How Can India regain Its Past Glory in Hockey?

**India's field hockey heritage** is **unmatched**, featuring a **golden age** **between 1928 and 1956** during which the men's team collected **six straight Olympic gold medals** without being defeated until 1960. During this time, the team featured a **stunning 30–0 win streak**, having **scored 178 goals** while letting in just seven in Olympic competitions. Heroes such as **Major Dhyan Chand**, who led the 1936 Olympic team to an 8–1 win over Germany, and **Balbir Singh Sr.** who led the 1952 Helsinki victory, represented India's supremacy. The men's first Olympic appearance in 1928 was the first of many shutout victories, followed by another in 1956. In addition to the Olympic victories, India also won a **World Cup title in 1975** and has the **most Olympic field hockey wins** (87/142 matches). The **women's hockey team** has fewer laurels, but the **Commonwealth Games gold in 2002** and **Asia Cup in 2004** are notable early achievements. These successes made India a world hockey power, linking the game with national identity and pride.

Over the last few decades, **Indian hockey dominance declined** because of the international **transition from grass to astroturf** in the 1970s, which put Indian players at a disadvantage who were used to playing on natural surfaces. **Inefficiencies in administration** and **lack of adjustment to astroturf** also hindered progress, leading to India's inability to qualify for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. But a **renaissance has commenced** since the **men's team claimed bronze medals at the 2020 Tokyo** and **2024 Paris Olympics**, ending **a 41-year Olympic medal drought**. The **women's team** advanced to the **Tokyo Olympic semifinals**, a historic first, and claimed **bronze at the 2022 Commonwealth Games**. Even with these advances, there remain **challenges** like uneven domestic systems, short game time against strong teams, and insufficient depth in talent pipelines. The men’s team’s early exit at the 2023 World Cup highlighted **fitness and mental conditioning gaps**.

The **Indian government has prioritized hockey’s revival** through a **few strategic investments**. The **Khelo India program** promotes grassroots sports, identifying and nurturing young talent. The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports recognizes **Hockey India** as the **sole governing body**, ensuring **streamlined administration**. State governments, particularly **Odisha**, have been pivotal. **Odisha's hosting of national teams up to 2033**, as well as the hosting of major events such as the **2018 and 2023 Men's World Cups**, has **increased visibility and infrastructure**. **Cash rewards for players**, including ₹1.5 crore to Olympic medalist Amit Rohidas, are part of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik's vision, rewarding performance. All this has been done in coordination with **National Sports Day**, which falls on the **birthday of Dhyan Chand**, to **increase fitness and sportsmanship**.

**Private sector** engagement has been revolutionary in the field of Sports in India. The **Hockey India League (HIL)**, restarted in 2024 after a break of seven years, is an international star and obligatory junior Indian player franchise competition, **promoting the development of talent**. **Corporate sponsorship** by companies like Odisha's IDCO and MCL has supported teams such as Kalinga Lancers. Academies such as Jalandhar-based Surjit Hockey Academy give rise to Olympians, with eight Tokyo 2020 players having originated from Punjab. Personal **investments in sponsorship and coaching** further **increase visibility for players.**

**High-quality infrastructure is essential** for reviving hockey. **Odisha takes the lead** with 30 synthetic turfs, which include the **Birsa Munda Hockey Stadium in Rourkela**, the **world's largest outdoor seated hockey stadium**. Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar is up to International Hockey Federation (FIH) standards, hosting tournaments such as the FIH Pro League. However, over-reliance on Odisha limits national reach. Other cities like Delhi and Lucknow have hosted events, but many lack FIH-compliant facilities. **Expanding astroturf access nationwide**, especially in rural areas, **is essential to train players** from a young age, addressing complaints that Indian players encounter astroturf only in their late teens.

**Physical fitness and mental resilience** are **vital for competing globally**. The lack of specialists like fitness trainer Robin Arkell, now with Germany, contributed to the fitness slumps during the 2023 World Cup. **Diet, recovery, and fitness** have been Hockey India's focus since 2007 and have raised standards, but there are gaps. **Mental conditioning is just as important** as physical fitness. **Sports psychology and yoga programs** incorporated during training can develop resilience, and daily fitness camps are a part of training for the hockey players.

The reinstatement of the **Hockey Indian League** in 2024 in both men's and women's versions is a breakthrough. Held from December 2024 to February 2025 in Ranchi and Rourkela, it includes eight men's and six women's teams, with Indian juniors and international stars combined. The previous versions of the league (2013–2017) **promoted fitness and tactical acumen**, which in turn **led to Olympic triumphs**. Hockey India League subjects players to **top-level preparation techniques**, instilling confidence. The FIH's 10-year timeline guarantees **best player involvement**, but **long-term financing and increased viewership are necessary** to steer clear of past mistakes.

India needs to embrace a **multi-faceted approach**:

1. **Strengthen Domestic Structure**: Initiate annual national tournaments outside of HIL to ensure regular game time. A solid domestic calendar, similar to cricket's Ranji Trophy, can keep players in form and depth.

2. **Increase Infrastructure**: Build FIH-standard turfs in Punjab, Haryana, and Tamil Nadu to delocalize hockey from Odisha. Grassroots academies need to be funded so that players learn on astroturf early.

3. **Improve Coaching and Support**: Appoint international fitness and mental conditioning coaches to the level of global standards. Exposure to the best teams through regular bilateral series or Pro League involvement is essential.

4. **Maintain HIL**: Make Hockey India League financially sustainable through smart marketing and OTT streaming partnerships (eg. FanCode). Growing to more cities can increase fan base.

5. **Grassroots and Inclusivity**: Expand Khelo India and private academies to find varied talent, particularly from rural and tribal pockets, as observed in Odisha's Sundargarh.

6. **Global Advocacy**: Insist on dual-surface tournaments (grass and astroturf) to build on India's traditional grass-field strengths, as proposed by former players.

India's hockey resurgence is in motion, driven by recent **Olympic victories**, **government support**, **private efforts**, and the return of HIL. By filling infrastructure gaps, focusing on player welfare, and maintaining domestic leagues, India can restore its golden age. The cultural appeal of the sport, bringing together diverse groups, makes it a symbol of national pride. **With collective efforts, India can again dominate world hockey**, paying tribute to legends like Dhyan Chand while inspiring generations to come.