

## Cricket 175

### Chapter 175

The sun rose over Melbourne with a promise. A bright, sharp December morning painted the city in gold as anticipation bubbled like soda inside the MCG. The famed Boxing Day Test had arrived, and with it, the echo of cricketing legacy called out to millions of fans watching from all around the globe. The day was clear, the sky a vast blue canvas, and the breeze carried the scent of anticipation, fresh grass, and sunscreen. From the first light, people began pouring into the stadium—young and old, families and friends, draped in green-and-gold or the deep blue of India.

The wide expanse of the Melbourne Cricket Ground, with its seats swathed in blue and grey, was already alive with spectators, most wrapped in team colors, waving flags, and chanting names. The pitch lay gleaming at the center like a battlefield, and the noise grew to a crescendo. The sheer magnitude of the day sent goosebumps through the veins of every cricket lover. Vendors hawked snacks and souvenirs, TV crews scurried, and stadium staff ensured every corner was perfect. Everything was ready.

As the anthems echoed across the packed coliseum and players took their positions, the tension in the air became almost electric. Flags waved like a sea of color, faces painted with team hues, fans screaming their throats dry. The Indian team stood shoulder to shoulder, eyes sharp, spirits high.

Down in the commentary box sat legends of the game.

"This is going to be an intriguing day of cricket," said Morne Morkel.

"The pressure is on both teams," Isha Guha added. "Especially on India due to absence of Kohli."

"Kohli is not the only player in the team, don't forget we have several new players in the team.," noted Sunil Gavaskar. "And with Rahane at the helm, it could be the start of something memorable."

Harsha Bhogle chimed in, "All eyes on the young blood—Gill and Siraj—and of course, Aarav Pathak. Can he deliver again?"

The crowd roared as Australian openers Matthew Wade and Joe Burns strode to the middle. Joe Burns took strike. Facing him—Aarav Pathak with the new ball, his eyes narrow, brimming with purpose.

He set an aggressive field: three slips, a gully, a man at third man, and a short leg. His rhythm was smooth, shoulders loose, fingers dancing on the seam. The ball gleamed under the Australian sun.

0.1 Aarav Pathak to Joe Burns

It was a perfectly pitched up delivery at 140.4 kmph, angling in and then swinging away late. Joe Burns misjudged, missed the flick, and was struck flush on the front pad. The umpire raised his finger, and despite a brief chat with Wade, Burns knew it was plumb. No review. Gone for a golden duck—dismissed by the same man who had gotten him last match.

A roar exploded across the MCG as Aarav let out a primal scream of joy, fists clenched.

"He's struck with the very first delivery!" shouted Harsha. "What a start for India!"

The Indian players crowded around Aarav, patting him on the back. Bumrah grinned. Siraj cheered. Rahane applauded.

Australia: 0/1.

In walked Marnus Labuschagne, head down, tapping his bat, muttering to himself. The crowd, too stunned by the early wicket, began to murmur. Some stood silently, absorbing the gravity. Others clapped with cautious hope.

Aarav was buzzing. Bumrah joined in from the other end, and the two produced a spell of high-quality seam bowling. Swinging the ball both ways, mixing up lengths—short jabs and fuller traps. But Marnus and Wade held on, showing grit and patience.

For the next half-an-hour or 40 minutes, cricket was a test of skill and nerve. The scoreboard crawled. India's fielders were on their toes, intensity etched on every face. The slips crouched low, eyes unblinking. Pant behind the stumps chattered away, keeping the energy up.

By the twelfth over, Australia had managed to recover slightly—35/1.

Rahane brought in Ravichandran Ashwin.

12.5 Ashwin to Wade, out Caught!

"Oh, Matt Wade! What have you done?" cried Isha Guha.

Wade danced down the pitch, looking to take Ashwin on. But Ashwin, with all his experience, dipped it just enough. Wade swung hard—too hard—and the ball caught the top edge.

It looped high in the air, two men converging: Gill from midwicket and Jadeja from mid-on. There was a terrifying moment of hesitation—a collision!—but Jadeja, ever the cat in the field, held on.

The Indian camp exhaled in unison.

"That was almost a disaster!" Gavaskar remarked. "But Ravindra Jadeja's hands—safe as houses."

Australia: 35/2.

Wade was gone for 30 off 45 balls, and Steven Smith entered the field. The crowd murmured. But everyone knew this was the moment to watch. Smith—Australia's talisman.

Aarav stood in the slips, during the break, wiping sweat off his brow, his heart still thumping from the early success. Siraj approached him.

"Bhai, that first ball... goosebumps," Siraj said.

Aarav smiled. "This is the start. Let's make it count. We're not letting them off easy."

As play resumed, Ashwin turned the ball square, and Umesh banged it in short. Every over felt like a chess move. Each ball built pressure, each field change added a layer of psychological warfare.

Smith was watchful. Marnus was twitchy. India's energy was unrelenting.

Aarav returned for his second spell after lunch, bowling from the Members' End. The sun now beat down hotter, beads of sweat trickling beneath helmets and brims. Every ball was an opportunity, every dot met with claps from Rahane.

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Australia resumed their innings at 92/2, with Marnus Labuschagne and Steven Smith at the crease. The pair looked determined, walking out under a barrage of applause and expectation. Indian captain Ajinkya Rahane, calm, gathered his players for a brief huddle near the pitch.

"Keep the energy tight," he said. "Play it ball by ball. This session is ours to win."

Jasprit Bumrah took the ball and bowled a probing line. The first over was filled with sizzle and swing, and Labuschagne played and missed twice. The tension was palpable.

But Marnus held firm. Steven Smith began to look more comfortable, his bat flowing smoothly through the line. Australia inched to 128/2, building steadily.

"Here comes Aarav Pathak, back into the attack," Isha Guha called out. "He's already shown great promise. Let's see how he handles this responsibility."

42.4 Aarav to Labuschagne, OUT!

A perfectly pitched delivery that kissed the seam and moved away. Marnus couldn't resist—he flirted outside off. Edge. Pant dived and took a low stunner.

"Got him!" Sunil Gavaskar shouted. "Labuschagne walks for 41. What a breakthrough by the young Aarav Pathak."

Australia: 133/3

Travis Head joined Smith and tried to inject momentum with quick singles and aggressive strokes. He looked confident, but Aarav wasn't finished yet.

50.2 Aarav to Head, OUT! Bowled!

An inswinging beauty. Head misjudged the length, left a gap, and the off-stump was sent spinning.

"Oh what a delivery! Absolute peach!" Harsha Bhogle's voice rose in admiration. "That's a dream ball for any seamer."

Australia: 149/4

Cameron Green, tall man, came in to face the heat. He fought bravely, absorbed pressure, and played a couple of elegant drives. But Siraj had other plans.

62.3 Siraj to Green, OUT! Caught at short leg!

A rising delivery cramped Green. He fended awkwardly and Jadeja at short leg grabbed a reflex catch.

"Siraj has really worked for that wicket, first wicket of the debutant" said Ricky Ponting. "Green did everything right until that one climbed awkwardly."

Australia: 165/5

As Day end loomed, Rahane called back Bumrah for a final burst. His instincts were sharp today. He had rotated his bowlers masterfully, sensing rhythm, fatigue, and match-ups.

One more before the break, he thought. Just one more. Let them walk in with heads down.

68.1 Bumrah to Smith, OUT! LBW!

A searing reverse-swinging yorker. Smith was late, beaten for pace, and struck low on the front pad. Plumb. The umpire didn't hesitate.

"Oh yes! That's a game-changer!" exclaimed Morne Morkel. "Smith out for 45, and Bumrah has knocked over Australia's anchor."

Australia: 179/6

Tim Paine walked out under growing pressure. But Bumrah wasn't done.

70.6 Bumrah to Paine, OUT! Bowled!

A back-of-a-length delivery that stayed low. Paine went to cut but the ball skidded through and crashed into the stumps.

"Two in two overs for Bumrah!" Isha Guha cried. "Paine never picked the length. India is surging!"

Australia: 180/7

Now the tail was exposed. Pat Cummins and Mitchell Starc tried to resist. They added a few quick runs, pushing the score closer to 200. A couple of crisp drives brought brief cheer, but Siraj was brewing something.

74.2 Siraj to Starc, OUT! Caught behind!

Wide of off stump, angled across. Starc swung hard, nicked, and Pant pouched it smoothly.

"Siraj gets his second! That's control and aggression paying off," Ponting praised. "Starc gone for 11."

Australia: 193/8

Nathan Lyon arrived with his typical swagger, but Bumrah wasn't offering any mercy.

But umpire the day end with this wicket, and Lyon had to return back to the Pavillion.

Day 2

"Welcome back, everyone," Harsha Bhogle greeted listeners with his signature smooth enthusiasm. "It's Day 2 at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Australia is looking to on brink of collapse after yesterday's Indian Pace bowler Powers, but India's bowlers have other ideas."

"Spot on, Harsha," added Morne Morkel. "And it's going to be an intense first hour. If India strikes early, Australia could be in deep trouble."

77.1 Bumrah to Lyon, OUT! Caught at slip!

A well-directed short ball angled in. Lyon fended awkwardly, thick edge, and Rahane at slip took a sharp, diving catch to his right.

"Captain fantastic!" Gavaskar applauded. "Rahane has been brilliant in the field and in tactics today."

Australia: 198/9

Josh Hazlewood, the last man, came in as clouds began to gather. He fought gamely, nudging a couple of twos and a single that brought up the 200 for Australia. But his resistance wouldn't last long.

81.4 Bumrah to Hazlewood, OUT! Bowled!

A full, fast inswinger. Hazlewood was late in bringing his bat down, and the stumps lit up behind him.

"There it is!" Harsha roared. "Australia all out for 210.

Bumrah with four, Aarav with three, Siraj two, and Ashwin one. What a team effort."

The Indian players sprinted in. Rahane gathered them together for high-fives and pats. His strategy had worked. His faith in the young guns had paid off.

In the dressing room corridor.

"I'm proud of you guys," Rahane said, clapping towards the Indian Bowlers. "This was an important morning. You helped shift the momentum."

Outside, the crowd buzzed. India had earned the upper hand, and now it was their batsmen's turn to step up. The match had opened up into a riveting contest, and morning of Day 2 had already left a mark.

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The Melbourne crowd was still abuzz with chatter after India's spirited bowling performance. 210 all out. A score that whispered possibility to the Indian side. As the players walked off, shades of the

morning's discipline and fire still lingered in the air. But now, it was time for a different kind of test—the batters' turn to face the fury.

The sun burned high above the MCG, no longer the golden warmth of morning but a blazing spotlight now bearing down on the middle. Shadows of the grandstands stretched across the lush outfield like towering spectators themselves.

The Indian openers strode out with the weight of a nation's expectations tucked in their bats. Mayank Agarwal looked focused, lips pursed, eyes squinting into the sunlight. Beside him, young Shubman Gill—the third debutant of the series for India—exuded a quiet energy, his steps light, almost gliding.

From the commentary box, Harsha Bhogle's voice wrapped around the stadium like a familiar embrace.

"Here we have, Shubman Gill, the debutant for India. The third one in this series. He's played a handful of ODIs, but this... this is his very first Test Match. A moment he'll remember forever."

Morne Morkel chimed in, "You never forget your debut. But walking out to bat at the MCG, Day 2, post a dominant bowling show—pressure meets opportunity. He'll need to show temperament now."

Mitchell Starc had the new ball in hand. The seam proud and gleaming under the sun. He steamed in from the Members' End like a locomotive, each stride pounding into the turf with purpose.

Mayank Agarwal took the strike.

The first five deliveries were fierce and probing. Classic Starc—full, fast, and swinging in. Agarwal met them with a straight bat, bending forward with textbook form. The ball hissed off the pitch but Mayank stood firm, unflinching.

"Starc's rhythm is sharp," said Sunil Gavaskar. "He's not giving anything loose. This is premium opening bowling." (Premium Bowler 😊😊)

Then came the final delivery of the over.

0.6 Starc to Agarwal — Big shout! Finger goes up!

The appeal echoed across the G.

Mayank froze, looked at Gill, who jogged down halfway. A quick chat. Gill nodded—review.

The third umpire was called. The replay played. Ball tracking showed it clipping the top of off stump.

"Umpire's call!" shouted Harsha. "So the decision stands, but India keep their review. That's high-quality bowling from Starc. No loosener, just old-fashioned seam and swing. Pitched just outside off and jagged back into Mayank's knee roll. Precision."

Gone. Mayank Agarwal out for a duck.

India: 0/1.

As Mayank turned and trudged back, bat tucked under his arm, a roar began to build in the crowd.

Aarav Pathak was making his way down the steps.

Jogging and bouncing, he looked up at the stands, eyes wide yet focused. The Australian crowd, notorious for giving it to opposition players, were instead chanting his name.

"Aarav! Aarav! Aarav!"

Ricky Ponting's voice was tinged with admiration.

"You know, Harsha, in the last match at Adelaide, this young man did something special. And Australians, we respect that. We love players who don't just survive here—but conquer. That's why King Kohli is loved. And I think Aarav, he might just be the next in this story."

Aarav looked at the pitch. The pitch looked no friendlier than it did an hour ago. Cummins turned at the top of his mark again, sniffing a second scalp.

1.1 Cummins to Gill — Back of a length, shaping away. Gill leaves it on length.

"Good leave," said Isha Guha. "Didn't push at it, let it go. He's showing calm already."

Gill tapped his bat nervously. But soon with a quick chat with Aarav, the nerves began to settle. Cummins took over from the Southern Stand End, and Gill got going with a confident backfoot punch for two.

Aarav, on the other hand, faced Starc like a seasoned vet—leaving tight lines, smothering inswingers, even cracking a crisp on-drive that had the Indian balcony clapping.

India moved to 18/1.

The partnership began to blossom.

Gill found his timing—an elegant cover drive off Cummins that drew oohs from the crowd. Aarav responded with a wristy flick off his pads, earning three.

Drinks were called at 55/1.

Harsha's tone softened, almost reflective. "I'm watching this and I'm reminded of the resilience this team has shown all tour. And here are two youngsters, one a debutant, the other playing only his second Test—and they're carrying India forward."

The second hour brought Lyon into the attack. The ball began to bite, offering sharp turn. Gill nearly fell, misjudging a straighter one that just missed off stump.

"Close shave!" Morne said. "Gill's gotta be careful. Lyon's mixing them up beautifully."

Well they have whole day to bat!