

Greek hockey gets back in the game

Wednesday, 02.20.2008 / 10:00 AM / Across the Pond

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Courtesy: Team Greece

The members of Team Greece celebrate their Division III World Championship qualification tournament victory in Sarajevo Worlds in Luxembourg.

The members of Team Greece have pulled off one of the most remarkable comebacks in international hockey history. After a nine-year absence from international competition, they've made a successful return. Even more notably, the team has fought to preserve a sport that was on the brink on extinction and given it hope for the future.

Recently, Team Greece emerged victorious in the IIHF Division III World Championship qualification tournament played in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina on Feb. 15-17. In addition to the host nation and the Greeks, the round-robin tourney included Armenia.

Team Greece defeated Bosnia and Herzegovina by a 10-1 count and downed Armenia, 8-5. As a result, Team Greece has earned a spot in the 2008 Division III

"It has been a very long road to get to this point," said Team Greece captain Dimtris Kalyvas. "There's still work to do before Luxembourg, but our team is prepared to continue working hard to do whatever it takes for Greek hockey to succeed. We are as hungry and passionate a team as you will find anywhere."

Officially, the Greek victory against Armenia will be changed from an 8-5 score to a 5-0 victory by forfeit. Armenia also had to forfeit a win over Bosnia and Herzegovina. The International Ice Hockey Federation disqualified the Armenian team for its refusal prior to the tournament to produce the passports of its players to prove their eligibility. Regardless of the forfeit, Greece earned its trip to Luxembourg by virtue of its own play on the ice.

The victory in Sarajevo caps a 14-year struggle for Greek hockey that saw the government eliminate funding for hockey and all the rinks in the country close. The national team last played in IIHF-sanctioned competition in 1999. Meanwhile, the Greek players funded the sport themselves for a number of years, lobbied successfully for the government to approve construction of a new rink (the project is not yet completed) and traveled abroad to practice and play.

For the last several years, the Greek national team players have organized twice-a-year playing trips to the Czech Republic. Initially the players had to pool their money to pay the \$1,115 per player cost themselves, but more recently the Greek Ice Sports Federation has put up the funding for the hockey trips.

In December 2007, head coach Panagiotis Efkarpidis and the Greek players headed to Zlin, Czech Republic for a training camp followed by a series of five qualification tournament prep games against Czech minor-league teams. The Greeks lost 9-2 to HC Brod, 15-2 to HC Hradiste, 15-5 to HC Veterani, and 9-1 to HC Hamag. In the penultimate game, Team Greece rallied from two goals back to tie HC Popelka, 7-7.

"We played against higher caliber teams -- as the scores indicate -- but the most important part is that it challenged our team to get better, and we showed improvement," said Kalyvas, who led the team with 10 points (two goals, eight assists) in the five matches.

Greece's extra preparation work paid dividends two months later in Sarajevo. But shortly before the qualification tourney started, the Greeks had to contend with a late change in the schedule.

"Originally we were supposed to have the first day of the tournament off and then play Armenia on day two. But we ended up having to play on back-to-back days. We played Bosnia on the first day and then faced Armenia without a day's rest. We tried to protest the change, but to no avail. Either way, we showed were ready," Kalyvas said.

With a crowd of 3,100 fans (including a sizeable Greek contingent) gathered at the Zetra Olympic Hall in Sarajevo, Greece opened the 2008 qualification tournament with a lopsided 10-1 win against the host nation. The following day, Team Greece took on a rested Armenian squad. This match proved considerably tougher than the opener, but Greece emerged with an 8-5 victory for the tournament championship.

By virtue of their victory in Sarajevo, Greece will compete in the 2008 Division III World Championships in Luxembourg, to be played from March 31 to April 6. In addition to the Greeks and the host country, the participating countries will be North Korea, Mongolia, South Africa and Greece's archrival Turkey.