

Cricket 143

Chapter 143

August 2, 2020

A dim glow flickered across the room as the television screen cast shadows on the walls. The air was still, save for the occasional hum of the ceiling fan overhead. Aarav sat cross-legged on the couch, remote in hand, eyes fixed on the TV. The tension of the past few months had been unbearable. Cricket had come to a standstill, and with it, his dreams had been put on hold.

BREAKING NEWS!

A sharp voice cut through the silence.

"I'm Vimal from News7, bringing you exclusive updates on the IPL! As previously announced in March, the IPL had been postponed due to the pandemic. However, after extensive discussions between the BCCI, Indian Government and the UAE Cricket Association, the tournament is officially set to start in the United Arab Emirates! The confirmed venues are Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi!"

Aarav's grip on the remote tightened.

"No spectators will be allowed this season, and strict health protocols will be implemented to ensure player safety. Here are the major changes for IPL 2020:

Players are prohibited from using saliva to shine the ball.

All matches will be played in empty stadiums.

Captains will not shake hands after the toss.

Teams will be allowed replacements if a player tests positive for COVID-19."

The news anchor's voice carried a sense of finality, yet an undercurrent of excitement remained.

Aarav leaned back against the sofa, a slow smile forming on his lips. His mind raced, thoughts cascading in a torrent of emotions. It's happening. The IPL is back.

As he remembered, IPL is in UAE!

He would rewrite history and future. He would win the IPL for RCB.

Aarav's mind drifted to the endless training sessions, the grueling early mornings, the sweat-drenched afternoons. The sleepless nights where he visualized victory, the sound of the ball meeting the bat, the roar of the crowd—though this time, there would be none. No electrifying chants. No deafening applause.

But none of that mattered.

He was no longer just a hopeful player. He was one of the best now. He had earned his place. And in the UAE, he would prove it.

He thought of Chinnaswamy Stadium, RCB's homeground. The smaller boundaries had always been a paradise for batters, a nightmare for bowlers. But the UAE? The massive grounds of Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi? This would play into his hands.

He smirked. My time has come.

Aarav practically sprinted towards the dining table, where his parents were finishing dinner. His father, looked up from his plate, adjusting his reading glasses. His mother, eyed him with curiosity.

"What's with the excitement, beta?" she asked, setting down her spoon.

Aarav took a deep breath, unable to contain his exhilaration. "It's happening! The IPL is finally happening in the UAE!"

His father's expression remained unreadable. "I know you've been training for this moment. But... are you sure? With everything going on? The pandemic is still serious."

His mother's forehead creased with concern. "Aarav, playing is one thing, but your safety is important too. Are they taking proper precautions?"

Aarav nodded vigorously. "Yes, Maa. The BCCI has strict protocols. Bio-secure bubbles, regular testing, no crowds—everything is under control."

His father exhaled deeply. "I trust you, son. If this is what you want, then go and give it your best."

His mother sighed, reaching for his hand. "Just promise me you'll be careful?"

Aarav smiled, squeezing her fingers. "I promise, Maa."

Aarav stretched his arms as he lay on his bed, his phone buzzing with an incoming message. The IPL was back, and this time, it was different. They had experience now. They knew the game, the pressure, and what it meant to be on the grandest stage of them all.

A message popped up in the group chat:

IPL Boys Group

Abhishek (SRH): guys, it's happening! Another season, another shot at glory!

Jaiswal (RR): Finally! Feels like we've been waiting forever.

Gill (KKR): More like eternity! The break was good, but man, I missed the game.

Aarav (RCB): Same here. But this time, we're not rookies anymore. We know the drill!

Abhishek: Haha, yeah! And this time, no more 'newbie' treatment from the seniors. We're the experienced ones now!

Jaiswal: Bro, I swear, last time they made me carry their kits like I was an intern!

Gill: Welcome to the IPL initiation, my friend. We all went through it.

Aarav laughed, reminiscing about how last season, senior players would tease them, asking them to do simple chores just for fun. But this time, things had changed. They had earned their places, and they were ready to prove themselves again.

Abhishek: So, when's the flight schedule?

Jaiswal: Franchise will send a car to pick us up, then Mumbai, then UAE.

Gill: Yeah, direct flight from Mumbai. September 1st.

Aarav: Then quarantine till the 15th or 16th.

Jaiswal: 14 days of sitting in a hotel room... gonna be torture!

Abhishek: Tell me about it! At least last time we had fresh legs. Now we'll be stuck in a room before the real game starts.

Gill: Haha, but imagine how good it'll feel stepping on the field again!

Aarav: Oh man, that feeling is unmatched. The first training session after quarantine is gonna hit different!

The excitement in the group was palpable. After a long break, they were returning to the sport they loved, with the experience of an entire season behind them.

Aarav was still grinning at his phone when another message popped up.

Shradha: So, Mr. Star Cricketer, ready for another season?

Aarav smirked, leaning against his bed's headrest.

Aarav: Of course! The only thing missing is your support!

Shradha: Oh really? And why would I support RCB when my dad is Sachin, X-captain of MI and you know we had deep bond with the MI franchise!

Aarav: Come on, Shrads! Just this once?

Shradha: Hmm... let me think... nah! Sorry, I was born into MI, I bleed blue.

Aarav: Not fair! What about me? Don't I matter?

Shradha: You matter, but not more than my dad's legacy. Sorry, bub.

Aarav: This is betrayal of the highest order.

Shradha: Oh, shut up! You'll be fine. But promise me one thing?

Aarav: Anything.

Shradha: Take care of yourself. No recklessness, no unnecessary risks.

Aarav smiled at her concern.

Aarav: Come on, I have to do something! That's literally part of my game!

Shradha: Yeah, yeah. Just don't get injured or be infected, okay?

Aarav: Fine, only if you promise to wear an RCB jersey just once.

Shradha: Never happening!

Aarav: I'll win you over someday.

Shradha: Good luck with that!

The Journey to IPL 2021

September 1 arrived faster than expected. Aarav stood at his doorstep, his suitcase ready. His parents watched him with pride and concern.

"Be safe, beta," his mother said, hugging him tightly.

His father also gave him a hug this time. "This is your season, I have seen you train, Aarav. Play with your heart."

A black SUV arrived to pick him up. He hopped in, heading to the airport, where he met the others.

The flight to UAE was smooth, but the real challenge lay ahead—the dreaded quarantine. Fourteen days of isolation before they could even touch a cricket ball.

Day after day, they found ways to pass the time—video calls, indoor workouts, binge-watching series.

Then, finally, September 16 arrived. The doors opened. The real work began.

Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) SQUAD: -

Batsman

- Virat Kohli

- Aron Finch

- Devdutt Padikkal

ALL ROUNDERS

- Aarav Pathak

- Moeen Ali

- Shivam Dube

- Pavan Deshpande

- Chris Morris

- Shahbaz Ahmed

- Pawan Negi

- Isuru Udana

- Washington Sundar

WICKET KEEPERS

- AB de Villiers

- Parthiv Patel

- Josh Philippe

BOWLERS

- Mohammed Siraj

- Yuzvendra Chahal

- Navdeep Saini

- Dale Steyn

- Umesh Yadav

- Adam Zampa

The sun blazed over the lush green training ground as the Royal Challengers Bangalore squad assembled for their first official practice session after quarantine. The anticipation was high, the energy electrifying, and the hunger for success evident in every player's eyes.

Coach Simon Katich stood in the center, holding his clipboard, while Mike Hesson, the Director of Cricket Operations, observed from a distance, hands folded across his chest. Today's session was all about setting the tone for the tournament.

"Alright, lads! Enough of the rest, time to get back to work," Katich called out. "We're starting with the batting drills. Virat, Finch, AB, Moeen, Aarav – you guys are in the first set. Nets are ready. Let's go!"

Aarav took a deep breath.

As he walked towards the nets, he found himself standing alongside legends—Virat Kohli, Aaron Finch, AB de Villiers, and Moeen Ali.

Virat was the first to pad up. The moment he stepped into the nets, everyone around stopped to watch. He was a master of the game, his footwork precise, his shots calculated. Siraj steamed in, bowled a sharp delivery, and in an instant, Virat had flicked it off his pads for a perfect on-drive.

"Classic Kohli," muttered Finch, watching in admiration.

AB de Villiers was next. As expected, he was unpredictable. He switched stances mid-shot, played innovative strokes, and made it look effortless. Even the bowlers shook their heads in disbelief.

Then came Aarav's turn.

He adjusted his gloves, took a deep breath, and walked into the nets. Dale Steyn marked his run-up. The legendary pacer charged in, and the first ball was a fiery yorker. Aarav reacted just in time, jamming his bat down to block it.

"Good response, kid!" Steyn called out.

The next delivery was short. Aarav anticipated it early and rocked back, pulling it ferociously over mid-wicket. The ball sailed over the net, disappearing into the practice ground.

"Whoa!" Kohli exclaimed. "That's a serious shot!"

Aarav's confidence grew. Steyn bowled again, this time a fuller length, outside off. Aarav stepped out and drove it straight past the bowler. The sound of the ball meeting the bat was crisp, clean, and powerful.

Mike Hesson exchanged glances with Katich. "He's improved his footwork significantly," Hesson noted.

Aarav continued, facing deliveries from Siraj and Navdeep Saini. He played cover drives, flicks, and cuts, showcasing his range. Then came another short-pitched delivery. Without hesitation, Aarav stepped forward and launched it high over long-on.

Then it was again Steyn's turn to bowl. The veteran pacer had been observing Aarav carefully. He now wanted to push him to his limits. "Aarav, get back in. Let's see how you handle real pace," Steyn said with a grin.

Steyn charged in with full force. The first delivery was a brutal bouncer. Aarav swayed back just in time, avoiding the ball. The next one was full, swinging in late. Aarav adjusted and flicked it past mid-wicket for four.

Kohli and Finch clapped. "That's the way!" Kohli shouted.

For the next ten minutes, Aarav faced one of the most intense spells of his career. Steyn, Siraj, and Navdeep took turns bowling at him, varying their pace, length, and movement. Aarav had to constantly adapt, focusing on his technique and reflexes.

Finch whistled. "Where was this version of you last season, Aarav?"

"Somewhere in quarantine, I guess," Aarav laughed.

Katich clapped. "Alright, that's enough Aarav, move to bowling!"

Aarav switched gears, preparing to bowl.

His first spell was against Kohli.

He took a deep breath, adjusted his grip, and ran in. The first ball was on a good length, outside off. Kohli judged it well and defended. Aarav smiled. He knew he had to do better.

He ran in again. This time, he bowled a sharp inswinger. Kohli looked to drive but missed it completely. The ball zipped past the bat, missing the off stump by inches.

"Damn, that moved!" Kohli said, adjusting his stance.

Next up was Finch. Aarav decided to test his patience. He bowled two dot balls, keeping it tight, and then fired in a yorker. Finch barely managed to get his bat down in time.

"That's some serious bowling, mate," Finch admitted.

AB de Villiers came next. This was the real challenge. Aarav bowled a slower one, disguising it well. AB misread it and mistimed his shot.

"Smart variation!" Siraj called out.

Next, Moeen Ali. Aarav ran in, bowled a perfect leg-cutter that deceived him. Moeen nodded in approval. "That's a proper delivery, Aarav."

By the end of the session, Aarav had left an impression. He had outperformed expectations in both batting and bowling. He was exhausted, but the fire in his eyes burned brighter than ever.

As the team gathered around, Katich spoke. "That's what I like to see! Great effort today, boys. And Aarav, outstanding work. Keep this up, and this could be your season."

Mike Hesson added, "You've improved significantly, Aarav. But remember, consistency is key. Keep working hard."

Aarav nodded. This was just the beginning. He had tasted what it felt like to stand among legends, and now, he wanted more.

Aarav smiled. He was ready for whatever came next.

The morning after an intense training session, Aarav woke up to a phone buzzing with notifications. Something was happening. As he grabbed his phone and scrolled through his Twitter feed, he saw the clip from his previous podcast for RCB social media management.

He had said it. Boldly, confidently, and now, it was everywhere.

Royal Challengers Bangalore - Official Twitter & Instagram Post:

⌚ BREAKING NEWS ⌚

Video from RCB PR TEAM, a Podcast of Aarav and Mr. Nags!

This was the clip taken from between the whole conversation.

Hey RCB fans, don't worry, Aarav Pathak is here! After a lot of training in quarantine, I will take care of everything and bring the title of IPL Champion 2020 to RCB. 🏆🔥

A gift from me and the team to Virat bhaiya, AB bhaiya, and also, although not in the team, Gayle too. So, don't worry! Ee sala cup namde! 💪💥

(he said the same words in the podcase in both English & Kannada) IN🔥

Within minutes, the video exploded! Thousands of retweets, likes, and replies flooded in. Fans, cricket analysts, and even former cricketers reacted to Aarav's confidence. While many supported his passion, others trolled him for being too overconfident.

🗣 @RCB_FAN: "Aarav bhai, finally someone with guts! 💪🔥 The confidence is top-tier! Let's win this thing! #EeSalaCupNamde"

🗣 @Aarav_GF: "Marry me, Aarav! 😊❤️ છુટું વાત કરીએ! Finally, someone who believes! #RCBForLife"

🗣 @Aarav_ke_baccho_ki_maa: "I don't know who needs to hear this, but Aarav is HIM! 🦁🔥 This is our year, RCB fans! #RCBFamily"

🗣 @ViratKohli_Stan: "Aarav is speaking Virat's language! 🦁 'Ee Sala Cup Namde' from his mouth feels so right! Let's go!"

🗣 @ABD_Magic: "Aarav x AB de Villiers = DEADLIEST DUO 🦁 Opponents better start shaking! #RCBWin2020"

🗣 @NammaRCB_Champions: "Finally, someone respects Bengaluru fans! Thank you for speaking Kannada, Aarav! Ee sala cup namde for real! 🦁"

🗣 @RajkumarRCB: "RCB forever, bro! Aarav showing respect to our city is the best thing ever! ❤️ છુટું વાત કરીએ! #BengaluruLovesAarav"

👉 @Kannada_Tiger: "First time an RCB player has spoken Kannada in an official statement! Aarav already a legend! 🏆🔥"

Of course, rival fans and skeptics had their say too.

👉 @CSK_Thala7: "Lmao 🤣 Another overconfident RCB player. 'Ee Sala Cup Namde' since 2008, and yet... nothing. 😂😂😂"

👉 @MI_PaltanChampions: "RCB fans get hyped every year just to watch their team choke in playoffs. Aarav, let's see if you can even make it that far. 😅💔"

👉 @KKR_Aunty: "Bhai, confidence is good, but jinxing is real. Don't jinx RCB again. 😅🔥"

👉 @SRH_Fire: "Not a single IPL trophy yet but talking like they are prime Australia. Sit down, kid. 💀"

Back at the RCB team hotel, Aarav entered the team lounge, where everyone was glued to their phones.

Virat Kohli smirked and turned his phone towards Aarav, showing the trending page. "You just blew up the internet, champ!"

AB de Villiers chuckled. "Didn't know we had a PR expert among us. 'A gift to Virat and Gayle?' Love it."

Chris Gayle, who wasn't even in the team anymore, called Aarav personally. "Boy, you got guts! I like it. But you better back it up on the field, yeah?"

Mike Hesson walked in, arms crossed. "Aarav, you do realize you've put a massive target on your back, right? Every bowler in the league is going to come at you now."

Aarav grinned. "Good. Let them come. I'll be ready."

Simon Katich shook his head. "This kid is fearless."

The media went into a frenzy. Every sports channel and YouTube channel covered Aarav's statement. News headlines flashed:

■ "Aarav Pathak Promises IPL Title to RCB Fans – Overconfidence or True Belief?"

■ "Aarav Speaks in Kannada! Wins Bengaluru Hearts Instantly!"

■ "RCB's Young Gun Challenges IPL Giants – Will He Deliver?"

Social media flooded with memes:

⌚ A picture of Thanos saying "Fine, I'll do it myself" – captioned: "Aarav after RCB fails every year."

⌚ A picture of Virat Kohli laughing with the caption: "Virat bhaiya watching Aarav take all the pressure off him."

⌚ A meme of MS Dhoni smirking, with the caption: "RCB player guarantees title. CSK fans: 'Acha?'"

Aarav knew this was just the beginning. His words had ignited a fire in fans and rivals alike. Now, the real challenge was proving it on the field.

He clenched his fists. "No more words. Time to let the bat and ball do the talking."

As the team geared up for their first match, all eyes were on one player – Aarav Pathak and the RCB team.

Would he deliver on his promise?

To Be Continued...