Time Ripe for India to Consolidate Gains

LONDON, Aug. 7.

If India did not capitalise on the lucky break it got by winning the gold medal at the Moscow Olympics, then it should forget hockey.

This was the opinion expressed by the President of the International Hockey Federation (FIH), Mr. Rene Frank, in an exclusive interview with PTI.

Mr. Frank said after sixteen years of almost total collapse at the Olympics, Indian hockey seemed to have picked up the right path. This was quite evident from the way its young forward and defence lines functioned in the Moscow Olympics final.

"But India should now prove that it was not a flash in the pan," said Mr. Frank, who saw every match during the Olympics.

The grand old man who watches hockey with his back still straight said the Champions Trophy to be held in Pakistan next year would be the real test for the Indian team to prove whether it had woken up from its "deep slumber and broken away from the clutches of petty politics, mismanagement and dictatorship".

"I for one, who has been the most ardent admirer of Indian hockey, sincerely wish India to regain its old glory, and therefore my observation should not be taken as any sort of interference in anybody's affairs," he said.

But at the same time Mr. Frank said, the task for India would be a tough one and only hard work and dedication would help to achieve its aim.

Mr. Frank said the Indian Hockey Federation (IHF) should primarily think of conducting the game on systematic lines. He felt that the IHF had failed to give proper direction to the game all these years.

"Let me admit it. The IHF was in a complete mess owing to some officials' lust for power and the parochial approach surpassed the epic battle of Mahabharata. This undoubtedly throttled Indian hockey," he said.

Mr. Frank, admitting it was his personal opinion, stressed the need for closer cooperation and understanding among the high-ups in the IHF so that it functioned smoothly.

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He said as far as he knew the IHF had met only once or twice a year. This, he thought, was suicidal for the game which was fast developing throughout the world. He suggested the Federation should meet every three months and not allow itself to be ruled arbitrarily by one or two high-ups or by any outsider.

Besides, he said, the Federation should be a truly representative body and not the monopoly of a few. It should critically review the progress of the game to achieve better results. "I am pained to say that no expert panel was so far formed to analyse the cause of the decline in India's national game and if at all there was any attempt in that direction, it was too casual," he said.

Mr. Frank said the IHF also never made any sincere attempt to keep itself abreast with the rapid changes that took place both in the style and technique and also the rules of the game. "It did not make any effort to know what was happening to hockey in the world," he said.

Mr. Frank said the IHF should send more and more of its coaches, umpires and players to various countries and international competitions and make suitable changes in its own hockey.

Asked to comment on the plea of various Indian experts that the introduction of astro turf led to India's downfall, Mr. Frank retorted: "They want to cover up their lapses by offering lame excuses".

He cited the example of Pakistan and asked how that country could remain world leader despite the astro turf. It too played the same style of hockey as India did and how was it that it was not handicapped?

Mr. Frank said astro turf had contributed a lot to the game and especially made it more interesting both for players and spectators.

But, at the same time, it was most important to ensure that the surface was made of the correct material and fulfilled all the major conditions for the competitions at the highest level.

"In brief it should allow hockey to be played exactly in the same conditions as on natural grass which, in fact, is costlier to maintain than astro turf," he said.

Mr. Frank said considering India's complete dominance over the game 16 years ago, it should have acquired at least one astro turf to train its national team. "If Pakistan can do it, why not India?" he asked.

Mr. Frank said personally he would prefer astro turf to polygrass which was used during the Olympics in Moscow. "Astro turf has many plus points and the most important one is that the ball does not bounce on it as in the case of polygrass", he said.

Mr. Frank admitted there had been a slight fall in the standard of the game throughout the world. But this, he said, was not at all alarming as many experienced players had retired and soon the standard would be high, if not higher, as it was in those good old days. —PTI.