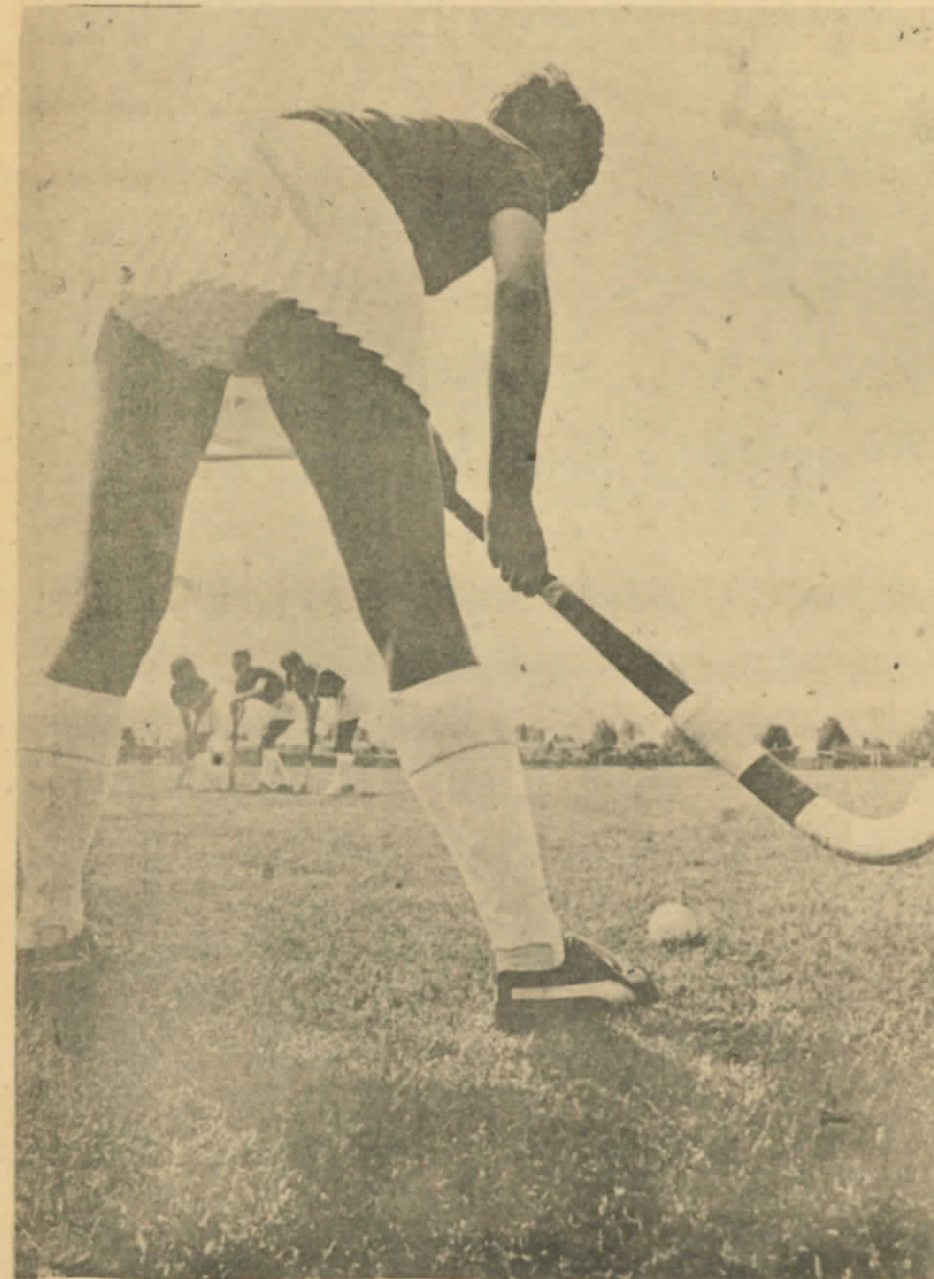


WHEN WILL WE STRIKE GOLD?

Dozens of olympiads and years of discussion and disappointments later, India is still athletically a huge zero, says CHAITANYA KALBAG.



MADAM YOUR SLIP IS SHOWING: We must at least relieve our talented women from their cooking ranges and see that they spend as much time as possible practising if they are to make a mark internationally.

1976 promises to be a year to remember: with five Sundays in February, America's Bicentennial, and the Olympics in Montreal.

Right now, July's looming up on the horizon. The Olympic Games are scheduled to begin on the 17th of that month, and a couple of weeks back, reports indicated that things aren't all that hunky-dorey over there. Construction crews have been running behind schedule, and a Superior Court judge granted an injunction against striking and sabotaging workers on the grounds that the opening of the Games was "in grave danger".

And in our country, we're still squabbling about who ought to go to Montreal and who ought to stay back. Air Vice Marshal O. P. Mehra, who is to head the Indian contingent, must have spent sleepless nights mulling over the burden that goes with his designation.

The sixteen-strong hockey team was finalised only towards mid-May, with volumes of rhetoric accompanying skipper Ajitpal Singh's resolution to sacrifice his happiness (at least for the moment) and to marry only after returning from Montreal, and "hockey lovers" raising a cloud of dust over the non-inclusion of Michael Kindo in the side. Things look more logical when we remember that Ajitpal was prevailed upon by several bigwigs on the hockey scene to postpone his wedding on the theory that honeymoons and penalty corners do not go together, and that Kindo has been disabled by a toe fracture.

According to an office-bearer of the Indian Olympic Association, our athletics squad will be restricted to four: in addition, three shooters, two boxers and a weightlifter will don the Montreal colours. And hockey is the only team event for which India have managed to qualify.

It would be fruitless analysing the wilderness in which Indian athletes continue to be lost. Dozens of Olympiads (the four-year period between successive Games) and years of dis-

cussion and disappointments later, India is still in the unenviable position of being athletically a huge zero. Not since Norman Pritchard brought in a Silver at the 1900 Olympics has an Indian athlete made the grade. We have been content with a few successes on the cricket and hockey fronts. We go delirious with joy when Michael Ferreira makes the finals of the World Billiards Championship, and we're already touting Prakash Padukone as the future World Badminton Champ.

There was hope held out by the Flying Sikh, Milkha Singh, after his smashing performance at the Commonwealth Games. Milkha did quite well at other international competitions, too, but when he reached the Olympics, all he could manage was a fourth place. And back in India, with not a single World Record to our credit in any athletic branch, we had to be content with pasting Milkha's picture in our pathetic Hall of Fame.

The only other fields where Indians have made a mark has been in wrestling and shooting. The wrestlers may have done it because when it comes to getting your opponent into a tangle, the Indian is supreme. The shooters have mostly been members of Royal families, and the Maharajahs, as we all know, have all the money and the ammunition and the time in the world to concentrate on knocking a tiny clay bird off a princely wall.

But we lack the biggest commodity necessary in athletic brilliance: discipline. When other countries spend huge amounts on training their athletes, providing their food, clothes, looking after their dependents, and when such full-time athletes have immediately begun climbing the ladder to the record-smashing stage, Indian athletes flounder in their own measly National records, and we shudder when sprinter after jumper after thrower fails to qualify for the Olympics. The sixth position at the last Olympics is taken as the norm by the International Olympic Association, and the best in our country could only come out ninth or tenth in terms of Olympic timings.

The only way out of this athletic chaos is sponsorship. If the Government is not prepared or is unable to train our athletes on a full-time basis, it's time our industrialists and other moneybags seriously went over the possibilities of taking a few outstanding athletes under each corporate wing. The Russians and the Chinese have shown how this can be done — the athlete there is in effect an employee of the State, relieved of the burden of earning a living by working at other things. It is astound-



THE PROMISED LAND: They have a long march ahead to reach the promised land. With things the way they are they may, in fact, never make it.

ing that when such State athletes have repeatedly come out with medal after medal in every international athletic arena, India has not yet considered the merits of State sponsorship.

There is of course the National Institute of Sports at Patiala. And there are occasional attempts at grooming a handful of young athletes, like the two-week residential athletics coaching camp recently organised by Joe Crasto at Powai under the sponsorship of the Cosmopolitan Recreation Centre.

Even when we manage after scrimping and saving to get together a squad for the Olympics, we have to suffer the ignominy of not having the funds to board and lodge our boys at Montreal, and to pay the 50-dollar per hour fee levied on hockey teams which practice on the artificial turf at Toronto. And as Hendricks pointed out in a recent piece, the Sikhs in Canada have come to our rescue, offering both to put up and feed the hockey side and to pay the stiff practice fee. If our boys lack the basic amenities, how then can we sit back here and wait for them to return with the laurels?

Isn't it also time we realised the horrifying backwardness our sports-women have to bear? Apart from one lady in the shooting contingent, there is no other woman in the Indian squad bound for Montreal. We may chortle over our Padukones and our Bajajs: but can we claim to have an Evert or a Korbut? Athletics, aquatics, and hockey: these are the

fields Indian girls have to really concentrate on; but do we have the facilities to foster any genuine female talent? Sports in our country is very much a male dominated field: once in a while some girl flashes on to the headlines, and as fast as she came on, disappears. If our men are too busy earning their bread to think of becoming international athletes, can't we at least relieve our talented women of their cooking ranges and see that they spend as much time as possible practising?

George Orwell wrote an essay many years back of the ludicrousity of nations fighting each other on the sports field. We Indians fit his sardonic picture perfectly. We send apologetic little teams to battle for the Motherland, and we overdo our adulation if they come back victorious. There is no point in explaining what we do if they lose. We just ignore the vanquished, and write and speak for days on the things that went wrong out there.

The Indian hockey team is scheduled to play an exhibition match against the Rest of India XI at the Bombay Gymkhana grounds on June 1st. Let's hope they beat the Rest of the World too at Montreal. Or let's get prepared with our knives and our forceps for the customary post-mortem if they come back with their heads bowed and their hands empty. Because, whatever we achieve in hockey or athletics or shooting, we cannot escape the syndrome of making a mountain out of a molehill.