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Greed, corruption, and murder have penetrated the breeding grounds for future N.H.L. stars.

Treading On RED ICE

In League With the Russian Mob

By all accounts Vladimir Bogach was a prince of a guy, not the type anyone expected to find facedown in a pool of his own blood. Four gunmen emerged from the bushes outside Moscow's Ice Palace one afternoon last summer and pumped Bogach, the longtime equipment manager of the Red Army hockey team, full of lead. His wife watched in horror as Bogach writhed on the pavement. When a bystander cried out for an ambulance, the assassins returned to deliver a coup de grace to their victim—right between the eyes.

A few months earlier photographer Feliks Solovyov left his apartment, cameras in hand, for a shoot on the other side of Moscow. He got as far as the driveway before he was greeted by a shoot of a different order: a hail of bullets, all drilled squarely into his head. The killer left the murder weapon behind—a pistol equipped with a special silencer issued only to agents of the former K.G.B.

The slayings shocked even the most jaded of Moscow's violence-weary citizens. In a city where contract killings have become the preferred method of arbitrating differences between gangsters and *biznezmeni*, Muscovites were at a loss to explain the rubouts of Bogach and Solovyov.

Neither had much money to speak of. Nor were they involved in the kind of shady moonlight deals that have come to bind Russia's post-Communist society together in a web of mutually complicit criminality—the kind of deals and broken deals that in Moscow seem to generate a chain reaction of all too literal forms of backstabbing.

Alexei Zhitnik (above) was targeted for extortion; Alexander Mogilny (left) was physically threatened unless he forked over $150,000.

Beyond their untimely appointments with death, Bogach and Solovyov had shared something else—something that made their murders even more disturbing: Both worked at the Ice Palace for one of the world's great sports dynasties, the C.S.K.A. Red Army hockey club of Moscow.

While Moscow detectives bumbled through the typically fruitless pro-forma investigations, Red Army officials, players, and fans struggled to make sense of the murders. At the very least the gangland-style executions seemed to underscore the intrusion of Moscow's criminal gangs into what had once been one of the most venerable institutions in the time of the Soviets: the universe of Russian hockey.

I had some knowledge of the problem when I arrived in Moscow on a hot, sunny morning last August to investigate the links between Russian gangsters and the hockey business. It was no secret in North America that several highly paid Russian National Hockey League superstars had become targets of kidnapping threats and extortion by sleazy compatriots. Russian criminals on the loose across our own continent were said to be keeping tabs on several players as well as on their families back in Moscow, Kiev, and Khabarovsk.

But an even seamier side of the Russian mob's connection to hockey had so far seemed to escape attention: the penetration of criminal groups into the Russian hockey business itself, into the very clubs back in Russia that of late years have become breeding grounds for future N.H.L. stars.

The demise of the Soviet Union at the start of the decade opened the floodgates on its vast repository of hockey talent. Playing for the glory of the motherland no longer counted for much; lucrative contracts did. The 1990s saw an unprecedented exodus of Russian hockey players for points west. By the summer of 1996 no fewer than 170 athletes from the former Soviet Union were listed as active players in the National Hockey League or its farm clubs.

The 1990s have seen hockey fever spread to such unlikely host cities as Phoenix, Miami, and Tampa Bay, with minimal dilution of talent, thanks in large measure to the contribution from Russia's gene pool. The presence of five Russians in the lineup of the 1995–96 Red Wings helped Detroit win a league-record 61 regular-season games.

"They enhanced the depth of skill in the N.H.L.," says Bob Goodenow, executive director of the National Hockey League's Players Association. "The Russian system focuses on skating, stick handling, passing skills. They put tremendous emphasis on physical conditioning."

But on the golden anniversary of Soviet hockey, the fate of the game in Russia—and the way it is taught and played—are teetering on the brink of collapse. State financing has dried up, leaving clubs ripe for the pluck-


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ing by criminal syndicates. Millions of dollars in transfer fees from the N.H.L., intended for Russian sports clubs near bankruptcy, have vanished. Teams have been left to scrounge in strange places for scarce funds and sponsorships. Attendance has plunged; a pickup game on some radioactive rink in the secret city of Chelyabynsk is likely to draw a larger crowd than the Red Army now pulls in at Moscow's Ice Palace.

During a two-month investigation that took me from dismal locker rooms in Moscow to center ice at Madison Square Garden, I learned how rampant graft, greed, and corruption have stymied even the most promising efforts to keep Russian hockey afloat.

Take the case of the C.S.K.A. Red Army team itself. In 1993 Howard Baldwin, the principal owner of the Pittsburgh Penguins, saw an opportunity to rescue the floundering C.S.K.A. franchise. Baldwin gathered a group of investors—including actor Michael J. Fox and Penguins superstar Mario Lemieux—to buy the rights to promote and market the C.S.K.A. team, which was fast becoming the principal incubator of N.H.L. talent outside North America.

According to an insider who is familiar with the deal, Baldwin made a commitment to rebuild C.S.K.A. Red Army with an infusion of cash, initially about $1 million. The team would receive a make-over in the Penguins' image. As a marketing ploy the traditional hammer and sickle on the team's uniform would be shifted to the shoulder but not done away with altogether, making way for the team's new emblem: a stick-handling Russian Penguin, subsequently redesigned by none other than Disney Productions.

The odd juxtaposition of a Mickey Mouse impostor with the grim Soviet reaper said everything about Pittsburgh's joint venture with coach Viktor V. Tikhonov's Red Army faction: a capitalist sapling was transplanted, with high hopes that it would take root in the mulch of the old *Sovietsky Soyuz*—the now-defunct U.S.S.R.

Pittsburgh would handle all expenses for marketing the Red Army Penguins within Russia and abroad. In return Baldwin's group would share the profits 50-50 with the Red Army's post-Communist owners—renowned former Soviet Olympic coach Tikhonov and his general manager, Valery I. Gushchin.

"Baldwin saw an opportunity to rebuild one of the greatest dynasties in sports history," says Steven Warshaw, executive vice president of the Russian Penguins. With the Red Army team near bankruptcy, Baldwin also saw a chance to get an inside track on the hockey business in Russia—and make money by controlling the flow of Red Army players bound for North America.

At the time N.H.L. teams were free to cut their own deals in prying talent loose from Soviet clubs. "Vancouver would say, you know, 'How much to get [Sergei] Makarov out of Russia?' " says a sports marketing agent who has worked extensively in Russia. "C.S.K.A. and Vancouver would do the deal directly, on their own. There were big bucks to be had in transfer fees."

International investors like Baldwin & Co. who played by the free-market rulebook were the exception. The smell of quick cash drew criminal gangs to hockey clubs like flies to fecal matter. According to Dennis McDonald, former Winnipeg Jets assistant general manager, a Mafia cartel bought Sokol Kiev, the largest and most powerful Soviet League (as it then was) club in Ukraine.

"Gangsters came in and took it over," McDonald says. "They came in to scoop up the players. They figured if the players belonged to them and they could represent them, they'd be in fat city." But the gangsters proved inept when it came to running the club. Sokol Kiev went bankrupt, and eventually folded altogether.

"Some teams are now owned by Mafia groups," says Mike Smith, McDonald's old boss at the Winnipeg Jets. Smith is widely regarded as one of the game's most knowledgeable—and candid—observers of the Russian scene. "It's a hard thing to prove. But a team will be owned by, say, a factory, and the factory will be owned by the Mafia. It's like following a ship in the fog."

Superboxes and Extravaganzas

The Penguins caught a glimpse of the ship and perceived a long-term investment opportunity. At the very least they could corner the market on C.S.K.A. players leaving for the N.H.L. "No other team has provided more players to the N.H.L. than C.S.K.A.," Warshaw says. "The Red Army [team] is the unofficial hatchery of superstars for the N.H.L." (Some 50 former Red Army players are listed with the N.H.L. and their farm clubs this season.) Baldwin and Tikhonov agreed to a 50-50 split of transfer-fee profits on any Red Army players leaving for the N.H.L.

Baldwin's team of marketeers moved into high gear. They sold rink-board advertising and six-figure corporate sponsorships to Coke, McDonald's, and others who were looking to introduce their products to the Russian market. "We were trying to introduce American-style marketing and promotion," says Thomas Ruta, one of the Pittsburgh Penguin owners and president of the Russian Penguins.

They built superboxes for season-ticket holders and added between-period extravaganzas—complete with beer-guzzling dancing bears, beat-the-goalie contests, even strippers. They had Jeep giveaways and Delta Airlines–sponsored "Stanley Cup fantasy trips."

Attendance soared—from a lackluster 500 or so a night to packed houses of 6,000 raucous fans. Scalpers flourished.

But by the second season the deal began to sour. Gangsters with sawed-off shotguns stuffed under their coats commandeered the superboxes, leaving V.I.P. season-ticket holders on the street. When one employee inquired about general manager Gushchin's strange guests, the chap was advised to refrain from asking further questions, lest he end up hanging by his thumbs from the arena's rafters.

Millions of dollars in transfer fees disappeared without a trace. One insider says the C.S.K.A.'s management would double-dip by docking players arbitrarily, then pocketing the fines without refunding the money to their Pittsburgh bankrollers. When one player asked why he was fined his entire $400 monthly salary, Gushchin flatly told him, "Because you're an asshole." When Nike donated equipment for the Red Army's youth program, it turned up for sale to the public at the club's store.

In the summer of 1995 the Penguins were told to get out; their role would henceforth be limited to marketing Red Army tours and merchandise outside Russia. Warshaw and Ruta would only say that things didn't work out quite the way they expected. But the demise of the Penguins–Red Army joint venture is one of the worst-kept secrets in hockey.

"The Penguins ownership was forced out," says Michael Bopp, a staffer of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which in May 1996 held hearings on Russian mob infiltration into the ranks of hockey. "Was it by businessmen or organized crime? It's hard to say."

With Baldwin safely stashed in the corner, Tikhonov and Gushchin thought they were cruising. But they hadn't prepared for the heavy checking that would come their way up-ice, courtesy of their old bosses in the Russian Army.

Defense Minister Pavel Grachev had watched the new Russian Penguins in action from one of the refurbished Ice Palace superboxes. Grachev liked what he saw: the team's potential as a huge cash cow. The Army, which in 1993 had leased the club's rights—and rink—to Tikhonov for 49 years, suddenly wanted the team back.

"Now, after three years, the Army saw how fancy it is, and that money could be made," Viktor Gusev, who handles public relations for Tikhonov, told me when I visited the Ice Palace last summer. "That's when the struggle started."

General Grachev summarily dismissed Tikhonov and moved to reassert Army control over the franchise. By the summer of 1996 a full-scale war had broken out between the Tikhonov-Gushchin office at the Ice Palace and their former bosses in the Army barracks behind the arena.

Tikhonov had led C.S.K.A. Red Army to 13 consecutive Soviet championships and the Soviet national team to three Olympic gold medals. From the late 1970s on, Tikhonov coached both the Red Army and the Soviet national teams. Players from across the Soviet Union dreamed of making Tikhonov's Red Army team; it was the most secure route to the Soviet Olympic squad.

Not that the players had any great love for Tikhonov; his drill-sergeant brutality left many players physically and mentally broken, earning him the antipathy of many of his finest skaters.

As the best athletes began to set their sights on North America, Tikhonov could no longer attract the same first-rate talent. C.S.K.A. fell in the standings; attendance fell accordingly. The Army dumped the team into Tikhonov's lap in April 1993. Shortly thereafter Tikhonov signed the deal with Pittsburgh.

Mexican Standoff in Moscow

But by the spring of '96 Pittsburgh had come and gone. So too had Grachev, sacked in a Kremlin shakeout. And so had the corporate sponsorships brought in by the Penguins marketing strategists. But Grachev's exuberance had not gone unnoticed. If the old hammer and sickle stood for anything now, it was dollars—forget rubles. The brass sniffed its commercial appeal—the same appeal that had so bedazzled the Penguin Capitalists—and they wanted back in. Defense Ministry officers even promised Baldwin they would make amends if he took their side.

Throughout the spring and into the summer of 1996, Tikhonov and Gushchin resisted Defense Ministry efforts to force them from the Ice Palace. The showdown came to a head in July, when Army troops occupied the arena and blocked Tikhonov's access.

Gushchin and Tikhonov fought back, slipping into the building in the early morning with an escort of elite anti-terror commandos they'd hired from the Interior Ministry. (That's right, *hired*. As one Russian sports agent put it, "In the U.S. you call the police. In Russia you call the cops and they say, 'Pay us money or go to hell.' ")

A full-blown Mexican standoff ensued, with Army soldiers surrounding the Ice Palace and the police on alert inside. The Army only backed off when television crews arrived on the scene.

It was shortly after this standoff that I called on Tikhonov and Gushchin. I crossed the same pavement where Vladimir Bogach had been gunned down. Climbing the gray marble stairs and passing through the grimy glass

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doors of the Ice Palace, I retraced Bogach's final steps.

The memory of the Bogach murder was still fresh in the minds of the C.S.K.A. employees I encountered in the dark hallway inside. But nobody cared to dig too deeply. "No one wants to reveal too much, because then they will be afraid for their life too," one C.S.K.A. worker whispered. "We know also that in recent days a high hockey official was murdered in Yekaterinburg. It wasn't in any of the papers, but we know it happened."

No one believed that Bogach's death was linked to any dispute with the Army. Most seemed to think it was a case of mistaken identity. An unidentified "banker" was said to be playing tennis that afternoon on the Red Army courts outside the Ice Palace. (The term "banker" is used loosely these days in Russia; anyone with $50,000 in cash can open a bank.)

When Bogach emerged from the arena dressed in a tennis suit, the gunmen opened fire, apparently thinking they had their man. Witnesses report that the banker immediately bolted from the court and never returned to collect his bullet-riddled Mercedes. It happened to be parked alongside the more modest sedan from which Mrs. Bogach suddenly became a front-row spectator at her husband's execution.

Solovyov's death defied all explanation; not even the got-the-wrong-guy scenario seemed to fit. He was blown away just outside his apartment door. The evidence suggested precise planning. "The nearest thing that we can figure is that he may have accidentally taken pictures of someone who didn't want to be seen," said one C.S.K.A. official, who insisted on anonymity.

While I waited to see Gushchin, a grim-faced Tikhonov strode past. He refused to speak with me. "I'm sure Mr. Gushchin will tell you whatever it is you want to know," he said.

"There Are No Problems"

Valery Gushchin is a rotund, pale man who looks a decade older than his 50 years. With a thick shock of oiled white hair and dark circles under his eyes, he is a dead ringer for Boris Yeltsin.

Gushchin seemed surprised when I referred to problems with the Penguins. "Problems?" he said. "There are no problems." I suggested that Americans might be hard pressed to understand the kind of ownership spat that had led to the standoff on the arena steps.

"Different countries, different systems of law," Gushchin said with a shrug. By then the case had been remanded to the courts, so I asked if Russia had a system of law capable of arbitrating a dispute. "If they rule in our favor, there is law," he said.

He rose from his chair. "One last question," I ventured. "Is there a Mafia problem with hockey in Russia?"

Gushchin smirked. "This is just sensationalism, done on purpose to prove America is better than we are," he said, wagging his finger. "It's a deliberate attempt in the West to discredit Russia. Enjoy your stay here. Good-bye."

Gushchin's words paralleled a broader undercurrent of indignation palpable across Russia these days. Russians bristle at the suggestion that the downfall of the Communist regime proves the moral superiority of the West. Criminal syndicates have been quick to exploit the vestiges of animosity and suspicion left in the wake of the Cold War.

"They're tapping into a huge resentment against the West," says Stephen Handelman, author of *Comrade Criminal*, an extensive study of post-Communist Russia. "They believe that McDonald's and sex films are destroying their country. Mafia leaders see this as an assault against Russia."

According to Handelman, when criminal groups move into an industry, they distort the free market. "Organized crime is interested in monopoly power," Handelman says. "Entry to the business is blocked. You can't have a free market if Mafia groups have a corner on the market. It's not a level playing field."

Or hockey rink. The dramatic rise in Russia's criminal syndicates—and their potential influence over N.H.L. players—prompted the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations to hold those hearings last May. Fearing for the lives of his family back home, one Russian racketeer agreed to testify from behind a screen.

The witness outlined how the extortion rackets work in Russia. "There are two things you must do to operate a business successfully in Moscow," he said. "First you must pay the right government officials under the table." Second, you must purchase a *krisha*, literally a "roof"—protection. "The more important you are, the higher the roof must be," he continued. "In Moscow organized crime provides the roof."

You can score twice with the same puck if you go for a "full roof"—an outfit that provides a complete range of "services." In lieu of exacting tribute, enterprising syndicates will forge joint ventures with foreign companies. In exchange for a seat on the board of directors or a share of joint stock, the outfits will assure access to the right official contacts *and* provide protection from other would-be predators.

But investors beware: The roof might

crash down. Stories abound of foreign businessmen victimized by shady partners. Once the racketeers are fully established within, they simply take over and lock you out—a moment known in Russian criminal parlance as "feeding the pig."

The Penguins themselves would be loath to admit they had indulged a swine's appetite. But one insider says Tikhonov, Gushchin, and their shady Russian partners got too greedy and, in effect, blew the chance for assuring their long-term viability. "Pigs get fat, and hogs get slaughtered," the insider said. "They could have all been fat, rich pigs. Instead, they kept taking and taking until the joint venture blew up."

While the Ice Palace intrigue continued, last August witnessed the quiet arrival in Moscow of Russia's greatest and highest-paid N.H.L. superstars. They had returned to train for ten days at the Sokolnike Arena, in preparation for a first-ever World Cup of Hockey tournament. The eight-nation competition was to offer a preview of the 1998 Nagano Olympics, when the N.H.L. will formally take a break in midseason to allow its players to suit up for their respective national teams.

All 25 players on Team Russia had been groomed since early childhood on far-flung frozen factory lots and rivers across the former Soviet Union. They had endured winters and even summers of merciless grind in order to become cogs in the "Red Machine," as successive Soviet championship teams came to be known in the course of the 1970s and 1980s.

Here were Russia's living legends, many home for the first time in years: Fetisov, Larionov, Mogilny, Bure, Federov. All were veterans of the Soviet League and gold-medal Olympic teams. Since 1990 all had bolted for big contracts in the N.H.L. And after Russia failed to bring home an Olympic medal for the first time ever in 1994, they represented the motherland's best shot at snatching faded glory from the ash heap of hockey history.

But with security high on the minds of officials and players alike, the presence of Team Russia in the secluded woods of Sokolnike was known to only a handful of reporters, agents, and scouts.

Team Russia's captain, Viacheslav Fetisov, joined me in a dark corner of the dim clubhouse bar. He dismissed my questions about security with a wave of the hand. "If somebody would be nervous about crime, they never come back," he said. "Maybe someone promises something to somebody and they go after him. If you don't promise, you have no problem."

At 38 Fetisov was entering his final year in the sport. Back in 1989, when he first left C.S.K.A. to play for the New Jersey Devils, Fetisov openly broke with his longtime coach, Viktor Tikhonov, calling him a "Communist dictator." Team Russia's players lined up squarely behind Fetisov in refusing to allow Tikhonov to coach the World Cup team.

His blond hair now fringed with gray, Fetisov looked tired. "I don't know how come North American papers are saying there's a big Mafia over here that comes after the guys," he said.

"Anything Can Happen in Russia"

Maybe because there is. Or if not a big Mafia with a capital M, then thousands of little mafias, each gorging on the carcass of the prostrate Soviet empire. The onetime Soviet superpower has not just splintered into a dozen or so quasi-republics, it has disintegrated into an unfathomable menagerie of private and semi-private fiefdoms, which, in their sum, remain as opaque even to insiders as the Kremlin was to outside observers in the darkest days of Stalinist rule.

"Anything can happen in Russia," groused Russian Hockey Federation President Valentin Sych, as we watched Team Russia's practice. "We have a saying that you cannot understand Russia using your mind."

It was a funny remark coming from Sych, whom many players accused of handling hockey with an ineptitude befitting the stodgy bureaucrat he was.

And it was an especially ironic remark given the fact that as this issue went to press, Sych was gunned down in a gangland-style rubout while driving outside Moscow.

If sheer bungling accounts for a good measure of Russian hockey's woes, chalk up another part to low-life thugs. Criminal elements attached themselves like leeches to the very first Soviet players who bolted for lucrative contracts in the West. Take the case of Alexander Mogilny, who defected from the C.S.K.A. Red Army team during a tournament in Sweden in 1988 to play for the Buffalo Sabres.

Five years later Mogilny was in a Buffalo courthouse, accusing a onetime associate of threatening to "shoot me in the back, or stab me in the legs" if the superstar did not fork over $150,000. When I asked Mogilny about the episode after practice last summer in Moscow, he simply said, "I had no problem. The media made it a problem."

This pervasive state of denial makes probing crime's links to Russian athletes something of a labyrinthine task. "If you were a Russian, you wouldn't talk about it either," says former Winnipeg Jets G.M. Mike Smith. "They know who these guys are; they know they're dangerous." Especially dangerous, Smith contends, because of their training and connections to the netherworld of the former Soviet state. "When they downsized the

K.G.B., a lot of colonels attached themselves to Mafia groups."

Smith knows of what he speaks; he oversaw Winnipeg efforts three years ago to rescue a draft prospect from a criminal band in Kiev. The player, Alex Alexeyev, went into hiding after being roughed up by a carload of thugs. "He was told he might have a piano fall on his head," says Dennis McDonald, the former Jets official who handled the Alexeyev affair. McDonald arranged Alexeyev's escape from Ukraine and placed the budding star on a junior farm club in Tacoma.

Last year Oleg Tverdovsky's mother was kidnapped and held for a $200,000 ransom by the player's former coach. Russian authorities eventually freed her.

Buffalo Sabres defenseman Alexei Zhitnik acknowledged he was targeted for extortion when he visited Kiev in 1992. Zhitnik figured he would only compound his troubles by calling the police, so he sought the assistance of "friends" who operated a more powerful *krisha*. "The cops can do nothing," Zhitnik told reporters. "No rules. No laws."

winning the World Cup had just been dashed in a humiliating defeat at the hands of Team U.S.A. The dressing room was quiet, but Larionov wasn't crying.

What really bothered him, he said, was the wholesale larceny jeopardizing the future of the game in Russia. A month earlier he had driven 50 miles out of Moscow to Voskresensk, the gray town of smokestacks and high rises where he grew up, and where 27 years ago his older brother first took him to meet the coach from Khimik—the state-run chemical company that financed the local hockey program.

It was a grim sort of nostalgia trip, but Larionov was richly rewarded after the youth team's practice, when he delivered 20 sets of equipment to a huddle of jubilant faces. It was the first new stuff they'd seen in years. And it was the only way, Larionov said, to make sure it would ever get there.

Larionov said his first three-year contract with Vancouver had generated $1.2 million in transfer fees, payable to the Russian Hockey Federation. "I haven't seen any sign of it being spent on young players," Larionov said. "In seven years they never give me an answer about where it went."

This past April the president of the Russian Hockey Federation was gunned down in a gangland-style rubout.

If gangsters are bleeding Russian hockey from one arm, the National Hockey League seems to have its teeth firmly sunk into the other. N.H.L. owners formed a cartel in 1993 to pay a flat $2.6 million a year in transfer fees for the right to sign the Russian players.

"It was a great deal for the N.H.L., and a terrible deal for everyone else," said an N.H.L. player-personnel director, insisting on anonymity. N.H.L. franchises can now sign as many Russians as they want, even send them down to single-A minors, all for a meager $100,000 contribution per team.

"The N.H.L. bought and dismantled Russian hockey," says Lou Vairo, an executive at U.S.A. Hockey, the governing board for every aspect of the sport in the U.S. "Their hockey is devastated."

Even the cut-rate transfer fees never seem to get to where they're supposed to go—the youth programs in Moscow, the Urals, and the far reaches of Siberia, where a boy's first pair of skates might well be carved from wood for lack of money, and where Russian-style hockey will survive or perish.

I caught up with a despondent Igor Larionov in Team Russia's locker room at the Corel Arena in Ottawa. It was early September 1996, and Russia's hopes for

One official working with the Russian Hockey Federation has no doubt about where Larionov's commissions—and millions more earned from the transfer of other Russian superstars—have gone.

"On the record, there's no criminal activity—Russia's getting a bad rap," the official told me. "Off the record, it's absolutely unavoidable" that N.H.L. money flows into criminal hands.

The N.H.L. refuses comment. "These are topics we do not normally discuss," said spokesman Andrew McGowan. "It's confidential material, not something the league would comment on."

Outright extortion may actually be a thing of the past in Russia's hockey business. Criminal groups in Russia have grown up; they have emerged as sophisticated enterprises with bigger fish to fry. Besides, underworld bosses seem to like the cachet of befriending marquee-name athletes.

"What really attracts Mafia people now is to get a better image for themselves," said the Moscow rep for a sporting-goods manufacturer. "They want a legal base for all their other activities. To be the sponsor of a club is to be respected. The period of killing for money is almost over."

Still, few players seem willing to return to Russia for extended visits. And one hockey source who works and travels throughout Russia insisted the danger persists. "Anyone who has money is vulnerable to the Russian mob," he said. "They're huge."

As if to prove his point, Alexander Osadchy came back to Russia and did not even live to regret it. When Osadchy failed to make practice at the Ice Palace for two days this past November, C.S.K.A. general manager Gushchin and a police detective broke into the defenseman's apartment. They found the bloated body of the 21-year-old Ukrainian sprawled on his bed.

There were no signs of foul play, and the autopsy proved equally fruitless: no traces of drugs, nor any other indication of how the young star met his untimely death. Osadchy had been drafted by the San Jose Sharks. After struggling in the North American minor leagues for a year, he decided to make a fresh start back home with C.S.K.A.

But midseason found Osadchy in a zinc coffin on a train hurtling across the forlorn plains of southern Russia, bound for his native village in Ukraine. Two weeks later, when players and fans observed a moment of silence at the Ice Palace, question marks seemed to hang like meat hooks from the rafters. Questions not only about Osadchy, but about Vladimir Bogach and Feliks Solovyov, and the horrific malady that has come to afflict the Red Army and Russian hockey in general.

Could Russian gangsters ever be in a position to fix the Stanley Cup on this side of the globe?

"It's an interesting question," says crime expert Handelman. "They'd have to have criminal partners here in the United States in order to do it. It's not beyond the realm of possibilities."

The Cold War's aftermath finds us trapped in a real-life comic-strip world—Riddlers, Jokers, and, yes, Penguins abound, threatening to poison Gotham City's water supply. Russian missiles may no longer be targeted at our cities; the hockey action might even be better in Miami than in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. But nuclear smugglers are on the loose, hit squads are breaking three-on-one across the blue line, and Batman is nowhere to be found.

With Russian mobsters hooking up with crime syndicates throughout North America, the chance for fraud in the professional sports business remains a distinct possibility. As one law-enforcement official puts it, "When it comes to what Russian criminals are capable of doing, the only limit is the imagination."

Imagine that.