

When Rani & Co inspired their inspirer

From being shy of building physiques, to emulating world beaters like Vinesh and Mary, women's hockey team scoring fitness goals

MIHIR VASAVDA
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IT WASN'T quite a sprint to Tokyo, as the first leg suggested it would be. But as the Indian women limped to the finish line, exhausting every ounce of strength to edge out the USA 6-5 on aggregate and qualify for the Olympics, they ended up inspiring the inspirer.

On Friday, minutes after India won the first match of the qualifiers 5-1, wrestler Vinesh Phogat tweeted: "If there is anyone I want to see doing really well at #Tokyo2020, it's the Hockey India ladies. These super-women are really amazing!"

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Playing rare games at home, India entertained a half-full Kalinga Stadium with their quick, hypnotising passes and speedy attacks; at least in the second half of both matches. It came as a revelation for most, as these traits have never been associated with women's hockey. In their decades of struggle, India had forged a dubious reputation of being one of the most unfit teams in the world. Even at full throttle, they gave an impression of playing in slow motion.

Two matches in one weekend, however, seems to have changed that perception. Think of the blistering counterattack from Lalremliam and Salima Tete deep into the third quarter of the first match; or Neha Goyal's probing run on the right in the 51st minute of the second... the kind of stuff seldom seen from the team at these stages of the match in the past.

"Right now, our team is so fit that we can turn things around even in the last second," captain Rani Rampal, who has been at the centre of the turnaround, says. "Two years ago, when Wayne (Lombard, the team physio) joined us, his first reaction was 'oh my god, where have I landed!' But he took it as a challenge and made it his mission to make us fitter."

Lombard, who has worked with Indian athletes like Vinesh and javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra, was appointed as the women's fitness trainer in 2017. The team he inherited was an eclectic mix: more than half of the players came from tribal areas in Odisha and Jharkhand, and rural Punjab and Haryana. Some hailed from Manipur and a few, like striker Lalremliam, were from Mizoram (in fact, Siami, as she is known in the team, could not speak Hindi and carries a Mizo-to-Hindi dictionary even today).

This was a close-knit group, Lombard observed. But fitness as a concept was alien. And they were timid, which gave their opponents a mental and physical advantage in most matches. "Before I joined the team, I had asked around and one of the answers I got was physically they were really poor," Lombard says. "Maybe, it was a cultural thing... they weren't in the limelight that much and I think they also thought they did not have the authority to be in the limelight."

Cultural differences

The players, according to him, were shy to develop a physique. To draw them out of their shell, Lombard gave the players examples of other Indian women athletes who became world-beaters by developing a strong physique.

Vinesh, whose Rio Olympics ended in tears after getting injured, is currently among the fittest and strongest athletes in the country; the mix of bravado and strength earning her the nickname of 'fighter plane' among her friends. Lombard, who worked closely with Vinesh in the rehab phase after the 2016 Games, also cited the example Mary Kom, who recently won her eighth World Championship medal last month at the age of 36.

"Listening to their stories, we realised if they could be so strong and have such a



Sharmila Devi (L) runs past a USA player in first of the two-match Olympic qualifiers in Bhubaneswar. Indian players' speed and strength came as a revelation. Hockey India

Mental game: Profiling personalities

New Delhi: When the failed clearance by a USA defender landed at Rani Rampal's stick, coach Sjoerd Marijne had a hunch of what could happen next. "I know some of our girls, they like the tension," Marijne says, without naming Rani.



Marijne isn't guessing. He knows for sure. His knowledge on the players' behaviour is based on a personality profile conducted on every player earlier this year. Physical fitness has just been one part of Marijne's project with the women's team, with whom he has been associated since early 2017. The Dutchman, also a motivational speaker, has laid equal emphasis on the mental aspect.

With language being the main barrier, Marijne said he had to develop an alternate way to extract basic information about his players: Why do they take a particular decision? What is their person-

ality like? How do they react under stress? What do they like?

"I used a personality profiling tool called VIP 24, which helps you understand better why the players are making certain choices inside the pitch. That, in turn, helps my coaching," Marijne says.

The results of the 30-minute online assessment were fascinating. "When some players are under stress, they are looking down. Consequently, they don't see the passes. So I take them off, try to bring the pressure off by talking to them and bring energy back," he says, adding that there were several occasions during the two-match Olympic qualifier against USA where the information came in handy.

"Every girl reacts in different ways to stress - the way they perform, the way they interact..." he says. "I hope to continue using this tool in the future as well. All this information helps me to build the team."

MIHIR VASAVDA

great physique, why can't we? If they can achieve so much with their fitness, even we can," Rani says.

Once they bought into Lombard's idea of fitness, the actual work began. It has taken two years of intense workout - gym sessions to increase strength, short sprints (20m) to improve endurance - for the team to match the world standards.

When Lombard had taken over, the average yo-yo test scores of the team were in the

range of 17 to 17.5. In international hockey, 18 is considered to be the bare minimum (to put it in perspective, the men's cricket team has a score of 16.1 as minimum). "When you are averaging 17, that means a couple of the athletes running an 18, and then the rest of running 17 or lower," Lombard says.

In September, before the team travelled to England to face Olympic champions Great Britain in a test series, the average scores had improved to 19.5. "So everyone has to be

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RANI RAMPAL
CAPTAIN, INDIA

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WAYNE LOMBARD
PHYSICAL TRAINER, WOMEN'S HOCKEY TEAM

above 18 and then a few players have to be about 20, 21 or 22. So yeah, so the improvement from that perspective has been pretty phenomenal," Lombard adds.

Rani says: "Wayne works on minutest of details. He works late into the night studying our GPS data... which player is playing with what intensity, what distance they've run in a match, who should take more load, who should slow down a bit... Every morning we get the data on how much percent the body is recovering and then according to that our training schedule is charted out. All these things have brought massive changes."

The impact of this has been visible on the pitch. The players have never looked stronger on the ball or so quick with, or without, it. There is a fair bit of distance to cover before India can match the European teams or Australia. But the win over the US gives them a solid base. "We have to do this for the entire match," coach Sjoerd Marijne says. "And the preparation starts tomorrow morning."

Need to work on finishing and deep defence: Men's coach

PTI adds: Endeavouring to accomplish an "unfinished" task at the Tokyo Olympics, Indian men's hockey team coach Graham Reid wants strikers with incredible finishing skills and a strongly fortified defence. "Obviously, I have an unfinished business. You always dream of an Olympics podium finish. I was lucky to win one as a player and those memories are things you hold on to," said Reid after India confirmed their place at the Tokyo Games on Saturday.

Eight-time champions India qualified after thrashing Russia 7-1 in the second game to win the double-leg FIH Olympic Qualifiers 11-3 on aggregate at the Kalinga Stadium here. "That's what we need to bring to this team and give it a big shot (in Tokyo)," the 55-year-old coach said. "I told the players just now that we have nine months (before Olympics). Just get better and better, that's our plan. Focus on the process, result will take care of itself."

Reid said his players will look to polish their game in the coming months. "I think for me what we need to get better in is finishing. We are creating a lot of opportunities, which is great. But we need to get more returns. Also in deep defence, we have to get tighter. We are still giving away too many opportunities (to opponents)," he said.

After opting out of the inaugural edition last year, India will make their debut in the FIH Pro League against the Netherlands in January next year. After Netherlands, India will host Belgium and Australia in February before embarking on overseas tours.

Reid believed playing against top teams will be handy for his side in its preparation for the Games. "That's one of the things that Pro League does, that it sets up competition schedule between now and Olympics," he said.

Swimming row: Students, officials involved in fudged results punished

NITIN SHARMA/SHAHID JUDGE
CHANDIGARH/MUMBAI, NOVEMBER 3

AT FOUR in the evening on Sunday, Dr Raj Kumar Sharma, director sports, Lovely Professional University (LPU) in Jalandhar requested to meet all swimmers present at the venue of the All-India Inter-University swimming meet.

"He apologised to everyone for the way the event had been handled," explained Kushagra Rawat, a student of the Delhi University and the 400m freestyle national record holder. "After that he sat behind all the judges for the races to make sure there would be no fudging of results."

On Saturday, the second day of the four-day meet, swimmers from outside colleges decided to boycott the event after race results were blatantly being changed to benefit the host team - false starts by the host team swimmers were being considered legal and timings, which were being recorded manually instead of the usual use of the automatic touchpads, were changed to declare LPU swimmers as winners.

The seven-member team from the Jain University in Bangalore, which includes multiple Khelo India gold-medallist Likith SP and Srihari Natraj, who holds five different national records, eventually decided to return to back to their college.

The discrepancies were eventually brought to the notice of the Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports Kiren Rijiju, who tweeted that he is looking into the matter and the "Director General of Sports Authority of India is in touch with AIU (Association of Indian Universities) officials."

Rijiju looking into the issue

In another post, Rijiju stated: "I would like to make it very clear, All organisations must ensure integrity of Sports. Transparency, fairness and equity in the sport world is a basic condition necessary to enhance opportunities for everyone to participate. There should be no scope for manipulation."

Following the protests and Rijiju's intervention, the AIU issued a letter to the host university asking for the officials responsible for the changed results to be relieved from duty and "immediately suspend the students from all the events who were involved in deception."

The letter further stated that it was attached with proof of the "manipulations in performance of swimmers."

Subsequently, the LPU made the desired changes. "The original timings were declared from the races that happened on the first two days and the rightful winners were announced," said Rawat, who had won the 400m freestyle, but was declared second based on the changed timings. "All races from today onwards would have results declared immediately and fairly, which is something that had not been happening at all."

The LPU also went further to suspend their swimmer Sahil Chopra, who had been benefiting from the doctored results.

"Two officials were responsible for getting the results from the pool and depositing with the results desk. These two officials are not of our university and were hired for the meet, but they have been suspended along with the two swimmers Sahil and Abhay from the meet," Kumar told The Indian Express.

"Unlike athletics, a false start in swimming is not stopped and the decision is taken after the race. Initially, Sahil was declared the winner and later as we got to know the discrepancy, we rectified the results and posted the correct results. We have started the pending events today evening and the remaining finals of the day will also be held today evening."

[SPORTS BAR]



Serie A: De Ligt keeps Juventus on top

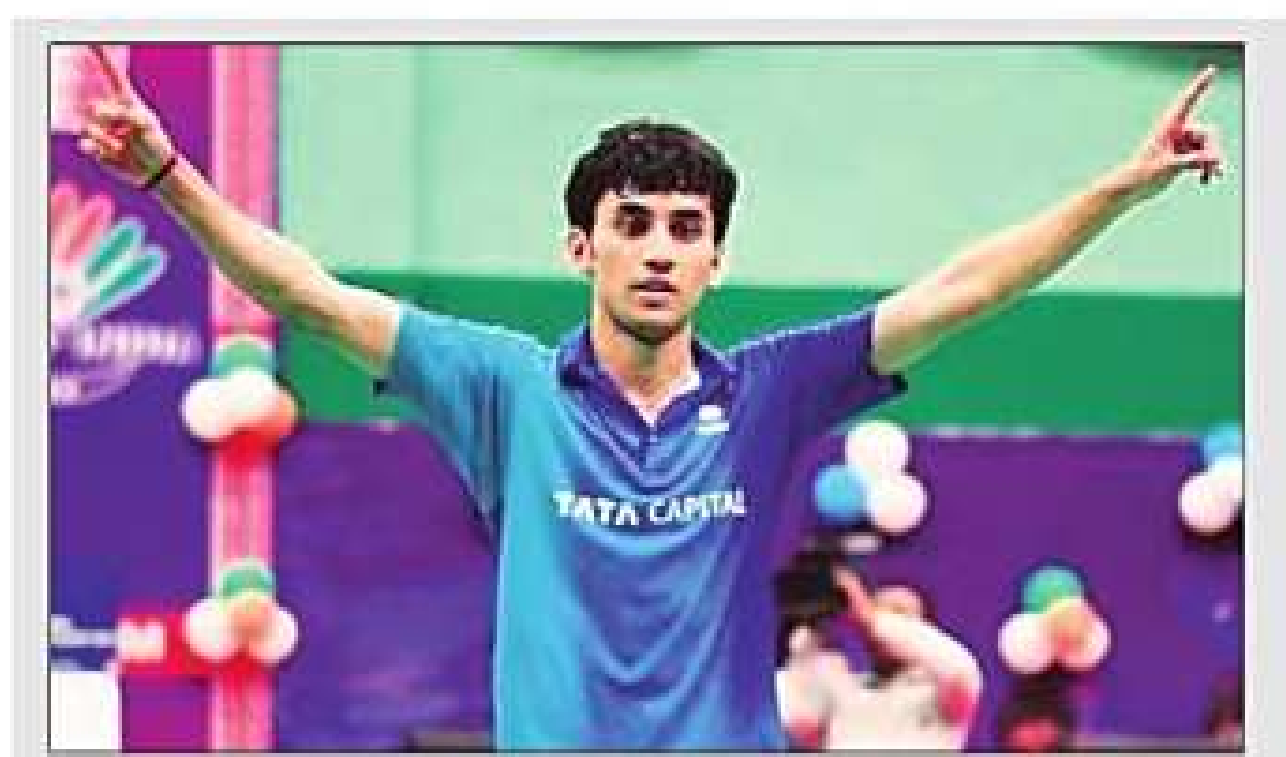
Matthijs de Ligt made sure Juventus kept hold of top spot in Serie A after his first goal for the club saw off local rivals Torino, leaving Inter Milan in second despite Romelu Lukaku taking his league tally to nine with a brace in a 2-1 win at Bologna. Inter had briefly led in Italy after Lukaku slotted home a 92nd-minute penalty to snatch the three points at Bologna but Juve retook first place thanks to De Ligt, who smashed home the only goal of the game in Turin with 20 minutes remaining. De Ligt scored in the 70th minute when he met substitute Gonzalo Higuain's pull back just after the Argentine had forced a corner with a sizzling volley.

Patel satisfied with football roadmap

All India Football Federation (AIFF) president Praful Patel on Saturday expressed happiness that a "broadly acceptable consensus" has been reached on Indian football's roadmap. "I am happy that a sustainable, comprehensive and broadly acceptable consensus roadmap has now been established which will do Indian football a lot of good in the future. Broadly a good solution has been found for club football in India," Patel said after the official Emblem of the FIFA Women's U-17 World Cup was launched in the presence of Sports Minister Kiren Rijiju.

Indian women lose 0-3 to Vietnam

The Indian women's team suffered a 0-3 defeat against hosts Vietnam in the first of the two FIFA international friendly matches in Hanoi, Vietnam on Sunday. Thi Nhung (8th minute), Thi Van (82nd) and Thi Thuy Hang (89th) scored a goal apiece for the hosts to secure the comfortable win. Aditi Chauhan pulled off a terrific save in the 12th minute to deny Vietnam from doubling the lead. At the stroke of the half-hour mark, Bala Devi unleashed a superb shot from centre only to see it missing the target by a whisker. Coach Maymol Rocky opted to make an early substitution in the form of Daya, who replaced Sumitra in the 32nd minute.



Lakshya Sen is set to break into top 50 of the world rankings on Tuesday. File

Lakshya claims SaarLorlux Open title

India's Lakshya Sen bagged his second successive BWF World Tour Super 100 title with a thrilling win over China's Weng Hong Yang in an exciting final at the SaarLorlux Open in Saarbrücken on Sunday. Lakshya, seeded eighth, needed 59 minutes to overcome Weng 17-21 21-18 21-16 in the summit clash for his third successive singles title of the season. He had clinched the Belgian International challenge and Dutch Open Super Tour 100 in his last two outings. He had also reached the Polish Open final this year. World number 51 Sen, who has won the Asian Junior championship, a silver at the Youth Olympics and a bronze at World Junior Championship last year, continues to impress on the senior circuit. The 18-year-old from Uttarakhand had come into the final with a 1-2 head-to-head record against the Chinese but it didn't matter as he rallied his way after squandering the first game to complete a thrilling win. After this win, Lakshya is set to break into the top 50 when the BWF rankings are released on Tuesday.

Bhanwal misses bronze, Ravi enters repechage

Three-time medallist Sajjan Bhanwal (77kg) missed out on a bronze in Greco-Roman category but Ravi (97kg) reached the repechage round at the U-23 Wrestling World Championships in Budapest on Sunday. Turkey's Serkan Akkoyun proved too strong for Bhanwal and won 10-1 by superiority in the bronze medal contest. Ravi was blanked 8-0 by Georgian grappler Giorgi Melia in the pre-quarter-finals, but, with the latter making it to the final, the Indian was presented with another chance to fight for a medal. Ravi now needs to win just one bout in repechage to enter the bronze medal play-off on the final day of the competition.



EPL: Leicester City beat Palace 3-0, stay in top 3

Leicester City underlined their EPL top-four credentials as goals by Caglar Soyuncu and Jamie Vardy sealed a clinical 2-0 victory at Crystal Palace on Sunday. Soyuncu (in pic, R) broke the deadlock when he headed in James Maddison's 57th-minute corner for his first Leicester goal. Leicester never looked like relinquishing their lead and Vardy added some late gloss with his 10th goal of the season. As impressive as last week's 9-0 win at 10-man Southampton was, Sunday's display was perhaps more meaningful in terms of Leicester's ambitions this season. Palace could have gone fifth with a win but Leicester were in control throughout and thoroughly deserved a third successive league victory to put them back above Chelsea into third place on goal difference with 23 points from 11 games.

Atwal placed 34th, Lahiri pulls out

A side-strain sustained during the second round forced Anirban Lahiri to withdraw before the start of the third round of the inaugural Bermuda Championship. Lahiri, who had made the cut despite the strain, decided to withdraw ahead of the third round. "I will be back for Mayakoba Classic," said Lahiri, who shot rounds of 66 and 73 in the first two rounds to be tied 50th. Meanwhile, Arjun Atwal, the only Indian to have ever won on the PGA Tour, shot a third straight two-under 69 to get to six-under 210 and was lying tied 34th after three rounds.