



In February 2008 Mark Tabrum and Al Bloomer visited St. Petersburg and Moscow, Russia. The purpose of the trip was to learn about the Russian Coaching Education Program and to observe the differences as well as similarities between USA Youth Hockey and Russian Youth Hockey. Barry Smith and Mikhail Manchik, CKA Ice Hockey Club of St. Petersburg, were our hosts. They made all the on-site arrangements for the visit. The Russian people we visited were very generous with their time and conversations were open and candid. This report is an attempt to summarize the trip. The first part will discuss coaching and coaching education. The second part will describe the philosophies and operation of Russian youth hockey, specifically age six thru the age of 18.

There are 168 indoor rinks in Russia. In 2007, the Russian Hockey Federation reported 25,956 male players, 257 female players and 56,754 junior players. The primary governing body for Russian Hockey is at the club level. The Russian club level is similar to our association level. Russia is divided into six regions for hockey; however, there appears to be no equivalent to our affiliates or districts.

We visited four hockey clubs:

CKA – St Petersburg – our host

Khimik – Moscow

Dynamo – Moscow

CSKA – Red Army – Moscow

We also visited The Basza in St. Petersburg. The former Red Army Hockey HQ was built in 1870 and serves as hockey training center, CKA offices, provides training meals, houses medical staff and provides sleeping quarters for players and staff.

### **Coaching Program:**

The Russian coaching education system is extensive and demanding.

- All coaches must go through a rigorous educational process. They must first obtain a sports degree from an accredited university. After receiving this degree, coaches spend a year attaining a coaching degree specific to the sport they are coaching. Coaches spend time in the classroom and are given practical experience by coaching with two separate teams during this year of hockey-specific training. This theory and practical experience totals 500 hours. Most Russian coaches are former players. Coaches are required to have skating ability and goaltender coaches receive additional specialized training.
- There is emphasis on player athleticism – off ice physical training and physiological development are a significant part of the coaching curriculum. Off ice training begins at age eight; weight training is used based on player testing, usually beginning at age 12. Dry land and strength training is a key component in the development of Russian players
- **All** youth hockey coaches are paid professionals. This is their full time job. Salaries vary; ranging from \$6,000 to \$10,000 per year. There are additional benefits that may include housing, insurance and meals. The coaches can make additional money conducting summer camps. Volunteer coaches are very rare; if they participate, it is on a very supervised and limited basis.
- The top/best coaches teach at the entry levels (6, 7 & 8 year olds).
- In some clubs a coach will move vertically through the system with the same birth year. In other clubs the coaches will stay at the same birth year level for up to 10 years.
- Clubs have three coaches per team (10 and under); two coaches per team for 11-18 year olds. Clubs have at least one goaltender specialist that works with all goaltenders.
- Clubs have a Hockey Director in charge of the entire program. Clubs also have a Coaching Program Director that establishes a detailed daily, as well as yearly, curriculum of development. This curriculum (lesson plan) is followed by all coaches at all levels. There may be coaching councils that offer ideas and suggestions, but ultimately the Coaching Program Director sets the curriculum. While some clubs prepare the detailed lesson plan, others give the coaches the scheduled points to emphasize and allow them to prepare the detailed lesson plan.
- The coaches are strict disciplinarians. If a player is misbehaving he/she will be told to leave the ice. In one instance we saw a coach firmly “whack” non-attentive players with his stick. Players can be dismissed by the Program Director for

discipline issues and/or behavior. There is no hearing and no appeal. We were told that although Directors have the ability to dismiss, it does not happen very often. The coach demands and receives respect on and off the ice. Russian coaches have almost a dictatorial style.

- Coaches within the club work together. The program is designed for vertical development – moving players to the next level within the club. Standardized curriculum/philosophy allows for smooth transition and players are prepared for the next level. The primary objective is to prepare players for the parent professional club team.
- Players practice on ice a minimum of five times per week. Each practice lasts from 90 to 120 minutes. In addition, players from age 8-12 will have three off ice training sessions per week. Older players will have five off ice training sessions per week. At about age 12-14, weights are added to the off ice training program. Off ice training is very important in Russian hockey.
- Coaches are evaluated at least once per year. Winning is **not** the major criteria in a coach's evaluation. Player skill development and progress is the primary criteria for coaches. Ultimately coaches are evaluated by the number and quality of players they develop. Historically turnover is low.
- The primary objective of each program is to develop players for the parent professional team. A secondary objective is to develop players for the national teams. Winning at the older ages (16 and older) is considered but is not a primary objective. A 17-year-old is eligible to play in the top professional league.
- The practices we observed for the 5-8 year-olds worked on fundamental skills. Specific drills, requiring multiple skills, were run for long periods of time (15 to 30 minutes) and emphasized repetition. The overall pace was moderate. The coach gave verbal instruction and occasionally stopped practice for demonstration. We saw practices at this level where a player had a puck on his stick for the entire session. Puck possession and puck protection are high priorities in Russian hockey.
- We observed a few practices for 17-22 year olds. Here one vs. one battles, odd man situations and puck movement seemed to be the focus. The pace of these practices was very high. There were three coaches on the ice and there were skill stations.
- Practices overall focus on the individual skills of the player not the team concept of North American hockey. One specific practice we observed had players skating around tires on one end of the rink. The other end had players stick-handling pucks through and around metal tri-pods. Players in the middle of the ice were put in 1 vs 1, 1 vs 2, and 1 vs 3 situations.
- Tactics and systems are ***not*** introduced in Russian hockey until age 14.

### **Summary of game to practice ratios for 2008:**

This may vary slightly from club to club. The following is an attempt to summarize the four clubs we visited.

**Birth year (age)** – games per season – practice/training information per week  
**2003 (5)** – No games – skate 3-4 times per week  
**2002 (6)** – No games – skate 4-5 days; 1-2 off-ice sessions  
**2001 (7)** – 10-15 games – practice 5 days; 2 to 3 off-ice sessions  
**2000 (8)** – 15-20 games – practice 5 days; 3 off-ice sessions  
**1999 (9)** – 20-30 games – practice 5 days; 3 off-ice sessions  
**1998 (10)** – 30-35 games – practice 5 days; 3 off-ice sessions  
**1997 (11)** – 40 games – practice 5 days; 3 off-ice sessions  
**1996 (12)** – 45 games – practice 5 days; 3 off-ice sessions  
**1995 (13)** – 45 games – practice 5 days; 3 off-ice sessions  
**1994 (14)** – 45-60 games – practice 5 days; 3 off-ice sessions  
**1993 (15)** – 45-60 games – practice 5 days; 3 off-ice sessions  
**1992 (16)** – 45-60 games – 2 practices per day 5 times per week; 5 off-ice sessions  
**1991 (17)** – 45-60 games – 2 practices per day 5 times per week; 5 off-ice sessions  
**1990 (18)** – 45-60 games – 2 practices per day 5 times per week; 5 off-ice sessions

Mark and Al visited the University of Sport in St. Petersburg, enrollment of 10,000 students. Leonid Mikhno, Director Ice Hockey Department was our host. We gave a 90-minute presentation on the USA Hockey Coaching Education Program to a class of 35 students. We met with about 25 coaches from CKA Hockey Club in St. Petersburg. Our host was Rafail Ishmatov, St. Petersburg Youth Hockey Director. We presented an outline of the USA Hockey Coaching Education Program. We answered many questions about our program as well as the USA Hockey structure and objectives.

### **Youth Hockey in Russia – 2008:**

Youth Hockey in Russia is club driven. The clubs are owned and administered by professional teams of the Russian Professional Elite League and is broadly governed by the Russian Hockey Federation. The federation dispenses state money to the clubs, deals with insurance issues, makes general youth program recommendations, selects coaches for and operates the national teams. There are 23 clubs in Moscow; 10 are members of the professional elite league. In St. Petersburg there is only one.

Although there are similarities between Russian Hockey and USA Hockey, the differences are cultural and in the points of emphasis. The Russians have issues with parents as well as the concern for cost just like we do. They want to grow their registration but availability of rinks and ice time are issues. Players having *fun* is not a priority in Russian hockey. The number of indoor rinks is 168. The weather changes have reduced outdoor ice facilities to almost none. Another issue in Moscow is the traffic and the ability of parents to get young players to the rink. Players tend to play for the club nearest their home. Hockey appears to be part of the school physical education curriculum. They approach the game the same as one would approach taking courses in school.

We asked each club about girls' hockey. There was not a girls' program in any of the four clubs we visited. Girls are often put in older groups (up to two years older) if they pass the testing due to the fact that they are physically bigger than boys. Spartak is the only organization with an official girls training program. Talented girls usually migrate there. Currently there are 257 registered Russian girls playing hockey.

- There is generally no cost for the ice.
- Players are put in groups by birth year. Players with the same birth year skate and play together. A player can move to an older birth year if he passes evaluation and testing. A player cannot move up more than two years.
- The clubs are open to any 5 & 6 year old that wants to play. The emphasis is skating. Players at this age will skate for one year without a stick. There are no games for 5 & 6 year olds. Usually the club has 60 to 80 skaters in this group. Dynamo had 200 in 2008. Parents pay for equipment.
- Each club evaluates their players – this evaluation occurs in either May or August.
- Seven-year-olds are evaluated and tested. They will play 10-15 games. Players eight and under use a lighter, but same size, black puck. They will play 15-20 games. All games are played on half-ice, but not “cross-ice”.
- At the end of the season nine-year-olds are tested. Those that do not meet high standards are dismissed. Those not selected can try another (less competitive) club or they drop out. Here about 40% of the original group advance, roughly 35 out of the 60 kids.
- At the end of season 10-year-olds are tested, about 40% (25) of the original 60 move on. From this point on drop out/dismissal is minimal.
- Movement of players from one club to another does occur. Any player from another club will be evaluated and tested before he is accepted.
- Although most of the players with a club start at age 5, 6 or 7, occasionally a club will get a first year player that is 8, 9 or 10. In this instance these players take skating for one year, are then tested and their future with the club is determined. Those 11 and older are selected and must meet high standards to continue.
- Goalies receive specific specialized training as early as age eight. This can be two extra sessions per week.
- The Russians teach and allow checking along the boards for 8-year-olds but will call a penalty if the play is too rough or flagrant. There is currently discussion within Russia about this practice. The opinion of the clubs we visited is that it will continue.
- Russians are just as concerned with recruiting players as we are. Soccer and hockey are the two most popular sports in Russia. With the growth of soccer and continued emphasis on it, the hockey talent pool is being depleted as kids at younger age levels are opting to play soccer instead of hockey.
- Russians do not play club hockey year round but their teams remain in tact by participating together in summer camps and other sports to develop their athleticism.
- All players (up to age 18) are required to wear neck guards and face mask but are not required to wear a mouth guard.
- National Championships
  - Ages 12-17 have an organized national championship for each birth year
  - Ages 10-11 have an unofficial regional tournament (6 regions)
  - Under 10 age groups have tournaments within their own cities

People we met:

CKA:

Barry Smith – Head Coach – CKA Hockey Director  
Misha Manchik – Executive Assistant Coach  
Rafail Ishmatov – St. Petersburg Youth Hockey Director  
Yury Kulikov – Interpreter Assistant to Barry Smith

Khimik:

Pavel – Hockey Director

Dynamo:

Vladimir Polupanov – Hockey Director

CSKA - Red Army:

Sergey Babinov – Hockey Director

University of Sport – St Petersburg:

Leniod Mikhno – President  
Yuri Balashov – Honorable National Coach of Russia

Moscow Guide/Interpreter:

Sasha Golovko

Recommended Reading: *King of Russia* by Dave King with Eric Duhatschek, 2007

Submitted by: Al Bloomer & Mark Tabrum