

After first leg, one foot in Tokyo

Brandishing a clinical game, India's women make short work of the Americans to reach a step closer to realising the Olympic dream

MIHIR VASAVDA
BHUBANESWAR, NOVEMBER 1

THE TURN was so sharp, so deadly that an American defender who got tricked lay flat on her stomach, burying face in her hands. Facing the goal sideways to her right, Rani Rampal seemingly had nowhere to go when Sushila Chanu played a square pass inside the 'D' from a fluffed penalty corner. Rani had two defenders on her, but both assuming Rani to either play it back to Sushila or pass it to a teammate a couple of yards behind her.

Instead, she locked the ball using the toe of her stick and executed a perfect 360-degree turn to open up space. Without even looking up, she found Neha Goyal on the baseline, who crossed it across the face of the USA goal and Lilima Minz tapped it in to put India ahead.

The 360 could well pass off as a metaphor for the turnaround in the Indian team in the recent years. In the 36-year competitive history between the two teams in International Hockey Federation (FIH) tournaments, India had never beaten the USA and had never scored more than two goals against them in one match.

On Friday, Rani's quick-thinking led to the goal that came against the run of play but opened the floodgates for India, who eventually won the first of the two Olympic qualifiers 5-1. The result puts them in a commanding position to qualify for two consecutive Olympics for the first time ever, as the USA will now have to beat them by a similar margin to force a shoot-out, or a bigger difference to qualify directly.

Before the win that could well be decisive, though, there was very nearly a disaster. It had been 1,690 days since Indian women played a FIH match at home. When they finally did on Friday, the stage fright very nearly killed India's Tokyo dreams. The range on the passes was missing and the trapping was pedestrian.

When they had to shoot, they were shy. When they had to defend, they erred. Their bodies won't do what the mind said. And it was baffling how the USA had not taken the lead. It was even more perplexing how India entered the half-time 1-0 ahead, via the Minz goal.

"I was not happy with the way we were playing in the first 30 minutes. They got nervous. So I told them this was not a matter of life and death. They did not have to fear anything. Just had to breathe, and think," coach Sjoerd Marijne says.

With the fear of losing gone, India unleashed hell in the third quarter. In those 15 minutes, India gave an exhibition of near-perfect hockey.

The tribal quintet

In deep defence, Deep Grace Ekka ensured the US did not enter India's defensive third even once. To her left, Lilima ran up and down the wings tirelessly, giving midfielders Namita Toppo and Salima Tete options to pass. On the right, Nikki Pradhan played the perfect defensive cover in absence of the experienced Sunita Lakra.

The quintet from the tribal belts of Odisha and Jharkhand provided India the solidity in structure, which allowed the more creative players the freedom to push forward. That push came from Sushila Chanu, who wrestled control of the mid-field from USA captain Kathleen Sharkey, and Navjot Kaur, whose long, probing balls invariably found an Indian player inside the American 'D'.

The full-court press employed in the third quarter choked USA's outletting — the first pass from the back — and pushed them deep into their own half. And three goals that came as a result of it was a snapshot of the progress the team has made.

The first goal in this 15-minute burst,

The full-court press employed in the third quarter choked USA's outletting — the first pass from the back — and pushed them deep into their own half. And three goals that came as a result of it was a snapshot of the team's progress.

Pooja wrestles past hurdles to claim World silver

NITIN SHARMA
CHANDIGARH, NOVEMBER 1

WHEN SHE first took up the sport, a teenage Pooja Gehlot faced the dilemma most women wrestlers training at *akhadas* face — whether to grapple with boys. Mixed training sessions are commonplace yet for someone entering an *akhada* the first time it can be a culture shock. This particular nursery in Bankner, North-West Delhi, was run by Anand Prakash Dahiya but the only trainees were boys. Pooja took the plunge.

The decision, not to be put off by the training tradition and take up the sport, has paid off. On Friday, she won a silver at the Under-23 World Wrestling Championships in Budapest. Pooja, 22, lost to Japan's Haruno Okuno 1-12 in the final. Though the difference in points is unflattering for Pooja, what must be accounted for was that she was up against a formidable wrestler. Okuno, just 20, has already won two senior world titles — in the 55 kg in 2017 and in the 53 kg in 2018. A day earlier, Pooja was impressive in the 8-4 win over 2018 Junior European Wrestling Championship gold-medallist Zeynep Yetgil of Turkey. Gehlot was solid in defence against the Turkish wrestler.



India's were clinical in exposing the vulnerability of their American opponents to notch up the maiden win over them in an FIH tournament. **HI**

RESULTS

WOMEN

India 5 (Lilima Minz 28, Sharmila Devi 40, Gurjit Kaur 42, 51, Navneet Kaur 46) beat USA 1 (Erin Matson 54).

MEN

India 4 (Harmanpreet Singh 5, Mandeep Singh 24 and 53, Sunil 48) beat Russia 2 (Andriy Kurev 17, Semen Matkovskiy 54).

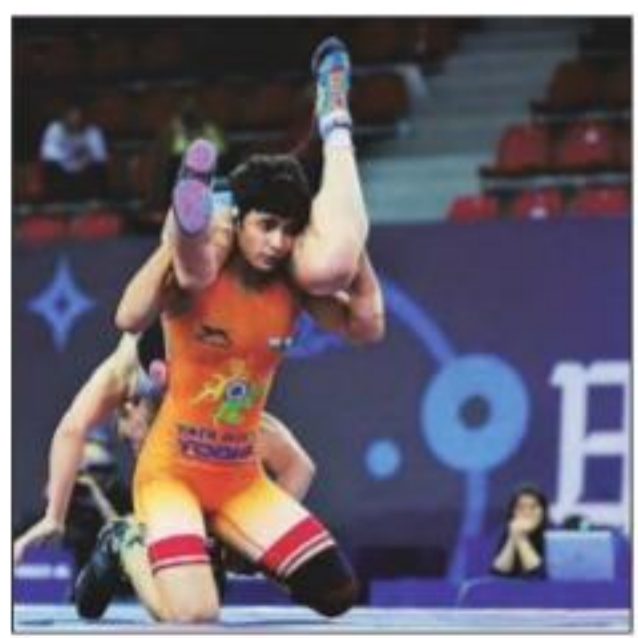
which doubled India's lead, came from a blinding combination play between Navneet Kaur and Lilima, before Sharmila Devi finished it off (a move yesteryear commentators would've as—Lilima se Navneet, Navneet se Sharmila, *aur yeh goal!*)

Minutes later, India earned their second penalty corner of the quarter and Gurjit Kaur, by far India's best woman drag-flicker, aimed it low towards USA goalkeeper Kealsie Robles' right to triple the scoreline. And before USA could even breathe, India were at their doorsteps once again with 17-year-old Lalremsiami and 18-year-old Salima launching a breathtaking counterattack that was finished off by Navneet.

"Setting up an attack like that at this stage. I think every Indian can be proud of that," Marijne says off the counterattack. "It was our best quarter."

India did not show any signs of letting up in the final 15 minutes. It was only after Gurjit made it 5-0 by converting a penalty stroke that Rani & Co. got a little complacent. And they were punished for that almost immediately as USA pulled one back after Erin Matson — who had multiple scoring opportunities in the first half — scored from the spot.

Whether her goal is a consolation, or it sparks a comeback on Saturday, though, remains to be seen. After half-time in this two-match tie, it is India who have their one foot in the Olympics.



Pooja's upper-body gives her an edge over her competitors. **File**

Pooja says her upper-body strength gives her an advantage and it comes from training with boys. "Initially, when I knew that I had to train with boys I was reluctant. But I wanted to be a wrestler and my father always motivated me to not think about such things. Training with Greco-Roman wrestlers helped make by defence rock-solid," Pooja says. Gehlot's father Vijender Singh and family

Gurjit, a drag-flick pioneer

MIHIR VASAVDA
BHUBANESWAR, NOVEMBER 1

FOR GURJIT KAUR, drag-flicking was once a desperate measure. It is now India's deadliest weapon. Ironic, in one sense, because until she picked it up, India's women teams had never really warmed up to this essential art that has been a must in modern hockey since the turn of the century.

"But there was a two-fold problem for the women," former women's team coach AK Bansal says. "Strength was one issue and the second was they did not have anyone to learn from."

Drag-flicking is an aspect, Bansal says, that no coach teaches a player. "Coaches refine or make some tweaks, but most Indians who are expert flickers are drawn to the art by themselves. If any coach says he has produced a drag-flicker, he is lying," Bansal, chief coach of the National Hockey Academy in Delhi, says.

Until very recently, a hit was the only option from a penalty corner for the women players. It was the go-to method for the likes of Suman Bala, Jaspreet Kaur or Asunta Lakra. There used to be variations, but they were seen as lacking the strength to execute a perfect penalty corner. In a way, Gurjit is single-handedly changing that perception.

Her first goal against the USA was the 20th of the year from drag-flicks for Gurjit, who is regarded as the first exponent of the art in India's women's hockey. She has, in fact, scored 21 out of the 73 goals India have scored in 2019, making her indispensable to the team. Just two years ago, however, she was a bench-warmer.

Like most women players in the country, Gurjit has been in the national team set-up from the time she was a teenager. "I got a few opportunities to play but in important series,



Gurjit Kaur netted a brace. **HI**

I was not getting chances," she says.

A defender with no real expertise, Gurjit remained in-and-out of the team for three years. "That's when I realized I needed some x-factor," she says. "Our team did not have a drag-flicker, so I thought of giving it a shot since strength has never been an issue for me."

There was, however, no one woman player she could turn to for tips. "So I started watching videos. I saw how the best men and women players took their penalty corners and tried to copy their technique in training," she says.

In 2017, during a tour to Europe, Sjoerd Marijne arranged a training session for Gurjit with Toon Siepmann, who has mentored some of the best drag-flickers of all-time, including Pakistan's Sohail Abbas and, more

recently, Netherlands' Mink van der Verden.

Through the videos, Gurjit had learnt how to execute a drag-flick. Siepmann, she says, taught her finer aspects like the foot-work, hip movement and wrist positions. Marijne, meanwhile, got her to change her hockey stick, which he thought was light and did not generate enough power.

"The sessions with Toon seemed to have helped her," former women's team coach Harendra Singh says. Harendra tweaked her technique a little more, getting her to use shoulders to generate power behind the shots. "We practiced 50 to 75 drag flicks during every training session," Harendra says.

Rigorous practice

The hours put in during training are now proving invaluable for the team. The 2017 Asia Cup became her breakthrough tournament, top-scoring with eight goals to help India win the title ahead of favourites China. At the World Cup last year, Gurjit delivered when the team needed the most, including the goal against USA which took India to the quarterfinals for the first time.

Her two goals against the same opponents on Friday have put India on the cusp of an Olympic berth. Gurjit took each of India's seven penalty corners, forcing saves from USA goalkeeper Kealsie Robles each time and keeping her guessing with each attempt. Her first goal of the evening came via a low, hard flick on the goalkeeper's right. Minutes before, she had targeted the top-left corner. "I enjoy big stage," she says. "Also, it helps that we have quality back-up in case my drag-flicks do not turn into goals. So I don't take much pressure."

India's back-up plan in penalty corner situations is Rani Rampal, whose deceptive short-hits have been equally effective. On Friday, India did not feel the need to turn to Rani. Marijne will hope he won't have to fall back on the Plan B on Saturday as well.

Mandeep's brace seals India's 4-2 victory over plucky Russia

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
BHUBANESWAR, NOVEMBER 1

MANDEEP SINGH struck twice as a below-par India struggled past minnows Russia 4-2 in the first-leg of the two-match hockey Olympic Qualifier here on Friday. Mandeep (24th, 53rd minutes) scored two field goals while Harmanpreet Singh (5th) and SV Sunil (48th) also hit the target for India.

It was an expected to be a 'David vs Goliath' contest going by the class and vast gap in world rankings between the two teams but world no. 22 Russia dished out a fighting effort to surprise the hosts and keep the difference of goals to just two.

World no.5 India still can't breathe easy as Russia clearly showed they are capable of creating an upset in the second and final match on Saturday. The aggregate winner at the end of the two-match qualifier will seal its place for the 2020 Tokyo Games.

Russia had the first shot at the goal in the third minute with Pavel Golubev showing quick-thinking from a free-hit, taking it himself but his backhand effort was blocked by India goalkeeper PR Sreejesh. Two minutes later, Russia goalkeeper Marat Gafarov was called into action by India captain Manpreet Singh, whose first shot was saved but was fouled as he attempted his follow-up. The hosts made good use of the video referral to get a penalty stroke and Harmanpreet made no mistake. India were dominant but it was far from cakewalk for the hosts as two minutes later Sreejesh was forced to make another save before the Russians won a penalty corner. However, the chance went wasted because of a miss-trap at the top of the circle from Iaroslav Loginov.

But two minutes into the second quarter, India were in for a shock as Russia equalised through a field strike from Andrey Kuraev, who after receiving an overhead pass, cut across the top of the circle before guiding his shot into the bottom left corner past India's second goalkeeper Krishan Bahadur Pathak. Minutes later, a diving Sergey Lepeshkin almost handed Russia the lead but his angled deflection from Evgeny Artemov's pass from the right, missed the top corner of the Indian goal by a fraction.

India, however, restored their lead in the 24th minute through Mandeep, who thrashed home a backhand strike into the bottom left corner past Russia goalkeeper Gafarov, just at the stroke of half-time, India secured their first penalty corner but Harmanpreet's try was comfortably kept away by Gafarov as the hosts went into the break with a slender 2-1 lead.

The Russians continued their good show and made a bright start to the third quarter creating two good chances, the second of which almost produced the equaliser. Marat Khairullin received the ball unmarked in the Indian circle and smashed a blistering backhand strike just wide of the goal. Russia matched their fancied opponents stick for stick but India, somehow, managed to hold on to their slender lead at the end of the third quarter. After wasting their second penalty corner, India finally got some breathing space by extending their lead in the 48th minute through Sunil, who scored from close range following a goal-mouth scramble. Mandeep scored his second goal of the day in the 53rd minute from a counter attack to make the scoreline 4-1 in favour of the hosts.



Mandeep Singh was yet again clinical. **HI**

Maxwell's decision to seek treatment courageous: Waugh

REUTERS
MELBOURNE, NOVEMBER 1

FORMER CAPTAIN Steve Waugh, an alumni of the "tough school" of Australian cricket, has praised all-rounder Glenn Maxwell for having the courage to seek treatment for a mental health issue. Maxwell was ruled out of the Australian team indefinitely on Thursday after confiding in coach Justin Langer about his health issues ahead of a T20 match against Sri Lanka in Adelaide. "I think it's a courageous decision and one that should be applauded," Waugh told reporters on Friday of Maxwell's break from the team. "It's a high-pressure situation, professional sport, and people have got outside pressures and things happening in life just like normal people. Sometimes it becomes a bit too much."

Waugh, who led a series of uncompromising teams in the late 1990s and early 2000s, is renowned for unabashedly championing "mental disintegration", Australia's tactic of putting opposition players off their games through targeted sledging.

He freely admitted that speaking about a

It was a tough school back then, and I look at a lot of players I played with and I think back now, and maybe they had mental issues. But at the time, it was almost a sign of weakness to put your hand up. I'm glad that that's changed because so many people suffered in silence.

STEVE WAUGH

mental health issue was taboo during his playing days. "It was a tough school back then, and I look at a lot of players I played with and I think back now, and maybe they had mental issues," said the 54-year-old. "But at the time, it was almost a sign of weakness to put your hand up. I'm glad that that's changed because so many people suffered in silence."

Waugh felt social media was fuelling mental health issues "Everyone's on Facebook and Instagram and nobody ever posts anything negative (about themselves), so when you see someone else's post you think, 'Maybe my life is not as good as it should be', and you're always trying to catch up and do things better."