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Table tennis federation of India (TTFI): Roles & responsibilities

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Abstract

The Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI) is the governing body for table tennis in India. India is represented through TTFI in all the major international championships like the Olympics, World, Commonwealth, Asian, and all Pro tours. The International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) has always looked upon TTFI as one of its backbones for organizing various International Events. TTFI hires head coach for the four-year Olympic cycle.

Keywords: Table tennis federation of India; table tennis; international table tennis federation

Introduction

The number of table tennis players throughout the world is said to be around 300 million. Table tennis is one of the most popular sports in India. It is not as popular as cricket or tennis in India, but the youth is crazy about this sport. This sport is extensively played in schools, colleges, and universities, wherein various competitions (at the inter-state and national level) are held for the same. Also, in due course of time, India has produced some good talents, but it has a long way to go. In the nineteenth century, it was an after-dinner amusement game and has come a long way to a professional sport. Originally, the sport was also known as ping pong, later it was rechristened to table tennis. The British brought this sport to the country. It is considered as sports rather than the game as it requires a high level of physical effort at a higher competitive level. Quick responsiveness is the basic skill that one requires to play table tennis. The player should have a high level of physical fitness and footwork to play the game. He/she must be shrewd to calculate the fast movements of the ball over the net. India boasts of having some of the outstanding players of the sport, who have displayed their talent at some of the important table tennis tournaments. Table tennis has now become a popular indoor recreation sport in India, which has caught on in states like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. The Table Tennis Federation of India is the official sports body. As of February 2019, India's Men's Team ranked 10th and Women's team ranked 22nd in the World. India has produced singles player ranked in the top 50 both in Men's and Women's category.

Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI)

The Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI) is the governing body for table tennis in India. The TTFI was established in 1926 and was a founding member of the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF). TTFI's membership includes 32 state units and 37 institutions^[1]. TTFI has the affiliation of 35 state units and 37 institutions. TTFI is one of the most active among all sports federations in the country. India is represented through TTFI in all the major international championships like the Olympics, World, Commonwealth, Asian, and all Pro tours. The ITTF has always looked upon TTFI as one of its backbone for organizing various International Events. It is worth mentioning that India has excellent, infrastructure in several cities to host international events including hosting of recent Asian Championship. TTFI has in the past hosted various international championships like World Championships, Asian Championships, SAF Championships, Commonwealth Table Tennis Championships, and various ITTF Pro Tour events.

Emergence of India's as a Powerhouse in Contemporary Global Table Tennis

Table tennis has always played second fiddle to sports like cricket, football, and tennis in India, but somehow it has managed to keep its existence amongst the din of its much-fancied competitors. The game has always enjoyed popularity in pockets like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Delhi, but it never managed to reach the farthest corners of the Indian landscape. However, lately, the sport has been some emphasis in the country with the recent streak of commendable performance as India progress in the year 2019.

- It is to be noted that Kamlesh Mehta was one of Asia's top-ranked players during the 1980s. But India remember him mainly for the eight national titles he claimed during his prime.
- Chetan Baboor was the poster boy of Indian Table Tennis for quite some time, especially in the 1990s. Apart from his national titles, he won a couple of medals at the Commonwealth Games. Chetan was the only entrant from India in Men's at the 1996 and 2000 Olympic Games but never managed to get past the first hurdle at the mega event. He reached a career-high rank of world number 68 before he called it a day in 2004.
- Indian Table Tennis was stagnant was for a few years with no one to carry forward the baton. It got a real push once the phenomenon named 'Achanta Sharath Kamal' came into the reckoning. The paddler from Chennai took India to the international stage at a greater magnitude than any player ever. The gold medal win in the Men's category of the 2006 Commonwealth Games was a landmark in Indian table tennis.
- There was no looking back for the dashing player as he reached a world ranking of 30, the highest by an Indian back then. Sharath, along with players from West Bengal like Subhajit Saha, Soumyadip Roy, Mouma Das and Poulomi Ghatak formed the cream of Indian table tennis in the first decade of the 21st century. Players like Anthony Amalraj, Sanil Shetty and Harmeet Desai also played their significant roles. But it would be unfair not to mention that Sharath Kamal was in a different league, he was way above his other country mates!
- Just when Sharath and Co. had played out their best years, a new bunch of talented players took centre stage. Among the new faces, Delhi girl Manika Batra and Chennai boy Gnansekaran Sathiyen emerged a class apart from the others; the duo was all set to re-write the history of Indian Table Tennis. It was not only a tale of the two players, but also a revolution of the sport in India. It was a time that India shifted our focus to the sport, which has a widespread appeal around the world. Table tennis is one such discipline which always gets neglected, but it seems sunny days have finally arrived.
- Even though Manika Batra had won many international titles since 2014, her claim to fame moment was the remarkable Women's singles gold medal win at the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games. It was the first time that an Indian woman won an individual medal at the global meet. She also inspired the women's team to a historic gold medal finish at the CWG. The 2018 Asian Games was a tougher ask for the Indian. Even though she was eliminated in the round of 16, the bronze medal in the mixed doubles event along with legendary Sharath Kamal was a commendable achievement for India.
- On the other hand, Gnanasekaran Sathiyen was equally gaining prominence in the world arena even though he

did not taste success in the individual categories at neither the Commonwealth Games nor the Asiad. His ventures in the Asian Cup speaks more of his ascent in recent times. Sathiyen finished at the sixth position, while he was also the only player to reach the round of 32 at the World Championships in Hungary. He had his biggest career win at the Asian Cup by edging past world no. 14 Chun Ting Wong of Hong Kong with scores of 12-10, 10-12, 11-5, 11-6, 11-8 in the 5-8 positions match.

The improvement in the quality of the players was not an overnight effect of a magic wand but was a process which took a few years to reap the results. Lack of proper exposure was one of the root causes of India's poor show at big-ticket events. It was a massive leap once Indian players started to feature in the European Leagues, especially in the German Bundesliga. The franchise-based Ultimate Table Tennis has been a steppingstone for budding paddlers who got an opportunity to brush shoulders with the best in the business. The experience was invaluable. The players made sure that there will not be a 'David and Goliath' affair if an Indian is on the other side of the table. India is no longer a minnow when it comes to Table Tennis; the present batch has got what it takes to compete at the top level. They can give a run for the money to any player today. Although India might not get a world champion soon, India should remain optimistic about climbing up the ranks steadily. Manika Batra is currently ranked 68th in the world, while Sathiyen is at the 24th spot, the highest ever ranking by an Indian. Not being too positive, but India can at least expect a rise in the number of kids taking up Table Tennis in the upcoming days. India is just more than a year away from the biggest sporting spectacle in the world, the Olympics. All the eyes will be glued to the television sets once it kick-starts in Tokyo. Although wrestling, shooting, badminton, archery, and boxing remains India's medal prospects, India is expecting to see improved performance by the paddlers, even though a medal is unlikely, let us keep our fingers crossed ^[2].

TTFI's Online Programme for Coaches

On May 15, 2020, the TTFI, along with the Sports Authority of India, came up with a 15-day online 'Coach Education Programme' (through app Zoom). This program will be a great motivation and education for coaches as they get to learn from renowned coaches and players like Peter Engel, Manjit Dua, Kamlesh Mehta, S. Raman, Muralidhara Rao, Sharath Kamal, G. Sathiyen, Harmeet Desai, Sandeep Gupta, Soumyadeep Roy, Brett Clarke and, N. Ravichandran, among others. There will be more than 100 coaches from SAI and TTFI panel. The TTFI calendar will be finalized once it gets the approval of SAI and Union Government. National ranking tournaments involve a large gathering of more than 1000 players. When the International Table Tennis Federation is done with its calendar, TTFI will come up with its calendar. TTFI requires at least 12 days for one National ranking tournament. Once TTFI starts, TTFI will do it extremely fast. It will be very hectic, though, for all the players. The new foreign coach will be decided by October-November next year ^[3].

Sharath Kamal is the lone most recognized face, (World Rank: 57; won the CWG Men's Singles Gold, 2006 and teamed up with Subhajit Sinha in 2010 to win the CWG Men's Doubles gold), others such as Soumyajeet Ghosh (WR: 83), Harmeet Desai (WR: 116) and Anthony Amalraj (WR: 197) are the power centers of TT in India.

In the women's category, Manika Batra (WR 134) and

Mouma Das (WR 151) continue to dominate the national arena.

Why is TT not as popular in India as other sports like badminton, shooting, and archery, or simply why don't we do better on the world stage?

It cannot be because of a dearth in talent, we have heavyweights in TT-like sports such as badminton and tennis. Also, derisive comments about TT not being a serious sport can be dismissed; check how intensively the Chinese have trained thus monopolizing TT in every global competition (like everything else).

It cannot be because we are not exposed to TT. Almost all schools provide a Table tennis table, given its minimal operating costs and the small space required for it to function. It cannot be because of the lack of a regulator, although the efficiency does raise eyebrows. TT does not have 4 federations like body-building, all claiming to be genuine or 2 warring hockey federations, HI and FIH. But Indian regulators cannot be trusted, because of the political angle, which inevitably and insidiously poisons our sports system.

There is a lack of top-notch Indian talent (albeit currently hidden) on the world stage to act as an inspiration for the amateur TT player. Infrastructure both human and physical is severely lagging global standards, and such investment will go a long way to cure this terminally-ill patient. Any sort of competition being televised on prime sports channels (Star Sports, Ten Sports or even Sony Six) is going to help popularize the scope for a career in TT (there is hardly any TT on the television apart from that which is broadcast on DD Sports, which has bland commentary and bad viewing angles).

A safe distance should be maintained from politics of the day as this becomes just another hub to score political points and our players suffer tremendously. I fail to understand the paradox that even though we have such great administrators amongst us in government services (IAS, IPS, IFS, IFoS, etc.), we severely lack sports administrators and managers who can run the sport as a well-oiled machine. Maybe a separate Central cadre of ISS, Indian Sports Services, should be envisaged under the aegis of the Sports Ministry and talented individuals from across the globe should be selected to give a fillip to our sports system. It is appalling that players must look out for patronage from the state post-retirement. With the onset of Indian Pro TT League this summer, an event on the lines of the IPL, I can only hope that TT gets a new lease of life that it desperately needs and deserves^[4].

Conclusion

Having learnt its lesson, TTFI hires head coach for the four-year Olympic cycle. The Indian paddlers, who are playing without a head coach since September 2018, have already lost crucial time in an Olympic year, though they have only themselves to blame for their below-par performance in the Olympic team qualifier in Portugal last month. The Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI) Secretary-General on Friday said former head coach Massimo Costantini kept "us" in dark over his sudden departure and promised to fill the position lying vacant for 18 months on the side-lines of the World Championships in Busan next month. TTFI Secretary-General said Costantini, who now works for the world body (ITTF), should have communicated his decision to leave after the 2018 Asian Games well in advance. Most teams employ coaches for a four-year Olympic cycle. So, when he suddenly left, we had only limited options to choose from and even that did not work out for us. "Going forward, we have decided to

hire a coach for four years instead of renewing his contract every year. We have also got the sports ministry's approval for that," (TTFI) Secretary-General said. Uncontrollable circumstances, such as the 2019 general elections and surgery of Canadian coach Dejan Papic, who did not join the Indian team last year after accepting the offer due to knee surgery, have also contributed to the delay in the appointment of the head coach. Notwithstanding their disappointing performance in the Olympic team qualifiers, the Indian paddlers have done exceedingly well in the last 18 months to raise the profile of the sport in the country. Manika Batra won four medals, including two gold at the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games before India secured two historic bronze medals at the subsequent Asian Games, ending a 60-year wait. Three Indians -- G Sathiyam (world rank 30), Sharath Kamal (rank 34), and Harmeet Desai (rank 86) -- are in the top-100 and a decent bench strength has been developed in the men's team. But with Olympics round the corner and players in need of guidance, the momentum gained over the past 18 months seems to be losing ground^[5]. Hence, in table tennis, the following key points need to be remembered:

- Match and practice analysis of the table tennis game indicates that during intense practice and competition it is predominantly the anaerobic alactic system that is called into play.
- The endurance system is relied on to recovery the anaerobic stores used during hard practice and competition effort.
- Coaches need to keep in mind that, while the anaerobic alactic system is the most energetic system used during periods of exertion in a table tennis game, a strong capacity for endurance is what helps a player recover quicker for the following match and the next day of competition.

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