

Coach Rex's Corner

2015 IIHF Men's World Ice Hockey Championship Experience



Most people have a bucket list. Things they wish to see or do in their life time. Being a hard core hockey fan on my bucket list had always been the IIHF Men's World Hockey Championship. Over the past decades I have had the pleasure and good fortune of attending Canada Cup, World Cup of Hockey, World Junior, and Stanley Cup playoff games in Toronto and Calgary but had not yet experienced the IIHF World Ice Hockey Championship showcased in Europe.

When it was announced that Prague and Ostrava, Czech Republic would be hosting this year's championship I thought it would be a perfect hockey setup! Why? Prague is one of the most beautiful cities in the world and located in Central Europe. Being a popular travel destination, fans from all over the world would flock to the Czech Republic. The competitive atmosphere would be dynamic and electric! As well my wife, Marcela is from Prague so I felt it was a perfect opportunity to visit our Czech family overseas, conduct a couple hockey business meetings for future projects and enjoy some great international hockey. I was not disappointed. It was 17 days of hockey heaven from May 1st to 17th, 2015 and every one of the tournament games were broadcasted on the local Czech TV.

After arriving in Prague I managed to secure tickets and had the pleasure to attend 6 of the games at the Prague O2 arena: Canada vs. Sweden and Latvia vs. Austria during the round robin, Canada vs. Belarus quarter final game, Canada vs. Czech Republic and Russia vs. USA semi final games and the Gold medal game Canada vs. Russia.

Canada dominated the tournament winning the Gold medal

with very dominating 6 to 1 win over Russia. Our first medal since 2009 and our first Gold medal since 2007. Team Canada went undefeated 10 wins and 0 losses. Canada out-shot its opponents 416 to 210 plus 206 and out scored its opponents 66 to 15 plus 51! Sidney Crosby the Captain of Team Canada became the 26th member of the triple Gold Club (Olympics, World Juniors and World hockey Championship) and the 1st to captain all 3 teams. Why was Team Canada so strong this year? So many top NHL stars were available after being knocked out of the playoffs and the majority said yes. Dave Reid, Hockey Analyst on TSN emphasized why the players said yes because the tournament was in Prague! Prague was a strong attraction for players to attend the tournament with their families and the Czech Republic proved to be a great host country.

Here are a few unique insights, facts and observations on the tournament.

A Few Tournament Facts / Observations:

- This year's tournament was the 79th IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship.
- The theme of the tournament – "Hockey & Smile". Lots of fans were having a good time at the tournament!
- A total of 16 countries compete in this annual hockey tournament.
- After the competition both Slovenia and Austria were relegated to the B Pool.
- Seating capacity at Prague's O2 Arena is 17,383 and most games were sold out
- The Czech Republic established a new tournament attendance record of 741,690.
- Thousands of fans throughout Europe traveled to attend the games, stayed in hotels, and enjoyed food and beverage as well as the many Czech attractions. For many of the fans it's an annual hockey vacation.
- The tournament was certainly a big boost to the local Czech economy bringing in millions of dollars.
- This is truly a "big money" IIHF tournament - generating

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millions of dollars in profits.

- Sometimes we think only Canadians are passionate about hockey, but other countries are equally as zealous about the game!

- I secured club

seats for the round robin games which included all you could eat buffet and all you could drink. Great set up for \$125 per ticket. Wondering how that kind of set up would go over in Calgary?

- Latvia is a small country population 2:1 million with only 17 indoor rinks and less than 4,000 registered male players in their hockey system. Their loyal fans show incredible support such an example were 2 Latvian drummers – who banged on their drums for practically the whole game against Austria!
- I lucked out and obtained a first row seat behind the Belarus team bench for Canada's quarter final game. With great admiration I watched Sidney Crosby during one of his back check plays going into 5th gear with 3 strides between the blue lines! A beautiful skating sight to see - so much power and speed.
- Czechs were doing their 2 foot jumping in their seats. It was quite the sight with practically the whole arena crowd jumping up and down against Canada in the Semis. Very happy to see Canada win 2 to 0 but it was a bit of a somber win. I could feel the disappointment and emotion from the partisan crowd! But they were classy had saluted the winning Team Canada with a great ovation.
- Jaromir Jagr was named 1 of the 3 best Czech players in the tournament. It was Jagr's last tournament and he received tremendous admiration and applause from the crowd. A special moment of thank you for all Jagr has done for his country on the international stage.
- Less than 3 hours after witnessing a dominant Czech crowd for the first semi final game the Russians came to town for the second semi. The Russians came from the other pool side in Ostrava and parts unknown to fill the O2 arena. They were loud and rowdy with their Russia Russia chants. Alexander Ovechkin flew in Friday from North America and played in the Saturday semi final to help the Russians win against the Americans. However, his presence didn't really help Russia in the Gold medal game. Canada dominated! Team Canada controlled the

puck and most of the play. Watching Ovechkin, Malkin, Kovalchuk, and Tarasenko chasing the puck all game was a very unfamiliar sight indeed. They were very ineffective against a stronger Team Canada.

- The gold medal game was a sell out - cheapest seats priced at \$360 Canadian.
- Canada won 1,000,000 Swizz Francs for winning all of its games in regulation time.
- Canada outshot Russia 37 to 12 in the Gold medal game.
- Russia only had 5 shots in the first period, 1 shot in the second and 6 in the third respectively.
- Russia's warm-up tactic – a stare down from the their blue line towards Team Canada's end, I had never witnessed it before and this tactic sure didn't work!
- Many of the Russian players left the ice before the Canadian national anthem was played – poor sportsmanship indeed. The IIHF President, Rene Fazell was not impressed with this tactic at all and fines are anticipated.
- Canada had 4 of the top 5 scorers in the tournament.
- Jason Spezza with 14, Jordan Eberle with 13, Taylor Hall with 13, and Matt Duchene with 12 points respectively.

Some Sights and Sounds at the O2 Arena:

- The fans expressed incredibly intense emotions of nationalistic pride at each game.
- Friendly rivalries among countries at the arena and national flags displayed everywhere.
- Friendly dance competitions amongst opposing fans displayed on the jumbo tron – lots of serious fun!
- Bob and Bobvek were the on ice mascots from Czech fairytale / storybook days – funny and light hearted presentations on the ice and in the stands. Good Czech humor!
- Fans dressed up in weird and wild costumes including cow suits as well as all kinds of different hats.
- A 65 year old 300 lbs Swede dressed in blue and yellow spandex with face paint – OMG!
- A 10 Czech drummer band in the stands making lots of upbeat noise and getting the crowds going.
- The arena was cleared out after the games with hundreds of riot police – no messing around! A very effective way with only 2 - 3 hours timelines between back to back playoff games to exit fans and have ticket holders attend the next game.

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- In the club seat lounge I saw two 12 to 13 year old Swedish boys drinking a beer with each of their Dads - not something you will see in Canada! However, not a big deal in the European world!

Atmosphere Outside the 02 Arena:

- The Prague subway system, security and police control were top notch and handled the large and lively crowds going to and from the 02 arena quite well.
- Fan Fest activities were well organized – lots to see and do outside the arena.
- A large merchandise store mainly stocked with IIHF, Czech, Russian and Swedish souvenirs.
- Latvia, Swedish and Russian fans were the most prominent visitors in Prague.
- Big screens in the Prague Old Town and Wenceslas Squares with 1,000's of people drinking beer, eating food and watching with a few police observing the situation – no violence to be seen. Great to see for those people who did not have tickets to the games!

Directorate Award Winners:

- **Top Goaltender:** Pekka Rinne (FIN) Top Defenceman: Brent Burns (CAN)
- **Top Forward:** Jason Spezza (CAN)
- **Media All-Star Team:** G – Connor Hellebuyck (USA) D – Brent Burns (CAN) D – Oliver Ekman - Larsson (SWE) F – Jason Spezza (CAN) F – Jaromir Jagr (CZECH) F – Taylor Hall (CAN)
- **MVP:** Jaromir Jagr (CZECH)

Final Results:

Gold Medal – Canada Silver Medal – Russia Bronze Medal – United States

Future Tournaments:

2016 Moscow and St: Petersburg, Russia
2017 Paris, France and Cologne, Germany
2018 Copenhagen, Denmark (Hosts For the First Time)
2019 Bratislava and Kosice, Slovakia
2020 Zurich and Lausanne, Switzerland

Next Year's Tournament:

The host country will be Russia. Hungary will return to the Championship after a 6 year absence. And Kazakhstan

returns after a 1 year absence. The seeding in the preliminary round was based on the 2015 IIHF World Ranking which ended at the conclusion of the 2015 IIHF World Ice Hockey Championship.

Group A (At St: Petersburg) - Canada (1), Finland (4), United States (5), Slovakia (8), Belarus (9), France (12), Germany (13) and Hungary (19).

Group B (At Moscow) - Russia (2), Sweden (3), Czech Republic (6), Switzerland (7), Latvia (10), Norway (11), Denmark (15) Kazakhstan (17).

The first games are played on May 6th, 2016 and the tournament runs until May 22nd, 2016.

In Conclusion:

Personally, the 2015 World Ice Hockey Championship was a fantastic hockey experience. I have to place it in my top 3 hockey spectator events! I never get tired of hearing our Canadian national anthem being played. As Jackie Gleason would say” How sweet it is!” I’m looking forward to next year’s tournament, but will watch it on TV. Who will take the Gold? Russia? Or Canada again? Or maybe another country? That’s the beauty of the WHC. It’s a very difficult tournament to win even on home soil! For me, the next live hockey spectator experience on my bucket list will be the Spengler Cup in Davos, Switzerland. It is cited as the oldest invitational ice hockey tournament in the world. First held in 1923. I would love in the future to experience the holiday atmosphere and excitement at the Vaillant Arena from this classic holiday season tournament held between Christmas Day and New Year’s Day. Go Canada Go!! The biggest challenge I fear will be securing tickets to the event! Dare to dream dare to dream! What’s on your hockey bucket list? Dare to dream, dare to dream!

