

Cricket 132

Chapter 132

The stadium buzzed with anticipation as the players took their positions on the field. The floodlights illuminated the lush green pitch, and the sea of blue in the stands erupted in cheers. The energy was palpable. India had won the toss and elected to bat first. Now, all eyes were on the young Indian openers—Prithvi Shaw and Shubman Gill—as they strode to the middle, their bats tapping the ground with quiet confidence.

The commentators' voices crackled through the speakers. Ian Smith, ever the lively presence, set the tone for the match. "Oh, what a sight! Two young men from India, paving their path to the future of Indian cricket. Prithvi Shaw and Shubman Gill—both immensely talented—will open the innings today."

Katey Martin chimed in, "And they'll be facing none other than Trent Boult with the new ball. Boult has been in phenomenal form, and he'll be looking to make early inroads."

Alan Richards added, "Absolutely, Katey. It's going to be a fascinating battle. Boult versus Shaw first up."

Chris Cairns finished the thought, "New Zealand will want to strike early. India, on the other hand, will want to build a solid platform."

Boult charged in for the first ball. Shaw took his stance, eyes locked on the bowler. The first delivery swung in sharply, beating the inside edge, thudding into the pads. A loud appeal followed, but the umpire shook his head.

Shaw responded aggressively. The next delivery was slightly short, and he pounced on it, cutting it past point for four. The crowd erupted. Boult smirked, knowing the battle had just begun.

By the end of the first over, India had six on the board. Tim Southee took the ball for the second over. Gill, watching from the non-striker's end, got his chance. A full delivery outside off, and Gill elegantly leaned into the drive, sending the ball racing past cover for another boundary.

India 12/0 after two overs.

The openers continued confidently, finding gaps and rotating the strike. Shaw was particularly aggressive, cutting and pulling anything remotely loose. Gill, ever composed, played with soft hands, placing the ball into gaps and running hard.

Then came the moment of tension. 7.6 overs in, Boult, continuing his spell, steamed in. Shaw was on strike, batting on 32. The ball seamed away just a fraction, enough to deceive him. He tried to withdraw his bat at the last second, but it was too late. The edge carried comfortably to Tom Latham behind the stumps.

"OUT! Prithvi Shaw has to go!" Ian Smith exclaimed.

The New Zealand players huddled in celebration. Boult pumped his fist. Shaw looked dejected as he trudged back, knowing he had given away a solid start.

India: 51/1.

The stadium, momentarily stunned, found its voice again as the big screen showed the next batsman walking in.

Virat Kohli.

The Indian fans roared in approval. "The King" was in the house.

Kohli took his guard, tapping the pitch a couple of times, scanning the field. Gill, at the other end, knew his role—rotate the strike and build a partnership.

Tim Southee came charging in for the next over. Gill faced him confidently and taking singles. But then, in the 8.4 over, disaster struck.

Southee batted in a short one, just wide enough outside off. Gill saw an opportunity. He went for the cut, his eyes lighting up. The connection was sweet, but unfortunately, it was straight to point.

Blundell didn't have to move an inch. The ball nestled safely into his hands.

"Would you believe it? Gill is OUT! What a blow for India," Katey Martin said, shaking her head.

Gill stared at his bat in disbelief before trudging off.

India: 54/2.

The crowd murmured. Two wickets in quick succession had put India in a tricky situation. And now, stepping onto the field was a new face, yet one carrying the weight of expectations.

Aarav Pathak.

A Moment of Silence

Aarav jogged onto the field, his MRF bat resting on his shoulder, adjusting his gloves, scanning the pitch. He knew the challenge ahead.

A deep breath. One step at a time.

He reached the crease, exchanged a glance with Kohli, who gave him a nod of assurance. The crowd watched closely—some excited, some anxious. Pathak had immense talent, but this was a high-pressure moment.

Southee ran in. Aarav took his stance, bat lifted. The first ball—fuller, on off-stump. Aarav met it with a firm defensive shot, showing composure. The second ball, similar length—again, well defended.

As the over ended, Aarav took a moment to scan the crowd. Amidst thousands of faces, he looked for one in particular.

And then, he found her.

Shraddha.

Their eyes met briefly. A flicker of recognition, a moment held in silence. Aarav quickly looked away before anyone could notice, but he smiled to himself.

Now, it was time to bat.

The game continued, tension thick in the air. Kohli took charge of the strike, blocking and nudging singles. Aarav, still new to the crease, played cautiously. Southee and Boult kept up the pressure, probing outside off-stump, testing the youngster's patience.

Kohli whispered something to Aarav between overs. "Play your game. Stay focused."

Aarav nodded. The next over, facing Boult, he finally got off the mark. A crisp flick through midwicket. A loud cheer from the stands. The runs had started to flow again.

Kohli continued his masterclass, finding gaps effortlessly. Aarav, taking inspiration, followed suit. A perfect cover drive against Southee—timing immaculate. Four runs. The crowd roared in approval.

India 75/2 after 12 overs.

Kohli, watching Aarav grow in confidence, smirked. "Good shot, kid."

The partnership was building. New Zealand knew they needed another breakthrough.

The game had settled into a rhythm, the quick fall of 2 wickets momentarily giving way to a tactical battle between bat and ball. I stood at the striker's end, my grip firm on the handle of my bat. Across from me, Kohli Bhai, rolling his shoulders as he prepared for the next ball. The spinners, Mitchell Santner and Ish Sodhi, had been brought on in tandem, both working their angles, extracting whatever turn they could from the surface. The challenge now was to keep the scoreboard ticking while ensuring we didn't give them an easy breakthrough.

Santner tossed one up outside off, inviting a drive. I leaned in and caressed the ball through the covers, placing it perfectly between the fielders. A quick call to Kohli Bhai—

"Two here!"

We sprinted hard, touching down and pushing for the second run just as the throw came in. Safe. The non-striker's end had never felt more reassuring.

I turned to Tom Latham, New Zealand's captain and wicketkeeper, who had been keenly observing the play.

"Hey mate, keeping spinners from both ends?" I asked casually.

"Yeah," he responded, adjusting his gloves. "Nice turn now!"

I nodded, taking mental notes.

As the over ended, I turned towards the dugout and signaled for my cap. Vijay Shankar came sprinting towards me, handing over my cap as I passed him my helmet. It was a small but significant shift—switching into a new mindset (and it even look cool), one where control and placement would be key. Kohli Bhai and I had found our groove, rotating the strike smoothly and taking calculated risks.

The next over belonged to Ish Sodhi. The first ball was a loopy delivery on off-stump. I stepped out, meeting the ball with a full face of the bat, driving it straight down the ground for a single. Kohli Bhai, ever watchful, clipped the next one behind square for another run.

Then came a shorter delivery. I rocked back and executed a precise late cut, guiding the ball past the diving fielder at short third man. The timing was exquisite. The ball raced away to the boundary. The crowd erupted.

In next over Santner, sensing my intent, adjusted his line. He bowled flatter, trying to cramp me for room. I anticipated it. The moment he released the ball, I shuffled across and swept it behind square. Another boundary. The New Zealand fielders exchanged glances, realizing they needed a new plan.

In the next over, Sodhi tried a quicker one on middle stump. I opened the face of the bat, gliding it delicately past point. Kohli Bhai and I instantly took off—

"Two! Push!"

The running was electric. We turned at the crease, eyes locked, and darted back for the second just as the throw came in. This was classic, efficient batting—finding the gaps, keeping the fielders on their toes, and never letting the bowlers dominate.

The scoreboard kept ticking. Boundaries were interspersed with quick singles and sharp twos, frustrating the New Zealand bowlers. By the 22th over, I was on 46. One more shot to the ropes would bring up my fifty.

Sodhi tossed another one up. I stepped out, met the ball at the perfect moment, and lofted it elegantly over extra cover. The timing was immaculate. The ball soared and landed just inside the boundary, one bounce and four.

The crowd rose to their feet. The stadium announcer's voice boomed over the speakers:

"Aarav Pathak reaches his fifty in 51 balls! What a knock from the young man! fully controlled innings from the man."

Kohli Bhai walked over, tapping my gloves. "Well played, champ. Keep going."

I raised my bat, acknowledging the cheers.

With the confidence of my fifty behind me, I found myself in the zone. Every ball seemed a little slower, every gap a little wider. My mind was clear, my body in perfect sync with my instincts.

Santner bowled one flatter, aiming for my pads. I flicked it off my hips, sending it past mid-wicket. Kohli Bhai called for two, and we ran hard, making it with ease. The rhythm was intoxicating.

Next ball, a flighted delivery. I shaped up for a sweep but, at the last second, adjusted and played a delicate reverse sweep instead. The ball raced away behind point. Another four.

"What a display of skill from Aarav Pathak! He's mixing caution with aggression brilliantly," Ian Smith exclaimed.

Katey Martin added, "The elegance of that shot! He waited until the last moment and just guided it past the fielders. That's a batsman in complete control."

Kohli Bhai, at the other end, smiled. "Having fun, aren't you?"

I grinned. "Loving it."

As the innings progressed, our understanding between the wickets became even sharper. There were moments where we didn't even need to call out—we just knew when to run.

A push to mid-off—single.

A soft tap towards backward point—another single.

A firm drive between cover and mid-off—"Two here!" We sprinted hard, the New Zealand fielders struggling to cut us off in time.

The partnership was flourishing. Kohli Bhai and I complemented each other perfectly, him with his calculated aggression, me with my timing and placement. The pressure was now on New Zealand.

As the overs ticked by, the match continued to unfold. The spinners had done their best, but we had weathered their challenge. Now, with the fast bowlers set to return, a new phase of the innings awaited us.

I took a deep breath.

Shradha sat on the edge of her seat, eyes fixated on the pitch. Aarav was batting with such effortless grace, his movements so fluid, it was almost as if he was dancing with the ball. The way he and Virat Kohli ran between the wickets, converting singles into twos with quick dashes, their coordination so in sync, left her in awe.

It was the 33rd over when Colin de Grandhomme was brought into the attack. Aarav, now fully clad in his helmet, stood at 78 off 78 balls. Shradha held her breath, her heart pounding with excitement. She found herself wishing, no—praying—that he would reach his century. A fleeting thought crossed her mind, something sweet, something silly, and she blushed instantly, shaking her head as if to rid herself of the distraction. No, she told herself, focus on him. Focus on the match. Yet, as soon as she did, she felt herself blushing again—not for him, of course. Just for the match.

As Colin de Grandhomme prepared to bowl, the atmosphere crackled with tension.

Ball 1: Aarav made space for himself, shifting his leg slightly away from the line of the ball. And then, in one swift motion, he pulled it over deep midwicket for a six! The crowd erupted, and Shradha jumped up in excitement. "Yeah!!!" she cheered, her fists clenched in triumph. He was now at 84.

Ball 2: The next delivery was a well-directed length ball. Aarav played it cautiously, a dot ball. Shradha exhaled sharply, trying to calm her nerves.

Ball 3: A fuller delivery outside off. Aarav let it go, the ball thudding into the keeper's gloves. Another dot. His score remained 84(81).

Shradha could feel her pulse quicken. "Come on, Aarav," she muttered under her breath.

Ball 4: And then it happened. Aarav stepped out of his crease, timing his movement perfectly. With a complete wrist rotation, he lofted the ball high and straight down the ground. A beautiful six! The ball sailed into the stands effortlessly. Shradha jumped up, clapping her hands together. "Yes! Yes!" she cheered, unable to contain her excitement.

Aarav now stood at 90(82).

Ball 5: Colin de Grandhomme attempted to correct his length, but he bowled it on the pads—a dangerous mistake against a batsman in sublime form. Aarav flicked it beautifully, almost nonchalantly, and it soared over the square leg boundary. Another six!

96(83).

Shradha gasped. "One more, just one more," she whispered, gripping the edges of her seat, her entire body thrumming with anticipation.

Ball 6: Aarav adjusted his stance, eyes locked on the bowler. Colin de Grandhomme charged in for the final ball of the over. Aarav made space, stepping towards the off-side, and in a breathtaking inside-out shot, lifted the ball over extra cover. The ball flew, effortlessly clearing the ropes.

A SIX!

The crowd erupted in a deafening roar. Shradha leapt to her feet, fists pumping in the air. "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" she screamed, her face lit up with joy.

Aarav removed his helmet, revealing his sweat-drenched but radiant face. He roared like a lion, a primal sound of triumph that echoed through the stadium. Virat ran up to him, wrapping him in a tight hug. The two of them exchanged pats on the back, grinning widely. Aarav then turned toward the crowd, acknowledging their cheers, before his eyes found hers.

For a brief moment, time seemed to pause. Shradha and Aarav locked eyes, a silent exchange passing between them. Her breath caught in her throat. And then, just as quickly, he broke the eye contact, turning his attention back to the crowd.

And then came his iconic celebration. He held his helmet in one hand, raised his bat high in the other, and bowed—his signature gentleman's bow. A gesture of respect, of gratitude, of acknowledgment to the fans, to the game, to the moment. The entire stadium celebrated with him, clapping and chanting his name.

Shradha felt her heart swell with pride. Every shot he played, every milestone he reached, every time he looked unstoppable—it all made her feel something indescribable. And now, as she watched him bask in the glory of his century, she realized something.