

For Ice Hockey Fans, Winter Games Begin With First Faceoff

By [The Moscow Times](#)

February 11, 2014



Russia's Alexander Ovechkin shooting a puck during the team's first practice at the Winter Olympics in Sochi. **Brian Snyder**

SOCHI — Although the Sochi Games have officially begun, for many sports fans the Winter Olympics do not really start until the puck drops on the men's ice hockey tournament.

Canada's Sidney Crosby and Russia's Alexander Ovechkin, two of the Olympics' biggest draws, arrived in the Black Sea resort on Monday, just two days before the men's ice hockey competition begins.

The 12-nation tournament promises to be one of the high points of the Olympics with the gold medal awarded on the final day of the Games, just hours before the closing ceremony.

For President Vladimir Putin, the Games are a chance to project his country as a resurgent world power, and a healthy medal tally would certainly help after winter sports superpower

Russia failed dismally in Vancouver four years ago.

A gold medal for the ice hockey team once known as the 'Big Red Machine' would remind the world of Russia's sporting prowess.

As Olympic finals go, the 2010 Vancouver Games will be hard to top, with Crosby scoring the golden goal against the U.S. to crown Canada Olympic champions and sent a wave of national pride surging across the Great White North.

If there is one country where the sport matters as much as it does to Canadians, it is Russia.

Former goaltending great Vladislav Tretyak, now president of the Russian Ice Hockey Federation, said the hosts would have a target on their backs.

"I am always nervous but everyone will be nervous," said Tretyak, who, along with figure skater Irina Rodnina, was given the honor of lighting the Olympic cauldron during Friday's opening ceremony.

"We are all nervous because everybody wants to win, especially against us. All teams want to face us in the final."

Russian fans have good reason to be nervous having had precious little ice hockey success to celebrate since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Winners of six of the seven Olympic competitions from the 1964 Innsbruck Games to Calgary in 1988, the last traces of their mighty ice hockey empire were seen at the 1992 Albertville Games when a "Unified Team" of former Soviet republics took the gold.

In the five Winter Olympics since, Russia have had to settle for one silver and a bronze while slumping to a new low in Vancouver with a sixth place finish.

"The pressure is going to come, 100 percent," said Ovechkin.

"It is simple now, you just have to enjoy your moment, enjoy your time."

"As soon as you start thinking about different stuff, you are going to be stuck in something bad."

The U.S. team should not be overlooked either and have brought a dozen players that lost in the heartbreaking Vancouver final.

The Americans have not won gold since the 1980 Lake Placid "Miracle on Ice," when a U.S. team comprising mainly college students defeated overwhelming favorites the Soviet Union in one of the greatest sporting upsets of all time.

After settling for silver in Vancouver, the U.S. should be among the medal contenders again in Sochi.

The bigger international rink has presented problems for both Canadian and American players who grew up playing the game on smaller surfaces.

With more room to maneuver, speed and creativity will be at a premium on the larger Sochi ice rather than the tight-checking physical style seen in North America.

Sweden, Finland and the Czech Republic will all fancy their medal chances on the larger surface.

The Czechs stunned the ice hockey world by taking gold at the 1998 Nagano Games while the Swedes were crowned Olympic champions in 1994 and 2006.

Finland will also be in the medal hunt having reached the podium at four of the last five Games.

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