

Cricket 108

Chapter 108

The last T20I against West Indies. We had already taken a 2-0 lead in the series. The atmosphere in Lauderhill was electric, with fans waving both Indian and West Indian flags, the smell of Caribbean street food filling the air. The West Indies team, bruised from the last loss, looked determined to bounce back.

Winning the toss, we chose to bat first. The pitch was flat, a paradise for stroke-makers, and Rohit Sharma wasted no time. From the very first ball, he was in full flow.

"Oh, that's Hitman at his best!" Aakash Chopra's voice boomed through the commentary box. "Step out, loft over long-on, and into the crowd! Kya drive maara hai, jaise koi artist apni painting bana raha ho!"

Pant, on the other end, was equally destructive. His one-handed sixes left the crowd gasping. The West Indies bowlers had no answers as India posted 198/3 in 20 overs, with Rohit scoring 92 off 54 and Pant adding a fiery 65 off 35.

Aarav Strikes Again

West Indies started strong, but I knew my moment would come. Sunil Narine, who had been promoted as an opener, tried to attack me early. I saw him charging down the pitch, premeditating a lofted shot.

I pulled my length back at the last second.

The ball moved away, kissed the edge, and flew straight into Pant's gloves.

"Dekh raha hai, Binod?! Yeh spin bowling ka jaadu hai!" Sidhu Paaji erupted. "Aarav Pathak ne Narine ko ek mithai wale bacche ki tarah bewajah uchhal diya!"

My first wicket of the night.

Nicholas Pooran was next. He was well set on 28 and looking dangerous. I knew he loved playing inside-out lofts, so I set him up with three deliveries outside off. Then, I darted one in full and straight.

He misjudged the dip and tried to flick across the line—stumps shattered!

"Pooran ne yeh shot toh socha tha Lamborghini jaisa hoga, lekin nikla Nano!" Sidhu laughed.

West Indies fought, but the required rate kept climbing. Eventually, we wrapped them up for 164, winning the match by 34 runs and sealing the series 3-0.

After back-to-back matches, we finally had a two-day break before the ODI series.

We had team bonding sessions, explored the beaches, and even played a few friendly beach cricket matches. Virat and Rohit led one team, while Buvi and Jadeja led the other.

But nature had its own plans. The first ODI was washed out due to heavy rain, leaving us with long seven-day break—a rare pause in international cricket, all thanks to an important West Indian festival.

The week-long break between matches was a rare luxury in international cricket. The constant travel, training, and matches rarely left time to truly soak in the places we visited. This time, however, I had company—Rishabh Pant, my partner-in-crime for the week. Both of us had been playing back-to-back matches, and a short escape from cricketing pressure sounded like the perfect plan.

We decided to rent a car and explore Port of Spain, the vibrant capital of Trinidad and Tobago. The West Indies had always fascinated me—their love for cricket, the rhythm in their everyday life, and the effortless mix of cultures. Rishabh was equally excited. We had heard stories about the city's buzzing streets, mouth-watering food, and breathtaking beaches, and we wanted to see it all.

The moment we got into our rented SUV, Rishabh took the driver's seat.

"Bhai, tujhe pata hai yahan ka traffic India se bhi zyada unpredictable hai?" I asked, fastening my seatbelt.

("Brother, do you know that the traffic here is even more unpredictable than in India?")

Rishabh laughed. "Toh kya hua? Woh toh Delhi ke streets bhi unpredictable hote hain! Bas gaadi chalane ka maza aana chahiye."

("So what? The streets of Delhi are just as unpredictable! The key is to enjoy driving.")

I rolled my eyes but let him take the wheel. The moment he hit the accelerator, I realized we were in for an adventure.

Our first stop was Queen's Park Savannah, a massive open area surrounded by colonial-style buildings. The lush greenery, the sound of steelpan music in the background, and the sight of joggers enjoying their morning run made it the perfect place to start our day. We parked the car and decided to walk around.

Our next stop was Maracas Beach, one of the most famous beaches in Trinidad. The drive itself was breathtaking—the roads winding through the mountains, with lush green landscapes on either side. Rishabh, who had switched on the music in full blast, was vibing to Caribbean beats while I enjoyed the view.

Upon reaching the beach, the first thing we did was order the famous Bake and Shark, a local delicacy. The crispy fried shark, stuffed inside soft bread with spicy sauces, was unlike anything I had ever tasted.

After devouring our food, we ran straight into the ocean, the cool water washing away the exhaustion from weeks of cricket. Rishabh and I had a race in the water (which he unfairly won by pushing me back), and then we spent hours just lying on the sand.

As the sun started setting, we decided to explore the nightlife. Our young guides insisted we visit Ariapita Avenue, the heart of Port of Spain's entertainment district. The street was alive with music, street performers, and a mix of locals and tourists dancing to the beats of Soca and Reggae.

We found a small open-air café, ordered fresh coconut water, and just sat there, absorbing the energy of the place. It was refreshing to be in a setting where no one was talking about cricket strategies, match schedules, or pressure—just pure enjoyment of the moment.

Late at night, as we drove back, the conversation took a reflective turn.

The next few days followed a similar rhythm—exploring hidden gems of Port of Spain, playing impromptu cricket matches with locals, and enjoying life beyond the game. On the last night before returning to the team, we visited Fort George, a historical site that offered the most stunning panoramic view of the entire city.

Standing there, looking at the vast ocean meeting the sky, I realized something—I had come to West Indies for cricket, but I was leaving with memories of a lifetime.

The anticipation was electric. After a week of exploring Port of Spain, I was back in the thick of things—team meetings, practice sessions, and the crucial moment of the playing XI announcement. The team management had been hinting that I would make the playing 11 in place of Shreyas Iyer, given my recent performances in the T20I series and my previous ODI performance. I had contributed with both

bat and ball, and I could feel that my place in the ODI squad was now more than just a possibility—it was a probability.

As we all gathered in the meeting room, there was a quiet buzz. Virat Kohli, our captain, stood at the center, looking around at all of us with his trademark intensity.

"Alright, boys," he began, his voice firm yet calm. "We have a strong squad, and I want each of you to be in your best form tomorrow. We've had a break, we've refreshed ourselves, but now—it's time to get back to business."

I nodded to myself. That break had been great, but the hunger to play again had been gnawing at me for days. My mind was already on the match, visualizing how I would play.

Virat continued, unfolding a sheet of paper. "Here's our playing XI for the first ODI against West Indies."

Everyone in the room straightened up. Even though most of us had an idea of who would make it, the final confirmation always brought a mix of relief and excitement.

"Opening the batting: Rohit Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan.

At number 3, I'll walk in.

Number 4—Aarav Pathak.

Number 5—Rishabh Pant.

At number 6, Kedar Jadhav.

Number 7—Ravindra Jadeja.

Our fast bowlers: Mohammad Shami, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, and Khaleel Ahmed.

And our spinner—Kuldeep Yadav."

As soon as I heard my name at number 4, I felt an instant surge of adrenaline. I was in. The spot wasn't just given to me—I had earned it.

I caught Rishabh's eye from across the room, and he gave me a slight nod, a smirk playing on his lips. I knew he'd be the first one to tease me after the meeting.

Virat glanced around. "This is our XI. We all know what we're capable of. This is West Indies—we're playing them in their own conditions, and we need to bring our best game. Rest well tonight, switch on your match mode, and let's get this win."

The room erupted into small murmurs, with players congratulating each other. I sat there for a moment, letting it sink in. This was my moment. My first ODI series in the Caribbean, and I was going to bat at number four. The responsibility was massive, but I thrived under pressure.

After the meeting, as expected, Rishabh threw an arm around my shoulder. "Bro, you're officially the middle-order king now!"

"Not a king yet, " I laughed. "But yeah, tomorrow is going to be exciting."

That night, as I lay in bed, I played out a thousand different match scenarios in my head. The conditions, the bowlers I would face, the kind of shots I would play. Cricket wasn't just played on the field—it started in the mind the night before.

The sun was shining bright over the Queen's Park Oval as the crowd buzzed with excitement. It was finally match day. Both teams had gone through their warm-ups, and now all eyes were on the center as the captains walked out for the toss.

Virat Kohli and Jason Holder stood alongside match referee Jeff Crowe. Holder spun the coin into the air, and Virat called it. The coin landed in West Indies' favor.

"We'll bowl first," Holder announced confidently.

It was the decision most captains made here—the early moisture in the pitch, combined with overcast conditions, made batting tricky in the first few overs.

As the Indian openers, Rohit Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan, strode to the middle, the West Indian fielders took their positions. The energy on the field was electric.

Sheldon Cottrell ran in to bowl the first over. His left-arm angle and ability to swing the ball early made him a tricky customer.

Rohit and Dhawan were cautious in the first few balls, looking to get their eye in. But then, on the fifth ball, there was a huge appeal!

A full delivery on off stump, Dhawan had stepped forward to defend, but the ball thudded into his pads. The West Indies players went up in unison, but the umpire remained unmoved.

Holder and his team huddled together. He had a long discussion with his bowler and keeper before finally deciding—Review taken!

The big screen flashed the replays.

The first angle suggested there was an inside edge, but ultra-edge showed a flat line. No bat involved!

The ball had struck Dhawan's front pad first before ricocheting onto the back pad. Ball tracking confirmed—Impact in line. Hitting middle stump!

A perfect review. Dhawan was gone for just 2 runs.

The West Indies players erupted in celebration as Dhawan trudged off, shaking his head in disappointment. India were 2 for 1 in the very first over.

Virat Kohli walked in at number three, his usual calm and composed self. He had played in such situations before, and India needed him to steady the innings.

For the next few overs, Virat and Rohit focused on rebuilding. They left the dangerous deliveries, rotated the strike, and found boundaries whenever possible. The partnership started looking solid.

But then, in the 13th over, disaster struck again.

Rohit Sharma, looking to up the scoring rate, tried an aggressive shot against the spin.

A slower, tossed-up delivery outside off stump, not much drift or turn, but enough to deceive him.

Rohit stepped out for a slog across the line but misjudged the dip. The ball gripped the surface, got extra bounce, and took a leading edge.

Nicholas Pooran, stationed at point, ran back and held on to a brilliant catch.

Rohit was out for 52 runs off 47 balls.

India were now 76 for 2 and in need of another solid partnership.

Virat, standing at the other end, tightened his grip on the bat. This was going to be a battle.

As Rohit Sharma walked past me towards the pavilion, he gave me a pat on the back. "Go well, Aarav," he said with a reassuring nod.

I took a deep breath and stepped onto the field. The moment I had been waiting for was finally here. The crowd roared as I walked towards the crease. The West Indies fielders were chirping, trying to unsettle me, but I stayed focused.

Reaching the pitch, I tapped my bat on the surface a couple of times to assess it. The bounce seemed a little unpredictable, and the ball was gripping just a bit. I knew I had to be careful in the beginning.

Virat Bhaiya walked up to me. "No rush, just settle in. We build from here," he said, his voice calm and full of experience.

I nodded, took my guard, and got ready.

The first few balls were all about getting my eye in. The bowlers were keeping it tight, not giving any room for easy runs. Virat and I played cautiously, rotating the strike and avoiding any risky shots. We focused on singles and doubles, occasionally sneaking in a three whenever there was a chance.

The scoreboard started moving steadily.

By the 16th over, we had reached 100 for 2.

We had laid a solid foundation. Now, it was time to push forward.

Virat Bhaiya stood there for a moment, staring at the sky in frustration before turning around and walking back towards the pavilion. As he passed me, he gave a nod and a small pat on my shoulder. "Stay in, Aarav. Build the innings," he said before disappearing into the dugout.

I sighed. Losing Virat at this stage was a big blow. Now, the responsibility fell on me to take the innings forward.

India: 132/3 in 20 overs.

As I looked towards the boundary, I saw Rishabh Pant walking in, his usual swagger intact. He adjusted his gloves, took a deep breath, and joined me at the crease.

"Bro, pressure hai par mazza aayega!" he said with a grin, exuding his natural confidence.

I smiled. "Yeah, but let's not do anything rash. We need to bat deep."

"Samajh gaya, boss. Aaj acche bacche ki tarah khelunga," he chuckled.

I shook my head. Rishabh was always this carefree, but that was also his strength. If he got going, he could single-handedly change the game.

Jason Holder was pumped up after getting Virat out, and the West Indies team could sense an opening. The fielders were chirping, their energy levels had shot up.

I knew we had to be smart here. A collapse now would put us in deep trouble. I tightened my grip on the bat and took my stance.

The battle was on.