

## **KIWG 2026: History-making Chandigarh becomes talk of town ahead of Republic Day men's ice hockey final vs Army**

In a come-from-behind win, Chandigarh stunned hosts Ladakh 3-2 in the semis

Chandigarh has never been in the final of Khelo India Winter Games ice hockey final

Leh (Ladakh), Jan. 25: Completely against the script, the Chandigarh men's team has become the darling of the ice-hockey loving community in Ladakh. In a thrilling semifinal on Friday night, Chandigarh stunned favourites Ladakh 3-2 to enter their first-ever KIWG ice-hockey final. The come-from-behind victory not only won them thousands of local fans but it also highlighted how youngsters from the plains are utilising their in-line hockey skills on ice rinks. Like how roller skaters switch to ice and figure skating, hockey in India is also seeing youngsters 'converting' from hard wooden or concrete surfaces to ice. In-line hockey is played on wheels while ice-skaters use blades. Both versions involve pace, stamina and skills to score and defend.

While players in regions like Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh have the luxury of ice surfaces and frozen ponds, teams like Chandigarh, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Telangana are not so fortunate. Most of them play in-line hockey and then train on ice surfaces ahead of events like Khelo India Winter Games or similar national events. Chandigarh's upset win against Ladakh thus makes it extra-special. And they started playing ice hockey only in KIWG 2025.

Chandigarh's head coach Gaurav Raheja was ecstatic after the triumph against Ladakh. "Before the match (vs Ladakh), we were only playing for performance and thinking only about giving our best. But the way each and every player played, and with the crowd cheering for us, we did it. You only get a few chances in life to be part of history leave alone writing it and Chandigarh did that today. We wrote history today," said Raheja to SAI Media.

There was double joy for Chandigarh on Saturday. Their women won the ice-hockey bronze medal defeating Himachal Pradesh 4-3 in extra time. That win spurred the men's team, said Raheja. "Because of them, we believed we could do it. That belief inspired our boys, and they did it too. This day will be remembered by Chandigarh, the Chandigarh Sports Department, and our Ice Hockey Federation for a lifetime," said Raheja.

"The 2025 Khelo India Winter Games was our first experience of playing hockey on ice. We don't get many chances to practice ice hockey because we don't have an ice rink in Chandigarh. We travel to Dehradun on weekends to practice, but even then, not all team members can join due to college and other commitments. So we take turns and practice whenever possible. Hockey is our life. We don't think much about financial constraints—we manage somehow. I'm really excited about tomorrow's match (versus Army) and looking forward to giving our best performance," said Chandigarh team captain Unnatveer Singh to SAI Media.

Team Chandigarh have been quick learners. "At the 5th Khelo India Winter Games, it was our first experience playing hockey on ice. was more about understanding ice and getting used to it. We couldn't perform well, but losing was also a big learning experience. For KIWG 2026, we prepared much better and had stronger practice sessions.

During the semi-final, I wasn't nervous at all and was actually excited to perform in front of such a big crowd, whether they were cheering or not. My focus was only on giving my best," said goalkeeper Ujjawal Pratap Singh Matharu to SAI Media.

"I really admire the Ladakh team, especially their speed and how naturally they perform on ice. This win is not just mine—it belongs to the entire team. Our parents and coaches are our biggest support, they helped us financially by arranging expensive equipment," added Matharu.

Monday, Republic Day, will be a big day for Chandigarh. Playing against mighty Army will in itself be an honour but Chandigarh will not throw in the towel, they promise. Army, the defending champions are taking nothing for granted.

"There is a saying, expect the unexpected, and we were open to both possibilities. Chandigarh's skill and mind-set were in sync, and they are a fast team. Against Ladakh, they truly put their best foot forward, and it is important to appreciate a good game. It will be an honour to play with them," said Tsewang Namgail, the Indian Army captain.

