfortunately, the dreams and hopes of Greek athletes depend on which party will win the elections. It's sad."

Shortly after the elections, Greece's new Undersecretary of State for Sports accused Ice Sports Federation leadership of misusing government funds earmarked for training and development programs. The government cut off all hockey-program funding while it began an investigation.

The investigation turned up no proof of financial impropriety, nor was the Ice Sports leadership officially exonerated. Instead, the purse strings remained cut, eviscerating the continued development of the Team Greece hockey program. For the next 13 years, Greek hockey received no 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 organizational 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.

One time Los Angeles Kings draftee Evgeny Fedorov (7th round, 2000 Entry Draft) is another early standout. The 26-year-old Moscow Dynamo center has five goals and eight points in seven games.

Czech Republic -- HC Mountfield holds the surprising early season lead in the Czech Extraliga, with 16 points through seven games. Sparta Prague center Jaroslav Hlinka holds the early season scoring lead with four goals and 11 points, although he has a minus-four defensive rating for the struggling defending champions.

Under IIHF rules, a country must have at least one Olympic-sized rink and a national league with at least four teams. As result, Team Greece was no longer eligible for IIHF-



Team Greece captain Dimitris Kalyvas has led the campaign to save Greek hockey both on and off the ice.

sanctioned tournaments. The country was left with one tiny rink, on which it was impossible to conduct proper practices or games. It was also inconveniently located for many young players, who lacked the resources to travel.

"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.

The captain rallies the team

Thirty-two-year-old Dimtris "Jimmy" Kalyvas never intended to be a political activist in Greece, but he wasn't about to let his team or sport go down without a fight. Kalyvas was born in Montreal to Greek parents in 1973. Like

many boys in Canada, he was bitten by the hockey bug early in life. From the age of 5 to 16, he played youth hockey in Quebec. Five years Dimtris' junior, younger brother Georgios "George" Kylvas, also started his hockey training in Montreal.

In 1989, their parents decided to move to Greece. The boys took their love of hockey with them across the ocean and were thrilled to find they'd still have the opportunity to play in Greece.

Dimitris, then 17, played on Team Greece's inaugural squad at the 1990 Pool C World Juniors in Yugoslavia. Over the next nine years, he joined the senior national team in tournaments around the world, playing in locales ranging from Rome, Italy to Metulla, Israel. In 1998, the forward assumed the role of team captain. George graduated from the junior to senior squad the same year.

The elder Kalyvas took his captaincy seriously, serving as the Greek players' leader, organizer, and advocate both on and off the ice. He was joined by 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.

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 the International Ice Hockey Federation.

The team also started a grass-roots drive to raise awareness. They wrote a formal proposal for a rink and published it online. They created a Web-based petition for a new rink. They even produced a video on their team and wrote a rap song to promote Greek hockey and generate support. The team later organized a party where Kalyvas performed the song live.

The Greek players made outreach efforts to selected NHL players of Greek descent, but chose not to pursue this particular campaign further after experiencing limited success.

"Our goal is to have a hockey program in Greece, not in North America," explains Kalyvas.

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 organized trips to the Czech Republic two or three times a year, scraping together the funds to pay all of their own expenses.

Rays of hope

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 on borrowed time.

"Each trip to the Czech Republic cost us approximately 900 Euros (\$1,150 U.S.) 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 political politics -- began to save it. With the change in parliamentary control from the Panhellenic Socialist Party to the New Democracy Party in 2004, came a renewed push for funding for ice hockey and other winter sports.

In a hearing of the Greek parliament, Minister of Sports George Orfanos pledged to build two new ice rinks in Greece, one each in Athens and Thessaloniki. He also called for the establishment of a Greek Hockey Federation independent of the Ice Sports Federation. On Feb. 1, 2005, the Hellenic Ice Hockey Federation (HIHF) was formed.

Kalyvas cautioned his teammates to keep their enthusiasm in check, because there was still a long battle ahead. "I've been trying to build the sport for at least 12 years. I've encountered hundreds of obstacles, and I knew this was going to quickly become a political battle again. Like I said before, if one party in Greece says it supports something, the opposition party will fight it," he says.

The captain's intuition was right. No sooner was HIHF split off from the Ice Sports Federation than politicians brokered agreements to scuttle the independent body, even though the International Ice Hockey Federation made it clear that it defines a proper national team as one governed by an independent hockey federation.

Meanwhile, progress on the proposed new rink moved forward at a snail's pace in 2005 and throughout 2006.

"For something to get done quickly in Greece there has to be an urgent political reason, namely increased votes or money, to cut through all the

red tape. Hockey doesn't have much pull politically, sadly. The bureaucracy is crazy. To build a rink, you need a permit from the Ministry of Sports. Then you need a separate permit from the Ministry of Physical Planning and Public Works. Finally, you need a zoning and building permit from the town where you want to build the rink," says Kalyvas.



In order for Team Greece to compete again in the IIHF Division III World Championships, a new Olympic-sized rink must be built in Greece.

Nevertheless, 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 team playing trips to the Czech Republic. In March 2006, the team played in a tournament called "the Acropolis Cup" held in the Czech Republic. Earlier this month, the Greeks took their second trip of the year. Plans are also underway to offer a Hellenic Ice Hockey school program to help re-grow the sport. The new team will start a series of trainings and will take part in various tournaments abroad.

Crucially, the rink projects seem to be entering the home stretch before they become reality. "The land has been purchased, all permits gathered, and the Finnish company that will build it up is ready to make the trip. I believe it's a matter of weeks now. We have our fingers crossed," says Kalyvas.

Team Greece is also hoping to gain approval from the IIHF to participate in the 2008 Division III World Championships, even if the country isn't yet able to meet the rink and national league requirements.

"Mr. Chatziathanasiou (the president of the Ice Sports Federation) and I spoke with members of the IIHF Council at the Annual Congress in Riga, Latvia, in May of this year," says Kalyvas. "We explained the situation in Greece and all efforts made during the past few years to keep the sport alive. The IIHF was very surprised; they were unaware of our efforts. They were also very happy to see the players keep hockey alive in Greece despite the problems and obstacles."

This week, from September 28 to 30, the IIHF board will convene again. Coincidentally, the meeting will be held in Athens. It's unknown if and when Team Greece will get the green light to resume participation in the Worlds.

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."

Team Greece promises it'll be prepared for its return to international hockey and anxiously awaits its first chance in years to play on a rink they can call their own. To this group of players, the simple act of pulling on the Hellas sweater and skating together on home ice will be a victory sweeter than any Stanley Cup or gold medal.

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