23, 1956, in Budapest, Hungarian students began a strong movement of protestation to provoke a Western reaction and make their country a democracy. On November 4, after 11 days of barricade, the tanks of the Red Army crushed the revolution. About 200,000 persons left Hungary. These events took place at the very same moment when the Hungarian Olympic delegation was on its way to Melbourne, where it was welcomed by several hundreds of Hungarian refugees avid to express their patriotic feelings and their hatred of the Soviets.

Water polo had been internationally dominated by Hungary for almost 30 years and it was the only Olympic event where both nations were directly opposed in Melbourne. In this context, the Hungarians’ victory was of special importance: It served as symbolic resistance against the Soviet domination and was largely echoed in the Western press, which in the heart of the Cold War, described it as a struggle for freedom. 

Thierry Terret

Further Reading


Ice Hockey, Europe

Historical Overview

While modern ice hockey is generally considered a Canadian invention, emanating from 1870s Montreal, its roots have often been traced back in history to various stick and ball games originating in preindustrial Europe, such as the Irish hurl, Holland’s kolven, and the Icelandic knattlekit. Apart from the rumor that the Europeans who migrated to North America brought their traditional pastimes with them to the New World—where these are said to have merged with other forms of play soon to become modern ice hockey—no comprehensive historical account of how these alleged predecessors actually developed into the game we know has ever been presented. Rather, on closer examination, most arguments concerning the matter seem to be based on immense simplifications and/or circumstantial evidence, since the tangible primary sources at hand are in short supply.

Contemporary information on how organized ice hockey was introduced in Europe, after its inception in late-19th-century Canada, is scarce as well. Some say that modern ice hockey was first played in Europe by two British university teams in St. Moritz in 1885. It has also been stated that Arthur Stanley—son of Lord Stanley of Preston, who donated the Stanley Cup—enticed the royal family into playing the game at Buckingham Palace when he returned to England in 1895, after his father’s service as the British governor-general of Canada. Still others maintain that the championship skater George Meagher from Kingston, Ontario, introduced the new sport in Paris in the late 1890s, having gathered skaters to play in a series of friendly games against British bandy clubs.

A complicating matter is that the similar European game bandy initially was dubbed “hockey” as well. Hence, nowadays it is sometimes difficult to determine if older statements concerning “hockey” refer to an early version of bandy or ice hockey. However, according to Nordisk familjeboeks sportlexikon (a renowned Swedish encyclopaedia of sports, published in the first half of the 20th century), Canadian ice hockey started to surpass bandy as the winter team sport of choice on the continent about 1906. What is certain is that ice hockey followed in the footsteps of bandy in Europe at the turn of the 19th century and soon flourished in metropolitan centers and fashionable winter resorts such as Berlin, Prague, Davos, and St. Moritz. Moreover, a clear historical milestone is the founding of the international ice hockey union in Paris, May 15, 1908, under the moniker Ligue Internationale de Hockey sur Glace (in the 1950s the name was changed to International Ice Hockey Federation, IIHF) by representatives from Belgium, France, Great Britain, and Switzerland. Apparently, this came about in order to bring a solution to the rule discrepancies between different countries, which were highlighted in the wake of the first international contests in 1905.

The first European championship was played in Les Avants, Switzerland, in 1910. After that, European championships were held annually until the outbreak of World War I. During the war European ice hockey
at large lay fallow, but the Olympic Games in Antwerp in 1920—where an ice hockey tournament was included for the first time—helped breathe new life into the game. Propelled by the many international contests arranged in the interwar era, as well as a wave of newly established artificial ice rinks all over Europe, the popularity of the game grew steadily on the continent. In 1923, Romania, Spain, and Italy were admitted to the IIHF, while countries such as Poland, Hungary, Norway, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia joined the federation in the late 1920s or early 1930s. This was part of an increased globalization of the game, since ice hockey leagues had been founded in Asia, Africa, and Oceania as well by the 1930s.

In the early days, the quality of European ice hockey was rather poor. The fact that the Swedish national squad assembled for the Antwerp Olympics, which was primarily made up of bandy players who had neither seen nor played in an actual ice hockey game before, was able to place fourth in the standings (after Canada, the United States, and the Czech Republic, but before France, Belgium, and Switzerland, where the ice hockey traditions were comparatively rich) bears testimony of that. Still, the quality of European ice hockey improved. Great Britain’s victory in the 1936 Olympics, which required the stunning defeat of the powerhouse Canada (2–1), marked the coming of European ice hockey in general, although the vast majority of the team members were English players raised in Canada. In most cases, though, not even North American–trained players could make up for the superior skill level of the Canadian and U.S. players. Rather, until the 1950s the expertise of the game was so much greater in North America than Europe that even second- and third-tier Canadian and U.S. amateur teams could usually defeat the best of the European national squads quite easily.

In 1946, the IIHF delegates met for the first time in seven years. Germany was expelled from the federation, and the memberships of the Baltic countries
were terminated due to their annexation by the Soviet Union. Austria—which had been dropped from the union after the Anschluss in 1938—was readmitted, while Denmark was added as a new member. After this postwar membership revision, the IIHF in the 1950s and 1960s experienced a period of consolidation and growth. Germany was re instituted in the federation as West Germany (1951) and East Germany (1956), and Bulgaria joined in 1960. However, the single most important admission after 1945 was the membership of the Soviet Union in 1952. The first official appearance of the Soviet Nationals—their stunning gold-winning debut in the world championships in 1954—instantly turned ice hockey into a red-hot cultural commodity on the international level, as the game was transformed to a Cold War battleground, where the Soviet Union wrestled with Canada, Sweden, the Czech Republic, and other countries for world supremacy.

Hence, 1954–1992 was a period wrought with politically fueled quarrels in international ice hockey. What made this so much more troubling for the IIHF was that the Cold War rivalry was interconnected with another issue that quickly gained traction in the late 1960s and early 1970s: the professionalization of European ice hockey.

The first known professional team in Europe was the London-based Grosvenor House Canadians in 1931–1932, while the first professional league, the English National League (ENL), was formed in 1935. According to historians Osmo Kivinen, Jani Mesikäm men, and Timo Metsä-Tokila, “The ENL offered just as good an option as any other . . . professional league” for North American players outside the National Hockey League (NHL). That, in concert with the close cultural ties that existed between Canada and Great Britain because of their colonial past, made for an abundance of Canadian players in the ENL, and it solidified Great Britain’s position as one of the leading powers—if not as the central force—in the first half-century of European ice hockey history.

After a six-year hiatus because of World War II, the ENL revived its business in 1946 but struggled with financial difficulties and finally folded in 1960. While this spelled the end of the golden age of British ice hockey, it soon proved to be a blessing for European ice hockey at large, since many of the Canadian players previously employed by the ENL found their way to different teams and leagues all over the continent, where they helped to create interest in the game and raise the talent level. Before long, European players caught the eyes of major league clubs in Canada and the United States.

In 1964–1965, the Swedish forward Ulf Sterner became the first Europe-trained player to dress for an NHL game. What really opened up the door for the migration of Europeans to professional teams in North America were the NHL expansion in 1967 and the founding of its short-lived rival the World Hockey Association (1972), which meant a dramatic increase in job openings in professional ice hockey. Concurrently, in order to better its chances in international competition, Canada lobbied to get the IIHF to allow professionals at the world championships, which they did in 1975. All this created a lot of commotion in European ice hockey circles, where many were already disenchanted by the Soviet players’ state professionalism and dreaded the ultimately fruitless venture of erecting a European professional league, launched by a group of North American entrepreneurs in the 1960s.

However, professionalism gradually took hold and soon became the order of the day in European top-level ice hockey. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, in the beginning of the 1990s, a growing number of players have migrated between North America and Europe in order to play professionally. Player movement from one country to another in Europe has increased rapidly as well, not least because of the European Court of Justice’s Bosman Ruling in 1995. Besides, professional leagues now operate in all major European countries, although their player salaries in general are much lower than the NHL payroll.

It remains to be seen if the European professional leagues can grow to the point of competing with the NHL financially and/or in recruitment of the best players. The newly established Russian Kontinental’naya Khokkeynaya Liga (Kontinental Hockey League, KHL) seems hard set on trying, even aiming at expanding to metropolitan centers in Western Europe. For some European power brokers—like former NHL great and current president of Färjestads BK in the Swedish elite league Håkan Loob, who has researched the prospect
of Swedish top clubs joining the KHL—a transnational league made up of the best clubs in Europe seems to mark the way of the future. Others argue that the whole idea of a European super-league is unsound and that the best interest of the game is served through each country’s national program.

The latter seems to be the predominant stance. This was clear during the World Hockey Summit in Toronto in the fall of 2010, where IIHF president René Fasel made headlines having declared “I will fight like hell and not let anybody come from abroad” when asked of the possibilities for a future NHL expansion to Europe. In doing this, Fasel not only stood up for European ice hockey in general but also followed in the footsteps of earlier IIHF presidents—such as Great Britain’s John Francis “Bunny” Ahearne—in challenging the NHL’s authority in the ice hockey world.

Overall, ice hockey seems to be thriving in Europe at the turn to the 21st century. A number of countries—such as Belarus, Greece, and Iceland—joined the IIHF in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. More important, since the end of the 1980s, women’s ice hockey—having been marginalized and ostracized for almost a century—has started to make headway in several countries, although the resources made available for female players are still but a fraction of those of their male counterparts.

Looking ahead, amid all the NHL and KHL hoopla, the development of women’s ice hockey seems to hold the key to future growth for the sport as a whole. While the men’s game will be hard pressed to expand much beyond its current position, women’s ice hockey is just tapping the surface in terms of recruitment, exposure, and quality. However, to grow, the women’s game is in need of more funding and opportunities, and it is still too early to say if it will receive the necessary support to fulfill its potential.

Overview of Major Countries

Czech Republic (Formerly Bohemia and Czechoslovakia). Ice hockey is first said to have been demonstrated in Prague in 1905 by Canadian Ruck Anderson. The ensuing spread of the game in the country was in large part due to the efforts of Professor Josef Gruss, who made the first translation of Canadian rules into Czech. In 1908, Gruss set out to establish the first clubs in Prague, which led to the founding of the Cesky Svaz Hockeyjovi (Czech Hockey Union) on November 6, 1908. Bohemia immediately established itself as one of Europe’s greatest ice hockey nations, winning the European championships in 1911, as well as in 1914, 1920, 1922, 1925, 1929, and 1933 (the last five under the new name Czechoslovakia).

In 1931, the country’s first artificial ice rink opened in Prague. The same year, Slovakia’s Hockey Union merged with the Czech Hockey Union to become the Czechoslovakian Hockey Union. Before that, there had been separate national Czech Championships (since 1910) and Slovak Championships (since 1930).

Czechoslovakian ice hockey continued to flourish after 1945. The Czechs won the World Championships in 1947 and placed second in the Olympics the following year, having tied the gold-winning Canadian Team. In 1949, the Czechoslovaks won the world championships but were denied the opportunity to defend their title, since the entire national team was arrested by the secret police prior to the tournament, accused of attempting to defect.

While the Soviet Union emerged as a world power in the postwar era, Czechoslovakia continued to rank among the greatest teams in Europe, often rivaling or bettering the Soviet Union, especially in the 1970s when it won the world championships in 1972, 1976, and 1977.

After the Iron Curtain fell, the Czech Republic and Slovakia split. The Czechs’ first major triumph was the gold-winning effort in the world championships in 1996. They also won the world championships in 1999, 2000, 2001, 2005, and 2010; their startling victory at the Olympics in 1998 is considered the acme of Czech ice hockey.

The Czech Extraliga (Extraliga lednìho hokeje), established in 1993, following the break-up of Czechoslovakia, is the highest-level league in the Czech Republic today. The Extraliga contains 14 teams. The top 10 at the end of the regular season are qualified for the play-offs for the national championships, whereas the bottom four compete with the first-place team in the second division for four openings in the Extraliga the following season.
Finland. Ice hockey is said to have been introduced in Finland by Professor Leonard Borgström at the end of the 19th century. However, the game did not gain a firm foothold in the country until 1927, when members of the Finnish Skating Union—tired of the impracticality of the huge bandy ice surface and enthused by ice hockey demonstrations they had witnessed abroad—embraced the new game. As a result, the skating union published the first set of rules in Finnish, based on the rules of the IIHF. The first club game was played in Tampere on January 15, 1928.

While indoor arenas with artificial ice were becoming common in Europe in the interwar era, Finland’s players were entirely dependent on natural ice well into the 1950s. Soon after that Finland experienced an ice hockey—boom, due to the development of one of Europe’s leading ice hockey equipment manufacturing industries.

Finland’s first great triumph, a silver medal in the European championships in 1962, marks the arrival of the Finish national squad as a competitive force at the international level. In the 1988 Olympics, Finland placed second, and the national squad earned its first first-place finish in the world championships in 1995. Finland also stunned the ice hockey world by beating Canada in the bronze medal game in the 1998 Olympics. Since then, Finland has ranked among the four best national teams in the world in men’s ice hockey. The same goes for Finnish women’s ice hockey, having placed third or fourth in every world championships and Olympic tournament since the start of top-level international competition among women.

The top league in Finland, the SM-Liiga, was founded in 1975. In the year 2000 the automatic promotion and relegation system was abandoned. The league now contains 14 teams, having allowed KalPa promotion in 2005.

Germany. In Germany, ice hockey is first said to have been played on the lake Hansee in Berlin in 1897. Over the next couple of years the first more stable team was formed with players practicing at a rink on the ground at the Berlin Zoo. Germany joined the IIHF in 1909, and the national squad went on to earn a medal in each of the European championships staged before World War I. After the war, Germany was expelled from the IIHF, but German teams—such as the European powerhouse Berliner Schlittschuh Club—continued to play internationally. When Germany was reestablished in the IIHF in 1926, the nationals reestablished themselves as one of the better teams in Europe, winning two European championships before the outbreak of World War II. During the war, German ice hockey teams kept on playing internationally, as the Nazi regime used sporting contests as political propaganda.

After the war, Germany was excluded from the IIHF once again. While absent from the international scene, the Oberliga was formed as the top league in the country, which in the late 1950s was replaced by the Bundesliga. In 1994, the first professional league, Deutsche Eishockey League (DEL), was created. Following an agreement with the Deutscher Eishockey-Bund (German Ice Hockey Federation), the league renamed itself DEL: Die 1 Bundesliga in 1999–2000 while reintroducing relegation and promotion to/from the second division. DEL currently contains 14 teams.

Russia/Soviet Union. Ice hockey was first demonstrated in the USSR in 1932, when a German labor team played a series of exhibition games in Moscow. After that, ice hockey was played sporadically in the Soviet Union until the late 1940s, when a “conscious decision was made to pursue the new sport while placing less emphasis on bandy,” as sociologist Hart Can­telon has put it. Strongly supported by the political authorities, the Soviet nationals went on to establish themselves as the strongest power that international ice hockey has ever known. In 1954–1990, the Soviets won 22 gold medals at the world championships and 8 Olympic gold medals. With the collapse of the USSR, the Soviet dominance came to an end. Still, Russia has continued to rank as one of the top nations in the world in the men’s game. Additionally, women’s ice hockey has started to make inroads and is currently ranked as one of the top six national teams in the world.

Internally, Russian ice hockey started to change at the end of the 1990s. In 1996, the Russian Hockey League (RHL) was established in place of the former interstate league containing clubs from the Soviet Union. After only three years, the RHL was replaced by the Professional Hockey League (PHL), which in its turn was disbanded in 2008, when KHL absorbed all 20
teams. In 2010–2011, the KHL contained 23 teams, of which 20 were based in the Russian Federation, and 1 each in Belarus, Latvia, and Kazakhstan. Regardless of the nationality of the team, the title Otkrytyy Chempionat Rossii po khokkeyu (champion of Russia) and the Gagarin Cup are awarded annually to the league champion following a 16-team play-off at the end of the regular season.

Sweden. Ice hockey was formally introduced in Sweden in 1920, as participation in the Olympic tournament in Antwerp was considered an opportunity to better Sweden’s chances at earning points in the national competition. As a reward for the team’s strong performance, IIHF appointed Sweden host of the European championships in 1921. Sweden won the tournament, having defeated the only other participant, Czechoslovakia, in the final. The following year, the Svenska Ishockeyförbundet (Swedish Ice Hockey Federation) was established.

During the interwar era, ice hockey gradually spread over the country from its original hotbed in Stockholm. In the postwar era, the public interest in ice hockey exploded in Sweden, as the game benefited from an extensive erection of artificial ice rinks all over the country in the 1950s and 1960s, after having been dependent on natural ice for most of the time (1920–1949).

Since then, Sweden has ranked as one of the top nations in the men’s game, having won the world championships eight times and the Olympic gold medals twice. Women’s ice hockey has started to blossom in recent years as well. The women’s team has finished in the top four in most of the world championships and Olympic tournaments staged since the start of top-level international competition among women in the 1990s.

Swedish players were in the frontline of the European player movement to the NHL. While Sterner was the first European-trained player to play in the NHL, Swedish defenceman Tommie Bergman was the first to become an NHL regular in 1972–1973. In 1989, forward Mats Sundin became the first Europe-born player to be drafted first overall in the NHL entry draft.

The top Swedish league, Elitserien, was founded in 1975. Today, Elitserien is composed of 12 teams. The top 8 teams in the regular season are qualified for the play-offs for the national championships, while the bottom 2 face the best 4 clubs in the second division for 2 spots in Elitserien the following year.

Further Reading


Indurain, Miguel (1964–)

Born July 16, 1964, Miguel Ángel Indurain Larrañeta (known as Big Mig) was a Spanish road-racing cyclist who was the first rider ever to win the Tour de France five consecutive times, which he did from 1991 through
Sports around the World

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