

Jubilee Christmas tournament is prelude to major hockey cup 2014

Belarusian President's team wins 10th Christmas amateur ice hockey tournament, recently held in Minsk

By Dmitry Baranovsky

At the invitation of Vladimir Putin, Mr. Lukashenko recently found time to visit pre-Olympic Sochi, where he appeared on the ice in the team of his Russian colleague. Before the two heads of state joined forces to play on the same squad, Mr. Lukashenko took a tour of the Ice Palace, which will be hosting hockey matches during the Winter Olympic Games.

Unfortunately, the Belarusian national squad won't be taking part in the Games, having failed to qualify. Nevertheless, the Belarusian President tested the ice and, with Mr. Putin, achieved a convincing victory of 12:3, helped by such stars as Vyacheslav Fetisov, Valery Kamensky, Pavel Bure and Alexander Kozhevnikov. The two presidents chatted informally before Mr. Lukashenko returned to Minsk to join the Belarusian squad, performing at the Christmas tournament.

The victorious tradition continued, with the President's team defeating the Russian squad without losing a single match, either in the group stage or in the play-offs. The old rivals were greeted by a full house at Minsk-Arena, and gave the most exciting match in the history of the competition. Regular time brought a score of 2:2, leading to forward Stepan Ponomarev scoring the decisive puck during the penalty shoot-out; this brought the Belarusian team its eighth title as winner of the Christmas amateur ice hockey



10th Christmas amateur ice hockey tournament won by Belarusian hockey-players

tournament. Of course, the event was more than a piece of festive fun: it was a trial run for May's World Championship. Players from the 12 squads were invited to give feedback, with journalists keen to learn how the Canadians, Swedes, Slovaks and other entrants viewed the facilities and organisation — at the arena and beyond.

"Everything was perfect from the moment we landed in Minsk. This tournament, its atmosphere

and all other details truly remind us of the World Championship. Our whole team has only the best impressions from time spent here," notes Roland Carlsson, the captain of the Finnish national team. His team, having earned bronze, had the opportunity to try the ice at the new arena. Playing in the semi-final, the Russians and Finns brought an 'international ticket' to the second venue of the forthcoming great event: Chizhovka-Arena. The smaller of

the two rinks was fully available to the teams for the first time.

Dmitry Shamolin, on the Russian national squad, expressed the common opinion, saying, "We've all enjoyed playing here. The ice and locker rooms are perfect, as are both arenas. It's the most luxurious sports complex, worthy of welcoming international tournaments. Judging by what we've seen here, Belarus has every chance of conducting one of the best World Championships."



Heads or tails?

By Kirill Karin

Fans discuss selection system for European Championship 2016 and our team's prospects, which appear quite good

It has long been known that 24 teams will play in the final stage of the Euro Championship for the first time, although the selection scheme has been inspiring debate. At least five different variations have been suggested but UEFA has chosen a time-tested classic: nine groups of 5-6 teams. This year, teams in first and second place after two rounds, as well as the team with the best performance among those third-placed, will automatically qualify for the finals, being hosted by France. The other eight teams in third place will contend for the remaining four places.

Coach Mr. Anatoly Baidachny comments, "Despite being in last place in our group, the team has progressed in the first round of the 2014 World Cup. We aren't a top team like Germany, Italy or Spain so we can't be sure of anything. We can't say anything for sure. With more qualifying places, it's now easier for us (and others) to be selected, so our chances appear quite good. However, much depends on our determination and whether we play as a true team, in every sense of the word, as well as which group we are placed into."

The draw for the qualifying tournament is to be held in Nice within two months. We can now say with greater confidence that we shouldn't count on an easy group. All those going for the 2016 European Championship are to be selected according to their UEFA rating, which takes into account the results of recent qualifying campaigns. Alas, we have nothing much to boast of.

Victoria Azarenko retains position as second seed worldwide



Belarus' top tennis player keeps her title as WTA second seed following first tournament of new season, in Australian Brisbane

Despite suffering defeat by USA first seed Serena Williams, Victoria has held onto her World Tennis Association second seed ranking, with 8,151 points. Ms. Williams boasts an impressive 13,260 points. Only one change has occurred in the top ten, with Russia's Maria Sharapova advancing from 4th position to 3rd, pushing back China's Na Li.

Podium conquered three times

Biathlete Darya Domracheva wins three prizes in three days — from 3rd-5th January — at World Cup stage in German Oberhof

By Sergey Sokolov

On 3rd January, Ms. Domracheva took first place in the 7.5km sprint; she completed the distance in 23 minutes and 6 seconds, with just one target miss over the two ranges. Second place went to Finland's Kaisa Makarainen, who was almost 30 seconds behind, with two misses. Ukrainian Yelena Pidgrushnaya came third.

On 4th January, Darya again delighted fans, winning the 10km pursuit despite three misses (two prone and one standing). Her 33 minutes and 36 seconds finish time could not be beaten, with Kaisa Makarainen again coming second (a full 34



Darya Domracheva strives for victory in Oberhof

seconds behind, with three misses). Norwegian Synnove Solemdal was third, with extra time of 1 minute and 11 seconds, and two misses.

In the final race in the 4th cup stage, on 5th January, the leader of the Belarusian team, Darya Domracheva, came third in the 12.5km

mass start, with only one miss across four ranges. She almost caught Norway's Synnove Solemdal in the final metres, being just only 0.3 seconds behind. Norwegian Tora Berger took first place, with a finish time of 37 minutes and 59 seconds and one miss.

In the overall World Cup standings, Darya is in 4th place, having missed the previous stage in Annecy; she has 284 points, as does Ukrainian Yelena Pidgrushnaya. Czech Gabriela Soukalová, with 306 points, leads, while Ukrainian Valentyna Semerenko occupies second position (304 points) and Finland's Kaisa Makarainen is third (301 points).