

Wrestling: Glory of India at the Olympics—A Brief History of Indian Wrestling Team in the Olympic Games

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Abstract: Wrestling as an Olympic sport has been around since the dawn of modern Olympic games and India is a participating nation in it. Wrestling has unique position among Olympic disciplines in India, from being provider of first individual medal to newly independent nation to lately becoming most significant contributor in medal tally. This coming of age of Indian wrestling team with double medal tally in the last Olympics has been outcome of long and steady journey of Indian wrestling team over a period of 40-50 years and numerous Summer Olympic Games. However, this journey of Indian wrestling team in the Olympics is also a story of significant twist and turn, near misses and also of glory. So this article covers the entire saga of Indian wrestlers at highest sporting event of world—Olympic Games, from inception of first Indian team of mere three grapplers to latest Olympics with debut of first Indian female grappler in Olympic arena. This history is written by sweat and hard work of Indian grapplers with its own highs and lows.

Key words: Indian wrestling team, the Olympics, wrestlers of India in Olympic Games, freestyle and Greco Roman Wrestling.

1. Introduction

As a participating nation, India has a long history in the modern Olympic Games with debut of Indian contingent in 2nd Olympic Games organized at Paris in 1900. After a gap, India has registered its continuous presence in the games since 1920 Olympics^[1] and Indian Wrestling Team also has remained important part of the nation's Olympic delegation. Till now, India as a nation has 26 medals at the Olympics to its credit, majority being in team event of Field Hockey with 11 different medals, leading the whole world in this sport. However, when it comes to individual events, it is the Wrestling Team of India which has set many records in Olympic History of the nation. Wrestling gave the first individual medal of independent India at 1952 Olympics^[2] and brought feeling of pride, honour and hope not only for the newly established republic, in comity of nations, but also to the millions toiling under

colonialism in third world countries. Wrestling along with shooting, as a discipline, share the second highest number of medal haul in the Olympics for India. Along with this Wrestling as a sport is only discipline, in India, which gave double Olympic medalist for the nation. Not only has wrestling registered its presence on medal tally of India at the Olympics in an impressive fashion, but also there are numerous instances of dominance of Indian Wrestling Team in the Olympics with many near miss opportunities. Hence the exploits of the Indian Wrestling Team at the various Olympics are worth analysis to understand the current direction of Sports in the nation and also to predict the future trends and pattern.

2. The Beginning

The sojourn of Indian Wrestling Team at the Olympics initiated from the 1920 Olympics^[3] itself where two member team represented India. Out of two disciplines in which the new nation participated, Wrestling was one of main event apart from Athletics.

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¹Organized at Antwerp, Belgium

²Ibid

³Organized at London, the UK

This team comprised of Kumar Navale and Randhir Shindes in middleweight^[4] and featherweight^[5] categories respectively. This debut of Indian Wrestling Team was indeed impressive as wrestler Randhir Shindes not only reached up to semifinal but also on his way defeated a famous Great Britain wrestler of that time, Henry Inman in quarter final. This was a great feat given that India was under colonial British Raj and its people were held to be inferior to British lot. However, after going down in semifinal, Randhir Shindes could only secure 4th Rank in final tally. Despite being one step short of a podium finish, this debut Indian Wrestling Team laid a proper foundation to the India's Olympic dream which encouraged and inspired the coming generations of wrestlers and sportspersons in the nation.

2.1 First Wrestling Team of India as Sovereign Nation in the Olympics

After a log gap, the next Olympics for Indian wrestlers came in 1948^[6], in the post war era when for the first time India participated as an independent nation. The new nation sent 6 members strong team for a of total 8 weight disciplines in freestyle category. This team had future stalwart of Indian wrestling, K.D. Jadhav, a boy only of 21 years in a new weight category introduced as Fly Weight. He was best performer of team and stood 6 in final standings of his weight category, after being defeated by much senior Iran's M. Raisi, who stood 4th.

However, the other members of 1948 Wrestling Team were not that impressive in their performance. Most of team went down in 2nd round of elimination, Nirmal Bose in Bantam Weight, S. Suryavanshi in Feather Weight, Banta Singh in Light Weight and Keshav Roy in Middle Weight. Only Anant Bhargava in Welter Weight reached 3rd round but still he failed to get a final ranking. Another important feature worth noticing here is that there is lack of representation in

higher weight categories by Indians and also in Greco-Roman Style. Despite all this, the Indian Wrestling Team had made its presence felt.

3. The First Podium Finish, 1952 Olympic Games

The 1952 Olympic Games^[7] have a special significance in general as well as from perspective of India. These games witnessed a paradigm shift with the coming of Soviet Union and other East European players in competition. This entry of Soviet Union in the games was most profoundly felt in Wrestling Discipline as they come to dominate this sports right from beginning. In this background, India sent 4 members strong team with K. D. Jadhav as senior of the earlier Olympic Games. This Indian Wrestling Team had dream run and had rendezvous with history.

Out of total 4 wrestlers in this team, one came very close to podium finish, Keshav D. Mangawai in freestyle Featherweight category securing 4th position, while his other teammate, K. D. Jadhav made history by becoming first Indian individual to win a medal at the Olympics. The gravity of this achievement can be gauged by the fact that for matching this feat by an Indian, it took 44 long years and 11 editions of the Olympics. Thus in this edition of the Olympic Games, Indian Wrestling Team achieved a hall mark which was no thought of earlier.

This staller performance by Mr K. D. Jadhav needs to bit explained. After migrating to higher Bantam weight category^[8] from earlier Fly weight^[9], Jadhav had to face tough pool with 6 rounds to cross before final round. In first two rounds, Jadhav defeated his Canadian and Mexican opponents, decisively by fall, respectively. In 3rd Round, Jadhav met tough opponent Schmitz whom he defeated by 2-1 difference of points.

The final round came down to Japan's Shohachi Ishii, Soviet Azerbaijani Rashid Mamedbekov, and Indian K. D. Jadhav. Mamedbekov had beaten Jhadav in round

⁴Up to 75 kg

⁵Up to 60 kg being lightest Weight category in 1920 Olympics.

⁶Organized at London, the UK

⁷Organized at Helsinki, Finland

⁸57 kg

⁹52kg

five, so Ishii fought Jhadav in the first final match, winning by unanimous decision. Ishii then defeated Mamedbekov, also by unanimous decision, to win the gold medal, with the Soviet taking silver. However, despite his loss in final round, it was by his stupendous performance that Indian wrestler impressed the wrestling fraternity of world and entered into annals of the Olympic Games history and that of a proud nation.

4. The Period of Long Wait 1956-2004

4.1 Stage of Ascendancy 1956-1976

In next edition of the summer Olympics^[10] in 1956, India sent 5 members contingent; however it failed to make the mark. None of wrestlers get beyond 3rd round and hence failed to secure final ranking. However, the situation changed in next summer games^[11] as India Wrestling Team performed better. The commendable performer of this team in Freestyle category were MadhoSingh contesting in Middle Weight securing 5th position, Sajan Singh got 7th position in Light Heavy Weight. Uday Chand and Gian Prakash got 14th and 15th position in Welter and Light Weight categories, respectively.

The 1964 Summer Olympic Games^[12] were special for India as well as other Asian countries, as these were organized for first time in Asian Continent. India sent 7 members strong Wrestling Team for various weight categories. However, except Bishamber Singh in Bantam Weight category who secured 6th rank, nobody could get any ranking, failing majorly in 2nd or 3rd round. However, this edition of the Olympic game witnessed the first participation by Indian Wrestlers in Greco-Roman Style. Mostly, the freestyle wrestlers of India participated in Greco-Roman category also and India was represented in 5 different weight categories of Greco-Roman Style, highest till now, though none succeeded beyond elimination round.

The Indian Wrestling Team in 1968 Olympic

Games^[13] achieved a unique feat, as its Light Weight Freestyle Wrestler Uday Chand went on to represent India in three consequent Summer Olympic Games of 1960, 1964 and 1968 at age of 33 years. In his last Olympics, Uday Chand gave his best and got 6th Rank. Apart from him another wrestler in Freestyle Light Weight Category, Sudesh Kumar achieved same position in ranking, but he failed during elimination round in same weight category at Greco-Roman event. Their other team mates failed to get a ranking position after failing in elimination rounds.

Munich Olympics^[14] though has been infamous for terrorist attack, witnessed the strong performance of Indian Wrestlers in different weight categories. It has been especially a close call for two Indian grapplers Sudesh Kumar and surprisingly young 17 years old Prem Nath, both of them missing podium finish by whisker and ending as 4th in their respective weight categories.

The senior of two, Sudesh Kumar using his previous Olympic experience performed well in his Fly Weight category, and remained unbeaten till final round, winning his all but one bout by fall. However, in last round, he was beaten by eventual Gold and Silver Medalists in closely contested matches. The young 17 years old Prem Nath had dream run in Bantam Weight, winning all his bouts in decisively. In end, he was defeated by mature USA wrestler Rich Sanders who was silver medalist in 1968 and also in 1972 Olympics. For Bronze medal, Prem Nath was unlucky, as he lost it on basis of bad points rather than a bout. He had more bad points than the 3rd adjudged Hungarian Wrestler, hence another close miss for medal hope.

In 1976 Olympics^[15] Indian Wrestling Team did not participate and it was only Olympics since 1948 where no Indian grappler took part. However, 1980's decade saw strong performance by Indian wrestlers in the Olympic arena.

¹⁰Organised at Melbourne, Australia

¹¹ 1960 Summer Olympics were organized at Rome, Italy

¹²Organised at Tokyo, Japan

¹³Organised at Mexico City, Mexico

¹⁴ 1972 Summer Olympics were organized at Munich, Germany.

¹⁵Organised at Montreal, Canada

4.2 The Stage of Plateau 1980-1992

In 1980^[16] Olympics among the 5 member team, two finished in top 6 positions. In Lightweight Freestyle Jagminder Singh displayed splendid wrestling and reached till 5th round and finally placed at 4th Rank, missing podium finish. Likewise in Welterweight Freestyle category, Rajinder Singh had dominant performance but been unlucky in third round when he lost to Italian Wrestler on criteria basis despite having tie in score. Eventually Rajinder Singh was placed 6th in his weight category.

The Los Angeles Olympics^[17] were interesting as USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) led East Bloc countries boycotted the games and hence competition in Wrestling was comparatively eased than previous editions. India entered one of most experienced team and was considered strong contenders for medals in wrestling, which was also proved by performance of its wrestlers. India participated in most of Freestyle Weight categories and out of these 4 of its wrestler got into final ranking bracket.

The best performer was Welterweight wrestler Rajinder Singh who reached up to final round and been placed 4th after losing to eventual silver and bronze medalist of his weight. But Rajinder Singh was first Indian wrestler since K. D. Jadhav to improve upon his performance in subsequent Olympics and finishing in ranking table, despite that fact that Singh could not repeat feat of Jadhav. Similarly, Rohtas Singh in Bantamweight got 5th rank in final standing, Mahavir Singh got 6th Rank in Flyweight category and Kartar Singh got 7th rank in Heavyweight category which was also best performance for an Indian wrestler in this particular weight category.

The Seoul Olympics^[18] saw a team of 4 Indian wrestlers competing in different weight categories of Freestyle event. However, none of team members

could get beyond the elimination rounds and hence could not get final ranking. Kartar Singh in Heavyweight Category became the 2nd Indian wrestler to participate in three consequent Olympics, that is, 1980, 1984 and 1988, after Uday Chand in 1960's.

The 1992 Olympic Games^[19] were also unique for Indian Wrestling Team for two main events. One of them was the performance on Pappu Yadav in Light Fly Weight of Greco-Roman Category, in which after long gap since 1968, an Indian participated and that too secured decent 8th rank. Along with that Subash Verma in Heavyweight of Freestyle category landed 6th Rank, improving over that of his team mate same category in last edition of the Games. These events are significant as Indian Wrestlers were now venturing into areas earlier not touched upon like Greco-Roman style and heavier weight categories of Freestyle.

4.3 Stage of Decline 1996-2000

In Atlanta Olympics^[20] lone Indian grappler was Pappu Yadav, who now migrated to higher weight category of Flyweight in Greco-Roman style of wrestling. However, he could not repeat his performance and got 17th rank tied with another grappler. Similar situation continued in next edition of Summer Olympics in 2000^[21] where lone Indian Wrestler representing India was Gurbinder Singh in Lightweight category of Greco-Roman Style, finishing at low rank of 13th. These two editions of games saw the nadir of this sport in Olympic History of India. However, things took dramatic turn since then onwards for better and better.

The Athens Olympic Games^[22] proved to be another watershed in history of Wrestling at Olympics, as it saw the introduction of women events for first since 1904 Olympics and also that too for India, as it saw the debut of rising Indian wrestler who later made India proud by putting India again in medal tally of wrestling

¹⁶Organised at Moscow, erstwhile USSR

¹⁷1984

¹⁸1988

¹⁹Organized at Barcelona, Spain

²⁰1996

²¹Organized at Sydney, Australia

²²2004

at Olympics. Indian wrestling team was comprised of total 7 wrestlers, one in Greco-Roman and six in Freestyle. The best performance in this team was that of Ramesh Kumar in Men's Welterweight category, where he secured 10th rank. However, it was the experience gained by young wrestlers of 21 years of age both, namely Yogeshwar Dutt and Sushil Kumar in Featherweight and Lightweight categories of Freestyle, respectively, that proved crucial for golden performance by these grapplers in later edition of the Olympic Games. Another first for Indian Wrestling Team at the Olympics was the entry of Palwinder Singh Cheema in Super Heavyweight^[23] category of Freestyle as this weight category was untouched by Indian wrestlers prior to that, though he finished 15th in final ranking yet this was a feat for Indian Wrestling Team.

5. The Golden Era of Indian wrestling in the Olympics 2008-onwards

5.1 Repeat of History and Second Ever Medal in Wrestling 2008

The new dawn of Indian wrestling came up unexpectedly in 2008 Olympics^[24] when the long draught of medals was quenched and in fact new flood gates were opened. Post these games, wrestling became a household name and it drew huge public as well as institutional support to Indian Wrestlers which went on to reshape the map of wrestling in India and manifested into more stellar performance by Indian Wrestlers in next Olympics.

In 2008, India sent a small contingent of three wrestlers; two experienced Yogeshwar Dutt in Men's Lightweight^[25] Category and Sushil Kumar in Welterweight^[26] Category, along with Rajeev Tomar in Super Heavyweight^[27]. It is worth discussing about the format of these freestyle competitions in the 2008

Olympics. This freestyle wrestling competition consisted of a single-elimination tournament, with a repechage^[28] used to determine the winner of two bronze medals. The two finalists faced off for gold and silver medals. Each wrestler who lost to one of the two finalists moved into the repechage, culminating in a pair of bronze medal matches featuring the semifinal losers each facing the remaining repechage opponent from their half of the bracket. Each bout consisted of up to three rounds, lasting two minutes apiece. The wrestler who scored more points in each round was the winner of that rounds; the bout finished when one wrestler had won two rounds (and thus the match).

Unfortunately for India, its Super Heavyweight grappler was ousted in round one of competition itself. In Men's Lightweight category, Dutt gave sturdy performance, after getting bye in initial round, he outclassed his Kazak competitor in dominant way. However, in quarterfinals, he met Japanese wrestler and both had a closely contested bout. After winning first round, Dutt conceded the second round to his competitor and it came to final and penultimate round. In this decisive final round, the Indian wrestler again seized the initiative early, going ahead 1-0 but failed to hold on to the lead in the last 10 seconds and gave away two match winning points to his opponent to lose 2-1. And in semifinal, this Japanese Wrestler lost out to eventual silver medalist Ukrainian Wrestler, closing even the possibility of a chance for Dutt in repechage round. This dented the moral of not only the individual but whole Indian Team.

However, the journey of Sushil Kumar in 2008 Olympics is albeit full of twist and turns which can even motivate a commercial sports thriller. He not only created history by equating the feat of K. D. Jadhav^[29], grand old man of Indian Wrestling at Olympics after 56 years by bagging bronze medal but also rewritten the

²³120kg

²⁴Organized at Beijing, China

²⁵60kg

²⁶66kg

²⁷See supra note 23

²⁸Repechage means literally "fishing out, rescuing" and is a practice in series competitions that allows participants who failed to meet qualifying standards by a small margin to continue to the next round.

²⁹Wrestling Bronze Medalist in Helsinki Olympics 1952

chronicles of Indian Wrestling for all the time to come by repeating his feat in next Olympics with improvement in metal of his medal to silver. This elevation of Kumar into history books is in fact manifestation of coming of age of Indian Wrestling Traditions at international arena, seeds of which were sown long ago.

After getting a bye to the 1/8 round, Kumar lost to Ukrainian Wrestler A. Stadnikin the first round of the 66 kg freestyle wrestling event in straight two rounds leaving, his medal hopes hinging on the repechage round, provided that Ukrainian wrestler reaches final. Stadnik reached in final round providing a chance to Kumar at repechage. There Kumar defeated American Doug Schwab, who was 5th in last world championships in which Kumar was seventh, in the first repechage round and Belarusian Albert Batyrov in the second repechage round. In the bronze medal match on 20 August 2008, Kumar faced the tough opponent Kazak wrestler L. Spiridonov, who reached up to semifinal round and there losing to finalist A. Stadnik.

This bronze medal match was so intense and had proved to harbinger of a positive change to Indian wrestling which nobody could have thought. In first round, Kumar got better of his opponent by score of 2-1 in close contest between both wrestlers. In second round, however, Kazak wrestler beat Kumar with score of 0-1. It came down to decisive final round and a hallowed medal of the Olympics at stake. Within stipulated time of 2 minutes, none of wrestler could score a point and match went on to be decided by a technique called clinch rule. In this scenario, one of the wrestlers is randomly chosen to take his opponent's leg for a final 30 seconds that decides the round. The positions are chosen at random by the official. He uses a bag containing two balls—one red, one blue; each representing a wrestler. The ball that is pulled by the official decides which wrestler starts in the offensive position. Even in this case, luck run out on Sushil and his opponent won the draw thus Kazak wrestler was in better position.

However, as it is said in folklores fortune favors the bold, Indian wrestler brought his opponent down from a seemingly disadvantaged position and winning this round with 2-0 score in his favor and thus bronze medal of the Olympics and an assured position in history books.

5.2 The First Ever Double Medal Haul for Indian Wrestling 2012

The latest 30th Olympic Games in London^[30] saw the zenith of Indian Wrestling Team where it returned with two Olympic medals, rare first in Indian sports that too of different colors—one silver and one bronze. And Sushil Kumar became first sports person to achieve distinct feat of being first sportsperson to achieve double Olympic medal. Along with that, in Geeta Phogat India found its first women grappler to compete in Olympics.

In London Olympic Games, India sent a team of 5 wrestlers, one woman and rest men in Freestyle category. Out of these, Geeta Phogat secured 13th rank in Women Lightweight category and become first woman wrestler from India to compete at Olympics since inception of woman wrestling events in 2004 Olympics onwards. Other two young wrestlers, Amit Kumar and Narsingh P. Yadav secured 10th and 13th ranks in Men's Featherweight and Middleweight, respectively.

It was feat of two veterans^[31] Yogeshwar Dutt and Sushil Kumar which took wrestling to its peak in this edition of Olympic Games. Competing in Men's Lightweight Freestyle category, Dutt defeated Bulgarian wrestler in Qualification round in three rounds. But he got defeated by eventual Silver medalist Russian B. Kudukhov in second round, allowing an attempt in repechage round. Dutt's performance in repechage round was decisive in all three rounds. In first round, he dismissed the Puerto Rican wrestler in straight two rounds. In second round, he dispatched

³⁰In 2012

³¹Both played in three Olympics 2004, 2008 and 2012

then Junior world and Asian champion and promising wrestler of Iran Masoud Esmaeilpour in closely contested match with score of 0-3-4 in his favour, coming from behind. In final bronze medal match, again coming from behind, Dutt defeated North Korean wrestler Ri Jong-myung with score of 0-1-6 in favour of Dutt. In final round of this bronze medal match, he out classed his opponent with full minute remaining by scoring straight 6 points to his opponents none. This was India's third Bronze Medal at Olympics in Wrestling.

Sushil Kumar's journey to maiden Olympic Finals, in Men's Welterweight Freestyle category, for that matter, first by any Indian Wrestler, is rather manifestation of dominance now been associated with Indian Wrestling Team at international events including at the Olympics. After getting a bye in first round, Kumar sent packing then defending Olympic Champion Ramazan Sahin^[32] of Turkey in second round itself. In quarterfinals, Kumar defeated the Uzbek wrestler in tough three rounds match. The semifinal was also keenly contested bout between Indian and Kazak Wrestler A. Tanatarov. First period was won by Kumar in dominant way with score of 3-0 in his favour. However, second period was won by Kazak wrestler with similar score line. This led to the final round of bout being decisive as both wrestlers were at tie after winning one round each. In this final round, Sushil got better of his opponent in last minute of contest as he was rallying behind by 3 points during initial duration. Thus he won this semifinal with amazing display of writ and willpower. And with a final score of 3-6 in his favour, he entered the Olympic final, first for any Indian Wrestler ever.

In final, however, Sushil Kumar suffering from fatigue and possible food poisoning lost to Japanese Wrestler in straight two rounds and settled for the Silver Medal. This is 4th medal of Indian Wrestling Team ever and only 2nd individual Silver

medal^[33] for India ever at Olympics till date.

6. Conclusion

Thus there are few things that become apparent on analysis of history of Indian Wrestling Team in Olympics. It is beyond doubt that Freestyle Wrestling has been backbone of India at the Olympic Games as compared to Greco-Roman Style of Wrestling. Though there been a presence of Indian wrestler in Greco-Roman Style at Olympics but largely it has been nominal in nature. It is the Freestyle Wrestling which is deeply rooted in cultural fabric of Indian society especially in its northern and western region that has produced numerous formidable competitors of this sport at Olympics for India.

Another factor which distinguishes Wrestling as Olympic sports in India Sporting History is its long and continuous presence at numerous the Olympic Games. Apart from sports like Hockey, none other discipline can boast of such long and strong presence in Indian Contingent at various Olympic Venues. However, the sheer tally of medals in wrestling discipline is low if we compare it in proportion to the players competing at the Olympics for India. But when we take into account the closely missed chances and stellar performance by various Indian grapplers at the Olympics then, it would be safe to say that no other sports in India, especially, in individual category has displayed such formidable performance at this highest sporting platform. Indian Wrestlers are now better off under severe levels of stress and anxiety to perform well at highest levels mainly on account of new found success of their colleagues at the Olympics. It has been proven too as a positive impact on mental toughness of Indian Wrestlers.

Hence this journey of Indian Wrestling Team at Olympics will continue and it is expected to get rich haul of medals for nation in coming games. As now especially the current generation of wrestlers in India

³²2008 Beijing Gold Medalist in Men's Welterweight Freestyle category

³³First Silver Medal for India was won by Maj. Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore in Men's Double Trap Shooting at 2004 Athens Olympic Games.

has seen first-hand experience of converting opportunities into medals, as for previous generations, the medals were eluding for long gap. Hope this good harvest of medals by Indian grappler continues for time to come in annals of the Olympic Games.

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