



Russian legends open hearts

Raise \$20,000 for FDNY 9/11 widows', children's fund

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Russian Hockey Legends captain Yuri Lyapkin (left) and former New York Ranger Ron Greschner (right) at the face-off. In the middle are New York City fire commissioner Salvatore Cassano (left) and Andrei Yushmanov, consul general of the Russian Federation in New York (right). Photo: Lioudmila Koudinova

NEW YORK – Valery Kamensky was undergoing a pre-season physical at the Dallas Stars training camp on Sept. 11, 2001 when he heard the shocking news that two planes had crashed into the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre. That's why Kamensky, a Stanley Cup winner with Colorado in 1996 and now a member of the board of directors of the Kontinental Hockey League, wanted to do something special to mark the 10th anniversary. Defenceman Yuri Lyapkin, now 66 years old, joined Kamensky and other Russian hockey legends like Alexander Yakushev, 64, Sergei Makarov, Alexei Kasatonov, Mikhail Shtalenkov and Vladimir Lutchenko in raising \$20,000 recently for the widows and children of New York City firefighters, who were killed trying to put out the fires created by the explosion. They participated in a pair of benefit games in Brooklyn, N.Y., entitled 'Historic Battles On Ice', along with a hockey team of firefighters from Russia and a team from the New York City Fire Department.

Held in conjunction with the ninth annual Russian Heritage Festival in the Big Apple, the games were organized by the Russian American Foundation, New York Daily News and Group 10 Development, and were sponsored by the KHL. KHL President Alexander Medvedev expressed what the exchange meant to his league.

“Our hope is that the exhibition games will extend the spirit of friendship between our two societies while also supporting the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice ten years ago,” he said.

In the first game, the FDNY team faced a team of firefighters from the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations, with the Russian team winning 5-2. In the second, it was the Legends of Hockey of the USSR against a combined team of players from the FDNY and former New York



Rangers like Ron Greschner, Steve Vickers and Ron Duguay.

Former Red Army defenceman Sergei Gimayev, now a TV commentator, said the NHL-FDNY combined team was much stronger than the Russians expected. Other Rangers alumni in uniform were Mark Janssens, Chris Kotsopoulos, Ed Hospador and the Ferraro brothers – Peter and Chris. Also in uniform for the Russian Legends team were Yuri Blinov, Yevgeni Davydov, Alexander Golikov, Vladimir Golikov, Yuri Lebedev, Vladimir Lutchenko, Yuri Lyapkin, Sergei Makarov, Igor Mishukov, Vitali Prokhorov and Viktor Shalimov.

"This speaks of the bond between firefighters, no matter where they're from," New York Fire Commissioner Salvatore Cassano said. "This event is firefighters coming together and celebrating their athleticism and camaraderie."

Victims of the 9/11 tragedy and their families first were remembered at Madison Square Garden on Oct. 7, 2001 when the Buffalo Sabres and New York Rangers opened the 2001-02 NHL season. Both clubs wore special jerseys with "New York" printed diagonally across the front. Following the game won by the Rangers 5-4 in overtime, both sets of jerseys were auctioned off to raise money for the Twin Towers Fund.

Before that game Larry McGee of the FDNY gave Ray Downey's firefighter's helmet, with a picture of Downey tucked into the brim of the helmet, to Mark Messier of the Rangers and asked him to wear it.

Downey, who was the Chief of the fire department's Special Operations team, was still missing at the time and was eventually declared dead following a heroic effort to save victims.

Of the 343 firefighters lost on 9/11, Special Operations Command lost a total of 95 men with 1,600 years of experience.

An avid New York Rangers fan, Downey had been involved in several major rescue operations previously and was a founding member of the FDNY hockey team. The team was formed in 1968 and played its first game against the New York Police Department in 1974. It now competes in charity events and tournaments from Alaska to Sweden.

The Russian firefighters are no strangers to tragic events either. Between 1996 and 2011 a total of 654 Russians were killed in various terrorist attacks in that country and firefighters were called in to put out blazes in many of the incidents.

A few days before the matches, all players were invited to a reception at the Russian Consulate in New York. While in New York, the Russian Legends players also took in the Broadway show Spiderman and had dinner at a Russian restaurant in Brighton Beach.

"This is about people coming together to form new friendships and remember the tragic events that happened," said Rina Kirshner, vice president of the Russian American Foundation, which was behind the festival. "We hope this introduces and continues a positive dialogue between Russian and American firefighters."