



## INDIAN MEN'S HOCKEY IN 2006 SCOPE FOR IMPROVEMENT

The first major international challenge for India in 2006 was the Commonwealth Games held in Melbourne, Australia, in March. The nation's mood however was downcast as India, playing hosts, finished last in the Chennai Champions Trophy at end of the year. Therefore, India had to start from scratch for its approach towards team selection and training for the Melbourne campaign.

The second Premier Hockey League (PHL), staged with much fanfare at Chandigarh in January, came as a good opportunity to spot new talent, firm up existing ones and get the new perspectives of coaches who manage the teams there. The Sector 42 Hockey Stadium, which hosted the PHL, was provided with a fantastic floodlight facility by the Chandigarh administration. And that in record time — just two months. The second PHL was a huge success in terms of crowds it drew and for the passion with which the matches were fought. Some well known coaches like Vasudevan Baskaran and Joaquim Carvalho were present during the PHL. National chief coach Rajinder (Jr.) was in charge of Hyderabad Sultans.

The Indian Hockey Federation had by then listed some probables who were put through physical conditioning even as the PHL took place simultaneously. The Commonwealth Games was preceded by a Test series against Pakistan. A six-match series, with three each on either side of the border. A 20-member team for both the Commonwealth Games and the Test series was announced a day after Bangalore Lions won the PHL Two. The selected team did not include stars such as Gagan Ajit, who led India at the Chennai Champions Trophy, Deepak Thakur, scorer of some scintillating goals in the PHL, steadily performing medio Viren Rasquinha and winger Prabhjot Singh. Shivender Singh, who scored a couple of good goals in the PHL, and brothers Didar Singh and Sardar Singh were the new faces in the team. For Tejbir Singh and Didar Singh, it was a recall after a gap of two years in the wilderness. About 10 players, not part of the team, were asked to attend a training camp separately

in New Delhi under Joaquim Carvalho.

**Pakistan Test Series:** It was a taxing schedule. Six tests in nine days. The Indian leg turned out to be a one-sided affair. For the first time in the annals of the bi-lateral test series between the two gifted neighbour nations since 1978, India lost three straight matches. The first two tests at Chandigarh were lacklustre affairs for the hosts. The scoreline (1-2) was misleading, the match not being a close affair as indicated. The visitors scored easily two goals inside the first 25 minutes and then relaxed. India's lone answer came in the 63rd minute.

The second test the next day at the same venue witnessed some improved play by India who fell prey to late collapses yet again. The scores were level, but Tariq Aziz and Rehan Butt took the match away and Pakistan romped home with a 3-1 victory. The third test at Jalandhar, hometown of coach Rajinder, again did not produce a sparkling duel, usually associated with the two nations. A sparsely attended match was lost 1-2 by India, all the scoring being done in the first half.

Crossing the border, India experienced a change of fortune. India drew at Lahore (1-1), won at Faisalabad (2-1) before drawing an exciting concluding test 3-3 at Rawalpindi. In the final analysis the 2006 series belonged to the visitors. Pakistan could not win any match on their soils, as was the case with India in the first leg. With neither India nor Pakistan doing well in leading tournaments, the series between the two did not evoke the kind of enthusiasm it usually does. This is the sad state of affairs not only for the gifted South Asian neighbours but also for the hockey as a global sport. That no media person crossed the border to cover the series was another dubious first.

**Commonwealth Games:** India did not possess a good history in the theatre of the Commonwealth Games and the trend continued in 2006. At Kuala Lumpur in 1998, where hockey was introduced to the Games, it lost in the semis to hosts Malaysia at the newly built, sprawling Bukit Jalil stadium. India then finished empty handed after losing the play-off for