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Hockey in Russia

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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It may be my imagination but it seems as though every time I leave the country for a few weeks the world of sport goes through some sort of convulsion or some extraordinary developments take place. This past couple of weeks seems to have been no exception and I will come back to those later.

First, however, I want to talk about hockey. Not the NHL playoffs which have been both exciting and surprising, but the World Hockey Championship that was held in Prague in the first half of May. I have written about this event in years past, once recounting a world championship won by the United States. My point was that, for the most part, those sports fans living below that large grey mass on North American weather maps gave little notice to this event and to the U.S. victory.

This indifference is in part due to the crowded sports schedule competing for television time in late April and early May. The NHL playoffs divert most hockey fans from the World Championship and the NBA playoffs divert the attention of another large cohort of sports fans. May 2, the first Saturday in May, featured the run for the roses at Churchill Downs and that same night was the much anticipated Mayweather-Pacquiao title bout. With all this happening in the United States it is little wonder that an event that could be seen only on the NHL television network drew little interest.

That was not the story in Russia where hockey has the flavor of a national sport, and where Russian fans followed the progress of the tournament taking place in Prague. On May 16, the same day as the second leg of the Triple Crown was run in Maryland; the United States/Russian hockey game received major attention, exceeding even the eight goals scored by Vladimir Putin in the exhibition game featuring Russian hockey greats in Sochi.

On that night I was in Moscow and headed off to a large Sports Bar with big screen TVs and perhaps 300 Russian hockey fanatics. The beer was flowing well before the game was underway and the Russian fans were ready to celebrate victory. There were Russian flags and even a Soviet flag on the premises, fans wearing hockey sweaters, and the place was hopping. A small contingent of Americans led the owner

of the bar to wonder aloud if we had come to provoke. In fact we had come to watch the hockey.

The Russian fans were loud and in high spirits. For the most part they showed little interest in the few Americans in the place. Once the game got going there were occasional friendly taunts directed our way as a puck was stolen by the Russians or the Americans missed a sure shot on goal. The focus however was on the game. The Russian fans were totally into the game with cheers, roars, shouts urging their team to shoot and score.

This was the first game played by the great Russian star Alexander Ovechkin who had just joined the Russian team following the Washington Capitals elimination from the Stanley Cup playoffs. Ovechkin was clearly seen as the great leader come to take the team to another World Championship. When he touched the puck, pushed toward the net, and then shot, or when he landed a hard check on an American player, there were roars of approval across the bar.

All day long the Russian television sports shows were focused on the upcoming game, and were obsessed with Ovechkin's return. Russia was at full strength and clearly they were now on the road to victory.

The game began with the Americans playing surprising well. The first period was scoreless. As with many evenly matched games the control of the puck and the action ebbed and flowed. Shouts of approval and dismay were frequent from Americans and Russians alike. At the end of the period there was some friendly back and forth between the Americans and the Russians sitting around us.

The second period was much the same. The flow went back and forth, both teams missed opportunities to score, and the tension was rising as it does in a scoreless tie. The third period began and the frustration levels in the sports bar were rising. The first eight minutes were much the same as the first two periods.

I began to worry just a bit about the consequences of the Americans scoring first and our small group exploding with cheering. How well would that sit? The crowd was now much louder, the chants of "Ru - See - Ah" grew louder and louder. Tension was building.

You could sense that the first score would break the damn and would lead to several more goals. Then just nine minutes into the third period a shot whizzed past the American goalie and the crowd exploded. The noise was deafening. The windows were rattling. There was a clear and present danger that the beer glasses themselves might explode.

In what seemed like a blink of an eye, Alexander Ovechkin took the puck off the stick of an American and broke into the clear slamming a shot past the helpless goalie. This time the crowd was even louder. It was 2-0. Over the remainder of the period the Russian scored twice more, the last goal of the empty net variety.

I will admit that after Ovechkin's goal, I left the bar with a few others. We were disappointed, and at the same time relieved, and for the same reason.

In the end it was a great night in Moscow and a hockey experience I have never had before. The Russian fans were both delirious in victory and gracious toward the small coterie of Americans. In Moscow these days nationalist and patriotic feeling is running high, and just because it was the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. It seemed as if more was at stake for the Russian fans than a mere hockey game.

In many ways I am happy that I did not return on Sunday for the Canadian victory over Russia, 6-1, The Canadians put on a clinic and I suspect the sports bar, so wild the night before, was very quiet on that day.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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