

NHL agrees to send players to Olympics

Kevin Allen, USA TODAY Sports 3:54 p.m. EDT July 19, 2013



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The NHL's spat-filled romance with the Olympics is officially on again with the league announcing that it will send its players to Sochi, Russia, for the 2014 Games.

The league will take a break in its schedule Feb. 9 and resume play Feb. 26 to accommodate the Olympic participation.

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Although owners and players came out of the last collective bargaining agreement fight with a presumption that the NHL would continue Olympic participation, the league and the NHL Players' Association needed months of negotiations to work out their differences with the International Olympic Committee and International Ice Hockey Federation.

"The decision to participate in the XXII Olympic Winter Games in Sochi was in many ways a difficult one, but one that we know will be well received by our players and, most importantly, by the vast majority of our fans and sports fans everywhere," NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said.

NHL officials appreciate the exposure the Olympics bring to their sport, but they have been displeased about the logistics. For example, the NHL hasn't been able to show Olympic game highlights on the league's websites and television network. Owners and team general managers had no access to the NHL players. The league and NHLPA also were seeking more benefits for the players, players' family members and league guests.

"Having the opportunity to wear their nation's sweater in Sochi is something the players look forward to," NHLPA executive director Don Fehr said.

The NHL has been sending players to the Olympics since 1998. Canada has won two gold medals (2002 and 2010), the Czech Republic won in 1998 and Sweden took gold in 2006. The Americans won silver medals in the 2002 and 2010 Games, both of which were played in North America. It lost in the quarterfinals the other two times.

As part of the agreement, seven NHL referees and six NHL linesmen will be integrated into the IIHF on-ice officials' crews for the men's tournament. The Olympic ice hockey tournament will be played according to the IIHF rulebook on the wider international ice surface.

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