

Defying the odds

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Greeks looking to recruit more players 16.10.2015



60 girls tried ice hockey as a new sport at Greece's first participation in the World Girls' Ice Hockey Weekend. Photo: HISF

ATHENS – The financial crisis in Greece may have stunted an upswing in Greek ice hockey but it didn't stop the passion of the Greek hockey family. Participating for the first time in the World Girls' Ice Hockey Weekend, Greece's hockey community is aiming at growth and hopes to convince decision makers to bring back an international-size rink.

Dramas were invented in ancient Greece and the history of Greek hockey definitely deserves to be rated dramatic.

Greece became an IIHF member in 1987 and participated in five IIHF tournaments from 1991 to 1999 before the closure of all ice rinks almost extinguished the sport in the country except for inline hockey and a few players who went to ice hockey camps abroad on their own.

A twist of fate for the better came a few years later. In the 2007/2008 season the first Greek championship in eight years was played at a small, temporary rink in Athens and the national team staged its comeback in IIHF play. For the 2008/2009 season it became even better when an ice rink was built into a disused wrestling arena built for the 2004 Olympic Summer Games in the Athens suburb of Ano Liosia. The Greeks even earned the right to host the 2010 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship Division III on that rink and the first national women's championship was played.

But that's when another twist of fate happened. The financial crisis hit Greece and there was no money to set up the rink for the following season. The event had to be moved to Luxembourg where Greece won a historic Division III silver medal, but the lack of ice back home dampened the enthusiasm.

"There were more players coming with the rink but after it shut down the growth stopped again and it was difficult to motivate the players, both men and women," said Georgia Proimou, General Secretary of the Hellenic Ice Sports Federation.

Ice sports are now limited to smaller rinks. There are two rinks, 1,000 and 800 square metres respectively, in Athens

and another 1,100 square metre arena in Thessaloniki, the country's second-largest city. Often teams have to play early morning or late at night since the rinks are mostly used for public skating.

The situation may deprive Greek athletes from competitive games according to the rule book but it's not the end of the world, since the Greeks are ready to improvise with what they have while hoping for better infrastructure.

"We can play 4-on-4 or 3-on-3, which is convenient for kids' teams. There are three rinks and in the winter seasons there are also small temporary rinks," Proimou said.

One of the Athens rinks, Ice N Skate, was used for two ice sessions as part of the World Girls' Ice Hockey Weekend last Saturday and Sunday. The Greeks followed the event with interest until last year, now they wanted to be part of it themselves and recruit new girls for the game. The event was organized by the most famous hockey club of the country, Iptameni Athens, who led the sessions with coaches and five players from the men's national team. 60 girls came to the event.

"We had a lot of fun. Many parents were asking questions where they can practise since ice hockey is not very popular in Greece," said Proimou.

"We also invited former players who came to attend. It was a great meeting point for former and new female players. Currently we just have two women's teams but there was no championship for the past few years but now we started with practices and hope to organize a league again. We start again and we really want to play. We already have new registrations. We are optimistic about the whole thing and the girls enjoyed it a lot."

"Especially the second day was amazing. We had many new girls and former players. We found players who want to start playing with clubs, the ice rink was almost full. We played a lot of games. Even mothers went onto the ice and the ice rink owners were so excited. It was a successful event and I hope that women's hockey will grow even more. It's good that this event happened before Christmas so we can use the momentum during the winter season."

The girls were introduced to ice hockey basics and given equipment before going onto the ice for a two-hour session. The time was used for skating, stick-handling and shooting sessions before they played games. Some younger girls hardly wanted to leave the ice and go back to their parents until they were promised that they will be back for hockey practices soon.

Bringing players back and finding new ones is a good sign for Greek hockey. Every additional athlete is another argument in the Greek hockey community's Sisyphean struggle for an international-size ice rink.

"The owners of the ice rink we use help us as much as they can so our goal is to find new players because right now we are not that many teams.

"There are plans for an Olympic-size ice rink, we have tried so hard in the last few years but unfortunately the economy in Greece is not the best right now so it's hard. However, some municipalities have interest and want to see that we have growth and participate internationally so we try really hard to make the sport more popular here," Proimou said.

"To have an Olympic-size ice rink is a main goal. We asked to use a venue from the 2004 Summer Olympics to convert to an ice rink but it's a big investment and we need investors who are willing to invest and maintain the ice."

After the recent elections in Greece, the situation can change again for the federation but the Greeks remain positive that one day their work will pay off with another dramatic twist to give ice hockey and its players more opportunities in Greece.

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