

# KING OF CRICKET

## Chapter 16: The Zonal Tournament Begins

The day started with an announcement that filled the air with anticipation. Coach Ashwin called us to the pavilion and stood with a whiteboard in hand, revealing the fixtures for the Zonal Tournament.

"Listen up, boys. This is how it's going to work. The tournament is divided into a group stage and knockouts. You'll be playing against top academies, and your first match is against Thane Cricket Academy at their home ground. After that, you face Pune Strikers Academy and Nashik Warriors Academy in the group stage. The top two teams will advance to the state-level championship, which will decide the winner of the entire tournament."

The stakes were clear, but what he said next was even more important.

"Now remember, selection for the U16 Vijay Merchant Trophy isn't just about winning. Even if we lose at the zonal level, players showing the best technique, temperament, and consistency can still make the cut. This is your chance to shine individually, even as we play as a team."

His words fueled our determination. Every run scored, every wicket taken could be a stepping stone toward the dream of representing Mumbai.

We arrived at the Thane Cricket Academy Stadium, a well-maintained ground with a lush outfield and a vibrant atmosphere despite the relatively small crowd. As we stepped onto the pitch for warm-ups, I could feel the pressure mounting.

The opposition captain, Ishaan Deshmukh, a wiry, confident teenager, came forward for the toss. It was my first toss in a Zonal Tournament as a captain. The coin spun in the air, and Ishaan called "Heads." It was Tails.

"We'll bat first," Ishaan announced with a broad smile.

I nodded. "Good luck."

We jogged back to regroup. Coach Ashwin clapped me on the back. "Aarav, set the tone with disciplined bowling. Make every delivery count."

## First Innings: Thane Cricket Academy Batting

The players took their positions, and the atmosphere was electric. The commentator's voice boomed over the loudspeakers, a baritone with the intensity of Ravi Shastri.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Zonal Tournament! It's the Shivaji Park Cricket Academy versus the Thane Cricket Academy. The stage is set, the crowd is buzzing, and here comes Aarav Pathak to lead his team!"

## Over 1: Kamal's Opening Attack

"Kamal with the new ball, a young left-arm pacer known for his speed and swing. The first ball... and he steams in! Right-arm over the wicket to the right-handed opener, Rohan Jadhav."

Kamal ran in with purpose and delivered a perfect outswinger. The ball pitched on a good length and moved away just enough to beat the bat.

"Oh, that's a peach of a delivery! Early signs of swing here from Kamal. The batsman had no clue!"

Rohan defended cautiously for the next three balls but mistimed the fifth delivery, which clipped his pad and rolled to fine leg for a leg bye.

"And Thane is off the mark! A leg bye, but they'll take it."

Over 3: Aarav Strikes

I brought myself into the attack in the third over. The opener, Rohan, had started finding his rhythm, hitting a couple of boundaries through the covers.

"Here comes the captain, Aarav Pathak, left-arm medium pace. He's known for his accuracy and sharp cricketing brain. Can he break this opening stand?"

Second ball—good length, angling across. Rohan went for an ambitious drive but nicked it to the keeper.

"Edged and TAKEN! That's the breakthrough they were looking for! Rohan Jadhav has to walk back. Brilliant captaincy from Aarav, and what a delivery!"

## Middle Overs: Spin Magic

As the innings progressed, I introduced Aniket and Yash, our spinners, into the attack. The opposition's middle order was cautious but effective.

Aniket struck in his first over with a flighted delivery that tempted the batsman into a lofted shot, only to be caught at long-on.

"GOT HIM! The spinners are weaving their magic here. Aniket tossed it up, and the batsman couldn't resist. Another wicket down!"

Yash followed with an over of pinpoint accuracy, frustrating the batsmen with sharp turn and bounce. His third delivery was a beauty—a classic off-break that sneaked through the gap to rattle the stumps.

"Clean bowled! Oh, that's a gem of a delivery! Yash is turning it on here at the Thane Cricket Academy!"

## Death Overs: A Fierce Fightback

Thane's lower order fought back fiercely in the death overs, with their captain, Ishaan, leading the charge. He smashed a couple of sixes off Arjun's over, one of them a monstrous hit over long-on.

"That's outta here! Ishaan Deshmukh has decided to take matters into his own hands. What a clean strike!"

Despite their resurgence, Kamal returned in the final over to restrict the flow of runs with a couple of yorkers. Thane Cricket Academy finished their innings at 158 for 8 in 20 overs.

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As we prepared to chase 159, Coach Ashwin gave us a simple message:  
"Play smart, but don't forget to play bold."

Over 1: Mayank Falls Early

Mayank and Abhishek walked out to open. The first over from Thane's left-arm pacer, Prithvi Naik, was fiery. Mayank edged the second ball to slip.

"Oh, he's gone! Mayank departs early, and Mumbai Cricket Academy is one down. What a start for Thane!"

I joined Abhishek at the crease, and we steadied the innings. Abhishek played some delightful flicks through mid-wicket, while I rotated the strike and picked up boundaries with cuts and drives.

"Classic cover drive from Aarav! That's as good as it gets. Pure timing, pure class."

Thane introduced their spinners, and the runs dried up. The pressure mounted, and Abhishek fell trying to clear the ropes.

"High in the air... and TAKEN! Abhishek goes, and this match is wide open again!"

Death Overs: The Final Push

With 40 runs needed off the last four overs, Rahul and I decided to attack. I launched two sixes off Ishaan's over, one over mid-wicket and the other straight down the ground.

"That's a BIG one! Aarav Pathak is turning on the heat. The captain is leading from the front!"

Rahul, too, joined the party with a flurry of boundaries.

With three runs needed off the final two balls, I faced Prithvi Naik. He bowled a full delivery on leg stump, and I flicked it through square leg for a boundary.

"AND THAT'S IT! Mumbai Cricket Academy wins their first Zonal match! Aarav Pathak finishes it in style. What a performance from the captain!"

The team celebrated the victory, but we knew this was just the beginning. Coach Ashwin reminded us, "This is step one. Keep your focus. The selectors are watching."



With one win under our belt, we were ready for the challenges ahead. The dream of the Vijay Merchant Trophy felt closer than ever.

Author's Note:- we are back baby, 1100+ words chapter!!