



'MIRACLE ON ICELAND'

A bunch of middle-aged hockey players are doing their best to help a troubled nation through the game they love

BY BRION O'CONNOR

HOCKEY, WHEN PLAYED RIGHT, is a game that celebrates teamwork, certainly above individual accolades. The same generally holds true for life, though our culture of personality sometimes blinds us to that fact. Yet every now and then, we're reminded. The Great Iceland Ice Hockey Bailout is a perfect example.

Three years ago, Iceland was considered one of the wealthiest countries, per capita, on earth, and was tabbed the world's most developed nation by the United Nations' Human Development Index. Then everything fell apart. In 2008, this island country with a population of less than 350,000 was rocked by an economic collapse after its banks failed. More recently, volcanic eruptions added insult to injury, threatening harvests and livestock, and literally putting the country under a dark cloud. The pain endured by the residents was palpable. But it was also shared.

Visitors who previously came to this European nation for small hockey tournaments fell in love with the people and empathized with their plight. One such player is a 60-year-old co-owner of a candy-producing company in New Jersey. Michael Dee hatched the concept of the Great Iceland Ice Hockey Bailout, otherwise known as the "Miracle on Iceland."

"When I first mentioned the germ of this idea to a few close friends, their encouragement overcame my misgivings," Dee said. "You have to be a little bit crazy to play adult hockey and this tournament is a little crazy. Like any sport, we play our best when the odds are slim – and you are loose – and it is surprising how often we pull off an upset. Let's be serious: the chances are slim that this Hockey Bailout will make a big impact on an entire country. But we will have a hell of a time trying."

The idea quickly sprouted wings among Dee's friends and other players, including Phil Mass, a 58-year-old real estate developer from Toronto, Barry Walmsley, a 46-year-old sports tour consultant from Ohio, and Sergei Zak, a 33-year-old tournament organizer in Iceland who is also the coach of the country's under-18 national team. Those who had been to Iceland were eager to return to lend a hand. Those who had never been were intrigued. All were motivated by an underlying mission of helping out a country that has always been a welcoming host.

"Tournaments such as this inject energy, pride and credibility into a local program," said Mass, one of the event's organizers. "Especially having teams from countries such as Canada and the U.S. – home of the NHL – come all the way to their tiny isolated island to play. It begins to trigger interest and participation."

The awareness is there, say organizers. Thirteen teams had signed on for the tournament as of early October, more than halfway to the goal of 20. Players from Russia, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden and Great Britain, as well as the U.S. and Canada, are expected to join in the fun.

The tournament is set to run Oct. 21 to 24 at two rinks in the country's capital, Reykjavik. As for the fundraising component, Dee says he'd like to scare up about \$40,000 through team fees and sponsorship. Money raised will be split equally between youth hockey programs in Iceland and the country's Red Cross. Though admittedly a "small fundraiser" compared to massive federal aid, Dee noted the key was using hockey as a vehicle to spur a grassroots effort.

"What we're trying to do is a people-to-people bailout, to help out the morale and maybe help stimulate the local economy," he said. "We're not raising money to give it to the government, so it goes into some black hole. This is about people helping people, not the government."

Mass, who has visited Iceland

five times previously, especially likes the contribution to the country's nascent youth hockey programs. Hockey, he says, can have a major impact on the lives of youngsters and one of the Bailout's major goals is to make sure more Icelandic children get the chance to lace 'em up.

"A few kids being given an opportunity to play, especially when inspired by adult role models, can spur other kids to pick up the sport," Mass said. "Over time a domino effect happens and a program grows and develops."

Having upwards of 400 hockey players – along with friends and families – visit can provide local merchants with a nice economic bump, too. Walmsley estimates that the Bailout, even with 100 players, can infuse more than 2 million Icelandic Kroners (about \$170,000) into the local economy.

"The money is almost secondary compared to the bonds created between people from different countries," said Walmsley, who also plans to play in a soccer tournament during the Iceland trip. "These trips can really help people understand other cultures and create lasting friendships."

The Great Iceland Ice Hockey Bailout will celebrate those basic truths. It will be the result of good intentions, hard work behind the scenes and considerable huffing and puffing on the ice. But it won't be a miracle.

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Previous trips to Iceland for small tournaments created a bond with the country.

