

Hockey World Cup: India must rediscover the spirit of 1975

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Members of the Indian men's hockey team in the 1975 World Cup. (Photo: Hockey India)

[Jitendra Nath Misra](#) Aug 18, 2026, 14:55:06 IST

The World Cup has begun. It should be serving as a reminder of what hockey means to us as a nation. But no, amid focus shifting to a cricket Test series against Sri Lanka and the World Badminton Championships in Delhi, hockey is struggling to string our emotions together. We live in times of instant gratification and shifting gazes. We are distracted by plentiful choices and unable to build the composed intensity of the fan who cares. The public hasn't been pushed to notice the World Cup.

Just as well, it puts less pressure on our teams. There is some reportage, mostly words of caution in the media (though the captain of the women's team, Salima Tete, breathlessly promised a gold medal). The coaches have almost said they don't know if India will do well (India have a 5 per cent

chance of winning the World Cup, Craig Fulton said). Evasion is good for helping maintain focus on the job at hand. Maybe, just maybe, the men's team could reach the last four. If that happens, who knows what comes after?

An event of the stature of the World Cup is the reason to rewind, for, in the past lies our future. The first three editions at Barcelona (1971), Amstelveen (1973), and Kuala Lumpur (1975) are the most remembered, for the only three medals India has won in the World Cup.

Looking back at Barcelona it appears that India failed to counter Pakistan's guerrilla minds aiming at psychological subversion of their opponents. Pakistan and the Netherlands were in the same pool, and the Dutch were expected to defeat Japan in their last pool match and qualify for the semi-finals, knocking Pakistan out. "Since his [the Pakistani] team was possibly out of the tournament, he [Khalid Mahmood], on behalf of his team-mates, wanted India to win it, writes the Indian player Charles Cornelius.

"The Cup should be yours," Cornelius recalls Mahmood telling him. When the Netherlands lost to Japan, making way for Pakistan to qualify for the semi-finals, "now the Cup is ours," Cornelius recalls Mahmood telling him. Mahmood's superficial cordiality towards Cornelius was an act of not-so-subtle gamesmanship. Was Cornelius aware? Pakistan defeated India in the semi-finals.

In the final of the 1973 World Cup at Amstelveen, India were defeated because of poor tactics and incapacity to correct mistakes. India carried a persistent weakness into the final – the failure to convert penalty strokes. Instead of seeking a solution, coach R.S. Gentle boastfully declared: "I'll eat my hat if this team doesn't win the World Cup."

The Netherlands found a way past India's hollow confidence by deploying unsettling tactics borrowed from football, making the Indians nervous and confused. A psychological meltdown punctured the team's bravado. Was there a core of fragility that was made invisible because the team was supremely fit and appeared to be at the peak of its powers?

Within nine minutes India led 2-0 from Surjit Singh's penalty corner hits, only for Ties Kruize to answer back with two goals, taking the game into extra time, and thereafter into a sudden-death extra-time. When India were awarded a penalty stroke during the sudden-death extra-time "The Netherlands players had trudged back to their dressing room at the Wagener Stadium because they thought it was all over for them."

But Beliappa Govinda failed to convert. India were to lose the match 2-4 on penalties after 115 minutes of play had failed to determine a winner. Goalkeeper Martin Sicking was to repeat the heroics of Holland's semi-final victory over West Germany. "12,000 fans hailed the "fairy tale" with "chants of "H-o-l-l-a-n-d" along with a melodious clapping of hands."

That defeat to the heroic Dutch continues to rankle. India can claim luck had deserted them, but great teams create their luck. Andre Bolhuis made a lunging goal-line save when Ashok Kumar's shot seemed set to enter goal. "I don't know where he [Bolhuis] came from. I wish Ashok had hit the ball instead of pushing it. I think he would have scored and we would have won the World Cup," captain M.P. Ganesh would lament. Is public criticism of a fellow-player a hint of lack of team unity? Or, is it analysis with the clarity of hindsight?

Despite that loss, India never lost trust in themselves and the nucleus of the team for the 1975 World Cup had been formed. The nation remembers the 1975 World Cup as if it happened yesterday (look at the commentary right now in the build-up to the World Cup). India's one and only coronation as world champions had tactical, psychological, and social sub-plots. A turning point was victory over Malaysia in the semi-finals after an extra-time penalty corner goal by Aslam Sher Khan.

According to captain Ajitpal Singh, the substitution surprised Malaysian goalkeeper Khairuddin Zainal. Khan hit a penalty corner to the goalkeeper's right, while Zainal expected a hit to his left. Khan had astutely reversed the decision of the other penalty corner specialist, Surjit Singh, to hit to the right of the goalkeeper. Each of Singh's shots had been defended. So, Khan

introduced the surprise by hitting the shot to the left. The Indian team had done its homework on the Malaysian goalkeeper.

Ajitpal Singh claims that fans supporting India in Malaysia's home match had been cautioned by a Malaysian minister to desist, a claim that could not be independently verified. Malaysia lost the match, but a legacy developed around the tournament helping Malaysian hockey grow. Ties between India and Malaysia have remained iron-clad.

Cultural astuteness contributed to victory over Pakistan in the final. Balbir Singh Sr. proved as good a manager as a player. *Sportstar*. "To bring the players closer the chief coach [Balbir Singh Sr.] grouped them in alphabetical order, for sharing the rooms and even while travelling. The idea is to discourage players coming from [a] region or belonging to particular religion bunching themselves together. The alphabetical grouping gives ample opportunities for new friendships to develop and also to do away with any kind of 'seniority business'. Both at Patiala and Delhi, Balbir took his boys to all the places of worship gurdwaras, temples, mosques and churches. It was not merely to seek the blessings of God to help us win. God helps those who help themselves. He is with us always. I wanted to let the boys feel that we are one, no matter which religion we belong to."

In a move aimed at multiple audiences Singh Sr. joined Aslam Sher Khan in offering prayers at a mosque in Kuala Lumpur the day before the final against Pakistan. Pakistani player Manzoor-ul Hassan, who was also at the same mosque, noticed. Amid India's continuing debates about identity and religion, this was a public display of unity and bonding. A show of unity before Pakistanis, and the message that national identity superseded religion, might have subtly served to degrade the religious spirit of Pakistani players, raising self-doubt. In sports, clogging the rival's mind is half the battle won. Such performative acts serve as a rich subject for the study of identity and culture in sport. Singh Sr. felt the pulse of India in a way no foreign coach could. The cultural understanding of Indian coaches must never be underestimated.

What lessons does history hold for the current World Cup? Team cohesion is as important as tactical acumen. Craig Fulton is a cautious man immersed in Reality. With the challenging format, the team must remain consistent; every match and every round count, and a single mistake will cost. Does Fulton possess the cultural sensitivity of Balbir Singh Sr.? Has he studied Indian history, or, at least the history of Indian hockey? With the inexplicable decision of Hockey India to introduce a saffron-coloured team jersey just before the World Cup, and the sharp debate it triggered, even forcing players to voice support for the new kit, is the team distracted? We will soon know.

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