

The European Hockey Union

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Zagreb's Medvescak became the 28th team in Russia's Kontinental Hockey League this year. This was a milestone for the KHL, which is only in its sixth season. Bringing in Medvescak will help it expand its international footprint as it works on having clubs from Finland, Italy and Germany join as well.

Croatia is not known for its ice hockey prowess. Few Croats grace the Medvescak roster, which is dominated by North Americans, including the winner of the 2006 National Hockey League goal scoring title, Jonathan Cheechoo, and the 2010 World Junior Champion, Luke Walker.

However, Medvescak has a loyal, even fanatical, following in Zagreb. It is a perennial national champion, but its Croatian rivals are weak. In the Slovenian and Austrian leagues, where it played several seasons, the level of play was also low. The KHL, on the other hand, has the world's toughest competition after the NHL. For the fans who regularly sell out the 6,400 seat arena, there is finally something serious to cheer about. Croat kids who flock to the games in large numbers finally can see some of the world's best players.

Today's sports fans are too young to remember the bitter, politically-tinged football rivalry between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. In the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, the two countries played to a dramatic 5-5 tie, with the Yugoslavs then winning a rematch two days later. Because Yugoslavia was then an ideological foe, the Red Army soccer club, the core of the Soviet national team, was dissolved. The Soviets exacted revenge eight years later, defeating Yugoslavia in the final of the 1960 European Championship.

It is a different era, and the same countries no longer even exist. Still, a recent match between Medvescak and Neftikhimik from Nizhnekamsk had an edge — probably more so than matches in the Austrian league. Perhaps it was just the Russians and the Canadians duking it out, but in any case the fans loved the passion and, as the KHL matures, long-standing rivalries will emerge, probably spurred by the troubled history of Central and Eastern Europe. In Riga, when the local Dynamo plays visitors from Russia, Latvian and Russian-speaking fans bury their differences and jointly root for their hometown club.

Russia has been trying hard to be a legitimate rival to the U.S. — in economic, political and military spheres. It is building its own customs union as a counterweight to the EU, which it considers an American stooge. It is working on its own missile defenses to match the NATO system. It is rushing to stake out portions of the Arctic ahead of Washington. But in hockey, without really trying, it seems well on its way to create a bona fide alternative to the NHL.

It is already a far more pleasant experience to attend a KHL game. Tickets are cheaper: the costliest seats for a regular season Medveczak game are about \$25. The beer is good, not the beer-flavored water you get at U.S. arenas for a small fortune. There has been no players' strike like the one that nearly killed last season in the NHL. Finally, the game is played on a wider surface, allowing for more skating and higher scoring, not the grinding mess that NHL hockey has become.

Perhaps if Russia wants to lead the world in other areas, it should look at the KHL. It might want to play nice and give people what they want. Then, others will surely follow its leadership.

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