



ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

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“Outwitting the world”

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Key to success of Czech hockey has been based on a David-versus-Goliath mentality

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Staff Reporter WORLD BEATERS: Martin Prochazka hoists trophy after Czech Republic beat Slovakia at the 2000 world championships. JIHLAVA, Czech Republic - The superhighway rushing by Moravian farmland down to this nondescript industrial city, 120 kilometers southeast of Prague, leads to the soul of Czech hockey.

That would be Jaroslav Holik, father of the New Jersey Devils' Bobby Holik, coach of the spectacularly underachieving Czech junior team, as well as coach of the Dukla Jihlava club, once a powerhouse Czech Army team in the former Society era that's fallen on lean times lately.

To Jaroslav Holik, Czech hockey and the Czech character are one and the same.

"We know how to be clever," he says.

That's needed no translation, until recently. Yes, Holik's juniors sputtered in their defence of the world junior championship, losing yesterday to Finland and getting bounced from medal contention. But still, they are the defending champs. And lest anyone forget, the Czechs are still the world's reigning hockey powerhouse, the 1998 Olympic gold medallists going into the Salt Lake City Games next month as well as the world hockey champs of last year.

But there's clever and there's clever. Until now Czech hockey has been able to think of itself as little-guy hockey. That's meant come-from-behind, David versus Goliath, let them think they've got you, then outsmart them - that kind of clever hockey,

To Holik, that kind of thinking is part of the very old Czech story that's been told over and over again. It's in the Czech soul and in classic Czech literature, the tale of the anti-hero in *The Good Soldier Schweik*, the 1920s Czech novel by Jaroslav Hasek, where Schweik, the "Sad Sack Everyman," slyly outwits the rest of the world.

"Read the book," says Jaroslav Holik, "and you'll know something about the Czech character and Czech hockey."

Little-guy hockey is the kind of hockey you might expect from a country with about the population of New York City but which has been cocky, self-reliant and, okay, lucky enough - that other Hasek of note, Dominik of the Detroit Red Wings, was born here after all - to smack down the big guys, those rich Canadians and even richer Americans, alike, rather the way cocky, defiant Czech students faced down the Soviets in the streets in the Prague Spring of 1968.

The Czech rebel spirit never died, even though the happy, hippy 1968 spurt of freedom was short-lived after Soviet tanks rolled in. But Czech hockey supremacy can't last is the worry here going into this long winter of international play.

For one thing, Czech success is hardly a secret anymore. Other countries now know what to do with the grinding Czech team style. And it would be hard to think of Jaromir Jagr, with his \$88 million (U.S.) contract from Washington or his spiffy sports bar in downtown Prague, as a "little guy" any more.

So this winter, all the Czech teams - even Czech hockey itself - are the targets as defending champs of just about everything. Maybe the little guy is about to take the big fall.

"Actually," says Jaroslav Holik, "we've had to be a bit more clever to find solutions to fit our problems." Simply put, Czech hockey - at the junior or Olympic level - has to become a bit more like North American hockey to survive. It's tough for Holik to admit this entirely, though.

His current junior lineup looked to be a good Czech team, he told this reporter between local team practices some weeks back at the Dukla Jihlava home rink. They had all those solid, team-first Czech values. Still, to win these days the team would need some players with experience in Canadian and American leagues.

"These players bring us some toughness, some hardness," Holik said. "So they can support our technical skills. They are big fighters. They are much bigger fighters than we are able to produce here. So I'm using about eight players with overseas experience not just for their toughness, but for their desire to win."

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- Jaroslav Holik

This, he insists, is just an adjustment. It's being clever, adapting the way Czechs always do adapt. Otherwise the Czech fundamentals are sound - in hockey and out.

"The real truth of this junior team will come in the next two years or so when the championship is played in Canada and America," Holik said. "Until now, we've always made it through our skills. We always had to show our enemies, inside the nation and out, that we were clever. And I think it will remain this way for the next 20 years or so.

"Maybe you won't see a hockey connection here, but the Czechs were - and are - very handy. We are used to building our homes ourselves. We know how to bring water into the houses, how to repair something, things like that.

"My impression of Americans is that they can barely cut their grass themselves. They order professionals in to do everything.

"I visited my daughter (Andrea, the former tennis star) and her husband (Frantisek Musil, the former NHL defenceman) in North America. They asked me how to start their lawnmower. They've only been living in North America for 15 years but he's lost all his abilities. This know-how is part of the Czech character that has influenced everything we do, not only in hockey but also in other sports. What I'm talking about is not just about hockey. It's about doing what is needed in life.

"Our kids are trained not to get fixed on playing only one position in hockey. They change which positions they'll play many times in their careers. By the time they're 12, they'll have learned to play more than just one position. They'll have learned to have different skills. They'll also have learned playing is also a question of the heart. To be able to do what you do for the team, you must play with heart."

Loving both hockey and his country has come at a cost for Holik, 60, though. Once a star with the Czech national team, Holik's coaching career crashed after daughter Andrea defected in the '80s to marry Musil. As punishment for his errant, democracy-seeking daughter, Holik was made to toe the line by the Soviet-run Czech sports administration that busted him down to being a mere assistant coach with Dukla Jihlava. When son Bobby was the Hartford Whalers' No.1 draft pick in 1989, his father wasn't allowed out of the country.

As revenge, Jaroslav insisted that Andrea and Bobby knew English, so that they could survive in North America, although to him that's not the same as becoming North American. At least not to Jaroslav Holik. "Children at school here know much more than American children in general, not just in hockey," he said. "They learn a lot more. This (learning) is our leading character which we use in hockey. We know how to play the clever game. But it's not about being colourful. America is built on a system of individualism. But since we know we are a little nation the only chance we have is to work together, to co-operate and to use

our brain."

Yes, Czech players may be turned into stars by the North American media. And, yes, Dominik Hasek is a one-man road show when he wants to be. "But that's Hasek and only Hasek. He's the only one," said Holik. "Hasek won the gold medal for us in Nagano (in '98). We would have been out without him. Every player on that team thinks this.

"But I wouldn't say that Jagr is such an individualist. Maybe it seems that way in North America where they want him to be a star. But whenever he comes here, he must accept the collective thinking and the collective game. He must accept the idea of team co-operation.

"I'm always telling my guys that if they really want to play hockey, to be able to go on and earn more money in Canada and the U.S., they will always learn how to play better here."

At noon he had to go, so we headed out into one of Jihlava's busier streets. Once a famous medieval mining town, the city of about 50,000 people was converted into yet another inglorious example of ugly Soviet-era architecture.

Although new signs of modern urban beautification can be found here and there, Jihlava is anything but rich, at least not as rich as it was in the 13th century when it was the site of a royal mint. But money isn't everything to the Czech character, Jaroslav Holik will tell you. Money can't buy Czech love. In fact, not even the big American bucks Czech players are scoring in the NHL will change their character, he says.

"At the beginning of the '90s, a lot of our players left to play in the NHL," he said. "When they started to return in the mid-'90s, they wanted to play for the national team.

"By then they had enough money. They really just wanted to enjoy the game and to reach the title matches. Mostly they played (for their country) for fun. There was lots of enthusiasm, but not much pressure.

"We learned how to handle our freedom (from Soviet rule). But what helped us absolutely destroyed the Russian team. For them, the money, the freedom meant too much alcohol and everything else. Czech players were clever enough not to do that - to smoke, to have a lot of women, to forget about their careers."

Exactly. They learned to stay Czech. **SPORTS WIRE**