

## Cricket 171

### Chapter 171

A hush had settled over the crowd, a silence so deep you could hear the creak of the boundary boards and the distant hum of a seagull flying overhead. Moments earlier, the unthinkable had happened—Marnus Labuschagne's stumps lay in disarray, castled by a young debutant whose name was now reverberating through the oval stands. Aarav Pathak, wearing the India cap for the first time in Test cricket, had delivered a dream start. First ball. Clean bowled. The scoreboard read 17 for 3. The Australian dressing room was in shock. And walking out with grim determination and heavy responsibility was Travis Head.

Commentary - Harsha Bhogle:

"Well, well, the young man Aarav Pathak has lit up oval! First ball wicket, and now Australia find themselves in unfamiliar territory. Here comes Travis Head, with a mountain to climb. You could not have scripted this better."

Aarav POV:

I was trembling inside. But outside, I forced myself to breathe slowly, evenly. This was beyond anything I imagined. As I jogged back to my fielding position, Virat bhaiya met me halfway, clapping me hard on the back. "Stay grounded," he said, though his eyes were ablaze with pride and intensity. "This is the start of something great."

I turned around and watched Travis Head take guard. A seasoned campaigner, known for his counter-attacking play. I knew he wasn't going to go down easily. I rolled my shoulders, reset my grip, and approached my mark. The next five deliveries were precise—testing his technique with a teasing blend of inswingers and outswingers. The ball hissed in the air and jagged on the seam. Head, for his part, was solid. His bat came down straight, his movements compact. He offered no risks.

The final ball of the over, a gentle tap to point. Head called for a sharp single and kept the strike. Smart play. One run off the over.

Commentary - Isha Guha:

"That was a quality over from Aarav Pathak. Five probing deliveries followed by a single to rotate the strike. He's got the control, the temperament. This is a serious cricketer we're watching."

The 15th Over: Shami's Statement

Mohammed Shami steamed in from the other end. His smooth action, his natural seam movement, his pace—everything was dialed up. Travis Head was left fending at deliveries that bounced menacingly off the deck. One ball kissed past his outside edge, another thudded into his pads. He left what he could and blocked what he had to, but it was clear he wasn't breathing easy. The scoreboard crept to 18/3.

I was at mid-on, palms on knees, itching. Every ball felt like it belonged to me. Every dot ball added pressure. And then—Virat turned, locked eyes with me, and tossed the ball back.

16th Over Begins

Steven Smith was on strike. The master technician. he is in my opinion the best Test Batsman of this generation, even a level ahead Virat Kohli. His reputation preceding him like a shadow. But in an odd

twist of fate, despite standing at the crease for two overs, he hadn't faced a single delivery. Now, all of that changed.

Smith POV:

I tapped my bat. Took my guard. Across the pitch, I saw Aarav talking with Kohli, meticulously placing his field. I had faced him before—in ODIs and T20Is—and I knew he had fire. But this was pink-ball cricket. A different beast. The kid was tall, got bounce, and that inswinger to Marnus? It was a message.

I looked around. Slip cordon in place. Virat moved to second slip. Rahane at first. Mayank crouched in at gully. Pant behind the stumps, already chattering.

Commentary - Allan Border:

"Here comes Aarav Pathak for his second over. His first was nothing short of sensational. A wicket with his first delivery in Test cricket, just one run conceded. Now he faces Steve Smith. Massive moment."

Aarav POV:

Smith. The mountain. The ultimate test.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Reset my grip. My fingers pressed into the seam, firm but nimble. I could hear my heartbeat. I wanted this wicket. No—I needed it.

I took off.

Ball released.

The seam stood upright. It pitched just short of a length outside off stump. The bounce kicked in—more than Smith anticipated. He tried adjusting late, squared up in the process. The ball grazed the shoulder of the bat and ballooned up, high, teasing.

Straight to second slip.

Rahane didn't flinch. Took it clean.

GONE.....

Commentary - Michael Vaughan:

"Gone! Taken at second slip! Can you believe this? Aarav Pathak is running riot at the Oval! Steve Smith, golden duck! What is happening out there?!"

Commentary - Harsha Bhogle:

"That is sensational. That is poetry. Back of a length, a hint of seam away, and it's done the trick. Smith has fallen. Only the second golden duck in his illustrious Test career—the first was Dale Steyn. And now, Aarav Pathak. Remember the name!"

The Indian fielders erupted. Virat ran like a child, leapt on me, wrapping me in a bear hug. "You beauty!" he roared in my ear.

Prithvi Shaw's voice echoed, "Yeh debut hai ya Test dream sequence? Steve Smith ko bhi le gaya!"

Rahane grinned, gave me a solid thump on the back. The energy was electric.

Smith walked off. Slowly. Silently.

Heads turned in disbelief. The crowd had gone from stunned silence to roaring celebration. Flags waved. Fans stood on their seats.

The Commentary Box Couldn't Stay Calm

Isha Guha:

"What a delivery! What a moment! This isn't just impressive—this is history in the making. To get Labuschagne and Smith in your first two overs? That's a dream, surely."

Allan Border:

"You don't see that every day. This kid has serious talent. I've seen generations of Aussie cricket and that kind of control, on debut, is frightening."

Mike Hussey:

"It's his composure. That rhythm in the run-up, the upright wrist position—it's McGrath-esque but with more swing."

The camera zoomed into the Indian dressing room. Ravi Shastri animatedly shouting and pumping his fist had a broad smile, clapping like a proud coach. Gill was also shouting and cheering his friend from the Pavillion.

Cameron Green Walks In

From one debutant's high to another's test. Cameron Green, tall and talented, made his way to the crease. But this wasn't how he imagined it. Walking in at 18/4. The team reeling. The pitch misbehaving.

Aarav POV:

I turned and walked back to my mark. My fingers traced the seam lovingly. The Kookaburra felt alive.

Virat raised his hand, smiled, and shouted, "Ek aur, Aarav! Finish it!"

I looked at Green. He was adjusting his gloves, but there was a tell-tale pause. A slight delay. I could see the hesitation.

From the stands, a chant had begun.

"Aarav! Aarav! Aarav!"

Every heartbeat, every breath, every sound was louder than usual. The tricolor waved. My name echoed.

Commentary - Harsha Bhogle (softly):

"You talk about magical beginnings, and this is as magical as they come. Aarav Pathak—writing his story not in ink, but in fire. What a debut."

The scoreboard showed 18/4.

But to me? It was the prologue of something greater.

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A hush had descended on the Oval—not the silence of tension, but the quiet murmur of anticipation. The storm of wickets had passed. Now came the calm. The long, grinding calm of Test cricket. The kind of silence that isn't empty, but full—full of possibility, of nerves held taut, of strategy brewing in the minds of eleven men in the field, and defiance burning in the two at the crease.

Australia, once 18 for 4, now stood resilient at 135 for 4. It had been a masterclass in resurrection, a testament to the unforgiving yet strangely beautiful nature of Test cricket. The scoreboard barely blinked for long stretches, yet every delivery held meaning. Every over was a conversation. Every run was earned. This was cricket in its most honest, unfiltered form.

Travis Head and Cameron Green—one a gritty left-hander with a point to prove, the other a towering debutant still learning the rhythms of the five-day dance—stood firm like seasoned monks weathering a storm of arrows. They were not just surviving; they were resisting, rewriting a narrative that had seemed written in bold letters just a session earlier.

Aarav (POV):

I stood at fine leg, hands on hips, watching Green tuck another delivery off his pads for a single. We'd bowled our hearts out. Lines tight, lengths precise. We'd summoned everything. But they endured.

Somehow. Even when the ball clipped the edge or jagged off the seam, it found no home in hands or stumps. It was as if luck had changed jerseys.

In my second spell, I came close. Real close.

Ball #3 of the 38th over:

It was a classic setup. Two inswingers. Then one that held its line. Head shouldered arms. The ball whizzed past off stump by a whisker.

Harsha Bhogle (Commentary):

"Oh, what a teasing delivery! Aarav Pathak is casting spells here! Travis Head playing for swing, but the ball had other plans. Inches away from off stump. You could hear the sighs from the slips!"

Another time, I got Green caught on the crease. A nipping delivery took the inside edge. The sound was clear. But it hit thigh pad. No appeal. Just groans and missed chances.

And then, heartbreak.

Ball #4 of the 41st over:

A short ball. Head hooked. Top edge. It flew high into the sky, spinning like a coin in slow motion.

Prithvi Shaw ran in from deep square. Eyes locked. Hands cupped.

He dropped it.

Allan Border (Commentary):

"Oh no! That's a sitter gone begging! You don't get many freebies at this level, and Travis Head has been handed a life. India might rue that later."

Isha Guha (Commentary):

"Test cricket is brutal. One dropped catch, and you're chasing leather for another 60 overs. That's how cruel it can be."

Virat shook his head. I didn't say anything to Prithvi. Didn't need to. He looked crushed already. The silence around him was louder than any rebuke.

But we weren't done. The very next over, another opportunity—

Ball #2 of the 43rd over:

I hit the perfect length. Travis Head misjudged. He came forward, missed completely. The ball struck the off stump—no, kissed it i.e touched the wicket. Bails rocked.

But didn't fall.

Harsha Bhogle:

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me! The ball has touched the stumps and the bails haven't fallen! What's keeping them up? Glue? This is incredible!"

Allan Border:

"Sometimes it's just not your day. That was dead to rights. But the bails have other plans. It's almost supernatural."

I turned to the umpire. He shrugged. All fair. All legal. The game carried on. That's Test cricket for you. Not a game of just wickets and runs—but of moments, of stories, of ghosts and glory. Sometimes, the game resists even when you've done everything right.

Lunch passed. So did tea. The Australian pair, now both in their fifties, had found rhythm. Ashwin came in and looped his deliveries with wizardry. Umesh tried reverse swing. Bumrah steamed in, grimacing with effort. But no breakthrough.

Still, the drama was constant.

Ball in the air...

Head lofted one over mid-off. Not timed. Skyed.

Mayank chased back.

It landed two meters ahead.

Isha Guha:

"They're living dangerously, but they've got the luck today. That could've gone to hand. Just didn't carry."

Allan Border:

"There's tension in every delivery, isn't there? You can sense it. Bowlers circling. Batters hanging on. This is vintage Test cricket."

Harsha Bhogle:

"And this is what makes Test cricket so special. It's not just about what happens. It's about what could have happened. It's a game of almosts. Of near misses. Of battles within battles."

Evening shadows stretched across the MCG. The light softened. The ball started reversing again under fading light. I was given one final spell. My ninth over.

Tired, yes. But burning inside.

I beat Green thrice. One clipped his pad. Another flicked his glove but fell short of saha. The last zipped past leg stump.

The field buzzed. Saha clapped. Kohli urged us on. The crowd leaned in, sensing the tension.

Aarav (POV):

Frustration clawed at me. But then I looked up. The stands were packed. Eyes glued. People weren't leaving.

Because they felt it too.

They felt the possibility. The theatre. The suspense of Test cricket that lives not in boundaries or wickets, but in the space between. In the pause between bowler's release and batter's response. In the gasp that escapes before the ball lands. In the sigh that follows a miss.

As we walked off at stumps, Head and Green unbeaten, Kohli clapped us in. No scolding. Just pride.

"You kept fighting," he said. "That's what this game's about."

In the dressing room, the replay of the near-wicket to Smith looped again. Then Shaw's drop. Then the bails not falling.