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UAE and Greece face challenges to ensure their future on ice
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United Arab Emirates captain Juma Al Dhaheeri and Greek defenceman Konstantinos Lempesis battle for the puck.
Photo: FLHG

KOCKELSCHEUER, Luxembourg – The international ice hockey community has welcomed a new World Championship member. While most are focused on the upcoming World Championship, the United Arab Emirates made its international debut last Wednesday in a game against Greece. It marked the first time an Arab nation participated at an IIHF World Championship. And it was a clash between two teams from warmer countries that face different challenges in developing the game.

April 14, 2010 will be the date a new chapter was added to the hockey history books. In Kockelscheuer, Luxembourg, twenty players dressed in red skated on the ice for the face-off in what is the start of a new era in Arab ice hockey.

In front of 150 spectators team captain Juma Al Dhaheeri and Team Greece captain Dimitrios Kalyvas shook hands in what turned out to be a special game for the two players. Both teams have reasons to be excited participating in the World Championships albeit for totally different reasons.

Desert development

Ice hockey in the deserts of the United Arab Emirates seems as strange as Jamaica having a bobsled team. Unknown to many is the fact that there has been ice hockey in the UAE for over 30 years. In 1979 the first rink opened in Dubai mainly used for exhibition games between domestic students who had returned from U.S. universities and expatriates from Canada, the Czech Republic and Russia. It was in 1998 that the country established an official hockey federation and shortly after became a member of the IIHF. The national team has been playing international games in the Asian Winter Games and the Challenge Cup of Asia since the start of this century and last month earned a silver medal after losing 3-2 to Chinese Taipei in the final. The good results helped get the financial backing of the Abu Dhabi Sports Council. With the extra resources available, the federation this year appointed Teemu Taruvuori and Matias Posio to further develop a solid structure.

"I studied in Vierumäki and had several options abroad to work. I chose the Emirates because the experience appealed to me," Taruvuori explained. "I thought it would be low level, but it was surprisingly good. I feel we have good opportunities to improve given the financial resources available."

The 25-year-old from Helsinki, who just signed a one-year contract extension, coaches the national team and is actively involved in setting up development programs to ensure hockey in the Emirates is there to

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stay. "Currently we're working hard on setting up a junior program. This is for the U9s and U12s and these young kids will have to keep the game alive."

But the biggest achievement was the start of a competitive domestic league, the EHL, which was started last autumn. "This is really important to us," Taruvori said. "We needed games and practices to get experience. Installing a junior program and a domestic league were the pre-requisites to be allowed in the World Championship."

It would have been tempting for the UAE to give several expats a passport and immediately compete for medals, but Taruvori and the federation will not do this to enable local players to develop. "Of course expatriates have a big effect on our hockey. To be honest, we wouldn't have enough players to organise a full league, but we only select Emiratis on our national team. I don't believe in giving people a passport, this will not help in the long term."

The long term seems rosy if the people in charge are patient. "Now we started with the junior programs we will have some young talent coming up, but there are virtually no players between the current national team members and the U12s, so we will have to be patient," the Finn said. "Hopefully we can have a true Emirati league in the future with only local players. The biggest thing we need at the moment is getting more rinks, currently there's just a single one in Abu Dhabi. But I'm convinced getting more rinks will be possible given the fantastic state support that we are getting."

Patriotic persistence

Ice hockey in Greece has many similarities with the UAE and also many differences. For well over a decade, the Greek hockey players have fought to ensure hockey has a place in the country. The battle is far from over, but the players are determined.

In the mid-nineties, the Greek government cut off all funding to hockey resulting in being just one of two European member countries without a viable hockey rink. The players, led by Dimitrios Kalyvas, have tried everything to get the game back on the political agenda with limited success. The main ice rink in the country, Moschato, was torn down since the land owner put it to more profitable use.

The players were boosted after promoting the sports among the General Secretary of Sports. A new ice rink was built in Athens and there was financial support for the national team. Team Greece participated in the 2008 and 2009 World Championships and was awaiting 2010, the year they would host the tournament.

Then Kalyvas and the players received a message that shocked them. "We were promised funding by the Greek government, but when a new government was installed we learned that all finances were stopped," Kalyvas said. Last March, after receiving a negative response from the General Secretary of Sports declining any financial responsibility and organizational support to host the games in Athens, Kalyvas was told Greece would annul its hosting with a possible expulsion from international hockey.

Kalyvas: "We, the players, then tried to fund the tournament ourselves, but unfortunately we couldn't find enough sponsors. Luckily Luxembourg could host it as they've got two beautiful rinks."

To illustrate the desperate situation of hockey in Greece, Kalyvas said that the ice sports federation would not give any funding for the trip to Luxembourg meaning the players had to either pay the costs themselves or pull out of the event.

"It's frustrating that a lot of false promises are made," Kalyvas admits, "but we keep playing until we're too old and we will keep fighting to realise our dream."

Asked what that dream would be, the Greek captain is crystal clear. "An ice rink. All we want is one Olympic-size ice rink and we will grow the sport in Greece."

Their current rink in Athens does not fulfil international requirements and has limited availability. "The rink is built with the help of private investors meaning they are only focused on making money with it. Public skating is earning the most money which means we can only practice at eight in the morning or at 22:30 in the evening. It's impossible to improve hockey this way." Add the fact that all the players have full-time jobs and it's easy to understand the difficulties the team is coping with.

Like many sports buildings, also the rink is facing extinction. "We're begging for an ice rink, but instead there are plans to turn it into a shopping mall as has happened with most venues built for the 2004 Olympics. It really drives me crazy. If countries like Bulgaria, Turkey, Israel or even the United Arab Emirates can have rinks, we should be able to, but unfortunately in Greece it's only about sun and beaches."

At age 36, Kalyvas, born and raised in Montreal, is among the veteran members of the team. He has been fighting for the sport in his country

throughout his career and truly believes it has a future. "Right now we have nine men's teams, two junior and two women's teams. The numbers are increasing and people come to watch the games. We deserve an ice rink and in the end the players are going to build the rink ourselves," he jokes.

The result:

Despite the lack of state support and no preparation camp in Switzerland like Team UAE had before the World Championship opener, Greece did win the encounter comfortably 7-1. Kalyvas led his team with four assists.

The Hellenic team took an early lead, but had to capitalise on a quick breakaway of Juma Al Dhaheri. The UAE captain outraced the Greek defence and went in alone on goaltender Ploutsis. Al Dhaheri made no mistake and scored the Emirates first-ever goal at a World Championship.

Their joy was short lived as Greece took the lead 30 seconds later and eventually took full advantage on the power play of an fatigued Emirates team, which took six minor penalties in the final period.

Although the Emirates kept the game close for forty minutes and scored on their debut, coach Taruvuori was not happy. "I am not satisfied at all and expected more. We have our skills, but the players began very nervous probably because of their first game at the Worlds. Before the game everything was fine, but during the game we lost the spirit."

On the opposite, Kalyvas was all smiles after the game. "Other than a three-minute video clip on YouTube we knew nothing about them. To win here is nice but that's not the most important thing to us," the captain states. "We have managed to play in three consecutive world championships. To us, that's like winning a gold medal given the lack of support we're getting. Being here is already a huge achievement and we hope to be here for the next years to come." JOERI LOONEN

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