

A Chinese women's hockey team? In Marlborough?

By Lenny Megliola Globe Correspondent November 13, 2015



The view from the Chinese women's national hockey team bench for an exhibition game.

MARLBOROUGH — Know what you don't hear much? The Chinese national anthem played before a hockey game.

But if 23 resolute Chinese women corral their dream, their anthem will be played at the Winter Olympics some day. The road to such a lofty goal took temporary residence recently at the expansive six-rink facility at New England Sports Center, where the women practiced daily and

played games against junior women's teams and Becker College after arriving in late October. They plan to return for a longer stay next summer.

"There are 1.4 billion people in China, and only about 170 women are playing hockey," said Rick Seeley, the former women's hockey coach at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut who now serves as head coach of the female Team China. Seeley says he is impressed by his new players' abilities, but certainly knows they're at ground floor if they hope to make their mark in international play.

"They're quick learners," said Seeley. "They want to get better. But they've got a lot of work ahead."

Team China went 4-2 in its first six games, with both losses coming by a goal. "The games have been extremely competitive," said Wes Tuttle, the sports center's general manager. "They can't get this kind of competition in China."

"The girls are gaining a lot of experience," said Li Yutian, Team China's general manager. "Everything is perfect here."

The Chinese team will be competing in tournaments in Canada and Europe over the next year, trying to accumulate enough points to qualify for the 2018 Winter Olympics in 2018, in Korea.

At 27, defenseman Yu Bai Wei is the oldest player on the team. "I started playing when I was 9," she said during the team's Marlborough stopover. "My father played hockey in China. I wanted to be like him. I love everything about hockey."

"The sport is so much quicker here than in China," she continued. "But I'm very much enjoying it."

Players answered questions through an interpreter, except for Emily Yue, a freshman goalie at Deerfield Academy. A Chinese-American, she has been to China twice — the first time when she was 10 — and played hockey there. She ultimately joined Team China at age 14.

"It's been a unique experience," said Yue. "The sport is growing in China. They're building a pr



handout

The Chinese women's national hockey team on the defense in front of their goal.

ogram and putting up more rinks, especially in Beijing.”

Defenseman Liu Zhi Xin, 22, got into the sport because “my primary school teacher was a hockey referee. I’m very honored to be on the team. Coach Seeley is a great coach. We’re working hard and getting better and better.”

After the team left Marlborough Thursday, it headed north to Toronto for more practice and games.

The players have different degrees of homesickness. “Not so much for me,” said Kong MingHui, a 23-year-old forward. “I love to watch NHL games. My favorite team? Chicago Blackhawks.”

And the food here? “It’s OK,” said Zhang MengYing, a 22-year-old forward, not too convincingly. “We have a lot of fast-food restaurants in China.”

Overall, she added, “I love this facility. It’s of high quality. I like the atmosphere. It’s been a good experience.”

It was also a good experience, business-wise, for the city of Marlborough, especially the New England Sports Center and the Marriott Residence across Donald Lynch Boulevard, where Team China players and staff are staying.

“We’re so pleased to have them,” said city councilor Don Landers during their stay. “We make sure they have one authentic Chinese meal a day.” Those meals were supplied by Silk Road Bistro, on Main Street next to city hall.

“I hate to talk dollars, but this is great for the community,” said Landers, a lifelong supporter of sports in Marlborough.

But it’s mostly about the hockey. “All our players are getting better, and eager to learn things,” said team leader Yu Tian, once a winger on the Chinese men’s national team. Relations are cordial, but this is a business trip for the team.

Ed Clancy, the city council president, coached the nascent girls’ hockey at Marlborough High in the 70s.

A team from China with Olympic aspirations practicing in his home town?

“I would never, ever had thought I’d see something like this,” he said.

Seeley coaches with an interpreter beside him on the ice. He first encountered Team China as the coach at Quinnipiac, which hosted the team.

“I realized they needed some help.” So he signed on for the entire journey.

A journey with a memorable, hockey-educating stopover in Marlborough.