

Cricket 130

Chapter 130

The series against Australia had ended in an unusual way—two of the three T20I matches were washed out due to heavy rain. While it was disappointing to miss out on more game time, there was nothing we could do about it. Now, after a short two-day break, we were gearing up for the next challenge: a tour to New Zealand for a highly anticipated ODI series.

With the tight international schedule, every break was precious. The management ensured we had time to relax and recharge before the long flight to New Zealand. The Australian team, showing incredible sportsmanship and camaraderie, invited us for a casual lunch at a local restaurant. It was a rare occasion where both teams could set aside their on-field rivalry and simply enjoy each other's company.

After a grueling series, it was refreshing to spend time with the Australian players in a relaxed setting. The lunch was arranged at a cozy waterfront restaurant in Melbourne, where we got a taste of some authentic Australian cuisine. David Warner, Glenn Maxwell, and Pat Cummins were among the hosts, ensuring that we felt welcomed.

As we entered the restaurant, the mood was light and cheerful. The aroma of grilled seafood and freshly baked bread filled the air. We settled into our seats, exchanging casual conversations about the game, travel plans, and even our favorite Netflix shows.

I sat next to David Warner, who, despite being a fierce competitor on the field, was one of the friendliest players off it. We talked about social media, as he was quite popular for his TikTok videos. "Aarav, you

should get into making fun reels more often," Warner suggested with a grin. "People love to see cricketers off the field too!"

That conversation sparked an idea. I pulled out my phone and recorded a short clip featuring Warner, Kohli, and Maxwell. It was a fun snippet of us joking about the unpredictable Australian weather, and within minutes, the clip was up on my social media. The response was overwhelming! The fans loved seeing the friendly banter between Indian and Australian players.

While the world sees us as fierce rivals, there's a deep mutual respect between cricketers. Over the time, I had developed a good bond with Marnus Labuschagne. During lunch, we discussed mental preparation, and how he loves to do yoga every day to keep him in shape.

Meanwhile, the bowlers had their own little gathering. Bumrah, Shami, and Chahal were locked in a conversation with Cummins, Starc, and Zampa, discussing some other things.

The lunch itself was a feast. We were served an array of dishes—grilled barramundi, kangaroo steak (which a few players hesitated to try), and a classic Aussie dessert, Pavlova. Kohli, being a strict vegetarian, opted for a fresh salad and some pasta.

Maxwell, being the entertainer he is, challenged me to try Vegemite on toast. "If you can handle this, you can handle anything New Zealand throws at you," he joked. I took a bite, and my expression said it all—bitter, salty, and unlike anything I had ever tasted before. The entire room burst into laughter.

As the lunch came to an end, we thanked our hosts for the wonderful time. Some players exchanged jerseys, others clicked selfies, and I made sure to capture a few more moments for my fans. Before leaving, we promised to keep the sportsmanship alive, no matter how intense our next encounters would be on the field.

That evening, back at the hotel, we started packing for our flight to New Zealand. The excitement was building up. New Zealand had always been a challenging tour—swinging conditions, fast outfields, and a passionate cricket-loving crowd. But for now, we cherished the brief moments of relaxation before stepping onto the field again.

As we landed in New Zealand, the cool, crisp air greeted us as we stepped out of the plane. The journey had been long, but the excitement of playing an ODI series against New Zealand overshadowed any exhaustion we felt. We boarded the team bus, eager to reach our hotel and settle in before the intense schedule began.

The drive through New Zealand's scenic landscapes was mesmerizing. Rolling green hills stretched endlessly, and the sight of snow-capped mountains in the distance added to the breathtaking view. The

roads were smooth, and the atmosphere was peaceful—a stark contrast to the high-energy matches we were about to play.

Upon our arrival at the hotel, the staff welcomed us in traditional Indian style. They adorned us with garlands and flowers while a group of drummers played rhythmic beats, creating an electric atmosphere. The warm hospitality made us feel instantly at home. As we walked in, I spotted Shubman Gill and Prithvi Shaw grinning at me. Without hesitation, I joined them in a Bhangra dance to the beat of the drums. Laughter echoed through the lobby as we celebrated our arrival in this beautiful country.

After the welcome ceremony, we proceeded to check-in. The hotel was nothing short of luxurious, with sprawling suites offering a stunning view of the city skyline and the ocean beyond. As soon as I entered my room, I sank into the plush bed, letting out a sigh of relief. The exhaustion from the flight caught up to me, and I decided to take a quick nap before dinner.

That evening, the team gathered for a light meal at the hotel's restaurant. The menu was diverse, offering both Indian and local New Zealand delicacies. Some of the boys were eager to try traditional Kiwi dishes, while others, including me, stuck to familiar Indian flavors. Conversations flowed effortlessly, ranging from cricket strategies to lighthearted banter about our flight experiences.

The next morning, our training sessions began. We headed to the stadium for our first net practice in New Zealand. The conditions were quite different from what we were used to. The pitches here had extra bounce, and the swing was more pronounced, making it a challenge for both batters and bowlers. I focused on my bowling, working closely with the coaches to adjust my length and pace. Facing deliveries in these conditions required a different level of precision.

After practice, we had a team meeting where the coaches briefed us on the upcoming matches. Strategies were discussed, and we analyzed footage of the New Zealand team to prepare for their key players. The emphasis was on maintaining composure under pressure and adapting quickly to the conditions.

Later that evening, some of us decided to explore the city. Auckland had a vibrant nightlife, and we took a stroll along the waterfront, enjoying the cool breeze and the stunning view of the illuminated skyline. Fans recognized us and came up for pictures and autographs. It was heartwarming to see the love and support we received, even in a foreign country.

The day ended with a relaxed session in the hotel lounge. Some of us played pool, while others engaged in card games. The camaraderie within the team was strong, and these moments off the field were just as important as the ones on it. They strengthened our bond and kept us motivated for the matches ahead.

As I lay in bed that night, reflecting on the day, I felt a mix of excitement and determination. The series against New Zealand was not going to be easy, but we were ready to give our best. With the first ODI just two days away, our focus was clear—to play fearless cricket and make our country proud.

With that thought, I drifted into a deep sleep, ready to take on whatever challenges lay ahead.

As the morning light filtered through the hotel curtains, I groggily turned over in bed, rubbing my eyes. With a lazy yawn, I stretched out and sat up, remembering something important.

"Hey, System!" I called out, my voice hoarse from sleep. "What about my reward for that match? I scored a hundred! It better not be something lame."

A moment of silence followed before the mechanical voice of the system rang in my ears.

[Initializing reward... Calculating...]

I tapped my fingers impatiently against the bedside table, waiting for it to announce my well-earned prize.

[Reward calculated!]

[1. IPL Trophy with RCB Winner Keychain.] [2. Good Singer.]

My eyebrows twitched at the second reward. "A good singer? Alright, that's not bad." But when I saw the first one, my mood instantly soured. "What the hell?! Are you making fun of me?!" I shouted at the system, my frustration bubbling over.

RCB Winning IPL trophy Key Chain? That was making fun of me! The very first thing in the morning, did the system have to mess with me like this? But as expected, the system had no response. I glared at the invisible presence for a few seconds before huffing in frustration.

"Whatever," I muttered, shaking my head. I had better things to do than argue with an AI system. With that, I rolled out of bed and headed to the bathroom to freshen up.

After a refreshing shower and a quick breakfast, I made my way to the hotel gym. The team had a few days before the ODI series against New Zealand, and I wanted to stay sharp. As I walked in, I spotted Kohli Bhaiya already deep into his workout, lifting weights effortlessly. Sweat glistened on his forehead, but he looked completely focused.

"Morning, bhaiya!" I called out as I grabbed a pair of dumbbells.

"Aarav! Morning, man!" he replied, pausing his reps. "You're up early. Sleep well?"

I nodded. "Yeah, had a dream regarding IPL, as it would start soon!"

He leaned against the machine, looking thoughtful. "You know, every year, we start with so much hope. This time, we have a solid squad. Good balance. You, AB, me, Finch, and our bowlers have been stepping up."

"True," I nodded. "But what about the pressure? Doesn't it get exhausting, all the RCB memes, the jokes?"

Kohli exhaled, stretching his arms. "At first, it used to bother me. But now? It's just part of the journey. We've come close, man. Finals, playoffs... the dream is still alive. One good season, one good campaign, and all of this changes."

I chuckled. "You sound like a politician rallying his supporters."

We continued our workout, chatting about cricket, fitness routines, and, of course, the upcoming IPL. The conversation flowed effortlessly, filled with jokes and casual banter. Kohli shared stories of past seasons, funny dressing room moments, and even a few prank wars between teammates.

"Remember when ABD hid my protein bars for an entire week?" Kohli laughed. "I was losing my mind!"

"Wait, ABD did that?!" I burst out laughing.

"Yeah! Turns out he replaced them with some weird South African herbal bars. Tasted like cardboard!" Kohli groaned.

"And you still didn't suspect anything?" I asked between chuckles.

"Nope! I thought I was just losing my appetite for protein bars. But when I found out, oh man, revenge was sweet!" Kohli grinned mischievously.

"Oh, you have no idea. But that's what makes it fun." Kohli finished his set and stretched. "Alright, bro, enough chit-chat. Time to push yourself. 20 more reps!"

I groaned, but I knew there was no arguing with Kohli Bhaiya when it came to fitness. I picked up my weights and got to work, feeling a renewed sense of motivation.

As much as I joked about RCB's IPL struggles, there was something about Kohli's unwavering belief that was infectious. Maybe, just maybe, this would be their year.

And who knows? Maybe the system's joke of a reward was actually a glimpse into the future.

I smirked to myself as I finished my set. The season ahead was going to be interesting.

With our morning workout done, we hit the juice bar inside the gym for a quick protein shake. I sipped on my chocolate-flavored drink, while Kohli opted for his usual banana smoothie. We sat on the lounge chairs, watching some New Zealand rugby matches on the big screen.

As we wrapped up our drinks, the rest of the team started trickling into the gym. More jokes, more camaraderie, and just another day in the life of a cricketer. The day was just getting started, and there was still so much to look forward to.