

Cricket 165

Chapter 165

The Adelaide Oval shimmered under the pink glow of twilight, as if the gods themselves had painted the sky in anticipation of battle. It was a scene of deceptive serenity—postcard perfection masking a cauldron of nerves and unspoken dreams. As the Indian openers, Mayank Agarwal and Prithvi Shaw, emerged from the pavilion, Aarav stood near the threshold of the dressing room, helmet in hand, gloves strapped, heart pounding like a war drum.

The buzz in the stadium was electric, a humming anticipation that sat thick in the air like the last breath before a thunderstorm. Over 25,000 fans filled the stands, some waving the Tricolour with proud defiance, others downing their second or third round of beer. Everyone, regardless of allegiance, enjoying the game.

{As for the crowd, yes there was crowd, approx. 27000 people on average in 5 days!}

Mitchell Starc, Australia's left-arm spearhead and certified pink-ball magician, marked his run-up with purpose. The ball in his hand gleamed like a polished ruby under the floodlights. Few bowlers were as menacing under lights as Starc. Few moments tested a batter like facing him with a new Kookaburra under twilight.

Ball 1 – Starc launched into his first delivery like a cannonball. The pink ball pitched on the sixth stump and shaped away, a teasing seamer. Shaw, cautious, let it pass. Tim Paine behind the stumps collected it with a comforting thud. A safe leave. But the buzz grew louder. The first punch hadn't landed, but the fighters had entered the ring.

Ball 2 – Starc again. More pace. More menace.

An inswinger. Good length. Shaw's eyes lit up. He went for the drive, feet unsure, balance uncertain. The bat came down a shade late.

Inside edge. Timber. The off stump cartwheeled.

The Adelaide crowd erupted. A guttural roar of satisfaction from the home fans. Shaw, bowled for a duck. India: 0 for 1.

The Australians huddled. Slaps on backs, smirks of confidence. The first blow had landed.

From the commentary box, Matthew Wade's voice crackled with excitement. "There it is! The young debutant's up next, and what a situation to walk into—new ball, under lights, against arguably the fiercest pace trio in the world. This is a baptism by fire!"

Isa Guha, ever the balanced analyst, chimed in, "Yeah, he's an incredible cricketer, no doubt. But this right here—this is the ultimate test. Let's see what he's really made of."

Aarav's POV

I felt a hand clasp my shoulder firmly. Virat Bhaiya. His eyes met mine—calm, fierce, knowing.

"You know what to do," he said simply.

I nodded. My legs moved on their own. The noise faded to a low hum. My heartbeat, once frantic, now felt like a steady war drum. My bat suddenly felt both heavy and sacred. Each step down the stairs to the field felt like walking into destiny.

The sky above had deepened into indigo. The pink ball in Starc's hand glowed like a comet waiting to strike. I took guard. Tapped my bat. Glanced around. First slip. Second slip. Second Gully Point. Short leg. Australia's hunting pack was ready.

My breath steadied. The stillness inside me grew. This was it.

Ball 3 – Starc charged in. A short ball angled at my ribs.

I didn't think. My body moved on instinct. I loosened my stance, swayed slightly back, rolled my wrists over the ball and pulled.

CRACK.

The sound of sweet timing echoed.

The ball soared. Deep square leg turned to chase, then gave up.

The crowd gasped. Then erupted.

SIX.

I didn't raise my bat. I didn't celebrate. I breathed. Calmly.

The dressing room rose. Virat clapped. Ravi shastri let out a cheer. The Indian dugout celebrated for me playing first ball for India in Test cricket.

Ball 4 – Starc responded with a thunderbolt yorker.

I was ready. Bat came down in a blur. Met the ball just in time. Opened the face slightly.

The ball sped between cover and mid-off.

FOUR.

Isa Guha's voice crackled in delight. "What a cover drive! A shot carved through the smallest of gaps. Pure class. Pure timing."

Two balls remained in the over. Both outside off. I let them go. Controlled. Measured.

End of the over: India 10/1.

As I walked to the non-striker's end, Mayank greeted me with a grin. "Well then. Talk about an entrance."

I chuckled, more to ease my nerves. "Couldn't have asked for a better welcome committee."

But inside, the adrenaline buzzed like a swarm of bees. This wasn't just my debut. This was my proving ground.

Hazlewood began from the other end. Immaculate line and length. His first delivery to Mayank was textbook: pitching on off, forcing a careful defense. The ball kissed the bat's edge without drama. But the intent was clear.

The over passed quietly—a maiden. India held at 10/1.

Next came Starc again. I read his eyes as he approached. Another bouncer? A yorker? No. Short of a length. Rising. I let it pass, just under my shoulder. No flash. No risk.

Next delivery—fuller. I leaned in, timed it gently into the covers. Called immediately.

"Yes!"

A clean single. 11/1.

It wasn't flashy, but it felt just as good as the six. It meant I was reading him. Finding rhythm.

Over the next 30 minutes, the tempo steadied. I focused on watching the ball until the very last moment. Mayank played with maturity, soaking pressure, rotating strike when needed.

By the tenth over, I had reached 21 off 28. Mayank stood firm on 13 off 32. Starc's venom had been momentarily tamed. Hazlewood probed. Cummins warmed up. Lyon remained unused, crouching like a spider at the edge of the web.

Drinks were called.

I dropped to one knee, gulping from the bottle passed by team member. My hands trembled slightly.

Shraddha's red thread was tight on my wrist. I kissed it lightly. (This is added at a spur of the moment, just as a good luck charm on his wrist, inside his gloves so hidden from the world till he removes his gloves!)

"You're doing good, debut boy," Mayank smiled, wiping sweat from his brow.

I nodded. "Trying not to let the moment get too big."

He leaned closer. "Don't forget this feeling—the lights, the fear, the fire. This is where you're forged."

I looked around. The stadium—so loud, so alive. Cameras panned. Flags waved. Somewhere in the stands, a little boy probably held his bat like I once did, dreaming of being here.

And I smiled, wide and real.

The twilight deepened, shadows stretching like long fingers across the vast canvas of the Adelaide Oval. The crowd, a sea of restless energy, buzzed with anticipation. After the brief drinks break, all eyes turned again to the field. Pat Cummins stood tall near the boundary line, his frame silhouetted against the lights as he rolled his muscular shoulders and jogged in place, preparing for the battle ahead.

He was about to deliver the 11th over.

Aarav returned to the strike, his face a blend of determination and calm. He adjusted his helmet slightly, tapped the bat twice, and sank into his stance. His eyes were laser-focused on Cummins. Everything else—the noise, the pressure, the enormity of the moment—faded into the background. There was only the bowler, the ball, and the intent.

Aarav's POV

Cummins charged in, his run-up like a predator's sprint. The pink ball gleamed ominously under the floodlights.

First ball—yorker. Sharp and searing.

But I was ready. I saw it early, anticipated its fury. Dropped my bat down as if splitting a log. The connection was pure.

CRACK.

It raced like lightning. Straight down the ground. Past Cummins, past mid-off. No fielder dared move.

Boundary.

The stadium erupted.

Matthew Wade's voice crackled through the commentary speakers. "What a piece of timing! Like an arrow fired from a longbow! Straight down the ground—this lad is playing with confidence beyond his years!"

I didn't show it. No smile. Just a brief nod, a tap of gloves with Mayank. Eyes still on the bowler. There was more to do.

The rest of the over was clinical. Cummins wasn't rattled. He recalibrated. Good lengths, wider angles, short ones rising into my ribs. I swayed. Blocked. Let them go. A maiden followed the boundary ball.

At the end of it, I was on 25 off 34. The scoreboard read: India 40/1.

Mayank and I met mid-pitch. We didn't need to speak. Our silence was an understanding—we were in this together.

The next phase of the match found its rhythm. Hazlewood took over from Starc, his deliveries relentless, tight, probing. Cummins switched ends. The duo hunted like seasoned wolves. But Mayank was a wall—his bat a shield forged in patience and precision. His forward defense echoed like a drumbeat of resistance.

Together, we held.

The Australians sledged. The fielders closed in like a tightening net. But we had built a fortress—not of brute strength, but of resolve and grit.

I remember the 14th over vividly. Hazlewood bowled one just outside off—inviting, dangerous. I leaned forward, soft hands, delicate wrists, and guided it between gully and point. The ball skipped across the turf and kissed the ropes.

In the 16th, Starc returned. I shuffled across the stumps, read the angle, and flicked the ball with finesse past square leg. It didn't race, but we ran hard—two more.

Every run felt like a punch to the chest of the opposition.

And then Mayank began to bloom. A glorious cover drive off Cummins left the crowd sighing in admiration. Then a fine glance off his hips added more. His innings wasn't flashy—it was classical, dependable. Like the hum of a well-oiled engine.

By the time we reached the 20-over milestone, something had changed.

The scoreboard told the story: India 80/1.

I stood at 49—not out. So close to my first major milestone.

Mayank was steady on 29—his rhythm matching mine.

The crowd sensed it. Cheers roared with every run. Tricolours waved from the stands. A sea of blue lit up under the Adelaide lights.

We touched gloves again.

"One more," Mayank grinned.

On the dressing room balcony, the mood had shifted from worry to respect. Virat stood like a statue, arms crossed, chin tilted slightly upward. His eyes were sharp, intense, but they held a quiet pride. Behind him, Shastri was speaking animatedly, gesturing toward the pitch.

The pace quartet huddled near the umpire. Discussions, frowns, strategy changes. But there was no panic—only awareness. And then, from the boundary, a figure started moving.

Nathan Lyon.

The off-spinner removed his cap and began his routine. Calm stretches, subtle shadow-bowling, loosening his fingers with meticulous care. He was a craftsman preparing his tools. The way he moved, the aura around him—it was unmistakable.

Spin was coming.

But that was for another time.

For now, I looked around.

The lights reflected off my helmet grill. The bat felt like an extension of my arm. My pads were sweat-soaked, but I didn't notice.

The pink ball gleamed under the floodlights, spinning slowly in the calloused fingers of Nathan Lyon as he stood at the top of his mark. But before the spinner could begin his spell, a different kind of heat began to rise on the field.

Tim Paine, crouched behind the stumps, leaned forward with a smirk. His words weren't loud, but they were sharp enough to pierce the cool night air.

"So, what do we have here? Baby boy, huh? First Test cap and already acting like he owns the place."

Travis Head at silly point chuckled, echoing the sentiment. "Looks like he brought his schoolbag to class. Hope he packed an excuse note too, in case Lyon gives him a spin test."

Steve Smith, positioned in the slips, joined in. "Reckon he'll last more than three balls against Lyon?"

The trio formed a wicked chorus, their voices weaving into a classic Australian sledging rhythm. But I didn't flinch. I didn't blink.

Aarav's POV

I stared.

Not a word. Not a shrug.

Just a cold, deliberate stare. Right through Paine. Right through Head. Right into Smith's grin. My silence wasn't weakness. It was challenge.

Nathan Lyon tossed the ball in the air, caught it, stepped in.

First ball of the over.

I stepped down the track—clean, measured steps. No panic. No rush.

The pitch met my bat like it had been waiting for it. Full face, high elbow. I lifted Lyon's off-spin over his head, the ball sailing into the stands like a comet.

SIX.

The crowd roared back to life.

The Indian flags in the stands rippled in celebration. The dugout stood, clapping. Virat, arms still folded, nodded once. Behind him, Jassi bhai grinned like a proud elder brother.

Fifty.

Aarav Pathak—55 runs off 71 balls.

I turned. Slowly. My eyes locked onto Paine.

Then Travis.

Then Smith.

And with a crooked smirk, I brought my left hand up to my helmet.

I cupped it behind my ear.

Bent forward slightly.

"What was that? Couldn't quite hear you."

They didn't reply. The sledge line broke. I could see the frustration bloom in Travis's narrowed eyes, in the tight press of Paine's lips.

Next ball.

Lyon again. Flighted. Tempting.

I moved forward, more decisively this time, and launched it high and wide over long-off.

Another SIX.

Commentary exploded.

Isa Guha's voice was electric. "This isn't just batting; this is a statement! What composure, what control, what confidence!"

Matthew Wade laughed in disbelief. "The kid's got fire. Pure fire."

I didn't celebrate much. Just a quiet nod to Mayank as I crossed over for the next delivery.

The field had gone silent.

Next ball—I played it soft. Nudged it to mid-on. Quick single.

Strike rotated.

Mayank took guard, calm as ever. His role wasn't about fireworks. It was about anchoring.

He took single on last ball.

The next over passed quietly. A maiden. Mayank's solid defense absorbed every delivery like an old oak tree bracing against a steady wind.

I stood at the non-striker's end, watching, breathing, recalibrating.

But the statement had been made.

They called me baby boy.

But I had answered in sixes.

Aarav at 62 in 73 balls!

Mayank at 30 in 47 balls!

INDIA 94/1.