

# EXCITEMENT PALPABLE AS NHL PREPARES FOR RETURN OF WORLD CUP OF HOCKEY

👤 Ryan Cowley 🕒 December 9, 2015



*World Cup of Hockey press conference stage, Air Canada Centre, Toronto; Sep. 9, 2015 (Photo credit: Ryan Cowley)*

TORONTO — To suggest that the **National Hockey League** has come a long way since 2004 would be an understatement. It may have suffered through two lockouts but all things considered, the National Hockey League is in great shape. From the advent of the **Winter Classic** and later the **Stadium Series** to the continuation of their participation in the **Winter Olympics**, the league — in most markets, at least — has had no difficulty drawing fans. Heck, if they were able

to make amends with the good majority of their fans after said lockouts — the former of which wiped out an entire season — than it is safe to suggest that the NHL can accomplish anything.

Since 2004, however, something was missing. It may not have been the most glaring admission on the hockey schedule but something was missing nonetheless — and that something was the **World Cup of Hockey**. But after a 12-year absence, the event will return as **Team Canada** — albeit a drastically different roster — will be defending their crown.

On Wednesday, the NHL held its press conference for next year's World Cup of Hockey with a plethora of representatives in attendance. From **NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman** and **NHLPA Executive Director Donald Fehr** to a slew of player representatives — **Anze Kopitar** and **Drew Doughty** for the **Los Angeles Kings** — the event, set for next September, is already gaining traction as the must-see event of 2016, especially for those fans having to deal with an early playoff exit or, worse, a playoff miss from their respective teams.

Also, unlike in previous World Cup (and **Canada Cup**) tournaments is the addition of mixed squads representing both **North America** and **Europe**, consisting of players who are 23 or under — including the young talent who may be deemed too inexperienced on the professional level to crack their own country's roster. **Brandon Saad** of the **Columbus Blue Jackets**, for example, is already a favourite to make **Team North America**.

Anze Kopitar of the Los Angeles Kings was asked about the mix of talent generated by said clubs.

"Well, first and foremost, it's going to be a little bit different," Kopitar said. "But it'll be interesting to see how we match up, how we come together and really bond. You know, for myself, it's going to be really

exciting to play with some of the players I won't have a chance to play with, so I'm sure it's going to be a good team and we're going to have fun."

Kopitar also admitted that he would like to play with **Boston Bruins** captain, **Slovakian Zdeno Chara** explaining that he doesn't "like to be chased around" by the 6-foot-9 blueliner.

The aforementioned NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman and NHLPA Executive Director Donald Fehr were also on stage together, discussing their thoughts on next year's tournament.

*World Cup of Hockey presser, Anze Kopitar, Air Canada Centre, Toronto; Sep. 9, 2015 (Photo credit: Ryan Cowley)*

"It also is an opportunity for us to relaunch our international initiatives by having this tournament, other tournaments, other competitions, pre-season games, regular-season games, clinics," Commissioner Bettman said. "And finally, we're working together [with the NHLPA]. That's very important and I think that bodes very well for our long-term relationship."

Donald Fehr was then asked why international hockey is important to the NHLPA.

"I think for a couple of reasons. First of all, you want to work together with the league because that's the way you get the most effective job done," Fehr said. "We have disagreements where interests are different but they're not different here. They are compline aligned and we want to make the best of it.

"All professional athletes, and certainly hockey players, want to play against the best in the world on the biggest stage of this type that they can find. They want to find out what happens."

Bettman and Fehr were then asked about the newer fans of the game and how this will be, in many ways, their first experience in watching their favourite players on the international level, given it's been so long since the last World Cup took place.

"Well, I think the competition itself will be exciting, whether you're a hockey fan or just a sports fan just taking a look," Bettman said. "But also, what's happened to media over the last 12 years, we're getting much more extensive coverage than before — we know Rogers and ESPN are going to do a great job — but also social media, the digital platforms, the fact that we have a number of websites in a number of different languages, it all means that fans will be able to connect to the game in ways they have never been able to do before and get more information and really be part of the process."

As for the prospect of growing the game through the World Cup, Fehr stepped in:

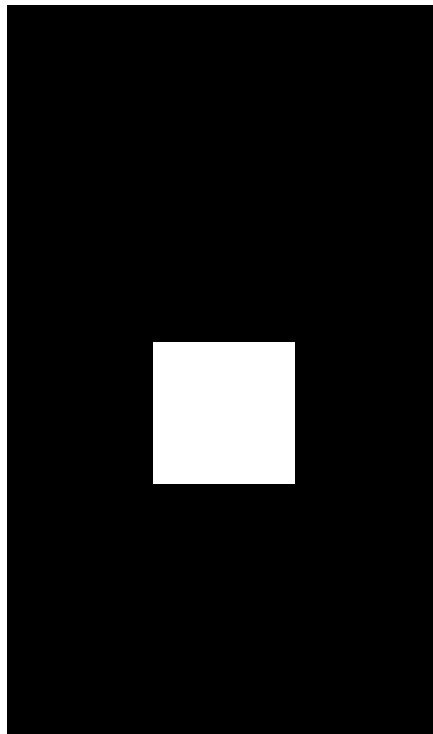
*World Cup of Hockey presser, Gary Bettman & Donald Fehr; Air Canada Centre, Toronto; Sep. 9, 2015 (Photo credit: Ryan Cowley)*

"In order to generate new fans, you have to expose the game. You have to expose the NHL game and the players and you have to do it in an attractive forum that's really going to grab their attention. We think this is it, but also, it's step one. There's going to be a lot more. This is going to be a nice ride the next several years."

Kings defenseman Drew Doughty, who already has two Olympic gold medals to his name in international play, isn't afraid to divide his allegiance away from his Los Angeles teammates when it comes time to represent his country.

"If I do play against them, my teammates, I want the bragging rights and I want to beat them as bad as anyone else," Doughty said before pointing out that teammate Anze Kopitar is no exception to the rule.

"Say, Kopitar's coming down on me, I'm not going to shy away from hitting him. He always thinks he can own me anyway, so I'm going to try to prove to him that he can't."



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For the older fans, next year's World Cup will add to a chapter to an already-extensive history of competition on the international stage overall but at this particular event dating back to the days of the Canada Cup.

From **Darryl Sittler's** tournament-winner in 1976 to — this writer's personal favourite — **Mario Lemieux's** top-corner tally to defeat the **Soviet Union** in 1987 to the inaugural World Cup in 1996 when

the **United States** scored two quick goals late to upend Canada in the championship, the Canada/World Cup has generated the richest of memories for hockey fans of all ages, temporarily dividing themselves with some and uniting themselves with others. After its longest layoff, the World Cup will be back, and hopefully better than ever as the best countries in the world vie for hockey supremacy, all the while with new friendships — and animosities — created.

On the opening day of the tournament, September 17, **Team USA** takes on **Team Europe** while **Team Canada** opens against the **Czech Republic**. As for the Canada vs. USA matchup, that happens on September 20. The championship will then be decided in a best-of-three.

For the full schedule, [click here](#).

The tournament runs from September 17 to October 1, 2016.