

Felix: Man-marking Shahid was futile

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• Jude Felix 



Former India captain Jude Felix pays tribute to his team-mate and idol, Mohammad Shahid, who he calls "one of the greatest of all time."

There has been a massive outpouring of grief and tributes in memory of Mohammad Shahid, one of Indian hockey's most celebrated and loved players, one of the true legends of the game. What younger people will hear most about him today is this: that he represented India at three Olympic Games, including the 1980 Moscow Olympics, where India won gold for the last time. That is just the fraction of what Shahid was all about.

Today I feel sorry for many of those who have missed seeing Shahid in action with their own eyes. I was one of the few privileged to have played alongside this remarkable hockey player, and to have been heavily influenced by him. Let me try and paint a picture for you, and tell you why he was so special, and will always continue to be so.

I can tell you it won't be easy, because his skills are difficult to sum up in words. Shahid was not just a good player; he was one of the greatest of all time, that was the level he belonged to; one of those rare players who were amazing in all their skills. He was the perfect package -- he could dribble, pass, feint and score just as effortlessly. And mind you, that was done at lightning-quick pace.

It was what made him the special one, singled out for special attention by every team, even though he played alongside very gifted teammates. Naturally, he was heavily man-marked, one defender attached to his ankles, but when any team did that, he showed off yet another aspect of his skill; he could fake a run like no one else in the game at the time. I wish more people had

seen him in action, because he was an absolute wizard. If you were a paying spectator, you got to see a true delight.

If you can find any old videos of Shahid in full flight, take a look and imagine what he would have been like doing those things, in front of you on a hockey field. Would Shahid have kept up with modern hockey? Definitely. He would take a defender to the corner and then make him drop to his knees, wrong footing them, sending them in one direction and creating space for himself in another and taking off.

I have seen the best defenders in the world give up when faced with Shahid and his complete repertoire of skills - control, footspeed, reflexes. So I don't think he would have been any different if he was a part of modern hockey. He began playing on natural grass and he finished his career playing on astro-turf. I don't think playing in this era would have made any difference to Shahid.

He belongs to that category of great players who are great across ages because they belong and they adapt. Another aspect of his game - and how the Indian team would love someone like him now - was that he could win you penalty corners from any situation.

As a team, we knew that with Shahid going forward, we were going to get a number of penalty corners. Back in those days, the Indian team was much better at penalty corner conversion than it is now. When you combined his great skills on the ball with this fact that he could win you any number of penalty corners, you realise how invaluable he remained.

One of the saddest days of my life was when I was put into his position (the now-rare inside-left) in the playing eleven in the 1988 Olympics. It was a proud moment for me to be playing for India at an Olympic Games; yet, it was heartbreaking to see one of my idols having to sit on the bench.

Mind you, this was simply because I was a fitter, younger man at the time. Even when he did come into the team, he was played out of position as a centre-forward, and the astonishing thing for all of us was how he excelled even there.

I can still distinctly remember in our Olympic match against the home team, Korea, he cut past four defenders and passed the ball to Thoiba on the left, who scored. That was the magic of Mohammad Shahid - the creator of openings, where you never expected them.

Shahid was such an entertaining and attractive player that he drew the eyes of the crowd towards himself; naturally he influenced many youngsters to take up the sport. I should know, as I was one of them. I remember seeing him in the flesh for the first time when I was 15; my school -- St. Germain High School in Bangalore -- had organised a felicitation for the gold-medal winning team from the 1980 Olympic Games.

Within four years, it was a dream come true to be playing alongside him for both Railways and soon afterwards for India. I am glad to say that I traveled to Varanasi to meet him in January this

year, the first time we were meeting since 1988. It was like he had just disappeared after the 1988 Olympics.

I had a plan of inviting him over to my academy, the Jude Felix Hockey Academy in Bangalore, where we work with orphans and other underprivileged children, and provide them with hockey training and education facilities. I had thought I would just give him a part of the field and let him show some of the basics of the game to the children, his own very original and special basics. Unfortunately, we couldn't make it happen because of his health.

We kept in touch, though and it is a very sad day for me personally to know that he is gone. Naturally, Shahid definitely left an impression on those who have followed him. You see, in those days, there were no videos or coaching manuals, we used to learn everything from watching our seniors. I know for sure that we can pass on all that we want to younger players, but you won't have another like him. He was God's gift to the world of hockey. There is and there will only be one Mohammad Shahid.

(As told to Debayan Sen)