

## Cricket 176

### Chapter 176

Though Mayank Agarwal had fallen early to a peach from Starc, and Shubman Gill was still settling in, the crowd was abuzz with excitement — Aarav Pathak was at the crease.

Isha Guha: "There's something about this lad. There's a spark, a calm fire in him. Let's see how he handles this pressure."

Shubman Gill and Aarav Pathak began to build. The early jitters gave way to calculated strokeplay. Gill, looking in sublime touch, drove beautifully through the covers and played aggressively, while Aarav, solid in defense and agile between the wickets, rotated strike with poise.

Sunil Gavaskar: "What I like about Aarav is his temperament. He's not in a hurry. He's respecting the good balls, and cashing in on the bad ones."

Harsha Bhogle: "And Gill at the other end is looking increasingly fluent. These two could be the future of Indian cricket."

But then came the breakthrough.

[Australia 85/1]

"Finally a wicket for Australia. Gill plays a loose shot outside off. It was fuller around the fourth-fifth stump. Gill went after it but his front foot didn't move. A healthy nick and Paine takes a regulation catch. India 85/2."

There was a silence in the Indian camp, a sigh of what could have been. Gill shook his head in disappointment, his 45 a brief but confident show. Ajinkya Rahane, the captain, walked in with purpose, his bat tapping rhythmically against his pads.

The scoreboard ticked along. Rahane and Aarav looked steady until calamity struck.

"How close is that? They'll have a look. Very risky business. Direct hit would've been out. Looks like he's gone. It's another run out involving Rahane, this time he's at the receiving end. Aarav tapped it to short cover, instinctively took off for a run that was really not on. Rahane responded immediately, went full tilt, went full-stretch but he's still just about short of the crease. What a sad end to a tremendous knock."

[India 107/3]

Harsha Bhogle: "That's a tough one. Aarav's instincts betrayed him. You could see the regret in his eyes immediately."

The weight of the dismissal bore heavy on Aarav, but he reset. Hanuma Vihari was the new man. The two looked to rebuild once more. Aarav was playing with maturity beyond his years — cutting square, defending soft-handed, and occasionally stepping out to loft Lyon over mid-on.

Then came the moment.

Aarav scores 50. His first in Test Cricket.

There were no dramatics. Aarav raised his bat to the dressing room, a modest nod to his teammates and to the crowd that roared his name.

Morne Morkel: "Fifty. And what a measured innings. Just the kind of knock you want to see from a young cricketer in Test cricket."

But joy in cricket, as in life, is short-lived.

"Lyon gets his man. Vihari was looking to sweep from outside off but misreads the line. The turn doesn't help either as he gloves it and the ball lobs behind the wicketkeeper. An easy catch for Smith who moves to his left from first slip to pouch it."

[India 142/4]

Rishabh Pant came in, bringing flair and unpredictability. He looked good, smacked a couple through point and even danced down the track to Lyon. But just as things began to look bright again...

"Got him! Pant looking to slash that through point but gets a thin bottom edge through to the keeper. The game is back on an even keel just as India were looking to take it away slowly. Faintest of edges to bring wicket No. 250 for Starc."

[India 180/5]

India's innings was faltering. Jadeja stepped up, played a couple of punches through the offside but couldn't resist the bouncer trap.

"Short ball finally does the trick. Another bouncer, Jadeja backs away and goes for the pull. It made good sound off the bat as well. Perhaps that was also the reason it carried to Cummins who although was stationed well inside the deep midwicket boundary, takes a good tumbling catch."

[India 194/6]

Ravi Ashwin joined Aarav. The duo looked composed. They focused on grinding the Australian bowlers.

Then came the delivery that ended his knock.

A faint edge. A simple catch. Aarav stood frozen for a moment, glancing at the fielders in celebration. He turned slowly, bat under his arm, the applause chasing him back to the pavilion. He had earned the respect not just of his team, but of every cricket lover watching.

Isha Guha: "Gone on 62 runs, calm under fire, and a temperament that speaks volumes. This boy is going to be something special."

Harsha Bhogle: "India may not have a big lead here, but the confidence, the grit shown by the debutant will be the talk tonight."

Ashwin and the tailenders hung in, scratching out vital runs. Siraj showed heart. Bumrah and Umesh Yadav defended valiantly. Every run was greeted with cheers.

Eventually, India were bowled out for 219.

A lead of just 9 runs.

Sunil Gavaskar: "It's not much, but psychologically, it's a lead. It means Australia have to bat again under pressure."

Morne Morkel: "And India's bowlers will be charged up. They've seen how Starc and Cummins operated. They'll know what to do."

The teams walked off. The crowd stood in applause. For India, it wasn't a massive score, but it was a statement — of resilience, of youthful fire, of a debutant who had dared to dream and delivered.

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As the second day edged closer to twilight, the sun hanging low over the towering stands of the MCG bathed the ground in gold. The atmosphere had shifted — the cheers for India's gritty innings now gave way to murmurs of anticipation as Australia began their second innings. The pitch had aged a little more, the cracks slightly widened, and the Indian bowlers stood charged, their eyes gleaming with intent.

With the scoreboard reading 0/0, Joe Burns and Matthew Wade walked out to open for Australia. The crowd buzzed, some still talking about Aarav Pathak's mature 62. Little did they know, his impact was far from over.

Bumrah steamed in for the first over, hissing in with pace and menace. A couple of deliveries zipped past the bat, but it was the introduction of Aarav that brought immediate drama.

Morne Morkel (in commentary): "He's got a amazing part with the bat. Can he strike with the ball?"

Aarav's run-up was measured. The ball was a touch slower through the air but deceptive. His first scalp came unexpectedly. A loopy delivery pitched on middle, turned ever so slightly, and Joe Burns, trying to flick it across, got a leading edge. The ball soared towards mid-off where Rahane lunged forward and completed the catch.

[Australia 17/1]

The crowd erupted. Aarav roared, arms wide, his teammates swarming him. His first Test wicket. A moment stitched in time.

Then, just two overs later, he struck again. Wade, growing restless, danced down the pitch, only to be beaten in flight. The ball dipped, turned, and Pant had all the time in the world to whip off the bails.

[Australia 34/2]

Morne Morkel: "Aarav Pathak, ladies and gentlemen! Two wickets in no time."

Harsha Bhogle: "This is the stuff of dreams. Batting brilliance and now a bowling breakthrough. What a find!"

But Australia, known for their stubborn spine, responded. Marnus Labuschagne and Steve Smith — two of their most reliable — came together and resisted. Aarav bowled with guile, Ashwin probed with classic off-spin, but the pair played out the day with determination.

By stumps, Australia stood at 66/2. The battle was well poised.

Day 3 began under a slightly overcast sky. The MCG pitch was still holding together, though spin and uneven bounce were creeping in. India started with Ashwin and Jadeja, attacking both edges of the bat. But Labuschagne and Smith had settled.

The morning session belonged to Australia. Marnus played late and soft, while Smith, wristy and weird as always, flicked and punched the ball with characteristic awkward grace. Rahane shuffled the bowlers, rotating spin and pace, but the Aussie duo didn't flinch.

By lunch, the score was 155/2. Indian shoulders began to droop.

Aarav, watching from the deep, felt the weight. He could feel the game slipping. It wasn't about his individual performance anymore — this was about pride, about a collective stand.

Then came the breakthrough.

Post-lunch, Ashwin trapped Labuschagne. A beautiful delivery that drifted in and spun away, catching the edge. Rahane at slip made no mistake.

[Australia 178/3]

Shortly after, Bumrah sent Head's stumps flying with a yorker from hell.

[Australia 195/4]

But Smith remained. He moved to 80, fidgeting, adjusting his gloves, tapping his bat incessantly. The crowd sensed another Smith century. But Aarav had other plans.

He flighted one just outside off. Smith leaned in, trying to caress it through cover, but the ball dipped and turned sharply. It clipped the inside edge and ballooned off the pad to short leg.

Out.

[Australia 214/5]

Smith stood there, stunned. It wasn't just the ball — it was the setup, the mind games. Aarav had outfoxed the master.

By the close of day three, Australia were 283/6. India had clawed back.

Day 4.

The sky was clear, the pitch cracked like dry earth. Australia resumed cautiously. Cummins and Paine tried to push the lead toward safety.

But Ashwin wasn't done.

He bowled with the wisdom of a thousand overs, each delivery a lesson in spin bowling. He took out Paine with one that straightened just enough. Then Lyon, caught behind. Then Cummins, lured into a false stroke.

Three quick wickets. Bumrah returned to polish off the tail with a brutal yorker to Hazlewood.

Australia all out for 323.

Ashwin: 5 wickets.

Aarav: 3.

Bumrah: 2.

It was a brilliant fightback, but the equation was stark.

India needed 314 to win.

Harsha Bhogle: "It's a steep mountain. But the spirit, the fire, it's there. India will believe."

Sunil Gavaskar: "Fourth innings chases at the MCG are rare and difficult. But if anyone can script the impossible, it's India."

The Indian dressing room was tense but united. Rahane gathered the players in a huddle.

"No pressure. Play your game. Stick to the basics. And remember, we have already shown them we won't back down."

Aarav sat quietly, hands wrapped around a bottle, eyes staring into the middle distance. He had done his bit. But the match was far from over. Now, it was time to bat again. Time to chase history.

As the Indian openers padded up, the stadium roared back to life. The final act of this riveting Test match was about to unfold.

The chase of 314 had begun.

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The sun cast a golden hue over the pitch as the fourth day commenced, and with it, the daunting task that lay before Team India. A target of 314 runs stood between them and glory. The Australian bowlers, battle-hardened and relentless, had the ball in their hands, and the Indian openers—Mayank Agarwal and Shubman Gill—knew the significance of every step they took.

As they jogged out onto the field, the vast stands of the stadium roared to life, echoing with the chants of hopeful fans, each voice a prayer wrapped in anticipation. The two batsmen did a few light stretches. Gill tapped his bat lightly on the turf. Mayank fixed his gloves one last time. The pitch looked worn, yet playable. It was going to be a test of patience and nerves.

Mitchell Starc was handed the new ball. He stood tall at his mark, red Kookaburra in hand, a glint of focus in his eyes. Tim Paine adjusted the field—three slips in place, a gully crouching low, and a short cover lingering with intent. Starc sprinted in, smooth and menacing, like a panther preparing to pounce.

The first ball zipped past the outside edge of Mayank's bat, whispering through the air with menace. The over was tight, probing—six balls, no runs. A maiden to start. The Australians had drawn their first psychological blood.

Then came Pat Cummins for the second over. His approach was thunderous, like a storm building on the horizon. Gill, calm and poised, welcomed him with grace and flair. The second delivery was short, and Gill rocked back to punch it through cover—four runs. The crowd roared. Two balls later, a delightful flick off the pads—another boundary. The tension momentarily lifted, joy bubbling in the stands.

Starc returned, third over now. Mayank saw a fuller delivery and drove handsomely through mid-off for four. A glimmer of rhythm. But cricket, like fate, is cruelly unpredictable.

Then it happened.

In over 4.2.

Agarwal's gone and it's come about because of uncertainty again. This one holds its line, Agarwal just feeling for the delivery yet again, gets a healthy edge and Paine does the rest. Muted celebration from Starc. 16/1]

The silence was deafening. The crowd cheering and enjoying. Mayank turned, visibly disheartened. He stared briefly at his bat as if questioning it, then trudged back to the pavilion, his head bowed, dragging the weight of dismissal with every step. His departure meant a shift, a new chapter in the innings.

And then, the crowd erupted again.

Aarav—the young prodigy, India's rising hero—emerged from the dressing room. Clad in confidence, armed with his MRF bat, and a simple white band on his wrist, he looked like a man ready for war. The cheers reached a crescendo, the chant reverberating through every corner of the stadium.

"AARAV! AARAV! AARAV!"

His jog to the pitch was smooth, energetic. There was purpose in every stride. As he reached the middle, Gill greeted him with a bump of the fists. It wasn't just a gesture; it was a silent pact—shoulder to shoulder, they would carry the nation's hopes. 2 friends with the responsibility of the nation.

Starc glared from his mark. He had tasted blood and wanted more.

The next delivery was a toe-crushing yorker, aimed straight at Aarav's off stump. But the young man, calm and collected, brought his bat down in time, dead-batting the ball with soft hands. There was no rush in his movements—just deliberate, refined control.

Then later the final delivery of the over was angled in at his ribs, short and rising. Aarav swiveled, kept it down, and tucked it gently behind square leg for a single. He was off the mark.

The scoreboard read: 17/1.

Cummins resumed his spell. Gill, buoyed by his earlier boundaries, looked sharp. He leaned into a cover drive, the ball racing to the boundary like a bullet.

But more than the strokes, it was Aarav's composure that began to shift the narrative. Every block, every leave, every nudge into the gaps told a story—not just of talent, but of maturity beyond years. He walked down the pitch between overs, exchanging quiet words with Gill.

"Play the ball late," he murmured. "Starc's moving it away—watch the seam."

Gill nodded. The bond between the two batsmen deepened with each passing over. They communicated in glances, brief words, and the occasional grin.

By lunch, India had reached 72/1. The crowd had found its rhythm again. Flags fluttered in the stands. The sun was merciless, but the spirit on the field shone brighter.

As they walked back to the pavilion, Aarav leading, bat resting casually on his shoulder, one couldn't help but feel that this chase—this monumental task—wasn't impossible. Not anymore.