



BATTLE CRY

A mural on the outer wall of the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar, which hosts India's Tokyo Olympics qualifying games. Hockey India

Women at home... not quite

Team has made rapid strides, but federation's apathy has not helped matters as they seek Olympic spot

MIHIR VASAVDA
BHUBANESWAR, OCTOBER 30

RANI RAMPAL was 14 when she first turned out for India. In the decade since, she has become captain and is inching towards her 250th international appearance. Incredibly however, this weekend will be just the second time she will play a high-stakes tournament at home. For the rest of her teammates, the two-match series against the USA – the winner will qualify for the Tokyo Olympics – will be the first experience of playing a big match at home.

“The last time I played this kind of tournament at home, the 2012 Olympic qualifiers, it was mostly in front of empty stands in Delhi. This will be the first time all of us will play an important match at home,” Rampal says.

For a country that attaches so much sentimental value to hockey – a sport that boasts of gender parity – the women's game has often been an afterthought. The cash-rich leagues, annual tournaments at home or expert coaching staff, have all been for the men; some of it because of market economics, but most of it due to the federation's priorities.

Things have changed for the better in the last few years, and the women players are now treated at par with their male counterparts. Yet, there are occasional not-so-subtle reminders of where the major priority lies. Like Hockey India's recent decision to withdraw the bid for the women's World Cup in 2023 and, instead, throw its hat in the ring to host the men's edition for the second time in a row.

Or, if one were to nitpick, the fact that a lower-profile men's qualifier between India and Russia getting a prime-time push-back this weekend ahead of the women's team's matches against the USA – a classic in the offing. The players, however, don't seem to hold any grudges. They are happy just to get a chance to play a high-profile match at home, something that none from the current squad have experienced. In that sense, strange as it may sound, the atmosphere at the 15,000-seater Kalinga Stadium will be as alien for India



Sjoerd Marijne's return has energised the women's team.

as it will be for the Americans.

Nothing, though, is more symbolic of the administration's attitude towards the women's team than last year's coach saga. In early 2017, Sjoerd Marijne, who was the coach of world number 1 Netherlands, took over the Indian team that had finished with a wooden spoon at Rio 2016, their first Olympic appearance in more than three decades. The dismal show – India did not win a single match at the Games – concerned few, though – their being there was a surprise in itself.

Changing perception

Marijne's task was to change this perception of the team. “In the beginning, it was bit of a struggle because I came from the number one (team) to the number 13. Things that were normal for me were not normal for the girls,” Marijne says, in reference to the tactical limits and fitness of the team.

He collaborated with another Dutchman, analytical coach Eric Wonkink, and South

African physio Wayne Lombard to slowly turn things around. In a short time, they got the women to play with spunk rarely seen earlier. Even the hard-to-please Hockey India were impressed. So impressed, in fact, that when they were looking for a coach for the men's team, after Roelant Oltmans was sacked in September 2017, they did what few predicted – poach the women's coach.

Marijne was informed of this decision via a phone call when he was away with the women's team on an exposure tour to Europe. Former men's coach Harendra Singh was subsequently handed over the reins of the women's team, and led them to a bronze medal at the Commonwealth Games last year. The women, once again, played with intensity and ambition unlike any of the previous sides.

The men, meanwhile, did not buy into Marijne's ideas and as a consequence, they returned from Gold Coast without a medal. Soon after, in what felt like a promotion for Harendra and punishment for Marijne, their

roles were swapped. During that turbulent eight-month period, the women's team was destabilised as their coach was changed twice because Hockey India wanted the men to perform better. “I don't like when I cannot finish my work. And that was my disappointment,” Marijne says about that phase. “It was a frustrating moment.”

The women, who had gleefully taken to his ideas, were relieved when he returned. After the trust issues in the men's set-up, the Dutchman was welcomed in the women's team. “I still remember that one player came to my room and said, ‘we are very happy that you are back’. I felt very happy at that moment,” Marijne says.

Since then, the women's team's rise has been phenomenal. They came close to reaching the semifinals of a World Cup, losing to Ireland in the quarterfinals last year, and head into the Olympic qualifiers with some morale-boosting wins over Rio Games gold medalists Great Britain last month.

Most of it, however, has been achieved without an analytical coach after Wonkink's services with the women's team were discontinued almost a year ago. The analytical coach is the most important member of the support staff after the chief coach – he is the one providing live feedback on opponents' tactics and game-plan to the chief coach during a match and assists in mapping out strategies in training and before a match.

A bureaucratic delay in appointment is responsible for the post remaining vacant for such a long time. At the qualifiers, high performance director David John is likely to perform that duty. “I do two jobs now by working a lot of hours. The girls put in a lot of effort and I do the same,” Marijne says.

That's been the story of the women's team – putting in hours of silent hard work that has brought them to a position where, for the first-time ever, they can compete at back-to-back Olympics. Them being ranked higher than the USA gives them the advantage of playing at home. But they don't know what home feels like.

The winding road to realising the American dream

MIHIR VASAVDA
BHUBANESWAR, OCTOBER 30

THE USA hockey team's Road to Tokyo 2020 began on a golf course. On the first day of October, the players swapped their hockey sticks for golf clubs and indulged in a round of four-person scramble. The goal? Raise funds for their Olympic journey, starting with a trip to Bhubaneswar for a two-match, winner-takes-all qualifying tournament against India this weekend.

They may have won bronze medals at the Olympics (1984) and World Cup (1994), and finished in the top five at the Rio Games, but the American hockey team can't reach the Olympics, or even make it to qualifying tournaments, without private donations. Unlike India, there is no support from the government and, given the cut-throat environment, the US Olympic Committee pays for the bare minimum.

So, in the run-up to big events like the Olympics and the World Cup, there are up to five such fund-raising events, usually hosted by a players' parent. “It's a way to make a bit a bit more money for our programme,” says USA coach Janneke Schopman, a Dutch legend who is a two-time gold medallist, having won the 2006 World Cup in Madrid and the Beijing Olympics. “The funds from the golf event were used to kick-start our preparations for the upcoming season.”

Money, or the lack of it, hasn't been the biggest hurdle for Schopman though. She belongs to a country where hockey is arguably the second-biggest team sport after football. For the last seven years, she has – in different roles – lived in a nation where the sport features nowhere in the public consciousness.

“It's hard to explain the sport, that's why we have to say field, right? In rest of the world you say hockey,” Schopman says, referring to the more popular version of the sport in the US – ice hockey.

Schopman, 42, joined the USA set-up in 2012, soon after the London Olympics where the team finished at the bottom of the 12-team pile. Back then, the programme was overseen by Australian Terry Walsh, who later became Indian men's team coach. USA parted ways with him and brought on board former Great Britain player Craig Parnham, who was an assistant coach of the British women's team at the London Games.

Schopman was appointed Parnham's assistant. The duo converted the USA into a team that constantly punched above its weight. They won the gold medal at the 2014 Champions Challenge, defeated then world number 2 Argentina for the Pan American Games title, won a bronze at the 2016 Champions Trophy, finished fourth at the 2014 World Cup and fifth at the 2016 Olympics.

The turnaround

The turnaround was scripted in the agricultural hub of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, from where most of the players emerge. “It's the hotbed of the sport in the United States,” USA Field Hockey Communications Manager Teryn Brill says. “Of the selected travelling roster of 20, 10 are from Pennsylvania. 17 of them are from the Northeast region (comprising New Jersey, New York and New Hampshire, among others but New Jersey is the most dominant region after Pennsylvania).”

Schopman explains that these are the only regions where hockey – a predominantly female sport in the USA – is played from an early school level right up to college. But the downside is that after college, there's nowhere to go, meaning the players retire at an age most players around the world begin their careers. “At college level, the player pool is very large. But if you don't make it to the national programme directly after college, there's no incentive to continue playing, which means many players retire when they are 22,” Schopman says.



USA coach Janneke Schopman is a Dutch legend and two-time gold medallist. Hockey India

EXPLAINED E. Road to Tokyo

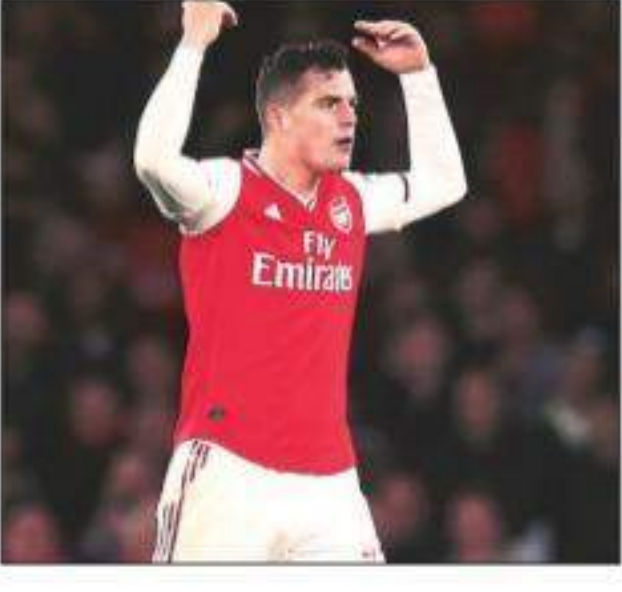
On November 1 and 2, the Indian men's team (rank 5) will play Russia, ranked 22, while the women (rank 10) will take on 13th-ranked USA in a two-match series. The winner of each match gets three points, while one point will be awarded to each team in case of a draw. The team with higher points after two matches will qualify for the Olympics. In case both teams are level on points, the team with the better goal difference will go through. If both teams are level on goal difference as well, a shootout will be held after the second match to determine the winner. This is the last chance for the teams to qualify for the Olympics.

The American aversion to hockey – field hockey – baffles Schopman especially since other sports that are similar in nature – lacrosse and ice hockey – continue to thrive. Several hockey players, in fact, have dabbled in these two sports. “In this country, people love the speed of games. They don't mind rules – American football is difficult to understand with all the rules, but they are not deterred by it. So yeah, one of my biggest dreams is to make hockey popular in this country,” she says.

One way to do it is by winning a medal at the Olympics. Before that, however, they'll have to beat India who are going through a phase similar to USA's – finished 12th at the Olympics and then produced a string of good results. There have been murmurs in the hockey fraternity that USA's failure to qualify for the Olympics could have an adverse impact on the sport's future at the Games itself, given that hockey's spot isn't guaranteed on the Olympic programme after the 2024 edition. With the organisers now keen to reduce the size of the Games, there have been suggestions to make five-a-side hockey an Olympic event.

Would the failure to qualify for Tokyo 2020 nudge Los Angeles 2028 towards that move? “I would lie if I say it doesn't matter (qualifying for Tokyo). It is important for a country as competitive as the US,” Schopman says. “The one thing I have learned from being here is that it is important for USA to feature in every sport in the Olympics. So qualifying for Tokyo does matter, yeah.”

[SPORTS BAR]



Arsenal to counsel Xhaka after fan feud

Arsenal will offer counselling to Granit Xhaka after the Gunners captain found himself in trouble for swearing at his own fans, according to reports in the British press. Xhaka cupped his ears and gesticulated to towards Arsenal fans who booed him when he was substituted during Sunday's 2-2 draw against Crystal Palace at the Emirates Stadium. The 27-year-old appeared to shout “f**k off” at the crowd as he stormed towards the tunnel and pulled off his shirt. Arsenal manager Unai Emery admitted Xhaka was wrong to react that way and refused to confirm if he would remain skipper. Xhaka has held three meetings with Emery since the incident but the club are putting the player's welfare ahead of any quick decision over his future.

Ravinder settles for silver; Jyoti exits

Indian grappler Ravinder settled for a silver medal after going down to Kyrgyzstan's Ulukbek Zholdosbekov in the 61 kg final at the Under-23 World Wrestling Championship here on Wednesday. The 22-year-old Indian suffered a 3-5 loss to Ulukbek, the current Asian U23 champion in 61 kg. Despite the loss, it was a creditable performance from Ravinder, who had won gold at the South Asian Games in 2016 and also a bronze at the Cadet Asian Championships in 2014. Meanwhile, Jyoti lost in the semifinals of the 50 kg bout to Japan's Kika Kagata.

Thiem battles past Raonic in Paris

Dominic Thiem booked his spot in the Paris Masters third round on Wednesday by edging out Milos Raonic in a marathon encounter, while Greek star Stefanos Tsitsipas also progressed. Fifth seed Thiem had to dig deep to get past Raonic 7-6 (7/5), 5-7, 6-4 as the Canadian powered down 30 aces in a thunderous serving display. But Thiem, who has lost the last two French Open finals to Rafael Nadal across Paris at Roland Garros, saved nine of 10 break points to stay with his opponent before clinching the crucial breakthrough in game nine of the deciding set. “It was unbelievable today, his serve,” admitted the Austrian after the match.



Federer said he wanted a fortnight's rest before resuming the season.

Federer to skip ATP Cup for ‘family reasons’

Roger Federer has withdrawn from the ATP Cup, a new team competition to be held in Australia in January, citing “family reasons”. “It is with great regret that I am withdrawing from the inaugural ATP Cup event,” Federer said in a statement. “When I entered the event last month, it was a really difficult decision because it meant less time at home with the family and a fully intense start to the season. “After much discussion with both my family and my team about the year ahead, I have decided that the extra two weeks at home will be beneficial for both my family and my tennis.” The world number three, 38 years old, withdrew on Monday from this week's Masters 1000 tournament in Paris, two hours before the start also saying he needed to rest. The ATP Cup organisers tweeted: “@rogerfederer announced that he would not play the #ATPCup for family reasons and therefore Switzerland was removed” from the competition. The ATP Cup is a new competition, which competes with the revamped Davis Cup, will be held in Brisbane, Perth and Sydney.

Vaibhaav and Prakash enter second round

The Indian men's doubles pairing of Vaibhaav and Prakash Raj entered the second round of the SaarLorLux Open Super Tour 100 after beating Malaysia's Amri Ameer and Muhammad Idham Zainal Abi Syazmil here on Wednesday. Vaibhaav and Prakash notched up a thrilling 16-21 21-14 21-16 win over the Malaysian pair in 45 minutes. The Indian duo will next face fourth seeds Alexander Dunn and Adam Hall of Scotland. On the first day, India's Kiran George defeated China's Liu Hai Chao 21-17 21-13 to set up a clash with France's Toma Junior Popov, while BM Rahul Bhardwaj beat Belgium's Rowan Scheurkogel 21-15 21-9 in the opening round. He will face Germany's Kai Schaefer.



Williams goal helps ATK beat Chennaiyin

ATK got the better of Chennaiyin FC 1-0 in an ISL match at the Marina Arena here on Wednesday to go top of the points table. David Williams scored the all-important goal in the 48th minute to seal the win on a day when Chennaiyin FC did everything but score, much to the dismay of their coach John Gregory. Williams' strike was the ISL's 1,000th goal. The defeat meant that Chennaiyin are yet to find the back of the net so far in three matches this season. ATK, on the other hand, moved to the top of the points table with six from three games, including a 5-0 demolition of Hyderabad FC. Agustin Iniguez set up the goal for ATK with a diagonal ball down the right flank which was picked up by Prabir Das, who ran into the box and pushed it to Javier Hernandez.

