



## HISTORY

### KAZAN OLYMPIC QUALIFIER 2008 LONG WAY TO GO FOR INDIA

India got a chance to play in the Olympic Qualifier in 2008 after missing it in 2004. India was hardly a force in the Qualifier for the Sydney Olympics in 2000 where it finished very low in the ranking. However, much water has flown down the Ganges since Sydney days. India emerged as a strong force in the global arena. It won its first Commonwealth Games gold in 2002 and reached the finals again four years later. In between, it won its first Asia Cup (2004, Delhi) and a heartwarming bronze at the Doha Asian Games. Therefore, it was but natural India was top-billed for the Kazan Olympic Qualifier only behind the United States of America. Others in the fray of the six-nation event included Netherlands Antilles, France and Belgium besides the hosts Russia.

India perhaps could not put in place a solid, deliverable programme to realize its true potential at Kazan. Whereas the States, always an Indian enigma — India lost a 3-match play off series to them, thus missing the 2002 World Cup — built on the solid 2006 World Cup performance. The States finished at a creditable fifth at the Madrid World Cup where India ended up eleventh. The States availed the services of two Australian brains to run its hockey affairs — Terry Walsh (Technical Director) and Lee Bodimeade (Chief Coach). The duo's vision mattered and strategy delivered.

After the Madrid World Cup, India went on to win the bronze at Doha at the fag end of 2006. The reasonable success — India went medal less in the previous Asiad — could have been utilized for better things, but it was not to be. The Indian Women Hockey Federation struggled to get extension for its chief coach MK Kaushik from his employer. As a result, the coaching team broke. India made a couple of exposure trips in 2007, besides Asia Cup in Hong Kong. Each tour had different coach and support staff. MK Kaushik was back only in February 2008, about six weeks before the Kazan Qualifier. The girls were, however, undergoing training in different spells with other set of coaches before Kaushik returned.

Indian team for Kazan was selected after a camp and the trails at Lucknow, a month in advance. Veteran player Pritam Rani Siwach, 32, made it to the team after a gap of four years on the strength of her performance at the Senior Nationals held in Jalandhar a month ago. The mother of two proved her recall worth, by scoring a goal in the first match itself. Her state mate Mamta Kharab led the side. Forward Rani Devi, 16, babe of the team, was hailed as a sensational star on the horizon.

The women team was under tremendous pressure to deliver at the Qualifier, more so after Indian men failed to qualify for the Beijing Olympics in March. At the Chile Qualifier, India lost to Great Britain in the final (0-2), thus missing the Olympics first time in 80 years. To say that the under-prepared Indian women buckled under pressure is stating the obvious.

India started their campaign well against the weak side in the fray, the hosts Russia. Both the senior most (Pritam Rani Siwach) and the youngest (Rani Devi) scored in its 3-1 win to make a perfect start. India could not build on this success subsequently. The Netherlands Antilles (1-2) — its almost B team of The Netherlands — Belgium (2-3) and the States (4-0) overwhelmed India in that order. Second seeded India was nowhere in the picture. India's made exit sooner than expected, as it was found wanting in vital areas of the game. Most glaring was the penalty corners. Most of those hard-earned penalty corners were wasted, due to bad stops, and then over-reliance on the direct hits of Suman Bala that did not click. There was no viable alternative to Bala to step in.

Second shortcoming was, scoring. India lacked the finish. India's main striker Surinder Kaur was woefully out of form, so also otherwise reliable Jasjeet Kaur. Debutant Rani impressed with some wonderful goals, but then she was alone. Pritam helped to hold the proceedings, but the midfielders were anything but impressive.