



SCENES FROM THE END OF THE WORLD

THE DIV. III WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP FEATURES A HANDFUL OF LOW-LEVEL HOCKEY NATIONS, FROM BULGARIA TO TURKMENISTAN TO SOUTH AFRICA. THEY PLAY TO WIN, BUT THEIR JOURNEY TO THE WORLDS IS MORE ABOUT THE LOVE OF THE GAME THAN A GOLD MEDAL. JUST HAPPY TO BE THERE? YOU BET **BY RONNIE SHUKER**

THE WINTER SPORTS PALACE in Sofia, Bulgaria, is a bit of a misnomer. It's about as palatial as a shoebox with its ends kicked in and has the architectural allure of an oversized accordion. The arena actually occupies the lower part of the complex, underneath two nightclubs, and the architect could only have selected the building's black, purple, beige, blue and baby-blue color scheme by throwing darts at a palette board while blindfolded.

It's here that 117 no-name players from six afterthought hockey nations have gathered together for the 2019 IIHF World Championship Div. III, a couple weeks before the superstars take center stage at

the top-rung worlds tournament in Slovakia. Promotional posters for the Div. III tourney, featuring a right-shooting Patrick Kane, list the teams: Bulgaria, Chinese Taipei, Luxembourg, South Africa, Turkey and Turkmenistan. With five games each in seven days, the schedule is unforgiving, though the tickets are free, and with only one foreign reporter in attendance it's a tournament the hockey world doesn't much care for.

Except the players, who come in all ages, sizes, shapes, skills and occupations. The youngest is 16 years old, the oldest 40. The smallest is 5-foot-6 and 132 pounds, the biggest 6-foot-4 and 225 pounds. There are software developers, massage therapists, PhDs, cops,

firefighters, prison guards, even a handful of soldiers, all playing alongside or against players from junior leagues, the NCAA, the KHL's farm league and all manner of European minor-pro circuits, with a bunch beer-leaguers mixed in as well. Some of the teams are heavily funded, others brutally underfunded. They come from Europe, Africa, Central Asia, the Far East and the Middle East. Two are Muslim countries, one is Catholic, one Protestant, another Eastern Orthodox and the other a mix of Buddhism and Taoism. It's the most multicultural division in the IIHF, but the players all share one thing: sheer love of the game. That and some of best uniforms around.



to the U.S. and had all but given up the game until he returned to Turkmenistan in 2015. Since then he has been playing for Galkan HC, which represents the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as the national team. A tournament like this is invaluable for him and his teammates, because it's a chance to test themselves against foreign competition. Aside from a handful of soldiers, they are all full-time, fully paid hockey players whose job is to win, and coming into the tournament their official record was 10-0. Gold is the goal in Bulgaria, but any medal would go a long way to pushing its young hockey program even further up the IIHF rankings. "It would be historic for our future," Soyunov said. "Turkmenistan has never won a medal in hockey. We would be the first. All of us talk about it in the dressing room. It's the biggest tournament of our lives."

Today, however, they get their first taste of adversity, losing to Chinese Taipei in overtime. Turkmenistan earns a crucial point, after coming back from being three goals down in the third period, but the team's first defeat clearly stings. The goaltender and a few of the players lay face-down on the ice afterward, while those on the bench stare blankly in disbelief that they actually lost a game.

DAY 1

TURKMENISTAN

IN TURKMENISTAN, ANYONE IS allowed to drive a vehicle of any color so long as it's white. In 2015, the same year the country joined the IIHF, the government banned colored automobiles, so citizens either had to repaint their cars accordingly

or lose them altogether.



Thankfully, the ban doesn't apply to Turkmenistan's national team. Its head-to-ankle forest-green uniform recalls the Minnesota Wild's home look, and the players wear it along with its sleek white-with-green-trim complement with pride. It is Turkmenistan's first foray into the World Championship and a rare opportunity for the players to represent their country on an international stage in a winter sport.

Turkmenistan is a secluded Muslim nation in Central Asia with vast oil and natural-gas

reserves. It is 90 percent desert with temperatures that reach as high as 45 degrees Celsius (115 Fahrenheit). The country averages fewer tourists per year than North Korea, and hockey has become one way for visitors to get a visa. In 2018, Turkmenistan began hosting the Friendship Cup in cooperation with the Howe International Consulting Group, a company that organizes sporting events in obscure locales. The event allows adventure-seeking hockey tourists to visit Turkmenistan and play friendlies against the country's nascent national team, which has come a long way in a very short time.

Despite Turkmenistan once being part of the Soviet Union, hockey never caught on until 2011 when the \$200-million Winter Sport Complex opened in the capital, Ashgabat. As part of a push to put the country on the sports map, the government took a liking to hockey and formed the eight-team Turkmenistan League, with each club representing a ministry, department or state enterprise. At the same time the government began pouring money into the country's

national team. After winning a handful of exhibition matches, Turkmenistan played its first official international game in 2017 at the Asia Winter Games, where it obliterated its grouping, and then last year it plowed through the IIHF's qualifying group for Div. III to book its ticket to Bulgaria. "This is good for us because we're getting experience," said 24-year-old Dovlet Soyunov, Turkmenistan's all-time leading goal-scorer. "Teams like Turkey, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, they all have experience. This is the first time in the division for us. Those teams, the players play all over Europe. It's not Asia, you know?"

TURKMENISTAN HAS NEVER WON A MEDAL IN HOCKEY. WE WOULD BE THE FIRST. IT'S THE BIGGEST TOURNAMENT OF OUR LIVES

— Dovlet Soyunov, Turkmenistan's all-time leading goal-scorer

Like most players on the national team, all of whom are between 19 and 29, Soyunov hasn't been playing hockey all that long. Turkmenistan didn't get its first rink until 2006, so Soyunov didn't start skating until he was 11 and didn't begin playing hockey until he was 13. He then took nearly three years off after his family moved

One player who isn't worried is 25-year-old captain Ahmet Gurbanov. After the game he comes out of the room dressed in his team jumpsuit and confidently conducts an interview in English. South Africa is up next for Turkmenistan. "Tomorrow will be different," Gurbanov said. "Tomorrow you will see another team."

DAY 2

SOUTH AFRICA

IT'S MID-AFTERNOON, AND Gurbanov indeed made good on his promise as Turkmenistan beats a plucky but exhausted South African squad in the first contest of the second day of the tournament. In the stands, South



Africa's American coach Bob Deraney has taken a seat in the near-empty media section to watch the sec-

ond afternoon affair, between Chinese Taipei and Luxembourg. Deraney is only 90 minutes removed from his team's second loss in barely 16 hours, but he isn't giving up on his players. He's here to scout Luxembourg for South Africa's next game. "We've got three games left," he said. "We want to come away with three wins."

The South Africans are used to having the deck stacked against them, even in their own

country. Like the rhino on the front of their provocative black, green, yellow and white jerseys, South Africa's hockey program has long straddled the line between existence and extinction. But the players are a resilient bunch, who hit with rugby-like reckless abandon, and they're as tough as rhino hide. None more so than Marc Giot.

Giot was born with clubbed feet, a condition in which the Achilles tendons are too short and so pull the feet over in varying degrees depending on the severity. Giot's feet were turned 180 degrees so that his soles were facing up. Nowadays new procedures realign the feet using casts that are slowly tightened, like braces for teeth. But when Giot was born in 1981, doctors had to break his ankles, cut open his feet, slice his Achilles tendons and then stretch and lengthen them to turn his feet over. He went through several surgeries from six months to three years old and then wore special boots for two years. The surgeries were successful, and Giot played soccer, rugby and other sports like any normal South African kid, until his late teens. That's when his pituitary gland stopped pumping out growth hormone, which had masked the pain. As the pain kicked in more and more, Giot had to stop playing sports altogether. All except

hockey. The nature of skating lessens the compression on his feet, which has allowed him to keep playing at 37 years old. He still deals with chronic pain, but he's able to play through it thanks to a pair of \$2,000 custom-made skates along with a few tricks of the trade. "I've got wraps, ankle braces, ice, you name it," Giot said. "Everyone has their own thing. You learn to live with it. I manage."

And so do the rest of the players, who must make do with what they've got, which is essentially themselves. With no government support, hockey in South Africa is mostly a mentor system. Elder statesmen like Giot and 40-year-old Michael Edwards, the oldest player in the tournament, play for the men's team and also coach other teams in the national program, as well as coach and play in the country's semi-pro leagues. They get their certification through an arrangement with USA Hockey. These players absorb as much information as possible from veteran American personnel and then pass on what they learn to the younger players, who do the same when they get older. This is how South Africa is able to keep its hockey program alive, but it's also why the country hasn't developed into a higher hockey nation despite being a member of the IIHF since 1937. "There's

no support from the government," Edwards said. "They just support rugby, soccer and cricket. That's it."

Like Edwards, most of the players on the national team come from the three clubs that make up South Africa's top circuit, the Super League: the Cape Town Kings, Pretoria Capitals and the Kempton Park Wildcats, who are based in Johannesburg. Players pay their own way, including flights to and from Cape Town in the south of the country, which is 800 miles away from where the other two teams are based in the north. In order to cut down on costs and limit the vacation time that players must take from work, the teams play a compressed schedule, with four games in four days played over a handful of weekends every year. The rest of the season they play in their local and provincial leagues.

Deraney, 54, has only been on the job a couple months, but he's already caught the infectious passion of his players. "They never complain, they never make excuses, they're just so appreciative to be on the ice and to get coaching," he said. "You want to give them more because they're the consummate hockey players. They just love the game, and that's why they come out. They sacrifice so much just to play the game."



SOUTH AFRICAN FEDERATION

DAY 3

CHINESE TAIPEI

AFTER TWO GAMES EACH, all six teams get a day off. With no assistant coaches, Ryan Lang could use it. Chinese Taipei won its first two games, but they were both one-goal nail-biters. "They were a lot closer than they should've been," Lang said. "It's a good thing I don't have any hair because I would have lost it all."



Lang arrived in Taiwan 11 years ago after playing junior in Canada and the U.S. and then semi-pro in Australia. For the past six years he has been running virtually the entire national program. Along with the men's team, he coaches the U-10 and U-14 mixed boys and girls teams as well as both the U-18s and U-20s, all on top of his day job as an English teacher, with a wife and two kids. Chinese Taipei has been an IIHF member since 1983, but it only began playing in tournaments in 2017. The women's team and the U-18s both won gold this year, so adding a medal from the men's team would go a long way to getting the government funding Lang has long coveted. "They just keep saying, 'Well, you need to show us some medals to get some money,'" Lang said. "It's like, 'Well, that's kind of backward. We need the money first to get the medals.' They're all results-based. To get funding from the government it's, 'Show me what you've done.'"

With no North American-style minor-hockey system in place, kids in Taiwan play on club teams for privately owned businesses. As they work their way up through the age groupings, Lang keeps tabs on those

who could potentially play for the national teams when they get older and invites their parents to enroll them in the U-10 and U-14 programs. The system runs smoothly up to the U-20s while the players are still living at home. But once they age out, leave home and start paying their own bills, Lang struggles to ice a men's team. The IIHF gives every federation a stipend to help cover costs, based on how far each team must travel to the tournament, which helped the Chinese Taipei Ice Hockey Federation cover food and accommodation for players and staff. But everyone had to pay their own way to Sofia and not all of them could. That left Lang with no assistant coaches and just 15 skaters to go along with his two goalies, who have their own problems to deal with. They only have one stick between them because they broke the other two in practice before the tournament began.

With a short bench Lang leans heavily on his veterans, especially 26-year-old Taiwanese-Canadian Po-Yuan Hsiao, a marketing coordinator in Vancouver, and 29-year-old captain



RYAN LANG

to care. They're grateful for the free apparel, and the players are content to play as Chinese Taipei instead of Taiwan to placate the Chinese government, which still views the island as part of China. "We're pretty transparent about it," Hsiao said. "It's not an issue for us. It's more a problem for them."

Like South Africa, the real problems for Chinese Taipei are money and ice. Along with a lack of government funding, there are only four arenas in the country, and each of them comes with its own unique whiskey-tango-foxtrot feature. There's a 3-on-3 rink, in a mall, that's shaped like a banana, with one side longer than the other, while another rink has poles in the middle of the ice. The country does have a modern Olympic-size arena, but

it through. We did host IIHF tournaments there, but then it came to a point where, 'You know what? This is ridiculous.' The facility is connected to a mall, and they would clear out the shops there and make those into dressing rooms. It's the weirdest thing."

The final straw came two years ago when Chinese Taipei hosted the division's U-18 tournament. Instead of clearing the shops, players were put outside in tents. After a torrential downpour soaked everyone's gear, the IIHF had had enough.

Yet Chinese Taipei continues to apply to host tournaments, and its hockey program continues to grow even as players are forced to play around the oddities of the country's arenas. And Lang keeps developing players for the national teams



Hung-Ju Lin, who join Lang at the snack bar after practice. All three are wearing Chinese Taipei jackets, with a Jack Nicklaus logo on them. They're hand-me-downs from the country's golf team, but none of them seems

even its design has an architectural brain cramp. "It's a beautiful rink and everything, but we have no dressing rooms," Hsiao said. "We've got beautiful stands, good ice, good facility, but someone just didn't think

to try to push the country up the IIHF rankings. "I'm doing it because I love hockey," he said, "and I want to help these guys because there are a lot of good players that could do a lot of good things."

DAY 4

TURKEY

AFTER THE DAY OFF, all six teams are back at it. Even with the rest, however, Chinese Taipei can't hold off Turkey despite leading after two periods. The short bench does the team in as Turkey scores four unanswered goals in the third for its first win.



Getting food certainly helped. Before Turkey's second game, against Bulgaria, the hotel failed to serve the team's dinner on time, so the players went without a proper pre-game meal in their 3-1 loss to the host nation.

After the win over Chinese Taipei, Cengiz Ciplak strolls into the lobby dressed in a team jumpsuit, his long, stringy hair tinged with gray still damp from his post-game shower. With only one win in its first three games Turkey doesn't have a chance at getting promoted, but Ciplak is still all smiles. At 36, he's just glad to be playing again. "Obviously I'm not the 24-year-old that I once was, kicking ass," he said. "I'm more of a role player, getting the young guys going. I've been away from the ice for a long time."

Ciplak is regarded as the best player ever to play for Turkey. His story reads like that of a typical Canadian kid, albeit with a Turkish twist. Ciplak was born in Edmonton, the youngest of three boys. His parents were both Turkish immigrants who came to Canada in their teens back in the 1960s. His father fell in love with the game almost immediately and became a stereotypical hockey dad when his sons were born. Ciplak was on the ice at three years old, play-

ing pond hockey with his older brothers. He started playing minor hockey at five, and at 10 he played in Edmonton's renowned Brick Invitational Novice Hockey Tournament on a team with Jay Bouwmeester. Ciplak rose through the ranks to AAA and then the Alberta Jr. A League. Along the way he played with or against many other future NHLers, including Joffrey Lupul, Scottie Upshall, Jordin Tootoo, Mike Comrie, Erik Christensen and Cam Ward.

Ciplak eventually landed in the QMJHL with the Victoriaville Tigres. Then, just a half-dozen games into his first season, he got an unexpected call from overseas. "Turkey somehow got a hold of me, through ethnicity or this or that, and they said, 'Listen, we have a program here and we're looking for imports. Would you like to come play pro in Turkey?'" Ciplak said. "They offered me some good money when I was 18, so I left the 'Q' for Turkey."

Turkey has been a member of the IIHF since 1991, but the country's hockey program was still in its infancy when Ciplak came over in 2001. He played six years on club teams, and after his first two years he became eligible for the national program. He debuted in 2003 for the U-20s, and for the next four years he threw himself into the national program, coaching the U-18s and U-20s while playing on the men's team and recruiting more overseas players of Turkish descent. In 2007, Ciplak scored nine of Turkey's 15 goals and was named MVP for the Div. II World Championship, despite the team losing all

five of its games by a combined score of 58-15.

Then just like that, he stopped playing. "I was in my prime, and I even got an offer to go play in Italy, but what happened was I got married, hitched," Ciplak said. "My wife didn't want me living the bachelor lifestyle on the road. She wanted to settle down, so I chose family over hockey."

Ciplak returned to Canada with his wife, had three kids and started an import/export business. He came back to Turkey briefly as an assistant coach for the men's team at the 2011 Div. III World Championship, where the country won its only gold medal to date. But that was it for 12 years. "It's a decision that I don't regret because I met my wife playing hockey and I have a family," he said. "But a lot of my friends growing up went the other way, the 'Q' ECHL, AHL, NHL. I went this way, but I helped a nation get recognized on an international stage."

During his time away from hockey, Ciplak didn't play at all aside from the odd pickup game. Then last fall he and his wife decided to move back on what he calls "a trial basis" to give their kids a taste of Turkey. The Turkish Ice Hockey Federation found out that its prodigal son had returned and after a little arm-twisting coaxed him back into the fold. Ciplak signed a contract with Zeytinburnu SK in the Turkish Super League and by January had started practising with the na-

tional team. He found a lot had changed in 12 years. "The players are way better now," Ciplak said. "When I was playing, I was playing like 40 minutes a game. We had two lines, literally, now we have four. When I played, there were one or two rinks, now there are 10. Turkish hockey is developing. We got some imports on the team who are playing abroad, and we got some pretty good local kids. And Turkey's starting to spend more money on hockey as a country."

That money includes a new \$100-million arena, complete with a hotel to host international tournaments, that's due to open in 2020. With six teams, the TSL is small but strong enough financially to pay its players on par with what ECHLers make. The money is irrelevant to Ciplak, who continues to run his business while playing hockey. He's just happy to be back in Turkey and wearing the country's minimalist Red Wings-like uniforms. "I'm playing again, it's crazy," he said. "And now I actually want to play until I'm 40. It keeps me young."

THEY OFFERED ME
SOME GOOD MONEY
WHEN I WAS 18, SO
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PLAY FOR TURKEY

— Cengiz Ciplak, regarded as Turkey's
all-time greatest hockey player

CENGIZ CIPLAK STEPPED AWAY FROM THE GAME FOR A DOZEN YEARS. NOW HE'S BACK, AND HE HAS EYES ON PLAYING UNTIL HE'S 40.



DAY 5

BULGARIA

IT'S BEEN A GOOD year for Bulgarian hockey and IIHF executive director Stoian "Tony" Batchvarov, the country's all-time leading scorer. Sporting jeans and a bright orange Oilers blazer, Batchvarov holds out his cellphone with a photo of him and Wayne Gretzky taken in Edmonton last summer. With Gretzky always occupied, Batchvarov almost didn't get to meet his idol, but he wasn't about to let the opportunity slip away. "I said to him, 'I've been waiting 35 years to meet you,'" Batchvarov said. "'Come here!'"

As for the country's accomplishments: Alexandar Georgiev, the first Bulgarian-born player to reach the NHL, won

the New York Rangers' backup job behind Henrik Lundqvist this past season and even got the bulk of the starts down the stretch. Then, in late March, Bulgaria won its first U-18 gold when it went undefeated in Div. III Group A. And at this event, after beating Chinese Taipei to go 4-0 in its first four games, the men's team has secured gold to earn promotion next year.

And all of that comes on top of Bulgaria getting its first player inducted into the IIHF Hall of Fame after netminder Konstantin Mihaylov was awarded the federation's annual Torriani Award, given to a player with an "outstanding career from non-top hockey nation."

"It's fabulous," Mihaylov said. "It's a great honor, not only for me but for Bulgarian ice hockey, my colleagues and the Bulgarian Ice Hockey Federation."

Mihaylov proudly holds out his phone to show the three-minute call he received from IIHF president Rene Fasel, who spoke mostly with one of Mihaylov's colleagues since Mihaylov speaks almost no English. A man of few words, even with the aid of a translator, Mihaylov was a man of many seasons for Bulgaria, which became a member of the IIHF in 1952. Beginning in



1981, he backstopped Bulgaria at World Championships and Olympic qualifying events for its U-18, U-20 and men's teams, as well as its inline squad, until he finally retired for good in 2015. Along the way Mihaylov played 23 years in the Bulgarian League. He never smoked or drank, and he trained year-round like players do today.

Mihaylov is proud of his accomplishments, but he laments the state of Bulgarian hockey, which he says has suffered from chronic funding cuts over the past two decades. Still, there are some talented players

GRABBING THE GREAT ONE

Stoian Batchvarov waited 35 years for a photo with Wayne Gretzky. He wasn't going to miss his chance.

in Bulgaria's national program, including Mihaylov's successor, 21-year-old Dimitar Dimitrov, who's allowed just seven goals through four games, along with Miroslav Vasilev, the tournament's leading scorer. Vasilev is playing junior in the Czech Republic and a pro career is in the offing, but his slick hockey skills come with soccer-style histrionics that exasperate his opponents and even the officials, who make him the tournament's leader in penalty minutes as well. Late in Bulgaria's first game, South Africa's 37-year-old captain, Andre Marais, had enough of the antics and decided to give the 19-year-old a bit of the Don Cherry treatment. "I just said to him that he's a really good player, and if he wants his opponents to respect him he needs to play the game the right way," Marais said. "I said, 'Good job, good player, but you can do better.' When you see a guy like that who probably has a world of opportunity ahead of him, especially from a smaller nation, you don't want him to waste it because someone sees a bad attitude..."

"Then I turned to 'Charl' (South Africa's goalie) and said, 'I'm probably going to cross-check him now anyway.'"



IVAN HODULOV & DIMITAR DIMITOV



DAY 6

LUXEMBOURG

AFTER A SECOND SET of back-to-back games, the teams get another day off. Luxembourg uses it to prepare for Bulgaria in its final contest. Luxembourg needs a win to bring home a medal, but the game will mean



a little more for 37-year-old captain Ronny Scheier, who by day runs his family's metal-fabric business back home. After 20 years on the national team, it will be the last time he puts on the country's lion-crested, red, white and light-blue uniform. "I just don't have the time anymore because of the job and everything," Scheier said. "Everybody on the team is a hobby player. Nobody is paid. Everybody does it because they want to do it, and so everybody has to do his job on the side of hockey. At some point you just

have to say, 'OK, it's too much now. I need some time for my job, my family.'"

Luxembourg is a little better off than South Africa and Chinese Taipei in that its federation has the resources to pay for the team's entire trip to Bulgaria and even bring along a social-media manager to cover the tournament for fans back home. But the country has its own unique challenges, too.

With less than 600,000 people to draw from, Luxembourg has long struggled to sustain its hockey program on its own. Instead it has relied on the influence of foreign nationals from other European countries to maintain a small but dedicated talent pool committed to growing the game in Luxembourg. Nearly half of the country's population is made up of foreigners, and in the capital, Luxembourg City, the ratio is more than two-thirds. Many work in the country's banking sector, and most come from Europe, including hockey-mad nations like Swe-

den, Finland and Switzerland, though mainly Germany, France and Belgium, which surround the tiny landlocked country. Many stay and raise their kids there, who in turn become citizens. The next generation retains its parents' love for the game, which then filters up through Luxembourg's two semi-pro teams and into its national program. On the men's team alone there are at least

10 different nationalities between players and staff. "What helps us a lot as well is that we get all those foreigners from outside who come to Luxembourg for work and then join the clubs because they want to play hockey," Scheier said.

"We've got some players that have played in higher leagues throughout the world, so they bring a lot of talent to practice and to the teams. And that helps the Luxembourgish players improve as well."

With only three rinks and such a small population, Luxembourg doesn't have the resources to support its own

EVERYBODY ON THE TEAM IS A HOBBY PLAYER. NOBODY IS PAID. **EVERYBODY DOES IT BECAUSE THEY WANT TO**

— Ronny Scheier, Team Luxembourg

GRAND FINALE

After 20 years with Luxembourg's national team, Ronny Scheier will hang 'em up after the worlds.

league, but it does have a club (Beaufort Knights) in Division 2 of the Belgian League and another (Tornado Luxembourg) in France's lowest pro league. None of the players are paid, however. In fact, all of them pay to play, including Scheier and his same-age cousin, Benny Welter. Although Luxembourg has been a member of the IIHF since 1912, eight years before Canada joined, the country didn't participate in its first World Championship until 1992 and then not again until 2000. Both Scheier and Welter have been on the national team since then while playing for Tornado Luxembourg. They get together once a week with others from the national team to prepare for the World Championship, but between club practices, work, school and family, rarely is Luxembourg able to practise as a full team until the last minute. "Sometimes we only meet all together at the World Championship," Welter said. "For most teams it's like that. Most meet at the hotel just before the tournament."



PHILIPPE BECHTOLD

LOMCEVOY PICTURES

DAY 7

IIHF

NEXT YEAR MANY OF the players will again meet at the hotel, though not Scheier whose swan song ends unceremoniously as Bulgaria shuts out Luxembourg. Afterward, Turkey and Turkmenistan join tournament-winning Bulgaria, in its run-of-the-mill red, green and white jerseys, to accept their silver and bronze medals. Bulgaria's Dimitrov and Vasilev win top goalie and best forward, respectively, while Yen-Len Shen takes home best defenseman for Chinese Taipei. In 2020 Bulgaria will move up to Div. II Group B, leaving Turkey and



Turkmenistan as the favorites for gold in Div. III along with North Korea, which was relegated. They'll be joined again by Luxembourg and Chinese Taipei as well as the United Arab Emirates, which earned promotion from the division's qualifying tournament. With Turkey, Turkmenistan and the UAE all in the same group, next year will mark the first time that three Muslim nations have made it to Div. III.

Despite sending Deraney home with a win its final game, South Africa wasn't able to avoid relegation. Deraney doesn't know if he'll be back behind the team's bench, but he leaves with an appreciation for hockey in unsung places of the world and an admiration for the players who keep it going. "These are the emerging teams," Deraney said. "These are the players who aren't high-profile athletes, who don't get the funding, don't get the fanfare, don't get the notoriety. They play because they just want to move up. They play for their country."

"They play for the love of the game." **H**

ALL-STAR AGITATOR

Bulgaria's Miroslav Vasilev was named the tournament's top forward but also riled opponents with his antics.



HAIL TO THE VICTORS! BULGARIA GRABS GOLD AND A PROMOTION TO DIV. II GROUP B FOR NEXT YEAR'S WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP. THEY ALSO NAB THE TOP FORWARD AND GOALIE AWARDS.