

Cricket 120

Chapter 120

Today, I was absolutely buzzing with excitement. It was January 5, 2020, and I was on a flight to Australia, a place that held a special significance in my career. It was here that I had lifted my first-ever ICC trophy as captain—the U19 World Cup. That victory was one of the best moments of my life, but this time, things were different. I wasn't coming as an U19 player. I was here to play at the highest level—a full-fledged ODI and T20I series against Australia, right in their backyard.

The pressure was immense, but so was the opportunity. Performing well against Australia in their home conditions is no small feat. Anyone who shines in Australia is considered a top-tier cricketer, and I wanted that recognition. My focus was razor-sharp—I wanted to make my mark. This wasn't just about playing a series; it was about proving my worth, about cementing my place in the team, about making sure that when people spoke of Indian cricket, my name was in that conversation.

I glanced around the plane, taking in my teammates who were equally focused. Some were listening to music, others were watching movies or chatting with each other. I had my notebook out, jotting down possible game scenarios, field placements, and areas I needed to target while batting. I even made a small note to remind myself to work on my pull shot, as the Australian pitches tend to offer extra bounce and for bowling, I need to work on my swing even more to get more swing.

After the Australia series, we had another big challenge ahead: a tour to New Zealand for an ODI series. The best part? My close friends, Shubman Gill and Prithvi Shaw, would be joining us for that leg of the tour. Playing with them again at this level was something I had been looking forward to for a long time. We had come a long way since our U19 days, and now, we had the chance to dominate world cricket together. Just imagining the three of us back in the same dressing room, sharing strategies, cracking jokes, and pushing each other to perform better, gave me an extra boost of energy.

I leaned back in my seat, looking out of the plane window. This tour would last until February 12, meaning more than a month away from home. But that didn't bother me—I thrived in challenges like

these. This was where I belonged, on the field, in the heat of battle, with thousands of fans cheering and millions watching around the world.

As I closed my eyes, my mind played out different match scenarios—stepping onto the field, facing the Australian pacers under the lights, the crowd roaring in the stadium. I could almost hear the sound of the ball hitting my bat perfectly, see the scoreboard ticking in our favor, feel the adrenaline of a match-winning performance.

I smiled to myself. This was it. The stage was set. The excitement was real. The journey had just begun!

As we landed in Australia for the much-anticipated series, the excitement in the air was palpable. The moment we stepped out of the airport, we were greeted by fans and media. Some of us stopped for a few pictures and brief interviews before heading to our hotel. The journey had been long, but the energy was high. The moment we reached our rooms, a wave of realization hit me—this was the land where I had lifted my first cup as captain, the U19 World Cup. But now, this was a whole new challenge—playing against one of the toughest teams in their own backyard.

After checking in and freshening up, we had a team dinner planned with the players, support staff, coach, and even some of the players' family members. It was a perfect way to start the tour—relaxing, bonding, and setting the tone for the weeks ahead. The dining hall was buzzing with excitement. Everyone was in high spirits, laughing, joking, and sharing their expectations for the tour. The aroma of delicious food mixed with the sounds of lively conversations created an atmosphere of camaraderie.

The dinner was lively. Laughter echoed through the room as we shared jokes, memories, and stories. I sat next to Rishabh Pant, who was his usual energetic self, cracking jokes and making everyone laugh.

I also met Anushka Bhabhi and Virat Bhaiya again. Anushka Bhabhi smiled warmly and asked how I was doing. "Aarav, how does it feel to be back here? You must have so many memories from your U19 days."

"Absolutely, Bhabhi! This place holds a special place in my heart. But this time, it's a whole different challenge," I replied, feeling nostalgic yet determined.

Virat Bhaiya patted me on the back. "Just give your best. Australia is tough, but this is where legends are made. Stay confident, and you'll shine."

Later, I had a quick chat with Rohit Bhaiya's wife, Ritika Bhabhi. "How's the energy in the team?" she asked curiously.

"Super high! Everyone's pumped up. And honestly, it feels amazing to be part of this squad," I said with a grin.

Coach Ravi Shastri stood up during the dinner and, in his usual bold style, addressed the team. "Boys, enjoy tonight, but from tomorrow, we switch gears. Two days of intense practice, and then we go out there and show them what Team India is made of!" His voice carried authority, and we all nodded in agreement.

As the night went on, I found myself engaged in different conversations. Some were about cricket, others about life beyond the game. I talked to a few of the younger players, giving them tips on how to handle the pressure of an Australian tour. At the same time, I learned from the senior players about their past experiences here and the challenges we might face.

After the dinner, I headed back to my room, feeling both excited and slightly nervous. The thought of playing in front of packed Australian stadiums, facing their world-class bowlers, and proving myself on this grand stage filled me with anticipation. In two days, we would be hitting the nets, sharpening our skills, and preparing for the first ODI on January 10.

This was just the beginning of what promised to be an unforgettable tour!

After two intense days of practice on the Australian pitches, we were starting to understand the conditions better. The pitches here offered great assistance to the bowlers—fast bowlers got extra bounce and swing, while spinners could extract extra bump. Batting wasn't going to be easy, and we knew that our approach had to be smart and disciplined. We had to adapt quickly if we wanted to dominate the series.

The day had finally arrived—Match Day. The energy in the dressing room was electric. Everyone was focused, some listening to music, some engaged in last-minute warm-ups, while others were discussing strategies. I sat near Virat Bhaiya, who was going through some notes about the Australian team, their key players, and possible tactics. He looked at me and said, "Aarav, Australian pitches test your patience. You won't get easy runs here. Play smart, and when you get a chance, capitalize."

Before heading out, Coach Ravi Shastri gave us a brief talk. "Boys, this is Australia. One of the toughest places to play cricket. The conditions will test you, the crowd will test you, and the opposition will test you. But remember one thing—nothing is more intimidating than an Indian team that knows how to fight! Stay aggressive, stay smart, and most importantly, enjoy the game!"

As we stepped out of the dressing room and walked towards the field, the noise from the stadium grew louder. The Australian crowd is known for being intense, and as Virat Bhaiya had warned us, they can be difficult at times. "Ignore the noise. Just focus on the game," he reminded us.

The moment arrived—the toss. The captains, Virat Kohli and Aaron Finch, walked to the center of the field where former Australian captain Allan Border was waiting for them, ready to conduct the toss.

Allan Border: "Welcome, everyone, to this much-anticipated ODI match between India and Australia. The two captains are here, and it's time for the toss. Virat, you have the coin. Please flip it."

Virat Bhaiya took the coin and flipped it high into the air. Everyone watched as it landed on the ground.

Allan Border: "Aaron, your call?"

Aaron Finch: "Heads."

The referee looked down at the coin. "It's heads! Australia wins the toss. Aaron, what will you do?"

Aaron Finch: "We'll bowl first. The pitch looks good for bowling early on, and we want to chase the innings. Our batsman will then take advantage of any wear and tear in the second innings."

Allan Border: "Sounds like a solid plan. Virat, what would you have done?"

Virat Bhaiya: "Honestly, we would have bowled first as well. But we're happy to defend. We have a strong batting lineup, and if we can score big and have an amazing total, we back ourselves to defend it down."

Allan Border: "Any specific plans for the game?"

Virat Bhaiya: "Look, playing Australia in Australia is always a challenge, but we've prepared well. The key will be to bat perfectly and not have early wickets. If we do that, we can put pressure on their Aussies."

Allan Border: What about the playing 11?

Virat Bhaiya: Well Rohit, Dhawan to open and then Me at number 3.

Then we had Aarav, who would be playing his first match here in Australia. then we have KL Rahul as our wicketkeeper Batsman. then for finishers we have Hardik, Jadeja and Shardul Thakur. for bowlers we have Jassi, Kuldeep and Shami

Allan Border: "Great. Best of luck, Virat."

As the players walked off the field after the toss, the buzz in the stadium was electric. We huddled together, discussing our bowling plans. Dhawan and Rohit were stretching and jogging to go for open.

I turned to Rohit Bhaiya, who was standing next to me, adjusting his cap. "Rohit Bhaiya, what do you think will be a good score for us?"

Rohit Bhaiya thought for a second before replying, "Anywhere between 280-300 should be good. And if we strike early at time of our bowling and break their top order, we can defend the total easily."

This was it. Game on!

With the stage set, Rohit Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan walked out to open the innings for India. The Australian bowlers were ready, and Mitchell Starc had the new ball in hand. The atmosphere was electrifying as the Indian openers took their positions. The crowd was buzzing with anticipation, knowing that early wickets could shift the momentum in Australia's favor, while India hoped for a solid start.

Over 1-5: India made a slow and cautious start, with Starc and Josh Hazlewood bowling tight lines. The ball was moving around, and the Australian pacers were making life difficult for the Indian batsmen. Rohit and Dhawan were content with leaving deliveries outside off and picking up the odd single. A few deliveries kicked off the pitch, showing early signs of uneven bounce.

After five overs, India was at 13 for no loss. The pressure was mounting on the openers to accelerate, but the Australian attack was relentless.

6th Over: Pat Cummins to Shikhar Dhawan Cummins charged in, looking to make an impact straight away. He started with a fiery bouncer that Dhawan ducked under. The next two deliveries were full, probing outside off. On the fourth ball of the over, Cummins delivered a well-disguised slower ball. Dhawan tried to flick it away but misjudged it completely, getting an outside edge. The ball lobbed towards cover, where Ashton Agar sprinted in from mid-off and dived to his right to take a stunning catch.

Harsha Bhogle (Commentary): "Oh, that's a brilliant catch! Ashton Agar with a full-stretch dive, and Dhawan has to go. A big wicket for Australia early on. Dhawan never looked comfortable today, and Cummins strikes! India 13/1."

As the crowd erupted, the moment every cricket fan was waiting for arrived. Virat Kohli walked into bat. The stadium roared in excitement as the Indian captain made his way to the crease, his eyes filled with determination.

Isa Guha: "And here comes the King! Virat Kohli walks in at number three. A lot depends on him today, and he knows it. The Australian bowlers will come hard at him, but can he steer India to a strong position? The battle begins."

Pat Cummins bowled a superb over to Kohli, keeping it tight and not giving him any room to play his shot. The over ended as a maiden, building even more pressure on India.

7th Over: Mitchell Starc to Rohit Sharma

Ball 1: Starc steamed in and pitched it short. Rohit pulled it ferociously, sending it sailing over the midwicket boundary for SIX!

Harsha Bhogle: "Oh, that is classic Rohit Sharma! A short ball, and he's absolutely demolished it into the stands! That will relieve some pressure."

Ball 2: Starc tried a fuller delivery, but Rohit was ready. He leaned in and hammered it through midwicket for a FOUR!

Isa Guha: "Back-to-back boundaries! Rohit Sharma means business. India needs this momentum right now. Can he build on this?"

Ball 3: Starc bowled another short ball, but this time, Rohit mistimed it. The ball went high up in the air towards mid-on. Steve Smith settled under it, eyes locked on the ball, and took a comfortable catch. out!

Harsha Bhogle: "Oh no! That's a massive blow! Rohit Sharma looked in great touch, but he's given it away. A short ball again, but he couldn't control it this time. And look who's under it—Steve Smith, one of the safest hands in world cricket. India is now in trouble at 23/2."

As Rohit walked back disappointed, the stadium turned its attention to the next batsman. Aarav Pathak was walking in. The cameras zoomed in as he adjusted his helmet, took a deep breath, and stepped onto the field.

Isa Guha: "And here comes the young sensation! Aarav Pathak, the rising star of Indian cricket, making his mark in international cricket. Can he step up in this situation and build a partnership with the King himself? This is a defining moment for the youngster."

The excitement in the stadium was building. The crowd, sensing something special, started chanting. Even the Australian players took a moment to assess the new batsman.

Harsha Bhogle: "Aarav Pathak is known for his composure and skill, but this is a different challenge altogether. Australia, in Australia, against one of the best bowling attacks in the world. Can the young gun rise to the occasion? The next few overs will be crucial."

Aarav took his guard, looking calm but focused. He shared a brief look with Virat Kohli at the other end, who nodded as if to say, "Play your game." The tension in the air was undeniable, and the next phase of the match was about to begin!

The Australians sensed a chance to tighten their grip on the game. Pat Cummins took his mark again, ready to bowl to the young debutant. Every fielder seemed to be in attacking positions, expecting another breakthrough.

The contest was heating up, and cricket fans knew that something special was about to unfold. Would Aarav rise to the occasion, or would the Australian pacers dominate again? The battle had just begun!