

NHL Players to Compete in Sochi Olympics

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The National Hockey League and International Ice Hockey Federation have reached an agreement to free players for the 2014 Sochi Olympics after nearly four years of intense and sometimes bitter negotiations.

After the 2010 Vancouver Games, unhappy NHL owners signaled through commissioner Gary Bettman that they were prepared to end their Olympic participation, triggering years of talks followed by months of grinding negotiations before finally producing the long-awaited deal.

"The National Hockey League features the most international player population in professional sports, and our outstanding athletes take tremendous pride in representing their homelands on the global stage," Bettman said in a statement Friday.

"The decision to participate in the XXII Olympic Winter Games in Sochi was in many ways a difficult one but one that we know will be well received by our players and, most

importantly, by the vast majority of our fans and sports fans everywhere."

News of an agreement was welcomed by both players and hockey fans around the world, including Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper who tweeted, "I'm pleased to hear that @NHL players will be competing in #Sochi. Like all Canadians I can't wait to see how Team Canada takes shape!"

Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby, who scored the overtime goal against the U.S. that gave Canada the gold medal in Vancouver, could not hide his delight about getting the chance to defend the country's Olympic title.

"I'm glad that we are going and obviously excited to kind of start the process," Crosby said on a conference call. "The biggest thing is just representing your country."

"Anybody who gets the chance to do that there is a lot of pride that comes with that and being Canadian and playing hockey that's a dream come true."

As part of the agreement, the NHL will halt its 2013-14 regular season to allow about 120 players the chance to compete in the Feb. 12-23 tournament.

Few other details of the deal were immediately available, however, the list of NHL demands was long and well-known.

NHL owners had loudly complained about what they perceived as second class treatment by the International Olympic Committee and wanted some form of compensation for shutting down operations in the middle of the season and turning over their most important assets — the players.

The key issues standing in the way of an agreement were believed to center on insurance, travel, access to players and hospitality for players' and owners' families.

The NHL also wanted to be treated more like a rights holder or top sponsor such as McDonald's, allowing the league greater access to video and other games-related media material so it can trade on the Olympic brand to help sell and promote its product.

Negotiations were often contentious, with Bettman arguing the league did not necessarily need the Olympics while IIHF chief Rene Fasel insisted they did, telling CBC in an interview earlier this year: "I think Gary has no other choice. He has to come to Sochi."

Since the 1998 Nagano Winter Games, when NHL players made their Olympic debut, owners insisted they have seen diminishing returns on their investment, particularly when the event is held outside North America and games cannot be aired in prime time.

But the NHL was under increasing pressure to get a deal done with many Russian players, including Washington Capitals captain Alexander Ovechkin, warning they would compete in Sochi no matter what the league decided.

President Vladimir Putin also urged the NHL to get a deal done while NBC, which paid \$775 million for the U.S. broadcast rights to the Sochi Games, would have expressed its hopes at having NHL players in Russia after inking a 10-year, \$2 billion television deal with

the league.

"Although there were many details to discuss with our partners NHL and NHLPA, there was never any doubt in my mind that we would not continue the tradition from Nagano, Salt Lake City, Turin and Vancouver," said Fasel, who is also a member of the powerful IOC executive committee, in a statement. "The modern Olympic era is about sportive competition on the highest possible level.

"This is what fans around the world expect from a 100-meter race or downhill skiing and this is also what they are entitled to expect from our sport."

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