



WOMEN'S HOCKEY

DREAMING BIG

Despite numerous obstacles, Mexico's women's team is climbing the IIHF ranks. And with the greatest female player of all-time in their corner, the Olympics are in sight **BY BERENGERE SIM**

IN 2011, A RAGTAG group of players arrived at Hayley Wickenheiser's World Female Hockey Festival in Burnaby, B.C. The future Hall of Famer was at the height of her powers then, blazing a trail for women's hockey in Canada, while these women were just trying to establish a trailhead in their home country.

"I find them very brave to do something where it's not very popular and people criticize you for it," Wickenheiser said. "It's the same way I grew up in Canada. Even though it's a hockey country, it was hard for me to play hockey as a girl in the small town that I came from. So, for them to do it in Mexico..."

Technically, the players weren't even a team yet. But

just eight years later, the Mexican women's national team is defying all expectations, both at home and abroad, securing a series of firsts for the country and now setting its sights on the Winter Olympics.

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Officially forming in 2012, the team advanced to the second round of the Olympic qualifiers in 2016, a feat none of the country's men's teams has managed. The following year, the women surprised the

hockey world when they won gold in Div. II Group B to earn promotion to Group A. That victory brought tears of joy to the eyes of the head of the Mexico Ice Hockey Federation. "People asked me, 'But why are you crying, Juaco?' " said MIHF president Joaquin de la Garma. " 'You can't understand. You know how much I have fought for this? And finally we are succeeding.' "

In its first year in Group A, the women finished last in 2018. But just one year later, they came within an overtime goal of capturing bronze. Their fourth overall finish is the highest for any Mexican hockey

team. "It was definitely historic for a country where ice hockey is not an important sport," said 37-year-old coach Diego de la Garma, Joaquin's son.

Indeed, hockey remains a fringe sport in Mexico. The

country does have 18 rinks, eight of which are spread out across sprawling Mexico City, but only four of those meet IIHF requirements and ice time is at premium for the national teams. "Other countries, they have rinks, loads of rinks," said 21-year-old forward Frida Cardenas Castro. "And for us, we're asking ourselves, 'Where are we going to train?'"

Money is another obstacle. With no government support, the team is self-financed, and the players struggle to support themselves. Their parents shoulder a large part of the financial burden. To send their daughters to this year's World

Championship in April, parents had to fork out roughly 20,000 pesos (about \$1,000), a hefty amount in a nation where the average annual income hovers around 130,000 pesos (about \$7,000). "We dream of going to

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see Frida play abroad one day," said Castro's father, Ivan Cardenas Martinez. "We just don't really have the resources to go right now."

On top of the infrastructural and financial hurdles, women face the added pressure of cultural resistance in their own

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country to them playing the game. "Sometimes people say, 'Oh, but hockey isn't for girls,' " said 25-year-old defenseman Thelma Escobedo Tapia.

This doesn't surprise Marion Reimers, a Mexican sports journalist and commentator for Fox Sports Latin America. Reimers

was fed up with the rampant sexism in the Mexican sporting world and decided to set up a non-governmental organization, Versus, to combat the idea that sports in the country are only for men. "In Mexico, the problem of machismo and discrimination against women is very accentuated," Reimers said. "Obviously, sport is a microcosm of this."

Mexican society is generally quite conservative, she added, and in some circles, people still think sports falls within the purview of men only. "Ideas still exist within very conservative sectors of Mexican society, which is mostly the majority, such as it is not feminine to practise a sport, it is not feminine to sweat, women shouldn't get dirty," Reimers said. "Women don't belong to the public space because sport is a fundamental part of public life."

Mexico became a member of the IIHF in 1985, but it took about a quarter-century for the women's game to take shape, thanks in large part to 23-year-old Macarena Cruz Ceballos. At 14 years old, after playing on boys' teams growing up, she was told she could no longer compete with her male counterparts. With no place to play, Ceballos tried other sports for a couple years, but she missed hockey so much that she decided to lobby the MIHF to create a league for women and girls. A draft was organized and

a four-team women's league was formed: the Pink Panthers, White Pearls, Blue Icebreakers and Black Widows. "Thirty girls said they wanted to come and 60 turned up," Ceballos said. "There were so many girls that wanted to play."

With 192 female players now registered, the program is still



DO-IT-YOURSELF ATTITUDE

Ceballos was told she could no longer play hockey with boys, so she fought for the creation of a women's league.

in its infancy, and support at home is largely limited to family, friends and the MIHF. But the women have at least one fan and supporter in Canada, where Wickenheiser has kept tabs on their ascent since 2011. The team has continued to re-

MEMORIES GALORE

Photos of the many of places Castro has visited via hockey hang on her wall in her home in Mexico City.

turn to WickFest almost annually and plans to attend the festival again later this year for its 10th anniversary in Calgary. Over the years, they have sent as many as three teams, some as young as peewee, which shows the growth of Mexico's women's game.

To help the country's nascent program, WickFest has arranged meetings with the IIHF and Hockey Canada, along with world-renowned coaches and players, to help the MIHF grow its own hockey network. Two of the festival's sponsors, Canadian Tire and SportChek, sent the women on a shopping spree in their first year, and every time the women return to Canada they make sure to stock up on equipment that they can't get at home.

The group of women who first showed up in Calgary all those years ago is now ranked 26th in the world, 10 spots higher than the men, and they have their sights set on qualifying for the Winter Olympics one day. "When I think of the first year they came to where they are now, people can't imagine the progress they have made," Wickenheiser said. "They're leaders now for the next generation of young girls that want to play hockey in Mexico." **H**