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Which way Indo-Pak hockey going?

By Anis-ul-Moula

The Champions' Trophy Hockey Tournament which ended in the Netherlands last month produced further evidence that the world hockey is slipping fast from the grip of two sub-continental giants of the game. Pakistan lost six of their seven matches and finished last but one, above Soviet Union in the eight-nation tournament. India even could not get a chance to play in the tournament.

Both the wizards — India and Pakistan — who dominated the world hockey scene for the last six decades, surprisingly have fared no better over the course of the past year or so. They have been overpowered by their pupils as neither of them reached the semis of the last World Cup Hockey.

Pakistan conceptualised the World Cup Hockey by presenting a trophy to the Federation International de Hockey (FIH) in March 1971. They became triumphant no less than three times — in 1971 at Barcelona, in 1978 at Buenos Aires and in 1982 at Bombay.

India won the Cup at Kuala Lumpur in 1975 and lost to Holland in final at Amsterdam in 1973. However, since the harrowing Montreal Olympics outing on synthetic turf, Indian hockey has been languishing at the bottom of a slippery slope. As hosts they finished fifth in Bombay and were soundly thrashed at Buenos Aires to end up in sixth place. In the last World Cup Hockey, Pakistan were placed 11th and India 12th in the 12-nation tournament.

It seems that hockey, both in India and Pakistan, is undergoing a period of transition. Both India and Pakistan were the masters of hockey till the introduction of the artificial astroturf/polygrass/superturf surfaces conducive to faster, scientific hockey demanding supreme physical fitness.

Ever since hockey entered the prestigious Olympic Games in 1920, the coveted gold medal

has only once been outside the Indo-Pak subcontinent. It was at the Antwerp Olympics that the winners were Britain in 1920. There was no hockey contest in the 1924 Paris Olympics.

India got on top of the world hockey ladder in 1928 at Amsterdam Olympics and retained the supremacy unbroken for 32 years till 1960. At the Rome Olympics in 1960, Pakistan took the hockey gold medal by defeating India in the final match by a solitary goal, blazing the hockey world as the new star.

It was of course, the Britishers who introduced the game of hockey in undivided India. But it was an irony of fate that after showing promise in earlier Olympic Hockey Tournaments, the Britons are also fading away.

However, all that was in the past. Now it is crystal clear that the domination of the world hockey by the subcontinental giants is an old story, not because the standard of play in these countries has gone down but because a dozen of European countries with their tough play in the synthetic turf have magnificently improved in the technique of the game.

The last World Cup Hockey has exposed the Indo-Pak hockey weakness. The Asian hockey progress-report makes apalling reading. Both India and Pakistan played five preliminary matches in different groups and respectively lost three and four times.

At the last Asian Games at Seoul, India lost just to Pakistan, while they in turn went down to Malaysia and ultimately to new champions the heatherto unknown to world hockey, the South Koreans.

Of the 15 Olympics titles, the Asian giants have bagged 11. Indian have won eight times and Pakistan who are current Olympic champions, have taken the crowns thrice. So where does the Indo-Pak hockey go from here?

Klaus Kleiter, the coach of the world champions, Australian team which finished third in the last month's Champions' Trophy Hockey behind West Germany, and the Netherlands, were confident about their Olympic chances in Seoul next year. "This tournament has been a good preparation for us and we

certainly hope to win a medal in Seoul", he said.

The Dutch side, who finished second after an exciting 2-1 win over Australia, have re-emerged as a hockey power after disappointing seventh place at the World Cup Hockey.

The Pakistan team coach, Zakauddin said: "The plastic surface has been a problem to us and it is one of the reasons we have performed badly here. The game is much quicker on plastic and we have got to adapt to the hard-tackling European midfield play which is becoming common place on it," he added.

Zakauddin said that the Pakistanis reached a low point at the tournament, but all was not lost for their Olympic defence. "We have been rebuilding our team since the World Cup last October and we are still doing so but I believe we have the basis of a side to take to the Olympics," he added.

It is really humiliating to watch champions and masters of yore, India and Pakistan locked in battle for the crumbs, the 11th and 12th positions. In the playoffs, India lost yet again to New Zealand and Canada. This means that they do not qualify for the next World Cup or the Olympics Hockey tournaments.

Pakistan automatically qualifies for a place in the main draw of the Seoul Olympics by its right of being title defenders. India will now have to cross sabres with the likes of the Kiwis, Pakistan, Argentina and Poland in the global inter-continental cup for a place in the Olympics as also the World Cup Hockey.

Both India and Pakistan must take it seriously if they want to keep their flags flying in the World Cup and Olympics in future. The need for hard training programme & more artificial turfs of the polygrass variety are of paramount importance. Hockey once the proud unconquered preserve of the subcontinent should not be allowed to extinguish.