

USA Hockey on Project Hope

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The New York Islanders have aspired to bring hockey to children around the corner and around the world.

And they're achieving their goals through the Charles B. Wang Ice Hockey Project Hope.

Around the corner is Long Island, where the program is aimed at developing the sport. Around the world is China, in which hockey is not only being offered to kids, but is used to provide access to higher education.

Spearheading the effort is director Angela Ruggiero, a three-time Olympian who has won gold, silver and bronze medals, and has remained a member of the U.S. Women's National Team for 10 years.

In addition to her playing experience, the Harvard alum brings impeccable credentials to Project Hope. A four-time All-American who was selected by USA Hockey as the top player in NCAA Division I her senior year, she finished her college career with 243 points in just 127 games and graduated cum laude in 2004.

Ruggiero and Islanders Senior Vice President Mike Milbury will work with local and provincial officials in the cities of Harbin and Qiqihar in Heilongjiang Province to develop and expand the program. Simply put, she can't wait.

"It will be wonderful to give kids an opportunity to play hockey, because hockey has given so much to me," she said. "It's great to have an 'in' in China, knowing that we're developing educational opportunities and really launching a sport there. I hope this sparks other NHL franchises to become involved."



Ruggiero added one hope is that player development in China will produce an athlete who can create a tremendous interest in hockey there, just as Houston Rockets star center Yao Ming has done for basketball. Millions of TV sets in China are tuned in when the Rockets play.

Not that hockey has been dormant there. The Chinese women's team has finished as high as fourth in the Olympics, but all organized sports in that country count on government funding to thrive. The relative lack of success in hockey has prompted the government to focus their financial efforts on other sports.

"We have to start at the youth level to see results at the elite level," said Ruggiero, who has also taken her humanitarian efforts to Africa. "If we do a good job of putting the pieces together, we could really make it happen.

"We're giving them the means and tools to build youth hockey in China. It's a country of 1.3 billion people. In Project Hope schools, we are offering opportunities for kids to receive scholarships and go to private schools here in the United States. It gives them great incentive to work hard in hockey."

Among the highlights of the program is the Project Hope Invitational, an annual youth tournament held

on Long Island. Each year, a Project Hope-sponsored all-star team representing Heilongjiang Province will travel to the United States to compete against area youth in the Project Hope Cup.

The most important subject in the Project Hope schools is English. It is imperative for the children to learn the language to better prepare themselves for trips and possible longer term life in the United States as scholarship winners, earned by those who become more fluent in English and also excel in other subjects.

The seeds for Project Hope were planted when Islanders owner Charles B. Wang, after whom it is named, sent Milbury to China to explore the possibilities of such a venture. Upon his return, Milbury expressed his optimism. Coaches were then dispatched to the country to run clinics and build the sport from a grassroots level.

In addition to developing hockey interest and talent, new indoor and outdoor rinks for use by Project Hope, as well as communities and schools, will be constructed throughout the area. Heilongjiang Province is located in a colder area of the country, which makes possible the construction of outdoor rinks.

Ruggiero will run the program from Long Island, but will check on its progress during a trip to China next January.

“When I traveled there the first time, I was only 17-years-old,” she said. “And in the whole country, they only had 300 players in both the boys' and girls' programs combined.”

That has changed dramatically. And Project Hope is one of the major reasons.

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