

*As the Great Britain team struggles through the lower reaches of the World Championships — Pool D, Pool C, Pool B — the cream of the world's hockey nations only have eyes for Pool A — the Championship proper. This time around the host nation is Czechoslovakia whose lively performance in the Winter Olympics indicates that playing on home ice they might be the dark horses of the tournament. The Czechs have always been amongst the foremost hockey players in Europe, competing in the early days as Bohemia. As Czechoslovakia they took part in the first Olympic ice hockey in 1920 (losing to Canada 15-0) and in 1929, an England team played in Prague. The Czech style has always put an emphasis on skill.*

## The Czech Connection . . . 1

The outstanding Czech player to appear in the British League was Jaroslav Lycka, a defenceman with Dundee Rockets who subsequently went South and played a couple of seasons with Lee Valley Lions. He left such a good impression North of the Border that on Friday, February 5th, 1988, Dundee Tigers hosted a game in his honour, the visitors being Lee Valley Lions.

Dundee asked this humble scribe to pen a tribute to 'Jaro' for the souvenir programme and this is what I wrote:— When I was a hockey-mad kid, stumbling around on double-runners by day and cheering my head off for Harringay Greyhounds at night, their stablemates, the Racers, had a lean dark defenceman named Len Burrage whose positional play was near perfect. He rarely hit anyone but was swift to intercept the puck and was a master of the almost forgotten art of the poke-check. Above all, he was a rushing defenceman in a day and age when most rearguards were big burly blockers who stood

*Dr. Karel Duda, London Ambassador of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, writes:—Ice Hockey has been enjoying many decades of popularity in Czechoslovakia and I was delighted to learn that the 1992 World Championships were to be held in Prague as well as were thousands of fans and followers of this magnificent sport. All previous World and European Championships held in my country met with enthusiastic response of sports-loving public and I am sure this event will not be an exception. I wish the Championships every success, their participants the best of sports luck and the spectators enjoyment of this wonderful game.*

astride their blue-line and belted anything which moved.

Bob Giddens, founder of **Ice Hockey World**, whose own hockey travels had taken him from Ottawa to Harvard and on to Paris and London, said Burrage was the best defenceman ever to play in the English National League. Burrage was earmarked as Streatham player-coach when war broke out. A family man he stayed in Canada then went down to Washington where he played for the Eagles in the United States Eastern League. He set scoring records there for a defenceman some of which lasted sixteen years.

One word summed him up — "Class" . . . I had not thought to see his like again until one night many — too many — years later when a defender for Dundee Rockets caught my eye. Here was a man with the precision, the elegance, the style, the class of Len Burrage.

I looked at my programme and saw the name, Jaroslav Lycka. It sounded familiar. I looked up the records. Yes it was the same Lycka. The man who scored from left defence when the Czech team Vitkovice beat Spartak Moscow for the Spengler Cup, who had held down a slot on the star-studded Czech National team where smooth passing, good stick-handling and shrewd distribution of the puck have always been basic requirements . . . Jaroslav's Czech club hails from a gloomy industrial town named Ostrava, a town whose griminess I can vouch for having been there with Harringay Racers one winter. So, in saluting Jaroslav Lycka tonight, we are once again reminded that jewels are found in the most unlikely places.

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One could have added that another fine player was Jiri Lycka, Jaro's older brother, and that the highlights of Jaro's career insofar as he himself is concerned are being captain of Vitkovice when they won the Czech championship and scoring two goals in one minute against the Canadian National Team.

Postwar British hockey has seen a number of players of Czech descent or resident here, Ludek Smelik, of Lee Valley Lions, and Karel

Stanek, recently coach of Blackburn Blackhawks for instance, plus further imports, like Lycka, direct from Czechoslovakia. In a bid to infuse some European skills into our Canadian-style hockey, Fife imported three internationals in 1988, Figala, Kokrment and Lukat, but it didn't really work out. Lukat went on to play for Streatham with his younger brother and in 1990 Fife had another go. So did Solihull but the outcome was the same, talented though the Czechs were. They took a rough ride and in the end the teams concerned gave up on the experiment. But one day, rest assured there will be other Jaro's displaying their skills in the British League. **PD.**



**Milan Figala, formerly with Fife Flyers and Kirkcaldy Kestrels (above); Jaro Lycka (opposite). (Photographs by Ian Alexander and Skoda Great Britain).**