The best under-20 hockey players in the world are coming to Edmonton this winter and the Golden Bears will be taking time out of their winter break to face off against two world class teams.

The annual World Junior Hockey Championships are being hosted this year in Edmonton and Calgary from Dec. 26 to Jan. 5. To prepare for the tournament, the national teams from Denmark and the Czech Republic will visit Clare Drake Arena to compete with the Green and Gold. The Bears host Denmark for two games on Dec. 15 and 16, with another game against the Czech Republic on the 17th. These games offer an opportunity for fans to see two world class hockey go up against their own school colours.

“I think for our guys it’s just a good opportunity to play a few games where there’s not a lot on the line in regards to two points in the league and we can have some fun with it,” said Bears head coach Stan Marple.

The initiative to plan these three games was led by Marple for the benefit of both student fans and players alike. The coach took advantage of the World Juniors in Edmonto

on this year to invite visiting teams to come to the U of A where they can warm up and adjust to their new surroundings before the tournament starts. Both the Danes and Czechs were eager to accept the offer, with Denmark agreeing to spend a week of training camp at the U of A before the tournament.

“Basically solicited all the teams that were coming to Edmonton and Calgary for the tournament and I thought that there might be one that might want to come a little bit early and get accustomed to the climate and everything,” Marple explained.

In the past, this tournament has been a stage for many future NHL stars to show off their potential and the skill they’ll bring to the pro leagues. This world class talent is an interesting challenge for the Golden Bears that’s unlike any of their normal competition. But Marple doesn’t think there’s much the team will have to adjust for against Denmark and the Czech Republic, focusing less on getting the win and more on giving his players a chance to go up against a different caliber of competition.

“I think it’s more the experience than anything else and an opportunity to try a few things when there’s not a lot on the line,” Marple said. “It’s not that we’re going to play any different. We’re still going to play with our great enthusiasm and desire to win but it’s just a maybe a little bit different.”

Marple also noted these games will give the team the opportunity to try new strategies offensively and different line combinations. But at the same time, Marple acknowledged that the heat and his team don’t entirely know what their competition will play like.

“You always see it on TV, the World Juniors Championships, like last year at Christmas, but you don’t really know until you actually play them. It’ll definitely be different,” Marple said. “They won’t be quite as physical and they’ll be very fast so we’ll just have to make very smart decisions and make sure that we’re ready to play. You can’t take anything for granted.”

Historically, the Golden Bears hockey squad does hold an impressive record in international competition. The team has an all-time record of 32-14-1 in international play. However, the team hasn’t played a foreign national team since 1997, when they defeated the Japanese national team 3-2. And Denmark and the Czech Republic are much stronger hockey nations than Japan and will likely pose a greater challenge.

“The Czech team is from a great hockey nation, one of the top in the world, both in their junior and senior teams,” Marple said. “The Danish team will be very well coached and we’re not going to take them for granted. We’re going to work hard against them and hopefully help them in preparation for the World Championships.”

The players themselves are excited for the games which is obvious by their willingness to participate in them. These games may interfere with the hectic exam schedule, but players were given too good of an opportunity for the team to pass up.

“It’s great the boys agreed to play these games. Some of them will be writing a few exams at that time but we’re going to try to arrange it so that everybody’s okay to play them,” Marple said. “We talked to the boys about that. Obviously academics come first, but the boys didn’t think it was that big of a deal.”

Before the Bears reach their winter break and their games against Denmark and the Czech Republic, they still have four CIS games left to play. A bye next week will be followed by a two-game trip to Regina the week following. The next week they will travel to Manitoba to finish the first half of the year. The Bears are 8-2-2 now.

HOCKEY PREVIEW

Bears vs. Danes and Czechs
Dec. 15, 16 and 18
Clare Drake Arena
Andrew Jeffrey
SPORTS STAFF • ANDREW JEFFREY

Danies and Czechs stop to take on Bears on way to World Jrs.