

A welcome sign for Indian hockey

Even in the thick of the Indian Premier League (IPL) battles on which the eyeballs of cricket crazy, though not necessarily informed, masses have been fixed for the last few weeks, the silver medal-winning campaign of the Indian hockey team has received some media attention. This is as it should be.

Not even the craziest of Indian cricket fans can remain indifferent to the fortunes of Indian hockey. Even cricket's superstars like Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid, M.S. Dhoni, Virendra Sehwag or Anil Kumble, or the game's latest generation of crorepati icons, will rise to applaud the silver medals that dangled on the chests of Sardara Singh's young team at the end of the Sultan Azlan Shah hockey tournament in the north Malaysian town of Ipoh. For, every Indian has been brought to believe it's hockey that is India's national game, and any little sign of revival in these lean times that it is going through will be welcome.

But let's not lose our sense of proportion in lauding the team's Ipoh showing. Only two months ago the nation went into a depression following India's failure at the Santiago Olympic qualifier. At the Azlan Shah Cup in the two previous years India had finished third. This time it went one step higher on the podium. That would be a more sensible way to look at the performance, nothing more than that.

Success, as they say, has many fathers. Even a minor prize like a silver medal in an invitation event like the Azlan Shah Cup is being attributed to the change of regime in the Indian Hockey Federation, a dispute that is now the subject of litigation. The fact is India's team at Ipoh, including the freshly inducted youngsters, was selected from the same pool of players who were groomed under an ongoing youth programme being implemented by the suspended K.P.S. Gill-led body.

As Sardara Singh, captain of the present team, went on record to say after the Santiago failure that it was the players who failed in the all-important final in the Olympic qualifier and he saw no point in blaming this or that official. Likewise, at Ipoh it was the team, a mixture of tried and untried players, that managed to reach the final after two back-to-back defeats. Sardara, a good player that he undoubtedly is, claimed no special credit even to his own role as captain. He was a player like all the rest of the squad.

The road to recovery is long and full of challenges far tougher than the one faced at Ipoh. Developing juniors take time to hone their talent. Even Sandeep Singh, top-scoring drag-flicker at Ipoh, has taken time in improving his all-round skills.

In the midst of adulations showered on the Ipoh-returned team, a jarring note has been struck when Aslam Sher Khan, the chairman of the ad hoc selection committee, announced he had revoked the suspension of three players for misdemeanour in the last Premier Hockey League at Chandigarh, something that drew international notice. The merit of his decision apart, it is questionable if matters of discipline are within the domain of the selection committee chief.

Meanwhile, it is good news that the sports ministry has decided to lay 40 more synthetic turf pitches to attract more and more youths to take to hockey which is not the same game as their ancestors once knew it to be. In the pre-artificial turf age of hockey, players played bare-footed on natural grass grounds, even grassless ones, and a hockey stick would cost just a few rupees. A good

hockey stick now costs anything between Rs.500 and Rs.5,000 and a pair of boots a couple of thousands more. To bring the game within the reach of the talented but impoverished is an aspect the sports ministry also needs to pay special attention to.

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