

Olympic history: How artificial surfaces altered the balance of power in world hockey

moneycontrol.com/sports/olympics/olympic-history-how-artificial-surfaces-altered-the-balance-of-power-in-world-hockey-article-12779064.html



Olympic sports history: A 1950s hockey match in the Netherlands, being played on grass. (Image credit: Wim van Rossem for Anefo via Wikimedia Commons)

When former International Hockey Federation (FIH) vice-president Ashwini Kumar died in 2015, the FIH praised him as a “great man”, and with good reason. Kumar was one of India’s greatest sports managers, holding senior positions on multiple international bodies like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and FIH, and dedicating selfless passion to Indian hockey.

Lofty as the FIH’s praise was, a single quote from Kumar shows how hollow such paeans are when confronted with the reality of power and greed. “I walked out of the FIH meeting in 1975 when it decided to introduce Astroturf. I never attended another meeting of the FIH. Market forces drove the FIH to go in for the drastic step. With that what transpired on the turfs in the name of hockey is not what we are used to ... this is a new game altogether.”



(Image via Wikimedia Commons)

Hockey had become a new game indeed. The introduction of artificial surfaces proved a turning point relegating the subtle art of Asian practitioners on natural grass. The steep decline in India's performance at the 1976 Montreal Olympics and after was not a coincidence. It was carnage.

All teams seek helpful playing surfaces. Discussion in Test cricket veers around types of batting surfaces: a green top, a spinning track, a dust bowl, or a hard surface. As in Test cricket, the country hosting the Davis Cup in tennis has the right to choose the surface, gaining home advantage. In hockey, a team successful on grass might struggle on artificial surfaces, and the opposite might hold true.

It is the strategists running the sport who choose the surface, not the athletes. The games nations play begin with representation on federations. The International Hockey Federation, in 101 years of its history, has had six presidents from Western Europe and only one from India, Narinder Batra. Between 2020 and 2022, there was only one Indian on its Executive Board (Batra, the president), and none after 2022. Between 1950 and 2008 India had zero representation on FIH Senior Officials. Cede space during the debate, and you fail to make the rules.

Just as the P-5 resist the entry of new permanent members into the UN Security Council, the Europeans dominating the FIH likely shut the door. Did poor representation weaken resolve? Or were Indians unaware? Probably both.

Why did the FIH introduce artificial surfaces?

In an interview in Delhi on December 19, 2016, Leandro Negre, the former FIH president, pointed to rain delays during the 1968 Mexico Olympics, despite the 12 natural grass pitches available. In Canada's cold climate, the organisers of the 1976 Montreal Olympics found the requirement of 12 grass pitches expensive and impossible to meet, Negre explained. With three cheaper artificial surfaces available, the FIH had "no real choice," and the president, Rene Frank, accepted "a less than ideal solution," Negre asserts.

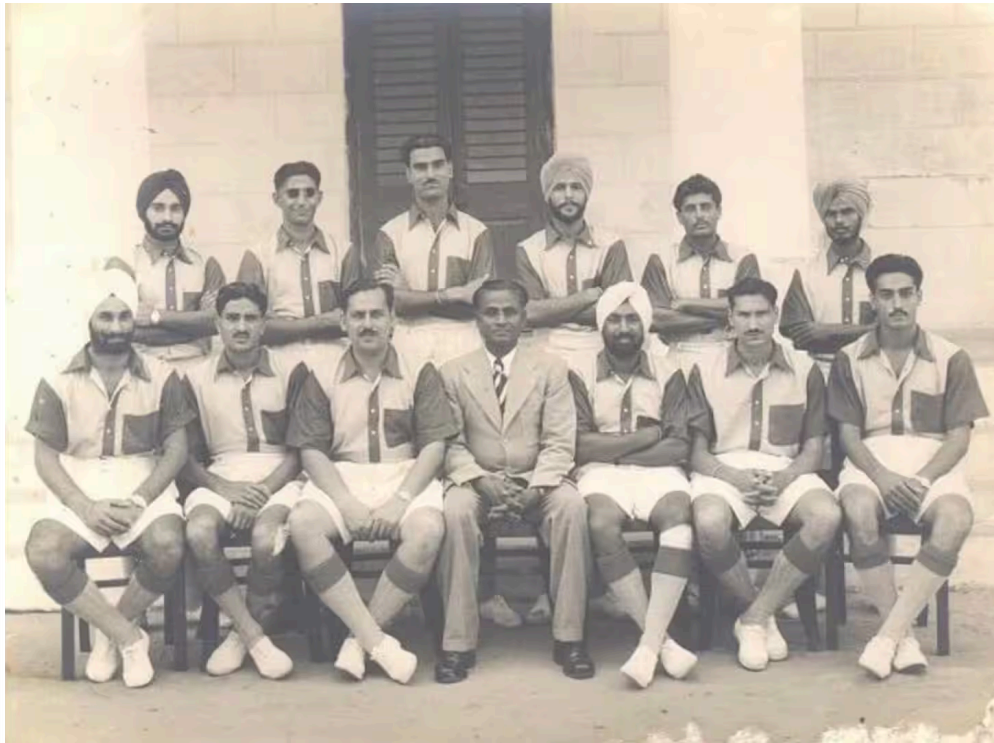
How did India respond?

India boycotted a pre-Olympics tournament but received no support, not even from Pakistan, writes Mihir Vasavda, in an article in DNA titled "Olympics 2012: Hockey's golden period — Those were the days".

As I have argued elsewhere, instead of hustling itself into decision-making as the high-performer, an overconfident India forgot the need for persuasion. With Pakistan playing well on artificial surfaces, India's objections lost force. India continued believing grass surfaces would return.

Meanwhile, during the preparations for Montreal, experts at Patiala laid a layer of cow dung on a field trimmed of grass, hoping to simulate an artificial surface. Injuries occurred, followed by the debacles at Montreal.

With Kumar's walkout, India lost its voice on the FIH. India's protest was ignored, and the FIH, feeling no pressure, had no incentive to respond. Besides, after the 1948 London Olympics, India had struggled even on natural grass. Why, then, blame the FIH?



Major Manna Singh with the Indian Hockey Team in 1950. (Image credit: Daljit Singh 23 via Wikimedia Commons)

No longer are questions asked. Negre termed India's objection "an excuse." In an interview on February 15, 2017, Marijke Fleuren, the then president of the European Hockey Federation, said that reversal to natural grass would be "a step back."

The Pakistani-origin and Macau-based Tayyab Ikram, now the FIH president, said in an interview at Ipoh on May 3, 2017: "Hockey will be out of the Olympics if it goes back to grass."

In interviews conducted between 2015 and 2020, Canada's Hargurnik Singh Sandhu, Pakistan's Hasan Sardar, Malaysia's Dato' Haji Abd. Rahim Md. Ariff, and India's H.J.S. Chimni, too, dismissed the idea of returning to grass.

If elite tennis can be commercially successful on grass, clay, or hard court, surely some elite hockey events could be played on grass? But no. Advantage once wrested is not ceded.

The absence of a discussion in Europe isn't a coincidence. I located only one report in 'The Guardian' newspaper: "Since the Games switched from grass to expensive synthetic turf, the Indians have won just one field hockey medal." Even if we concede that Europeans did not steal control over rule-making, it is human to artfully seek gain.

What is the argument for artificial surfaces?

Cost was the argument for Canada, and Europe. Sandhu, the former Canadian senior player and coach of the junior men's team, said in a 2015 interview at Vancouver that artificial pitches were distinctly cheaper in Canada. In cold Scotland, outdoor hockey is possible for only three months a year, and for four months in the Netherlands and Belgium, Fleuren said in a February 2017 interview at Delhi.

But outside the rich West, artificial surfaces are more expensive. In 2019, India had only about 40 artificial surfaces. Curiously, hockey is the poor man's sport in rich New Zealand, winning the gold medal in Montreal even after failing to invest in artificial surfaces.

Secondly, sponsors want live television coverage at fixed hours during prime-time television viewership. This makes artificial surfaces, which drain quickly after rain, the preferred option over grass, where schedules and maximum viewership get disrupted after rain delays.

Finally, commercial interests might have influenced the FIH's decision, as Kumar asserted after his walkout. SportsGroup, whose brands Astro Turf and Polytan the FIH has used, is a company from the West. The FIH is opaque on award of contracts because conflicts of interest might come out into the open.

Could a rising India shape the future of hockey?

With the highest television coverage and biggest sponsors, India ought to be seeking a change in rules, but isn't. The Europe-dominated FIH resists. Can European teams, regularly winning on artificial surfaces, win on grass, or can India? For answers we must await a return to grass, if at all. In 2018, Thierry Weil, the FIH chief executive officer, said that a decision regarding natural grass would "allow far more countries to be a part of the Road to Paris." This was not followed up.

India's frustration might stir "grievance politics" in hockey, as in foreign affairs. The new India, says External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in his book 'The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World', is shifting from being a "soft state" steeped in "fatalism," (Page 50) to one practicing "realpolitik." (Page 51) Realist principles pursued in foreign affairs might echo in hockey with a stronger response to perceived bias: "You stole our hockey by changing surfaces, we will fight back to reclaim our rightful ownership."

And why not? India's rise (it's the fifth largest economy) and the revival of its hockey are occurring simultaneously. Odisha state spent \$8.2 million on the 2018 men's World Cup, and a staggering \$ 130 million on the 2023 men's World Cup. (Tusharkanti Behera, Odisha's Minister of Sports and Youth Services, told the state's Legislative Assembly that the government had provided Rs 1,098.4 crore in the 2022-23 state budget [April to March] for construction of a hockey stadium in Rourkela, renovation of Bhubaneswar's Kalinga Stadium, and improvement of infrastructure in the two cities.)

If India deploys economic instruments to secure better representation on the FIH, a multipolar international system of hockey might emerge. The grass might then turn greener. Jitendra Nath Misra is a former ambassador and the author of “Radhaland and Worlds Beyond”. He is Professor of Diplomatic Practice at O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat. Views are personal, and do not represent the stance of this publication