



OF CHAMPIONS: YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW

It was 1936 and Berlin was hosting the Summer Olympics creating historic landmarks at multiple levels. The IOC committee gathered to vote for a city hosting the Olympics for the second and final time in history, Adolf Hitler used the platform as a propaganda for his ideas of racial supremacy, Leni Riefenstahl filmed the games and named it "Olympia" (now considered to be the pioneer in techniques for shooting sport films) and it marked the beginning of a 12 year gap in the Olympics: the next chapter being held in 1948, London, post the World War II.

Amidst these path breaking and historical milestones, a humble Indian left an equally important impact: holding his own in the books of Sporting history. A German newspaper famously carried a banner headline: 'The Olympic complex now has a magic show too.' The city of Berlin was posted across with: "Visit the hockey stadium to watch the Indian magician Dhyana Chand in action." This was the legend's third Olympic stint, and he had already been named as the best hockey player in the world. The opinion still stands strong. What Dhyana Chand did for India in the history of Sport, probably no other athlete has ever done. With over 400 goals in international games, the golden era of Indian Hockey was ushered and nurtured under Chand.

With such glory associated with the game, it is a pity that today many a times we are faced with one question. Is justice being done to the "national" game of India? For decades the importance of the foundations set by great Indian hockey players has diminished in our cricket fanatic nation, almost to the point of disappearance. Stories of lack of funds, infrastructure and respect at large are no longer stories but hard and blatant facts.

A game that started out on basis of pure skill, has evolved in terms of speed, stamina, turf and other physical attributes. The game moved on, but Indian Hockey didn't. For a nation who holds the unbeaten record of 8 Olympic golds, our last major stint at the games was in 1980, Moscow. Ever since then our victories have been few and far in between and lack consistency at the global level.



The New Face of Indian Hockey

But 17th June 2016 has infused a new ray of hope in the sport with India clinching a second place in a highly controversial win awarded to Australia (current world champion and 14 times Champions trophy winners) , post defeating Germany (winners of last Olympic games) in the semi finals, at the Champions Trophy.

The current team is promising, young, and talented and has its goals set loud and clear. The applaud worthy fact about the young team is that, while the current form marks excellent individual performers – SV Sunil, Harmanpreet Singh, PR Sreejesh, Manpreet Singh to name a few ,they all together are creating magic as a team. The factors that are ensuring this team's current good form are not only skill, but a strong mental make-up, immense confidence, dedicated fitness levels and the will to prove a point to the world. surrounded by mirrors, bat in his hand, and sessions of shadow practice.

This level of introspection does not come naturally. It's a conscious decision made by a person when the only thing that matters is getting better.

The Saviour :

A special shout-out to the one man who is considered to be the saviour of Indian Hockey in shootouts: PR Shreejesh. He led our team to the first ever silver medal in the Champions Trophy and is known as "the wall" within the circuit. The humble 30 year old belongs to a family of farmers from Kerela and made his debut in 2006 in the senior national team at the Asian Games in Colombo. Shreejesh has played over 121 international games in his career now is and is slated to be one of the key driving forces behind India sealing a decent chance to perform better than the last few Olympic Games. It is said that Shreejesh, had not even imagined playing hockey when he was a child. But when he got selected for the Kerela team during his 9th standard, such was the dedication of his family to ensure that he makes a career in hockey, that his father sold their cow to buy him a goalkeeper's pad. Not the one to stay silent and be politically correct, Shreejesh has pointed out the flaws in the various state and national associations when it comes to politics and corruption that ruin bright prospective careers. This stand in skipper has the perfect balance of skill, dedication



The Road Ahead :

From the days of being heralded as the torchbearers of Hockey, we have come to a point that even a qualification at the Olympics or silver at a championship is satisfactory and celebratory. As deplorable as that might seem, what is needed today is total revival of the National sport and a complete re-haul in terms of the approach and resources provided. Just being proud of a qualification is not enough. Only time will tell about how close this team could be to a medal at the games. As Shreejesh has rightly mentioned in a few interviews, the focus right now should be one step at a time. First the qualifiers, then work at the quarter finals and give it all in the semis to reach finals. We hope that this fresh start works for the nation at large and that India can re-instate the pride that the sport once brought to us.