

# Is Indian hockey team operating upon the right principles - Strategy and Tactics - to climb back to the Top?

To answer this burning question, I like these **Time Tested Universal Principles**, to **advocate and evaluate** the current situation, improvement and performance of the former champions; India:

In the May 2016 issue of the Harvard Business Review magazine **Meg Whitman**, CEO of **Hewlett - Packard (HP)** was interviewed, by its editor in chief **Adi Ignatius**. She made the following comments, while referring to how she **successfully turned around HP**, in a short span of 5 years, since 2011, when she took over the reins.

1. “So we set out on a turnaround journey, which I predicted would take five years. I said, “What are the core values of this company? **Let’s identify what it does really well and do more of that as the anchor for the turn around.** Then let’s make a to-do list for the things to be fixed.” So we went back to our core founding principles, and the company responded”.
2. “You need the **right people in the right jobs** at the right time with the right attitude. That sounds easy, but it’s very hard”.
3. “The great thing about team sports is that you don’t win unless everyone **plays her position.** Have you ever watched a bunch of five-year-olds play soccer? They all go with the ball, and it’s not very effective. The ability to **play defense and offense, to know your position,** to know what you’re accountable for—all of that is learned by doing, for me, that “all for one, one for all” approach, led by a coach, was part of how I learned to lead”.

BTW, Meg played field hockey during her college days.

4. “**What things you are not going to do.** That is the most difficult decision for companies, because we all have eyes that are bigger than our stomachs”

### **In other words;**

1. What are one's strengths?
2. Is the right player playing on the right position?
3. Does one know and understand their role and responsibility. ABC?
4. What to do and what exactly not to do?

### **Improvements:**

Before analyzing that have these principles been implemented or not, it is important to look at, what has improved and being done very well? As it has resulted in bringing **positive changes** and help India crawl out of the slump and be on its turnaround journey. Thanks to the foreign coaches, their knowledge and sacrifices. **It is hard to also not think of the Punjab Institute of Sports**, which has developed more than 50% of the players on the current Indian senior national team and the 2016 Junior World Cup winning team, under the leadership of **Sukhvir Singh Grewal**.

Here is the list of the things, Indian Hockey team is doing very well.

#### **1. Tactical:**

Team structure, especially in the back four

Circulating the ball in the back

Press Tactics as a team

Defending and attacking as a team

Marking individually and as a team

Interchanging Positions during the run of play

#### **2. Technical:**

Back checking or reverse tackling by the forwards

Aerial hockey

Sweeps from the strong and weak side

Overall basic skills

#### **3. Physical:**

Vastly Improved Physical fitness, which is a tremendous plus  
Collective teamwork rate. Very high

#### **4. Psychological:**

Improved attitude - positive self-expectancy, self-discipline, self – belief, team unity, work ethic, and the desire to learn and excel

#### **5. Management:**

Improved planning and organization

#### **6. Goal scoring:**

Especially via Tomahawk's, deflections and rebounds

#### **7. Set Plays:**

Improved penalty corner conversion rate, offensively and defensively

#### **8. Goalkeeping**

Vastly Improved department and a big reason for team's success. Fewer soft goals are allowed now

### **S.W.O.T. Analysis:**

When a new Head Coach takes reins of a team, he usually looks at the Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats in regard to the team's present form. A critical questions which must be asked is; **what needs to be done?**

### **What India Needed to Improve?**

India's weaknesses from the beginning of the 90's, till the late part of the previous decade, was basically not being able to **upgrade their technical and tactical skills** to keep up with the changing times. They completely **ignored the use of science and technology**, to a large extent, during this period. For Example;

1. How to blend and play direct and indirect hockey. India was playing too much direct hockey, especially on their 16's offensive free hits

This was one of the key reasons, why India did not qualify for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. During the qualifier in Chile, against Great Britain, in the final match, India kept on taking direct hits on the offensive 16's, while trying to penetrate the ball through the GB press, which was like a China wall. This resulted in not only giving GB possession, but also control the game via circulating the ball,

as a team and attack at will. As India's **press tactics, as a unit, were basically nonexistent.**

2. Circulating the ball in the back
3. Implementation of Press tactics as a team
4. Know how to play as a team. Too much selfish play. Individual dodging. There were too many mini teams – groups - on the Indian team, on and off the field
5. Back checking/ reverse tackling. There was very little or almost none reverse tackling by the forwards
6. Running off the ball to create space individually and as a team, Interchanging positions and Marking
7. I don't care attitude by some senior players and a couple of coaching staff members. Loosing had become a habit, which was expected and easily accepted
8. Below average goal keeping
9. Not a very high rate of Penalty corner conversion
10. Below average work rate, as a team. Players – especially forwards - loved to run with the ball on their own and turnover it, after dodging one, two or three opponents. To add insult to injury, they strolled back, imagining as they are walking in a rose garden, while singing the latest hit song from a Bollywood movie, with their girlfriend

**Please Note:** In spite of all these weaknesses, India was very close to qualifying for the semi's during the following three Olympic Games. An extra goal or a one win in a pool match would have helped them qualify for the semis. So close still so far.

1996 Atlanta Olympics: Finished 8<sup>th</sup>

2000 Sydney Olympics: Finished 7<sup>th</sup>

2004 Athens Olympics: Finished 7<sup>th</sup>

Please refer to B.G. Joshi's latest article, Stats Speak, for more detailed stats

**So the question is,** was India really that bad, as was depicted by the foreign coaches and gurus? Especially, after the 2008 Olympic Games, when India failed

to qualify for the Olympics for the first time. I don't think so. BTW, the foreign coaches have not yet been able to surpass the above results, which the Indian coaches were able to achieve, in spite of having such glaring shortcomings, during its down period. So strange but true.

**The bigger question is why India** has not been able to crack the top six or four bracket in the last two Olympic Games and World Cups? This is, in spite of the foreign coaches, getting all the support in the form of science, technology, training and competition, which the Indian coaches were deprived. And given a step mother treatment to a certain degree.

2008 Beijing Olympics: Did not qualify

2012 London Olympics: Finished 12<sup>th</sup> and last, under Head Coach Michael Nobbs

2016 Rio Olympics: Finished 8<sup>th</sup>, under Head Coach Roelant Oltmans

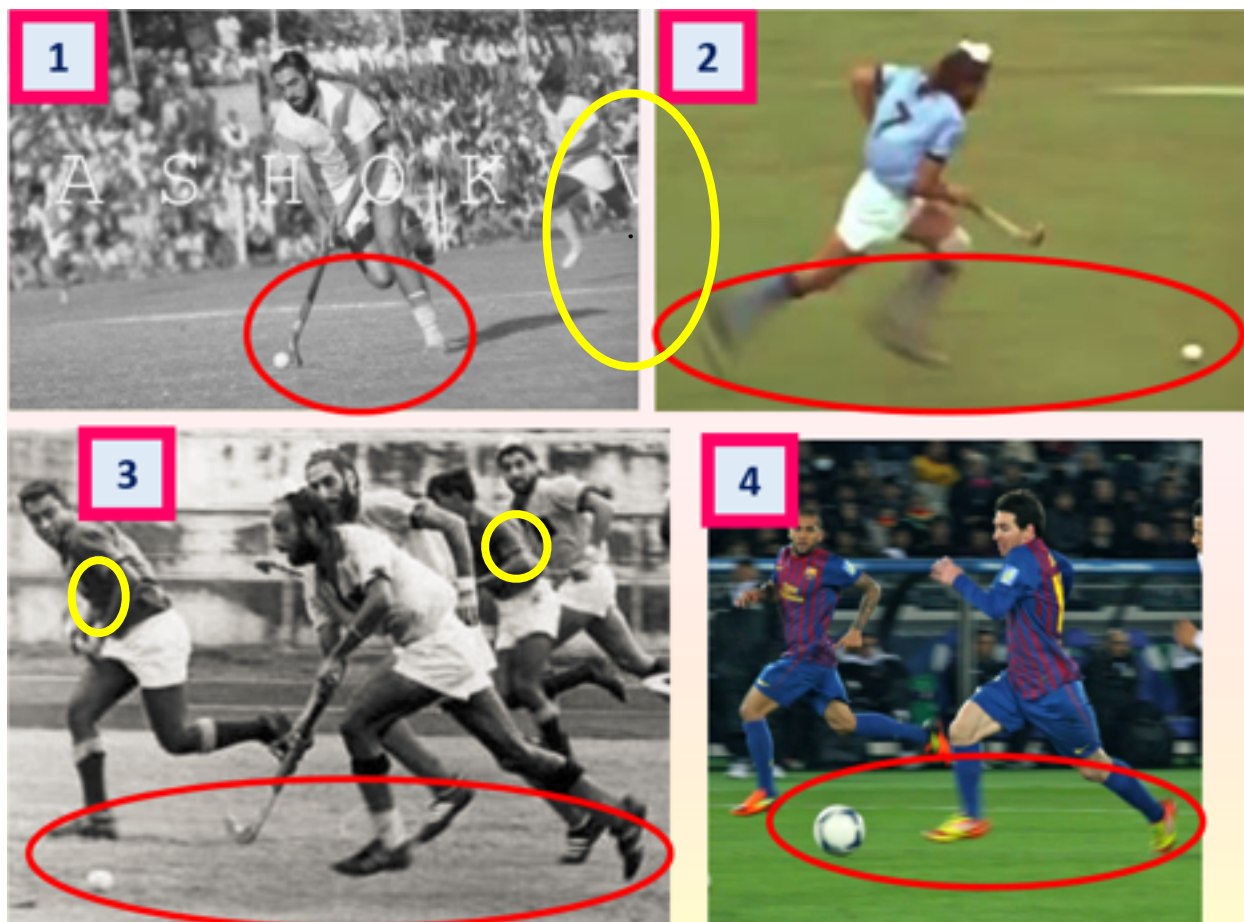
**This brings us to the burning question of this article;** is India operating upon the right principles – strategy and tactics?

In a way Yes, India is doing so, to a high degree. They just **need a strategic course correction**, which will facilitate and optimize their unique strengths. What they have – in fact had in the past - **Technical Brilliance**, no other country has ever had, other than Pakistan and Australia, the later to a lesser extent. They are simply not being coached to play to their **optimum unique strengths**. They are coached and encouraged to play a style, which operates more on the basis of Speed, Speed, Speed, Brute force and Hard skills – tilting more towards the European style of play. Rather than on their own style of play, with unique features of Grace, Finesse and Soft skills.

**I like to make this absolutely clear**, that there is nothing wrong with the European style of play. European coaches have intelligently leveraged their unique strengths. The outstanding **results of Germany, Netherland and Belgium** speak for itself. **I have tremendous respect for the European style of play**, as I have learned so very much from it. And am still learning. The question is, does it blend with India's unique strengths, and style of play? What should one embrace and discard what?

No doubt, Coach Oltmans commented, prior to the 2017 Asian Snooker Cup, **“Our style will be very much Indian”**. With all due respect, this is true in theory but not in practice.

**Just to be clear**, when I say **Technical Brilliance**, I don't mean the players who over dribble and hang on to the ball unnecessarily. I am talking about Balbir Singh and Harbinder Singh, from the Railways, Olympic Gold and Bronze medal winners, who were way ahead of their times in the 60's. They knew exactly **how to cleanly eliminate the defenders**, with their body feints, stick feints, change of pace and direction, on the run. The rumor has it that both these forwards ran the 100 meters sprint under 11:00 seconds, whereas Bob Hayes, gold medal winner of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics ran the 100 Meter sprint in 10.00 seconds.



### What we can learn from the past:

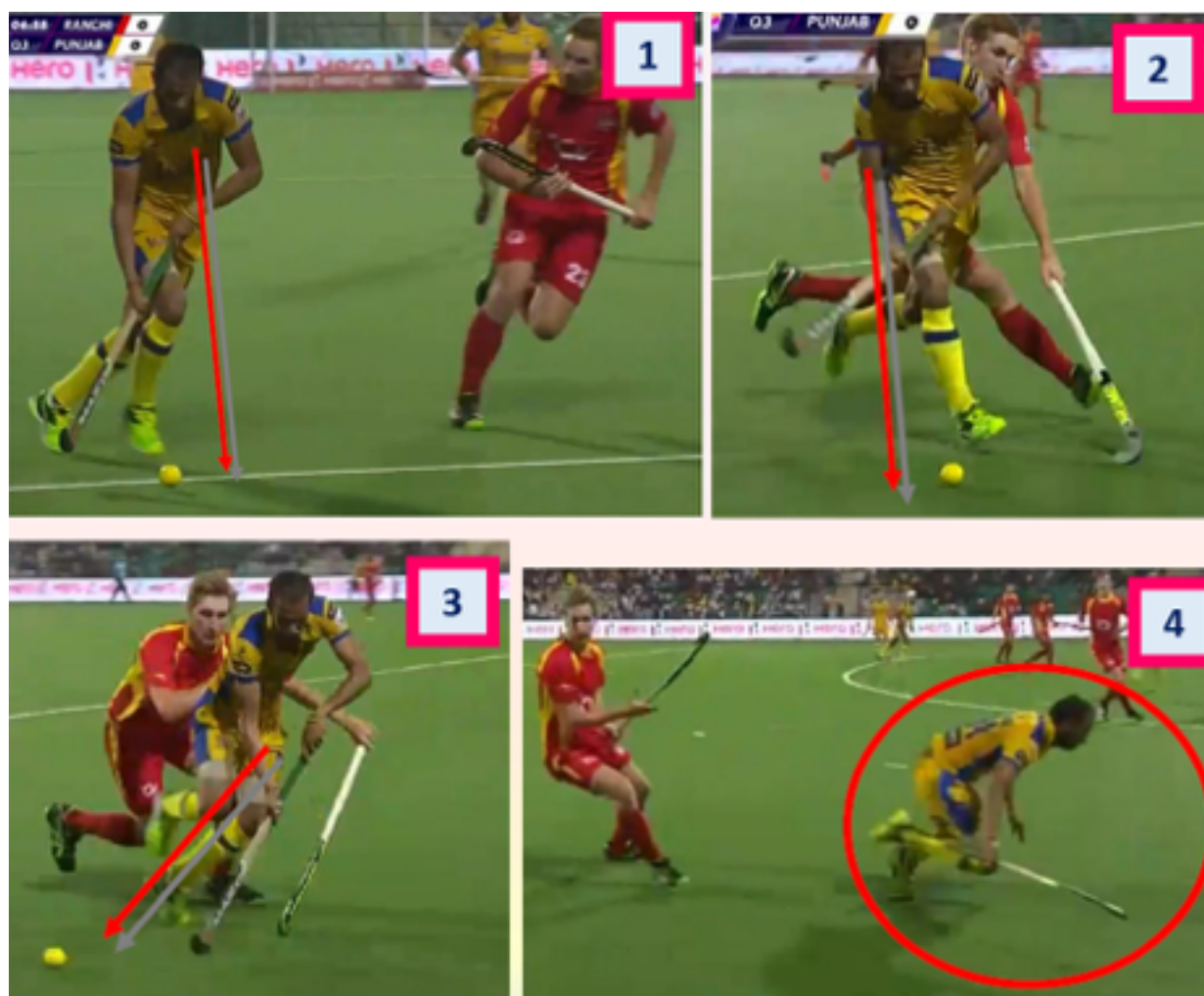
Please see the above photo sequences of Balbir, bare footed in photo # 1 and running gracefully in Photo # 2. Harbinder, Balbir and Messi are running with the ball, in almost the same style. They are not afraid to expose it, by keeping it in front of them. Sometimes they deliberately make it a **common ball, to entice a defender to commit and take a bait**. Have you also noticed, that there are no defenders near these players? If you see any, they are chasing in desperation - yellow circle. The secret is that they know how to shake and dump them, before



they even come closer. Just the way a beautiful and intelligent girl knows how to dump a junkie boy, even before he approaches her. Photos are courtesy Balbir's Facebook and internet

### **Comparative Analysis of the photo sequences:**

In the below action photos of SV Sunil, current member of the Indian national team -Right Winger/ Striker. Please note how he is over protecting the ball, with his head down, while running with the ball at full speed in a straight line. And finally gets pushed. Not fair. At the same time Sunil should not blame anyone, rather than his coaches, who have taught him this style of running with the ball. He lacks the finesse of how to change the pace and direction, while selling dummies.



**Later in the 70's**, Pakistan produced highly intelligent and effective players, namely Manzoor Junior, Kaliumullah and Shabaz Senior, who single handedly helped their teams win Olympic Gold medals and world titles. And made the

former greats, at least maintain their superiority. This was also an era, when the Europeans and Oceanic teams had improved tremendously, while implementing scientific training methods, to close the knowledge and performance gap.

**On a side note**, sadly Australians have also driven away from their unique strengths of technical brilliance, which always gave them the winning edge, both in Men and Women. Their shocking defeat in the hands of Japan and Great Britain, during the recently concluded 2017 Azlan Shah Cup, have raised eyebrows. **Yes, they missed their star, captain and ageing Mark Knowles, due to injury. Mark is a player in his own class. India used to have quite a few players like him, on their 60's and 70's teams.**

**One should not blindly – knowingly or unknowingly - follow rival's strategies and tactics. This is an easy way to fall in their trap, while being a copycat. Trying to play completely the rival's style of play and discarding one's own unique strengths is a recipe for failure.**

**Quote:**

**“If you don't stand for something you will fall for anything”.**

**Peter Marshall**