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Hockey Fever Hits Russia as Men Open Olympic Bid

By Jennifer Monaghan

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The Russian men's hockey team will play their first match against Slovenia.

Russian hockey fans will have much to cheer for Thursday when their men's and women's teams take to the ice at the Shayba Arena.

The men's team, which opens its Olympic bid against Slovenia at 4:30 p.m., boasts an impressive array of international talents among their ranks with no less than 16 NHL players in their squad.

Among Russia's biggest stars is Alexander Ovechkin, captain of the Washington Capitals and this year's leading NHL scorer with 40 goals and 15 power-play goals. Fans will be hoping Ovechkin's goal scoring abilities can help his team improve on their disappointing sixth place finish in Vancouver four years ago.

Despite hockey being one of the most popular winter sports in Russia, the national team has failed to match the glory years of 1964-1988, when the Soviet team won six out of a possible seven Olympic titles. Since 1996, Russia has won only two medals — a silver and a bronze — with the U.S. and Canada proving to be the dominant forces in men's hockey.

In a change from the last Olympics, the 2014 competition will be played on a European-sized rink, which is 15-feet wider than the NHL standard. This could force some of the game's major players to change the way they approach the tournament.

"You have to be conservative with how you play on the ice," U.S. forward Patrick Kane told USA Today. "You can't really run at guys or chase the puck around. You have to really use your hockey sense to your advantage and realize what kind of situation you're in," he added.

The 12-nation tournament is sure to be a highlight of the Games, and Russia will be hoping to replicate the success of the Canadian men's hockey team, who clinched gold on home soil four years ago. With the final match coming just hours before the closing ceremony, victory could be the icing on the cake in Sochi.

Women's Team

On Thursday evening, the Russian women's team will take to the ice with the intention of laying down a marker.

The team currently sit joint-top of group B along with Sweden, and will take on their Scandinavian counterparts at 9 p.m. to determine the seeding for the quarter-final draw. With two matches played, both teams have already secured qualification from the group stage, following victories over Germany and Japan, respectively.

In this year's competition, a new group format has been introduced to curb the dominance of the U.S. and Canadian teams. In Vancouver 2010 the two North American teams scored a combined total of 73 goals in the preliminary rounds, conceding just three goals in reply.

"The problem is that Canada and the U.S. continue to improve and it's harder for the other countries to catch up. So that's a dilemma that women's hockey is always going to face," said Canada's three-time Olympic gold medallist Hayley Wickenheiser, The Globe and Mail reported.

Under the new front, the eight women's teams have been split into two pools: group A, which comprises the top-four ranked teams, and group B, which comprises the lesser-ranked nations.

The top two spots in group A — which have already been secured by the U.S. and Canada — will get an automatic bye to the semi-final, with the bottom two teams in group A facing the top two teams from group B in the quarter-finals.

As things stand, Finland and Switzerland will join Russia and Sweden in the quarter-finals, with Thursday's matches determining the definitive fixtures.

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