

Cricket 138

Chapter 138

Three days had passed since the last incident, and we had spent every moment preparing. Early morning training sessions, hours in the nets. Today was our second match against New Zealand, and we were determined to take the lead in the series.

The dressing room buzzed with anticipation. Some players stretched, others adjusted their gear, and a few sat quietly, lost in thought. I tied my shoelaces tightly, feeling the familiar rush of adrenaline. The air was thick with a mix of excitement and nervous energy.

As we stepped onto the field, the conditions were nearly perfect for cricket. The sky was overcast, a slight breeze drifted across the ground, and the pitch had a hint of moisture—ideal for fast bowlers early on.

New Zealand won the toss and, unsurprisingly, opted to bowl first. Their pacers would thrive in these conditions, and we knew the first ten overs would be crucial.

Gill and Prithvi Shaw walked onto the field, their body language exuding confidence. They had been in excellent form, and we needed them to provide a solid start. The first few overs were cautious, yet they managed to rotate the strike efficiently, ensuring no pressure built up.

The New Zealand pacers bowled with fire, extracting bounce and movement from the pitch. But Gill and Shaw played with composure. They left the swinging deliveries and punished anything too full or too short. By the 10th over, we were at 58/0—a steady start.

In the 12.1 over, Prithvi mistimed a shot, edging the ball straight to the wicketkeeper. Out for a well-made 38. India: 64/1.

Then, the moment everyone had been waiting for—Virat Kohli walked in. The crowd erupted as he took his guard. He glanced at the field, adjusted his gloves, and prepared for battle.

First ball—cover drive! Classic Kohli! The ball raced to the boundary. A statement shot.

But cricket is unpredictable.

In the 15th over,

Kohli attempted an uncharacteristic shot, trying to slash a short delivery over point, but mistimed it completely. The ball ballooned up, and Jamieson at third man made no mistake. Kohli out for just 8.

Silence.

The dressing room went cold. 71/2.

I took a deep breath and jogged onto the field. Two quick wickets meant we had to rebuild. The New Zealand bowlers had their tails up, sensing an opportunity.

Before taking my stance, I checked my leg stump, adjusted my gloves, and tapped the bat twice on the ground. The familiar routine helped me settle my nerves.

The very next over, Gill was bowled by an absolute peach of a delivery. The ball pitched on off-stump, straightened just enough, and sent his bails flying. Gone for 27.

72/3.

New Zealand's celebration was intense. The momentum was firmly in their favor.

Shreyas Iyer walked in next. He looked calm, but I knew he felt the pressure.

"We bat till the 35th over, no rash shots," he murmured as he took his stance.

I nodded. "Agreed."

The bowlers kept up the intensity, hitting good lengths and making us work for every run. We focused on singles, rotating the strike to ease the pressure.

By the 20th over, we had steadied the ship—98/3.

Iyer started to take calculated risks. He stepped out to a spinner and lofted him over mid-on for four. The shot infused new energy into our innings. I followed suit, flicking a half-volley for another boundary.

"Good shot!" Iyer called, grinning.

The dressing room roared in approval. The momentum was shifting back in our favor.

By the 25th over, I reached my 50 with a crisp drive through extra cover. I raised my bat, acknowledging the applause.

Iyer was in the 40s. We were rebuilding well.

At the 30-over mark, we stood at 152/3.

Cricket is a game of uncertainties. In the 32nd over, I misjudged a slower ball and chipped it straight to mid-wicket. Out for 62.

I cursed under my breath but walked off knowing I had done my job.

Rishabh Pant was the next man in. The aggressive wicketkeeper-batsman could take the game away from the opposition in minutes.

But the New Zealand bowlers had different plans. Boult and Southee returned for their second spells, and the pressure mounted.

Pant started well, hitting a couple of boundaries, but in the 35th over, he played one shot too many and was caught at deep mid-wicket.

178/5.

Iyer, now past his 50, had to anchor the innings. He adjusted his approach, farming the strike and guiding the tailenders. Meanwhile, Ravindra Jadeja provided much-needed support at the other end.

With five overs to go, we were at 230/6. We needed a strong finish to post a competitive total.

Jadeja switched gears, slapping a six over long-on. Iyer, too, played some exquisite shots, including a late cut for four. The final overs were all about maximizing every run.

The last over arrived—our score: 267/7.

Jadeja smashed a six off the first ball. The crowd erupted.

Second ball—four! He was on fire.

A couple of singles followed before he went for one big shot too many. Caught at deep square leg for a valiant 45.

We finished at 285/8.

A decent total, but was it enough?

We walked off the field, heads held high. It wasn't an easy innings, but we had fought hard. As we sat down, the coach clapped his hands.

"Good recovery, boys," he said. "Now, it's up to the bowlers."

After setting a competitive total, it was time for us to defend it. 285 runs to win.

Jasprit Bumrah took the new ball, his eyes locked onto the opening pair—Martin Guptill and Henry Nicholls. The first few overs were tight, with Jasprit Bumrah and Shardul Thakur keeping it disciplined. The ball was swinging under the lights, making it difficult for the batsmen to time their shots.

In the 4th over, Bumrah got the breakthrough!

"Bowled him!" The stumps went cartwheeling as Guptill completely missed a scorching yorker. The Indian team erupted in celebration. Guptill was gone for just 12 runs.

I was brought into the attack in the 8th over. My first few deliveries were all about finding my rhythm. In my second over, I decided to bowl a cross-seam delivery to Henry Nicholls. The ball gripped and took the edge, flying straight to Virat at slip!

Gone for 18. New Zealand at 42/2.

Kane Williamson walked in, calm as ever. He was the backbone of their batting and would be the key wicket.

By the 12th over, New Zealand had reached 68/2. It was time for spin.

Yuzvendra Chahal was introduced into the attack, and he immediately found turn on the dry surface. His variations kept the batsmen guessing.

In the 14th over, he trapped Ross Taylor LBW with a beautifully tossed-up leg break! Taylor reviewed it, but ball-tracking showed it crashing into the stumps. He was out for 7 runs.

In his very next over, Chahal struck again! Tom Latham attempted a sweep, but the top edge flew straight to Rishabh Pant behind the stumps.

New Zealand 82/4.

Williamson was playing carefully, rotating the strike, but we knew one mistake was all it would take.

In the 22nd over, I bowled a slower off-cutter. Williamson misjudged the pace and chipped it straight to Jadeja at point!

Out for 32. This was huge!

James Neesham and Colin de Grandhomme tried to steady the ship, adding a quick 50-run partnership. Neesham counter-attacked, hitting me for two boundaries in an over, but we stayed patient.

Chahal returned in the 30th over and struck again, deceiving Neesham with a sharp googly. Bold!

New Zealand was 195/6 when Jadeja got into the action. In the 39th over, he dismissed Santner with a direct-hit run-out!

Shardul Thakur cleaned up Tim Southee with a short ball, and Bumrah returned in the death overs to take out Jamieson with another deadly yorker.

The final wicket? Chahal's 5th! Hamish Bennett skied one straight to deep midwicket, and Gill made no mistake.

The third and final match of the series was here. With the series already in our favor, this match was about finishing strong. However, New Zealand had other plans. They were determined to win at least one game in the series, and their intent was clear right from the toss.

Kane Williamson won the toss and chose to bat first. The pitch looked like a batting paradise—flat, true bounce, and perfect for stroke play. We knew we had a long day ahead.

As soon as their openers, Martin Guptill and Henry Nicholls, walked onto the field, they looked in supreme touch. The first few overs from Bumrah and me were disciplined, but the Kiwi batsmen were patient. They took their time to settle, rotating the strike well and putting the occasional bad ball away for boundaries.

After the first powerplay, New Zealand was already at 72/0, looking dangerous. Guptill was aggressive, punishing anything slightly off length, while Nicholls was technically sound, anchoring the innings.

By the 20th over, both batsmen had reached their fifties, and we were desperate for a breakthrough. Chahal was brought into the attack, and he created a couple of close chances, but luck was on their side.

The real damage came in the next 15 overs. Guptill and Nicholls accelerated, sending the ball to all parts of the ground. Guptill smashed a six over extra cover off Shardul, bringing up his century in just 92 balls. A few overs later, Nicholls followed suit, completing his hundred in 108 balls.

The frustration was evident on our faces. Even our best deliveries were being met with precision. Kane Williamson walked in at number three and continued the onslaught. He played his usual elegant strokes, keeping the scoreboard ticking with smart singles and well-placed boundaries.

At the end of 50 overs, New Zealand posted a mammoth total—344/5.

Indian Bowling Performance:

Jasprit Bumrah: 3 wickets, 10 overs, 58 runs.

Aarav: 2 wickets, 9 overs, 62 runs

. Yuzvendra Chahal: 4 wickets, 10 overs, 72 runs.

Ravindra Jadeja: 1 wicket, 10 overs, 74 runs.

Shardul Thakur: 0 wickets, 10 overs, 71 runs

We had done well in the final overs, pulling things back slightly, but the damage was done. 344 was a massive total, and we needed something special to chase it down.

India's Chase

Prithvi Shaw and Shubman Gill opened for us, knowing that a flying start was crucial. Unfortunately, the New Zealand pacers were relentless.

Tim Southee got the early breakthrough, dismissing Shaw for just 9 runs. The ball swung late, clipped his inside edge, and crashed into the stumps. India 15/1.

Gill tried to counter-attack with a crisp cover drive, but Kyle Jamieson had him trapped LBW in the next over. India 24/2.

The pressure mounted as Virat Kohli walked in. We needed him to play a captain's knock. He began fluently, driving elegantly through the covers and flicking with class. Just when things were stabilizing, disaster struck.

Kohli tried to flick a length delivery from Santner but got a leading edge. The ball ballooned up, and Williamson took an easy catch at mid-off. India 48/3.

I felt a chill down my spine as I jogged onto the field. We were in trouble.

Shreyas Iyer joined me at the crease. The required run rate was climbing rapidly. We needed to play smartly—take calculated risks and avoid unnecessary shots.

For the next 15 overs, we focused on strike rotation. Iyer played some brilliant shots, using his wrists effectively against the spinners. I pulled a short delivery from Jamieson to the midwicket boundary, and that gave me confidence. We kept the scoreboard moving and brought the asking rate back under control.

At the 30th over mark, India was 182/3.

However, just when we thought we were back in the game, New Zealand struck again. Iyer mistimed a pull shot and was caught at deep square leg. I tried to accelerate but edged one to the keeper while trying to upper-cut a bouncer.

India 202/4.

With 200 runs still needed from the last 12 overs, it was up to Rishabh Pant and Ravi Jadeja. The duo had only one approach—attack.

Pant unleashed his reverse sweeps and unorthodox shots, while Jadeja was all power, smashing sixes down the ground. They added a crucial 85-run partnership in just 40 balls, bringing the required run rate within reach.

Pant fell for 47, but Jadeja continued. With some late fireworks from Thakur, we reached 317/6 at the end of 50 overs.

India had lost the match, but we had won the series 2-1. The dressing room was filled with mixed emotions—disappointment at the loss, but immense pride in our fight.

Kohli, despite his early dismissal, gathered the team.

"Boys, We may have lost today, but we showed our character. Winning the series against New Zealand in their own backyard is no small feat. Hold your heads high!"

As we packed up and left the stadium, I couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment. This was just the beginning of greater battles to come.