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### ***Belgium World Champions after sluggish start***

Belgium became the sixth team to win the hockey World Cup in Bhubaneswar on Sunday evening. After a pulsating yet fruitless 60 minutes, the match was decided in a shootout before a capacity crowd which included cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar. Belgium had had a somewhat sluggish start but began to look like serious contenders as the tournament progressed.

On Sunday, after each team scored only twice out of five chances in the shootout, Belgium had prematurely celebrated a winning effort by de Sloover only to be denied on video appeal. It was left to the cool Florent Van Aubel to put Belgium ahead in sudden-death. When Hertzberger was forced wide and shot high, the Belgium team and supporters unleashed their pent up emotion in jubilant celebrations. They had finally broken through on the biggest hockey stage; they were the World Champions.

The final began with a rush of half chances but as the game developed it became obvious that one goal might decide it. Both teams defended in numbers and with great vigilance and Vanash and Blaak were rarely called upon as events unfolded. It was only in the shootout that they became central figures. Vanash was announced Man of the Match and Arthur Van Doren, the Player of the Tournament.

The game of the weekend, however, was undoubtedly the semi-final clash between Australia and the Netherlands. It was replete with dazzling offence and spectacular and desperate defence. Surprised by an early goal from the unlikely Schuurman and then trailing 0-2 after 20 minutes when a Van Ass cross was unfortunately deflected in by Howard, Australia launched a determined fight back. Howard made amends before 3/4 time and Australia pushed for an equaliser. It seemed Blaak, in goal, was the difference with Australia having more possession, penetrations and shots.

Yet, in perhaps the best demonstration of transition in the match Swann, Dawson, Brand, Ockenden, and Beale combined to take the ball from backline to attacking circle. Ockenden's speculative shot was ironically deflected past Blaak by the hapless Schuurman with only 26 seconds remaining. Netherlands trailed in the shootout only to turn it around and in sudden death Blaak's sweep against Beale saw Netherlands take a real thriller. The Kookaburra's dreams of a fifth consecutive final were dashed.

England, in the other semi-final and then bronze medal match, were swept away by Belgium (6-0) and Australia (8-1), respectively, and the tournament's three best teams shared the medals. Of the others, India were perhaps the most impressive, losing narrowly to the Netherlands in a highly competitive quarter final and drawing with the eventual winners in their round game.

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***Hockey sees greater depth in the last decade; at crossroads today***

It's been an interesting decade in hockey. Countries like Australia and the Netherlands have fared much the same in world competitions but Germany hasn't done that well since the London Olympics. The rise of Argentina and Belgium has been significant, and then there is the resurgence of India; they are now very competitive and are among the top countries.

If you look at the World Cup in particular, they drew with Belgium in the round matches and probably had the better of the game, and against The Netherlands the result was very close. On top of that you see countries like Ireland, France making progress, and Spain's results have been a bit of a revelation.

I think there's more depth in world hockey. The game is at crossroads with respect to marketing and expanding the game because there's a lot of competition. A lot of sports out there are sucking up the oxygen: in India it's cricket, in the rest of the world it's football and rugby, and in Australia it's Aussie Rules. This almost makes it a niche sport.

So there are some things I would like to see done better. I'm not a fan of Hockey 5s. It's all right for the development stage for small countries but the essence of the game gets lost. I do believe the game could benefit from having fewer players on the field, maybe nine-a-side, which would allow for more individual skill contests.

I'm impressed by India the more I see them. We're seeing the sorts of skill that I used to attach to them 3-4 decades ago. They've made good progress but the challenge is that next step. They can have the foreign advice and assistance but it's hard to communicate so developing Indian coaches needs to be a priority. Goalkeeping is a critical area that requires attention. I said before the tournament that you won't win the World Cup without good 'keeping and the three medallists had quality keepers. They have some pretty good corner-takers but need more. Also, they may need to work on other tactical factors in terms of changing the momentum of the game: they either go flat out or get very defensive. Even then, I think India can take on any team in the top five now. The challenge is to get into the top 2 or 3.

Finally, I still like the idea of an Indian Ocean League where the top teams from India, Australia, and New Zealand and so on play each other as a counter-balance to the leagues in Europe. For example, a team from Chennai playing one from Perth, or one from New Zealand against a Malaysian side would give a local domestic flavour to our region.