



Handzus appreciates all that comes with opportunity

By Josh Brewster - NHL.com Correspondent

Slovakia's Michal Handzus spent his childhood behind the Iron Curtain and his adulthood in the free world. Now, about to embark on his second Olympic experience, he remains deeply appreciative for his freedom.

"We never heard about the NHL because of the Communist regime," Handzus said of his early years growing up in the former Czechoslovakia. "Back home, everything was all about the national team. We didn't have a chance to watch the NHL, so everybody wanted to play for the national team."

Handzus, who will turn 33 on March 11, is enjoying his third season with the Los Angeles Kings and 11th in the NHL.

He previously represented Slovakia at the 2002 Olympics (an injury in 2006 forced him to withdraw from those Games), and won gold at the 2002 World Championship.

"(Back home) the biggest stage was the Olympics for sure, and World Championships," said Handzus, who was born in the city of Banska Bystrica, an important economic and cultural center. "(The) Olympics is only once every four years. It's the biggest stage. If you can get an Olympic medal it's huge back home and huge for me, also."

Handzus' NHL career began in St. Louis. Far from home, Handzus found linemates in countrymen Pavol Demitra and Lubos Bartecko. The trio came to be known as the "Slovak Pack."

Will we see a reunion in Vancouver?

"Probably not, because Pavol will play center," Handzus said. "We don't have as many centers. But (if) we have a chance in some games and we can play together, that would be cool."

Handzus expects Slovakia's top line will be the same from '06.

"In the last Olympics in 2006, (Marian) Gaborik, Pavol (Demitra) and (Marian) Hossa played together and they played great," Handzus said.

When Czechoslovakia was dissolved Jan. 1, 1993, the Czech Republic's Ice Hockey Association took over the position of the former country, while Slovakia had to start from scratch in the IIHF World Championship program and work its way up the IIHF ladder.

Slovakia first entered Olympic competition in 1994, has yet to win an Olympic medal, and finds itself in the shadows of long-time giants such as Russia and Canada.

"I think it's good for us that we're kind of overlooked," Handzus said. "We have a good roster. We have a lot of older guys. If the U.S. has to overcome that they are a young team, with (Olympic) inexperience, then we have to overcome that we might be too old."

In addition to Handzus, Slovakia features nine players that were on the gold medal-winning World Championship roster in 2002: Miroslav Satan, Zigmund Palffy, Lubomir Visnovsky, Jozef Stumpel, Richard Lintner, Bartecko, Rastislav Stana and Martin Strbak.

While Slovakia features offensively gifted NHL players like Gaborik and Hossa, the defense, led by Zdeno Chara, will be the key.

"It's all about how we play defense," Handzus said.

A runner-up for the NHL's Selke trophy after the 1999-2000 season, Handzus said his natural two-way role with penalty killing responsibilities will be precisely what he'll be called on to do in Vancouver by coach Jan Filc.

"I'm not going to change because it's the Olympics," Handzus said. "I don't know whether I can get a lot of power-play time because we have a lot of offensive guys. It's a little different game (at the Olympics). You

don't have just one line to shut down; you have to shut down all four lines."

Handzus, who has spent NHL time in St. Louis, Philadelphia, Chicago and Los Angeles, is grateful to live in a world where he's free to choose his fate, unlike the situation faced by so many of his hockey-playing countrymen in previous decades. Prior to Communism's fall, professional options were few and harsh -- live behind the Iron Curtain or choose defection and bid farewell to most, if not all, family and friends.

"Some of them, like Peter Stastny, they played here and showed that they were top players (in the NHL)," Handzus said. "It's very hard to leave your country knowing that you would never see your parents or friends or anybody. So it (was) tough to defect. Not many of them did."

With 20 years since the regime's end, Handzus hopes the lessons of captivity are not lost on the young.

"I feel lucky," Handzus said. "When Communism fell in 1989, I was 12. I remember some stuff but I don't remember much. A lot of people in Slovakia, younger people, they don't remember. They feel like freedom was forever, that it's always been like this. The older people, they remember. They know the price that was paid. They couldn't go on vacation because they couldn't get out of the country. We had bananas maybe once a year, for Christmas, that was it. There (were) a lot of things that a lot of people don't remember.

"I think it's good that we should remember, and especially for the people who didn't live in that environment. I feel lucky that I can play here, and travel home as many times as I can. Hopefully the world will stay the same (as it is now)."