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INTERNATIONAL SPORTS

# Chinese Hockey Players Make Islanders' Ice Theirs, for a Period

By [DAVE CALDWELL](#)

UNIONDALE

TWO youth hockey teams gathered at center ice at Nassau Coliseum to pose for a photograph before a game one morning last month. The players and coaches were told to holler, "Let's go, Islanders!" and they did, though a little too softly.

They tried again, and again, and their voices finally carried through the virtually empty arena to where the Islanders' owner, [Charles B. Wang](#), was seated with the coach, Ted Nolan, and the general manager, Garth Snow. Mr. Wang smiled at the teams and nodded.

These were not two hometown youth teams who got to play a game in a National Hockey League arena. They were from China and had been invited by Mr. Wang to Long Island as part of a four-year-old initiative, Project Hope.

The teams, from Harbin and Qiqihar, both in China's most northeastern province, Heilongjiang, play on rinks built as part of the program. There are 17 Project Hope rinks at schools in China, and plans to complete about 10 more by the end of this year.

[Yao Ming](#), a native of China, is a star in the National Basketball Association, but hockey is virtually unknown there. N.H.L. games are not televised, although the Islanders are working on that. Mr. Wang, 63, the founder of Computer Associates, who bought the Islanders in 2000, is part of the league's push to sell the game to China, where he was born and lived for eight years.

But Project Hope may be more than a way to get Chinese youth to tune in. "Perhaps, one day, we'll have a Yao Ming out of China for hockey," Mr. Wang said after the team from Qiqihar had defeated the Harbin team, 6-0.

Or maybe, Mr. Wang suggested later, the president of China will be interviewed one day and talk about how much he enjoyed playing hockey, or how hockey helped him focus on his studies in school.

Mr. Wang is thinking big. Last month, two New York-based announcers, Alex Peng and Justin Chang, began broadcasting Islanders games in Mandarin. The eventual hope is to televise the team's games in China, perhaps by the end of this season.

“We’ve got that bridge built where we are able to expand those opportunities,” said Chris Dey, the Islanders’ vice president for sales, marketing and operations.

The two Chinese teams, each with 13 boys ranging from 9 to 13 years old, competed in the four-team International Division of the Lighthouse Tournament, played at several rinks throughout Long Island.

More than 60 teams participated altogether. But the Chinese teams, which also competed in their division against a team from Finland and a team from the faraway land of Westchester County, were not on Long Island just to play hockey. They also watched two Islanders games and toured Manhattan.

“The memories that are created outside hockey are what make these moments special,” Mr. Snow said.

The Chinese teams climbed on a bus after their plane touched down at Kennedy International Airport on Jan. 17 and scoured the horizon for the [Empire State Building](#), not realizing the bus was headed the other way.

“Pretty much when everybody got here, we were very happy,” Liu Qing, an 11-year-old defenseman for Qiqihar, said through an interpreter.

He was making his first trip to the United States; Qiqihar’s other top defenseman, Zhang Shuchao, was making his second.

Chinese teams have clearly improved; the Islanders’ management was raving about Qing’s skating skills.

“They’re just overwhelmed that their skills are noticeable,” said the players’ interpreter and chaperone, Joseph Fu, who works at the Islanders’ practice facility in Syosset.

Shuchao and Qing scored all six goals in their team’s lopsided victory over Harbin, but were careful not to celebrate too vigorously after scoring. “It’s not a meaningful game,” Shuchao said through Mr. Fu.

The teams lined up, just as their N.H.L. counterparts do at the end of Stanley Cup playoffs, to shake hands afterward. Then they shook the hands of the two officials before facing each other and tapping their sticks on the ice — the way any glove-wearing hockey player applauds.

“There are more kids who want to play hockey in China,” their coach, Baichang Qing, said through an interpreter. “There is a great base, and we can choose the excellent ones.”

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