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Iptameni triumphs in Greece

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Old champion defends title in new Athens ice arena

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Iptameni Athens won the Greek championship for the second consecutive year. Photo: icehockey.gr

ATHENS – After many years without an ice rink in Greece, a national championship was held for the second consecutive season. Only the champion remained the same: Iptameni Athens.

After finishing the World Championship program in 44th place, one position better than in the comeback season 2007-2008, the Greeks held their national ice hockey championship - again in the summer, when the thermometer indicated about 30°C.

The late season comes not without reason. The Greeks still don't have a permanent ice arena for the whole year, but a solution was found in an Athens suburb, Ano Liosia, where an ice arena was made to work at least for a few weeks.

Many facilities of the 2004 Olympic Summer Games in the capital are abandoned and virtually not used. But one arena, originally used for wrestling, has now been converted into an ice arena and the modern facility will re-open next spring to stage the 2010 IIHF World Championship Division III Group A.

After Greece participated in four World Championship tournaments in the '90s – all of them in South Africa – and in Luxembourg and New Zealand in the last two years, it will be the first time an IIHF tournament will be held in Greece, in the former Summer Olympics venue.

The first national championship since 2000 was played last year under a tent on a temporary 40x20-metre ice rink and Iptameni Athens ending up as champion was no surprise. The team's core included most of the players who participated in Greek national team training camps and tournaments in the Czech Republic during the iceless years. And these players consequently joined the same club for the 2008 championship.

All but three players in the current national team were from Iptameni and they were again the big favourite in this year's three-week championship.

The difference between the seven teams was at times substantial and it became clear that Iptameni Athens and PAOK Thessaloniki would decide the title race between themselves.

In the all-deciding game of the final round, Iptameni met PAOK in a game for gold. Iptameni scored three unanswered goals in the

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opening stages and eventually won 4-1 to climb Greece's hockey Olympus. Iptameni won all of its nine matches with a 98-4 goal record.

Iptameni captain George Kalyvas was named MVP, George Fiotakis won the best goalkeeper award and Dimitris Kalyvas took home the top scorer's trophy. From PAOK, Nikos Papadopoulos was selected best defenceman and George Adamidis got the Fair-play award.

While there were some women mixed into the teams last year, there were two full women's teams this time around, Amazonas and Pegasus, who played five games against each other.

"In my opinion, this was the best Greek championship in our hockey's history," said Dimitris Kalyvas, who was excited about playing in an Olympic facility compared to the tent rink last year.

Staging the World Championship tournament in the restructured arena could give Greek hockey a much needed boost.

However, the other side of the coin is that the ice rink in the Olympic venue will also be temporary for the next season and those who would like to start to play ice hockey inspired by the tournament, might get a disappointment. A permanent ice arena in Greece is still not imminent.

"Greek ice hockey has been promised a permanent rink so many times, and many promises have been broken," Dimitris Kalyvas said. "I hope the rink stays open in the future, so we can develop hockey the proper way. We've been struggling too long to lose the battle now. We have had to overcome many hurdles but I think in the end we will be successful."

MARTIN MERK



Photo from the Greek championship in the 9,000-seat arena in Ano Liosia. Photo: Hellenic Ice Sports Federation

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