

Russia Can Score Big With Hockey

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The performance of the Russian national hockey team at the 2013 World Championship in Helsinki earlier this month has been roundly criticized. Bad enough, it was dismantled 8-3 by Team USA in the quarterfinals, its earliest and most humiliating exit since 2006. Worse, at the group stage Russia even managed to lose to the upstart French for the first time in history.

But this year's tournament revealed excellent opportunities for the development of hockey outside North America, of which Russia should be taking advantage. The current season in the

National Hockey League has been shortened by a player strike, and Stanley Cup playoffs have been delayed. The World Championship begins every year in the midst of NHL playoffs, and as North American clubs get knocked out of the competition their stars rush to join their national teams. As a result, the seven hockey powers — which, along with Russia include Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, Slovakia, Sweden and the U.S. — become stronger as the tournament progresses. This year, however, fewer NHL players could come to the World Championship.

As a result, we saw that traditional whipping boys have become stronger. Switzerland was this year's Cinderella, reaching the final and winning silver, but Germany, Denmark, Norway, Latvia and even France all showed excellent results. The popularity and the level of hockey in Europe is growing. Moreover, as rapidly developing countries in the south become richer and a large number of middle class kids gain access to artificial ice, there is no reason for the interest in hockey not to explode in coming years — much the way the spread of television and the ability of many people to afford television sets has created a soccer fever around the world.

Even though the NHL is still the most prestigious hockey competition, hockey in North America is in crisis. The NHL has been convulsed by regular strikes and player lockouts. But there are deeper problems. In North America, hockey is played on narrow rinks, where big, fast defensemen make it very difficult to skate. Goal cages are too small for huge goalies wearing wide light-weight equipment. With the exception of the four-on-four overtime, NHL games have turned into boring, grinding, low-scoring contests between huge men on skates elbowing each other along the boards. No wonder it is the least popular of the four major team sports in the U.S.

"European" hockey is played on wider surfaces. It is a beautiful, swift game where skating and passing are at a premium. It certainly has a better chance to win worldwide following — if only it can get the right leadership.

Russia is uniquely positioned to provide such leadership. Hockey stars are, along with hydrocarbons and weapons, its only world-class export. In 2008, Russia used its bulk and resources to form a Eurasian league, the KHL, which next year will have teams from 7 neighboring countries, including some hockey powerhouses. A team from Vladivostok will also enter the competition. This may become a gateway to the Far East, and professional clubs may be soon organized in Japan, South Korea, China and even Alaska. American kids, for example, started playing hockey long after NHL clubs appeared in U.S. cities.

What Russia needs is to view the KHL as a purely commercial undertaking and not a national one. It should pattern its business model on the NHL. As matters now stand, the KHL is excessively Russia-centered. Even its main trophy, the Gagarin Cup, has nothing to do with hockey and everything with Russia's chip-on-the-shoulder nationalism and outdated patriotism.

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