

The Russians are Coming!

Hockey history was made in Seattle on December 25, 1972 when the defending world champion hockey team from Russia took the ice at the Coliseum for a game against the minor league Totems of the WHL. It marked the first time a professional, U.S.-based hockey team had ever hosted a team from Russia on American soil. The first game in a four-game series between the Russians and WHL clubs, it was a huge success as a crowd of over 12,000 turned out for the exhibition. The Totems were clearly overmatched by the Russian squad which included 17 players who had participated in the Summit Series against the Canadian All-Stars earlier in the year, barely losing to the top Canadian pros.

The Russians jumped out to a quick 3-0 lead in the game's opening 10 minutes, but the Totems came back strong in the second half of the period with two goals of their own to make it 3-2 at the intermission. A goal by Dave Bonter tied it at 4-4 at 7:32 of the second, and the local fans had a glimmer of hope... but not for long. The Russians scored late in the period to take a 5-4 lead, then tacked on four more unanswered goals in the third to earn the 9-4 win. The Totems played well, but the minor leaguers were simply no match for the top team in the world. The Russians won all four games against WHL opponents, outscoring them 33-14.

By all accounts the series had been very successful. Even the Russians were happy - they took in 50% of the gate, helping to offset the cost of their trip. When they returned to the U.S. the following year for the World Cup tournament a second exhibition tour through the WHL was arranged, though this time Seattle was to be the last stop.

When the Soviets arrived in Seattle for their January 5, 1974 rematch, they had already beaten three WHL clubs (by a combined score of 21-7) and won the four-team World Cup tournament. They were both confident and tired, which is a deadly combination for any team. Four of their regulars didn't even suit up for the game, as it was felt that they wouldn't be needed to knock off the Totems. That turned out to be a big mistake.

A standing-room-only crowd of 12,710 packed the Coliseum to the rafters, and Dave Westner quickly got the home team on the board with a goal in the game's first two minutes. It was the only goal of the period, and the Totems took a 1-0 lead into the first

intermission. The Russians got on track in the second, scoring twice to take a 2-1 lead. It looked like they were going to begin pulling away, until Gene Sobchuk lit the lamp at the 9:35 mark. His goal was quickly followed by two more, and in the span of 1:43 the Totems went from a 2-1 deficit to a 4-2 lead. A goal by Dave Westbrooke (his second of the period) with under a minute to go in the period gave them a 5-2 lead at the second intermission, and the Seattle fans could feel the improbable upset looming.

The Russians felt it too, and quickly suited up their four “scratches” to put fresh legs on the ice in the third. It was too little, too late. The Totems scored twice in the first 10 minutes of the third to go up 7-2 and the game was pretty much in hand. The Russian scratches picked up a pair of quick goals in the middle of the period to make it 7-4 and put a little worry back into the crowd, but the Totems clamped down on defense and held them off the scoring sheet for the rest of the night. Westbrooke scored with just over a minute left to complete the hat trick, and Seattle beat the Russians 8-4.

It was the only win by a WHL club over the Russians, and after that embarrassing loss the Soviet national team would no longer face minor league teams. It was a high water mark for the Totems, the one moment of glory during their period of decline in the early 1970s, and it remains a treasured memory for a generation of Seattle hockey fans. *Jeff Obermeyer is a 13-year season ticket holder with the Thunderbirds. His new book, “Hockey in Seattle”, chronicles the history of hockey in Seattle from 1915 to the present day. It is available at the souvenir stands or through his website at <http://www.seattlehockey.net>.*