



# NHL HAS CHANGED EUROPE AS WELL

HEAVY INFLUENCE OF **NORTH AMERICAN GAME** HAS CHANGED LEAGUES ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

**THE FIRST EUROPEANS ENTERED THE** NHL in the 1970s, the big boost was seen in the '80s and by the late '90s, winning the Stanley Cup had become the biggest dream for little boys in Finland, Sweden, Russia and the Czech Republic.

That's not news. Ever since Inge Hammarstrom skated into a corner with a basket of eggs and back out without breaking them, the discussion about Europeans in the NHL has been lively.

Mostly, though, the debate has been about the European players' influence on the NHL.

Meanwhile, the increased contact between the two hockey worlds has also left an imprint on the European leagues. In fact, the first steps were taken even before the first European player, Tommi Salmelainen, was drafted to the NHL in 1969, when Carl Brewer took a year to play with IFK Helsinki in the Finnish league. Brewer created the spirit of the club which, to this day, is known for its straightforward North American style of physical play, perseverance and guts.

After the first wave of NHL Euro-stars came their natural return home in the early '90s. The Swedish league got back Hakan Loob, Borje Salming and Bengt-Ake Gustafsson, the Finnish league was made tougher and more skilled by the returns of Pekka Rautakallio, Kari Eloranta and Kari Takko. All but Salming are still active in the game, as coaches or GMs.

Today, Europe is no longer simply the end of the road for aged European hockey stars. These days, players can go back and forth – try their luck in the NHL, return to Europe to develop some more and then make another attempt a few years later.

It's not even a dead end or last frontier for North Americans. The Red Wings' Brian Rafalski, the Bruins' Tim Thomas and the Panthers' Cory Murphy are good examples of players who have skated through Europe en route to the NHL.

The same applies to coaches. Several former NHL bench bosses – Pierre Page, Barry Smith, Dave King, to name a few – work in European leagues, mixing it up with their North American way of doing things.

With the improved hockey market in Europe and higher salaries (especially in Sweden and Russia), there are more former NHLers in their prime playing in Europe. They all know what it

takes to make it to the NHL and they know what they need to do to get back. And their work ethic is contagious.

The best example of that was seen last season when Modo clinched its first Swedish title in 28 years. For the last shift in the final game, the coach sent out these five players: Hans Jonsson, Mattias Timander, Per Svartvadet, Andreas Salomonsson and Niklas Sundstrom, all former NHLers.

The biggest influence, however, may be the one that's seen off the ice. The game operations are modeled after NHL games and team merchandising is also copied.

The NHL influence also is obvious when looking at the European top nations' management teams: Finland's GM is Jari Kurri; Russia's is Pavel Bure; Sweden's coach is Bengt-Ake Gustafsson while the team manager is Mats Naslund; and, Slovakia's GM is Peter Bondra.

The European NHL pioneers are still at it, shaping the future of European hockey, if not with the national teams, then as coaches and GMs on club teams. Many more, like Hammarstrom, are working for NHL teams as scouts, shaping the future of the NHL and the European leagues.

The NHL is the yardstick against which all hockey work is measured in Europe. Players are evaluated according to their potential to play in

## Old face, new place

Here are 2006-07 leading scorers in the top European leagues, with NHL experience.



### GERMANY

Dave McLlwain  
501 NHL games, 1987-97



### RUSSIA

Alexei Morozov  
451 NHL games, 1997-04



### SWITZERLAND

Simon Gamache  
48 NHL games, 2003-present



### CZECH REPUBLIC

Petr Sykora  
12 NHL games, 2005-06



### SWEDEN

Fredrik Bremberg  
8 NHL games, 1998-99



### FINLAND

Martin Kariya  
84 AHL games, 2003-present



### SLOVAKIA

Erik Weissman  
No North American experience

When the title was on the line, Modo leaned on five ex-NHLers to bring it all home.



STEFAN JERREKANG/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

**Hakan Loob was a champion in Calgary and has brought his success back home to Sweden.**

the NHL and the front offices' actions are measured against the more abstract "What would an NHL team do?" There's no expert commentator or journalist who wouldn't use the NHL trump card to criticize the league or team management, however absurd it sometimes may be, when the journalists have no first-hand experience of how NHL teams work – and the owners and managers are just beginning to get it.

Peter Forsberg was instrumental when his alma mater, Modo, built a new arena last year. The Flyers' Sami Kapanen and Kimmo Timonen are co-owners of KalPa in the Finnish Elite League and more players will soon be following in their footsteps.

European hockey wouldn't be the same without the NHL. It would be smaller and even more introverted.

Meanwhile, Loob, having built a Swedish powerhouse in Farjestad, is dreaming the ultimate European dream. He wants to see his club, of which he will be the CEO next year, play in a Pan-European professional hockey league. If he gets his way, as he's used to, maybe the true convergence of the NHL and European leagues will become more concrete.

That's one thing the NHL won't be able to do alone, and neither will the Europeans. If past experiences about European Cups, or co-operation between different leagues in Europe is any indication, it may not be Loob who will be building the European league.

It will be his grandson. **TMN**



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