

India take on France at the Road to London Olympic qualifying tournament in Delhi, India.

Stanislas Brochier

STANDARDS IN SPORT: HOCKEY

While ructions over rival leagues and governing bodies are marring the game in India, it remains one of the most important global stages for field hockey – once seen as a national game. Away from the limelight, advances in materials and equipment have kept the rule makers busy, aiming to make the sport safer, fairer and more entertaining to watch.

Hockey sticks at dawn

It reads like a script from a Hollywood soap: accusations of cheating, being disowned, rival factions at war. Friendships, enemies, egos and money. And that's just one episode in the saga that surrounds field hockey in India.

Fortunately, the game elsewhere in the world is not so complicated. While it doesn't attract the limelight that many sports do, it is played the world over and research suggests that its popularity is growing. The International Hockey Federation (IFH), which governs the game worldwide, has 130 nations as members and says increasing numbers are signing up and more clubs are being established. This is in the game's interests– the more people that play, the more exposure it gets, the more money will eventually filter in and the better it will get – or that's the theory.

It's one that's being put into practice by the two factions in India, which are aiming to introduce the sport to wider audiences with the hope that younger generations will then pick up a stick.

On one side is the Indian Hockey Federation. It was denounced by the IFH in 2008 for alleged bribery offences, and has since been embroiled in a bitter tangle with its opposers. It established the World Series of Hockey at the start of this year and ruffled more than a few feathers when it attracted members of national teams to play. Many were threatened with expulsion if they played in the series, and hefty fines were waved over their heads by national bodies. A second series is scheduled for the end of this year and the stakes are high: not only in terms of the prize money, which ran close to two million dollars this year – the most lucrative hockey event ever staged – but there is also the small question of pride.

On the other side is the 'official' national governing body, Hockey India, which, with support from the IFH, is launching a league in January called Hockey India League. It is inviting some of the best international stars to play alongside the cream of the domestic talent, with players entering an auction for sponsors to bid on. It is not dissimilar to the World Series, although currently without the same financial backing. It is expecting many of the world's top players to sign up – without fear of sanctions, this time.



Team GB – bronze medal winners – versus women's champions the Netherlands at the London 2012 Olympics. The astro turf was coloured blue to make the ball more visible.

Grant Treeby

Emotions are running high between the two sides and there are no signs of either backing down. It is a Mexican standoff that's all the sadder when it is remembered that India is the most decorated men's team in the world; at this summer's Olympics, they finished last.

The money game

The main inhibitor to growth in field hockey is a lack of funding. There are very few professional hockey players; those that are paid are often not paid well (compared with many other sportspeople). Full-time players in the Netherlands, Germany, the UK and Spain might be incentivised in other ways or supplement their wages with coaching, while in India and Pakistan they might be on companies' or institutions' payrolls that have a vested interest. But there are no big sponsorships, no TV deals and very few high-profile stars in the sport as a whole. Funding is often through government-backed schemes or small sponsorships. For the vast majority, it is

COPYRIGHT



Brabo's new generation of TeXtreme carbon fibre field hockey sticks, made in the Netherlands by Kubus Sport.

Kubus Sport

merely played for the enjoyment.

However, the sheer number of people that play the game worldwide makes it a lucrative sport for those companies that supply to it. Many are fairly niche, for example Grays, TK Hockey, Voodoo and Dita, while bigger names such as Slazenger, adidas and Asics are also prevalent.

Laying down the law

Rules determining the clothing and equipment are set in Switzerland, the headquarters of the IFH, by a rules committee made up of 16 members. The committee's job is to ensure the rules are applied, provide advice, make the game safer and easier to understand, and contribute to its development.

The main piece of equipment is obviously the stick, which was traditionally made from wood, particularly that of the mulberry tree. With the advancement of technologies, additional materials have been introduced - fibreglass, carbon fibre and Kevlar - and improvements in the strength and feel of composite sticks have resulted in their increased use in recent years.

New rules regarding stick specification will come into force in January 2013. They have been rewritten to make them clearer and the method of measuring the bow or rake has been revised. Roger Webb, head of sports at the IFH and a prominent member of the rules committee, says sticks are continuously monitored. "With new materials coming along and new manufacturing methods, we want to retain a fairly standard style, shape and size and so on," he says.

When a rule change is being considered, the IFH consults some of the major companies well in advance, with the next amendment having been discussed since 2009. "We've got quite extensive informal contacts with brands," says Mr Webb. "We give them prior notice of any upcoming rule changes, recognising it takes a year or two to get through the manufacturing, retail and supply chain."

Material world

It is therefore left to the equipment manufacturers to drive improvements to materials that stay within the boundaries. UK-based stick manufacturer Grays International has introduced a new range that was reshaped, modified and improved to comply with the new regulations. Tests were conducted in conjunction with a university, monitoring the stick's rigidity and rebound. The resin is impregnated with reinforcing fibres using carbon nanotubes technology, which results in greater tensile strength, improving the stick's consistency and performance.

Similarly, Netherlands-based Kubus Sport has recently introduced TeXtreme technology into its sticks. This uses carbon fibre spread into very thin tapes, which are then woven into a fabric. By spreading the fibre, the TeXtreme carbon material has less crimp, straighter fibres and more fibres in a given volume, which improves performance and reduces weight.

First impressions count

The rules regarding apparel are few. They state merely that field players of the same team must wear uniform clothing and that it must not pose a danger to other players. The IFH does not have preferred suppliers; the brands must fight it out off the pitch. Similar to other sports, performance textiles feature heavily – moisture wicking, breathable, perhaps temperature regulating or wind resistant.

"Given the nature of our sport, clothing is fairly standard so we're not directly involved in making specifications," says Mr Webb. "We're much more concerned that the colours work. For instance if they're wearing undershorts, we do require that they're the same colour scheme as the overshorts, and the same with women's skorts. The reason for this is twofold: that the team is readily recognisable because of the colours they're wearing, but also that they present the sport in a smart, appropriate way."

The IFH does recommend that players wear shin, ankle and mouth protection.

Slazenger's Phantom Extreme goalkeeper helmet is injection moulded with a zytel shell and carbon steel face mask for high impact protection.

Slazenger



Cultural fit

While most women play in skirts, Muslim women are allowed to wear trousers if they

COPYRIGHT

choose. Associations including the International Amateur Boxing Association and Badminton World Federation have caused controversy recently by trying to make skirts compulsory – which would be unacceptable in some cultures – but eventually conceding it should be an individual's decision. "Apart from some protective clothing, we don't specify many requirements," says Mr Webb.

The IFH also has no problem with playing in hijabs or headscarves, as women from Muslim countries might wish to. In July, the International Football Association Board overturned its rule that banned them for safety reasons – but not before the Iranian women's football team were disqualified for not removing them in an Olympic qualifying match. "This situation hasn't arisen very often," says Mr Webb. "Whenever it has arisen we've been pragmatic about it and fully respectful of the individual's rights."

Safety first

The majority of stipulations for clothing and equipment are for goalkeepers. This is obviously a safety requirement as the ball is hard, heavy, can be travelling at high speeds and with spin. They are required to wear at least headgear, leg guards and kickers; and body, upper arm, elbow, forearm, hand, thigh and knee protectors might also be requested.

One of the reasons the IFH gives as the importance of the rules committee is to help the game to adapt to advancements in materials and practices. Thirty years ago, goalies were not required to wear helmets, but the game now is not only quicker (due to astro turf surfaces) but also the ball is in the air more (flicking the ball up is now allowed), increasing the risk of injury. This was also a determining factor in a ruling that allows defenders to wear face masks in some circumstances, particularly when they are inside the posts protecting the goal.

Similar masks are also permitted for medical reasons, as are goggles with a soft-covered frame and plastic lenses – at the umpire's discretion. "If you take the example of a player needing to wear some sort of protection because they've had a head injury, we would be concerned that it's not too hard or has any protrusions on the outside, so it doesn't cause injury to another player in the case of a collision. So it's both the wearer's safety we're concerned about and the other players'," says Mr Webb.

International stage

With the Olympics over, country-level players are looking forward. For many, the upcoming leagues in India are promising. Five-times IFH player-of the-year Jamie Dywer from Australia has signed up as brand ambassador of the Hockey India League, and four Australian co-captains have also made themselves available. A contingent of New Zealand internationals signed up as *WSA* went to print, with Hockey India promising more big announcements are on the way. TV coverage for the rival World Series will also bring the game into the living rooms of hundreds of thousands of spectators across the Indian sub-continent.

So the thrills and spills are set to continue until at least the early part of next year – and if the negative side of the fall-out can be mitigated, the leagues are at least bringing the sport to a wider audience, increasing players' profiles and potential wages, and engaging youth – which can only be a good thing for those equipment and apparel companies that supply to it.

