

KING OF CRICKET

Chapter 17 - 17

The morning sun cast its golden rays across the pitch, signaling the perfect conditions for the second match of the Zonal Tournament. The toss was an event in itself, drawing a small but vibrant crowd of cricket enthusiasts to the stands. Both captains approached the pitch with determination written all over their faces. Aarav Pathak, confident after a hard-fought victory in the previous game, was up against the Pune Strikers Academy captain, Vishal Mehra.

The announcer's voice thundered through the stadium as the coin flipped high into the air. "Here we go, folks! Aarav Pathak calls it, and... it's Tails! Shivaji Park Academy wins the toss!"

The microphone swung toward Aarav as the announcer leaned in with his signature enthusiasm. "Aarav, congratulations on the toss! What's the decision?"

Aarav smiled, exuding calm authority. "We'll bat first. The pitch looks great for batting, and we'd like to put up a solid total."

"Confident words from the young skipper! All the best, Aarav!" The announcer turned to Vishal. "Vishal, not your day at the toss. How do you feel about bowling first?"

Vishal shrugged, grinning. "It's part of the game. We'll back our bowlers to restrict them and then chase down whatever total they set."

"Ladies and gentlemen, both captains are ready for a cracker of a contest. Fasten your seat belts. It's showtime!"

The crowd settled into their seats as the opening pair of Mayank Tiwari and Abhishek Sharma walked out to the middle. The air buzzed with excitement as the first ball was about to be bowled by the Pune Strikers Academy's star pacer, Raghav Bhatia.

"Here comes Raghav, steaming in like a freight train. First ball... and it's a peach! Pitched up, shaping away, and Abhishek lets it go. Smart leave to start things off."

The opening overs were cautious but steady. Abhishek began to find his rhythm, dispatching a short ball over square leg for the first boundary of the day.

"WHACK! Short, wide, and punished. That's the first four, and it's Abhishek Sharma opening his account in style!"

Mayank, on the other end, took his time settling in, flicking singles and rotating the strike. The duo built a steady partnership until the fifth over when Abhishek mistimed an aggressive shot off a slower ball and holed out to mid-on.

"Oh, that's in the air! Will it be taken? Yes, it is! Abhishek Sharma goes for 19, and the breakthrough comes for the Pune Strikers Academy. Raghav Bhatia strikes again!"

Aarav strode out to the middle, greeted by loud cheers from the Shivaji Park Academy supporters. He exchanged a quick fist bump with Mayank and took his position at the non-striker's end.

The crowd erupted as Mayank unleashed a crisp drive through the covers on the very next ball. "OH, THAT'S GLORIOUS! Mayank Tiwari with a cover drive straight out of the textbook. This young man is making his presence felt!"

But the celebration was short-lived. The very next delivery, Mayank set off for a quick single, but confusion between the wickets left Aarav stranded halfway down the pitch.

"Mix-up in the middle! This could be trouble... direct hit! Aarav Pathak is RUN OUT without facing a ball! Oh, you have to feel for the skipper. That is absolute heartbreak."

With Aarav gone, the pressure mounted. Wickets began to tumble as the middle order faltered against the disciplined bowling of the Pune Strikers Academy. But through it all, Mayank stood tall. He began to accelerate, finding the gaps with surgical precision and lofting the occasional delivery over the infield.

"That's down the ground... AND SIX! Mayank Tiwari is putting on an exhibition here. What a knock from the opener!"

As the innings progressed, Mayank reached his century with a flick to deep mid-wicket, earning a standing ovation from the crowd.

"THERE IT IS! A magnificent century for Mayank Tiwari! He raises his bat to acknowledge the applause. This is a knock to remember, folks. He's single-handedly keeping his team in the hunt."

The innings ended with Shivaji Park Academy posting a respectable total of 174 for 7. Mayank remained unbeaten on a scintillating 131, a masterclass in resilience and skill.

The second innings began with the Pune Strikers Academy's openers, Aryan Jaiswal and Kabir Khanna, striding out to chase down the target. Aarav handed the new ball to Kamal, who delivered a tight first over, conceding just three runs.

"Kamal starts strong with some excellent line and length. The batsmen are cautious, and rightly so. This chase is no walk in the park."

Aryan broke the shackles in the third over, smashing a short ball from Aarav over mid-wicket for six.

"BOOM! That's gone high, and it's gone long. Aryan Jaiswal announces his arrival with a towering six!"

Aarav struggled to find his rhythm, and the Pune Strikers Academy capitalized. His second over went for 14 runs, with Aryan and Kabir finding boundaries at will.

"Another one through the covers! Aarav Pathak is under pressure here. The batsmen are taking the attack to the captain."

The spinners were brought into the attack, and Yash provided the much-needed breakthrough, trapping Aryan in front with a beautifully flighted delivery.

"GOT HIM! Yash strikes! Aryan Jaiswal departs for a well-made 47. The Shivaji Park Academy needed that wicket, and boy, didn't Yash deliver!"

But the Pune Strikers Academy kept the scoreboard ticking, with their skipper Vishal Mehra leading the charge. Aarav returned for his second spell and

struck twice in quick succession, removing Kabir and another middle-order batsman.

"Aarav Pathak with a double strike! The captain redeems himself with two crucial wickets. This game is swinging back and forth like a pendulum!"

The equation came down to the final over. The Pune Strikers Academy needed four runs to win, with two wickets in hand. Aarav handed the ball to Kamal, placing his faith in the left-arm pacer.

"All eyes on Kamal now. Can he defend four runs? The tension is palpable!"

The first ball was a dot, a perfect yorker that the batsman could only dig out.

"THUNDERBOLT! That's right in the blockhole. Kamal is keeping his cool under immense pressure."

The second ball was a single, bringing the equation to three runs off four balls.

"Just a single. The Shivaji Park Academy is hanging by a thread here."

On the third ball, Kamal struck. A full delivery caught the batsman off guard, and the ball ricocheted onto the stumps.

"BOWLED HIM! Kamal delivers a knockout punch! This is turning into a thriller!"

The fourth ball was another dot, a slower delivery that deceived the batsman completely.

"Oh, he's played and missed! Kamal is showing nerves of steel!"

With three runs needed off two balls, the pressure was immense. The batsman swung hard at the fifth ball but could only manage a single.

"Down to the final ball, folks. Two runs to win, one ball to go. This is what cricket is all about!"

Kamal ran in for the last delivery, a perfect yorker that jammed into the batsman's pads. The non-striker attempted a risky single, but a lightning throw from Yash at mid-off found him short of his crease.

"DIRECT HIT! He's OUT! Shivaji Park Academy wins by ONE RUN! What a finish! What a match! Kamal has pulled off a miracle here!"

The players rushed onto the field, celebrating an incredible victory. The crowd erupted in applause, and the announcer's voice boomed one last time.

"Take a bow, Kamal! Take a bow, Shivaji Park Academy! This has been a match for the ages. The Zonal Tournament just keeps getting better and better!"