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India struggles to hold Ukraine



FACE-SAVER:Y. Soundarya scores India's equaliser against Ukraine in the women's Olympic qualifiers in New Delhi on Saturday.— Photo: S. Subramaniam

It was a low-intensity start to the crucial Olympic qualifiers by the Indian women's hockey team, which survived a scare to eke out a 1-1 draw against 28th-ranked Ukraine at the National Stadium here on Saturday.

The below-par performance disappointed the sparse crowd that had turned up to cheer the home players, and did not lose hope until the final hooter, which went off amid chaotic circumstances.

Tough opponent

History shows that Ukraine, despite its minnow status, has never been an easy opponent for India. In the last encounter between the two sides, India had scored a narrow 2-1 win in the Champions Challenge II in Kazan.

In home conditions, the Asunta Lakra-led side, ranked 13th in the world, was expected to put up a better exhibition of its ability.

Ukraine, despite its limited preparations, had done its homework well and outsmarted India in the first half with a sound tactical display.

With inputs from former India men's team coach Jose Brasa, the European side marked the home players strongly, changed their positions swiftly and closed the gaps to deny India any advantage.

The Indians struggled to find rhythm and could not sustain the pressure. Moves from the right lacked bite, while the odd attacks from the left were intercepted well by the alert Ukrainian defenders.

Jasjeet Kaur Handa showed some good touch upfront, but Rani Rampal and Poonam Rani fumbled in crucial moments to spoil a few fine attempts. India missed at least two fabulous chances.

Once Jasjeet's deflection off a 35-yard slapshot from Asunta Lakra went wide, while Rani Rampal's scoop just before the breather was guided away by Ukraine custodian Alvina Budonnia.

With seasoned defender Subhadra Pradhan guarding the left, Ukraine applied pressure from the other flank and earned the lead in the 26th minute.

Captain Maryna Vynohradova delivered a low-flight shot off her team's second penalty corner to beat Indian goalkeeper Yogita Bali.

India showed more urgency after the change of ends and created enough gaps to operate freely.

The home side scored the equaliser seven minutes after the resumption. Jasjeet beat a defender inside the circle to give the ball to Y. Soundarya and the latter hit the target without any problem.

Goal disallowed

Inspired by the success, Poonam raised her game and combined well with Anuradha Devi on the opposite flank.

Minutes after failing to stop a scoop from Poonam, Anuradha tapped another in midway through the second half. However, the goal was disallowed.

India was also lacklustre in its penalty corner conversion and could not utilise the two, including one in the last minute, that came its way.

Ultimately, it had no choice but to be satisfied with only one point from its tournament opener.

In earlier matches, South Africa recorded a hard-fought 2-1 win over Poland, while Italy held Canada to a 2-2 draw.

The results:

South Africa 2 (Kate Woods 39, Pietie Coetzee 53) bt Poland 1 (Magdalena Zagajska 39).

Italy 2 (Agata Wybieralska 3, Alessia Padalino 63) drew with Canada 2 (Thea Culley 40, Brienna Stairs 61).

India 1 (Y. Soundarya 42) drew with Ukraine 1 (Maryna Vynohradova 26).