

## Playing hooky from reality - women's hockey loses to 'Chak De!'

Time was when you watched a film and exclaimed that it had captured so much of real life. Today the trend has reversed: we compare a real life situation to a certain turn of the script in some film. 'Just like in that movie,' we say wonderingly. That sense of wonder has nothing to do with real life; it has everything to do with reel life. In fact, the image has become more real than the real thing.

Take the case of the much deserved runaway success - the film 'Chak De! India'. In cold print, over the radio waves and on TV screens, the media seized with gratitude this opportunity to milk the positive messages of the film every which way. In the process, the media inscribed itself into the liberal message of the film. It made perfect marketing sense.

It seemed as if an astonishingly gender-sensitive, hockey crazy nation had been born overnight. Newspapers devoted their weekend double spreads to interviews with each actor of 'Chak De! India'. Coaches, for long accustomed to the darkness of obscurity in small towns, were brought in from nowhere and made to stand with their students in a pose made popular by the film. The reference was to the film and not really to the game, but no one quibbled. It was enough that a film on hockey had become so popular.

Newspapers piously editorialised about the lamentable tendency to play hooky from covering unglamorous sports like hockey and especially women's hockey. They thought they were talking about hockey, but actually they were talking about a film - albeit woven around the game of hockey.

Maybe the media thought it had done enough service to the cause of the sport. For when the real thing came up, no one had much patience for it. The 6th Asia Cup women's hockey tournament started in Hong Kong on Sep 1 (a day after the 7th Asia Cup for men commenced in Chennai). The tournament, held every four years, is considered a pre-Olympic 'showdown' between Asian giants who come high in the current world rankings of the FIH.

Being the naive sort, if you had hunted the sports pages of most 'national' newspapers for news of the Chak De! team as the women's team had been christened, you were in for a major disappointment. What you saw was news squished into the corner, literally, or boxed in solitary paragraphs within news items of the Indian men's advance. This despite the fact that the Indian women (like the Indian men's team) went into the tournament as reigning champions; despite the fact that this team has grown out of the dream team of 2002 which came from nowhere to clinch the Commonwealth gold in Manchester and provided inspiration for 'Chak De! India'.

In the first week of September, the women's team indulged in some serious business of winning their matches, like the men, but did not manage to get past the prejudices of 'national' news desks.

No, Indian hockey skipper Mamta Kharab's five goals against Singapore or Surinder Kaur's five goals against Thailand were no match for Sania Mirza's female doubles partner in the US Open whose leopard skin printed outfit got her those 15 minutes of fame, or even a sprawled-on-the-ground derriere of Spanish dynamo Raphael Nadal who exited the tournament. Certainly, Kharab's goals were no match for the exploits and non-exploits of the men in blue-who 'play' once in a blue moon-in England. That's where the money comes from. This is the real life situation.

The touching aspect of this whole business is that the women's team left the shores of India with music CDs of 'Chak De!' in their kits for inspiration. As far as the nation is concerned, it has supported hockey by watching the movie and remembering each scene, each dialogue, each song and each time actor Shah Rukh Khan could have hammed but did not.

Why is it important to know about hockey to be a hockey lover when you can love a movie and be a hockey lover? Isn't sport all about watching a spectacle today? What better spectacle can there be than reel life? A sports lover is not one who plays on the street or in the park but one who watches images flit past the TV screen. For one it is more convenient.

If the women had won the title, a nation obsessed with developing muscles would have celebrated the adrenalin rush of victory - without caring to know how a young team in the process of building cohesion reached there. That is so boring. Or maybe the nation would have feted the 'Chak De!' actors once again, seeing the real win as a pale imitation of the rousing reel win.

But Mamta Kharab need not be very unhappy to see the reel dominate the real. After all, an entire generation of Indians conjures the image of a muscular Ben Kingsley in Richard Attenborough's magnum opus while thinking of Gandhi. That is the power of the image to play hooky from reality.

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