



# PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: APRIL 12, 2023

## Friendship Series Returns to Belfast in 2024

*Providence and Princeton Reignite Women's College Hockey in Northern Ireland*

**BELFAST, Northern Ireland** - The Hockey East Association, ECAC Hockey, and the Odyssey Trust jointly announced today the return of the Friendship Series for the 2023-24 season. Princeton University and Providence College will renew the event with a two-game series on January 6-7, 2024 at The SSE Arena in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

The weekend will be part of a homestand by the Belfast Giants, the professional outfit that skates out of the SSE Arena as part of the United Kingdom's Elite Ice Hockey League. It will mark the third iteration of the women's college hockey event, following clashes between Clarkson and Northeastern in 2018-19 and Merrimack and Quinnipiac in 2019-20.

The Friendship Series is an extension of the Friendship Four tournament, which was devised by The Odyssey Trust in 2015, and has been developed year on year to promote education, social welfare, and community integration in Northern Ireland, building on the sister cities agreement between Belfast and Boston.

**Robert Fitzpatrick**, chief executive officer of The Odyssey Trust, said: "As the first and only NCAA Division 1 women's hockey tournament to be held outside of the United States - we are pleased to announce that the Friendship Series will return once again to Belfast in January 2024, for what will be an elite sporting event, featuring two women's sides Princeton and Providence.

"The Odyssey Trust is proud to bring women's ice hockey to Northern Ireland, and to continue the legacy of international collaboration through sport and friendship - bridging cultural, sporting and educational partnerships between Northern Ireland and America."

The Friendship Four tournament and Friendship Series grew out of a relationship that started when the Boston Bruins played an exhibition contest against the Belfast Giants in 2010, before going on to win the Stanley Cup that same year.

"Hockey East remains committed to providing memorable experiences for our student-athletes and we are excited for two new women's teams to return to Belfast for another Friendship Series," said **Steve Metcalf**, Commissioner of Hockey East.

"We're appreciative of the opportunity the great people in Belfast are providing and look forward continuing the series in the future."

Belfast and Boston signed a 'Sister Cities' agreement in 2014, designed to foster stronger economic development, trade and investment, tourism, youth, cultural, faith-based exchanges, and educational linkages between the two cities, and to increase awareness of both cities as being growth hubs in the connected health, life sciences, creative industries, tourism, financial services, and knowledge economy sectors.

The tournament returned in 2023 with support from The Odyssey Trust, Hockey East, ECAC Hockey, and the former Governor of Massachusetts and current President of the NCAA, Charlie Baker.

"First and foremost, I want to thank the Belfast Giants, The Odyssey Trust, The Hockey East Association, and ECAC Hockey for reigniting this experience for NCAA women's ice hockey," said **Matt Kelly**, head coach of Providence women's ice hockey.

"I've heard nothing but great stories and memories from teams that have been over to Belfast in the past, and I look forward to creating memories of our own that will last a lifetime."

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The Friendship Series is the first and only NCAA Division I women's hockey tournament to be held outside of the United States, but its roots are well and truly in Boston, Massachusetts. The Friendship theme is more than a namesake for the tournament. The event focuses on unifying communities throughout Northern Ireland by bringing a diverse group of young people from across all socioeconomic and religious backgrounds together for one event. It strives to create lasting cultural, sporting and educational partnerships between Northern Ireland and America.

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"We are very excited to once again have ECAC Hockey participate in the Friendship Series with the Princeton women's program facing Providence in January 2024 in Belfast, Northern Ireland," said **Steve Hagwell**, ECAC Hockey Commissioner.

"All previous events hosted by our friends in Belfast have been first class, and provided lifetime memories for student-athletes, coaches, staff, and fans. We are certain the 2024 Friendship Series will be the same - a tremendously memorable event for everyone involved."

As a result of the agreement, discussions began with the City of Boston, Hockey East and the ECAC about the possibility of hosting a tournament in Belfast. The city of Belfast identified that, through their professional ice hockey team, the Belfast Giants, that hockey was the one sport where people came together, irrespective of religion or community background, in a neutral setting, to cheer for the same team.

"We are so excited to travel to Belfast and showcase our game to international fans," Princeton head coach **Cara Morey** said. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that most college hockey players never get to experience. At Princeton, we believe in Education Through Athletics, and we are excited to learn the unique history and customs from the people of Belfast."

"We are also excited to play top-level college hockey as we take on Providence. This is going to be a highlight for many of our players as they create memories that last a lifetime. We're grateful for the ECAC and Princeton University for helping facilitate this amazing experience."

A key focus of the Friendship Series is education, including education of youth through sports to create a spirit of mutual understanding and the spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play; an exploration of the opportunities that education can provide, both in Northern Ireland and the USA through scholarships and placements; and education linked to future job opportunities and economic success.

In parallel, the Friendship Series initiative aims to focus on social inclusion – ensuring that young people and communities from rural and urban deprived areas are engaged with education and provided with opportunities to identify relevant areas of study and future potential career paths.

Further information and details on the release of Friendship Series tickets will be released will be announced in the coming months.

For further media information and interview requests, please contact:

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**## FRIENDSHIP FOUR ##**

