

KING OF CRICKET

Chapter 18 - 18

The day had finally arrived—the final match of the local zonal tournament. The Shivaji Park Academy boys were pumped up, their excitement matched by the electric atmosphere at their home ground. The stands were brimming with energy. Students from affiliated schools, local cricket enthusiasts, and the players' families had all gathered to cheer their hearts out. Aarav Pathak, standing at the boundary, spotted his mother in the crowd, her ever-present cameraman Arjun and his brother Magan hovering close by. Aarav smiled faintly. They had been instrumental in running her vlog and business's social media pages.

"I told you," Aarav thought to himself, "Give it a year or two, and India's internet boom will change everything."

But there wasn't time to dwell on that now. This wasn't just any game; it was the game that would decide which fifteen players from the zone would proceed to the Mumbai Knock Selection Tournament. And from there, the dream of playing in the U16 Vijay Merchant Trophy awaited. Aarav's focus snapped back to the present.

The toss was critical, and the tension was palpable as Aarav and the Nashik Warriors Academy captain walked out to the pitch. The announcer, his voice brimming with enthusiasm, described the scene.

"The captains are out in the middle for what is an all-important toss. Aarav Pathak spins the coin—tails is the call—and it's TAILS! Shivaji Park Academy wins the toss! What's the decision going to be?"

The microphone swung toward Aarav, who spoke with the confident calm of a seasoned leader. "We'll bat first. The pitch looks like a belter, and we'd like to put runs on the board and back our bowlers to defend it."

"Well, there you have it," the announcer boomed. "Aarav Pathak, showing confidence in his batsmen. And why not? They've been in red-hot form this tournament. Sit tight, folks; this promises to be a cracker!"

As the Shivaji Park openers, Abhishek Sharma and Mayank Tiwari, took their positions, the announcer set the stage.

"Here we go, ladies and gentlemen. Raghav Deshmukh with the new ball for Nashik Warriors. First ball coming up, and the crowd is buzzing. Let's play!"

The first delivery was a dot, a probing line outside off that Abhishek left alone.

"Good start from Raghav, hitting the right areas. Abhishek Sharma bides his time. But don't blink, folks. This young man can light up the scoreboard in no time."

The next over was a completely different story. Abhishek exploded into action, smashing two boundaries and a six in quick succession.

"WHAM! That's over midwicket, and it's gone the distance! Abhishek Sharma has arrived, ladies and gentlemen!"

By the fourth over, Abhishek was unstoppable. The announcer's voice rose with every cracking shot.

"Oh, that's a flick of the wrists! Poetry in motion! Another boundary for Abhishek. He's batting like a man possessed. And would you believe it? Fifty runs for Abhishek Sharma, off just 17 balls. This is sensational cricket!"

But just as the crowd roared in delight, disaster struck.

"Short ball... he's gone for the pull... and he's caught! Abhishek Sharma departs after a breathtaking 50. You have to applaud this knock, but Nashik Warriors have their breakthrough."

The crowd sighed collectively as Aarav walked out to bat. The announcer took note.

"Here comes the captain. Aarav Pathak, the backbone of Shivaji Park's batting lineup. He's got a mountain of responsibility on his shoulders now."

Aarav started cautiously, allowing Mayank to dominate the strike. Together, they built a partnership that steadied the innings.

"What a lovely drive down the ground from Mayank Tiwari. This young man has timing to die for!"

Mayank reached his half-century with a glorious cut shot, and the crowd erupted.

"Fifty for Mayank Tiwari! He's played the perfect foil to Abhishek earlier and is now anchoring this innings beautifully."

But cricket, as they say, is a great leveler.

"Oh, he's edged it! Straight to the keeper! Mayank Tiwari is gone for 66, and the Nashik Warriors are clawing their way back into this game."

With Mayank gone, Rohan joined Aarav in the middle. The partnership that followed was nothing short of spectacular. Aarav began to shift gears, unleashing a flurry of shots that had the crowd on their feet.

"That's high... it's long... and it's out of here! Aarav Pathak, take a bow! He's putting on a show for his home crowd!"

The boundaries flowed freely, and by the end of the innings, Aarav had reached a personal milestone.

"Century for Aarav Pathak! A captain's knock, and what a time to bring it up. 111 not out for the skipper, and Shivaji Park Academy finishes at a colossal 264 for 4. Nashik Warriors have a mountain to climb."

As the second innings began, the Nashik Warriors' openers walked out to face an intimidating target. The Shivaji Park fielders spread out, and the announcer set the scene once more.

"264 to win. Can the Nashik Warriors pull off the improbable, or will Shivaji Park Academy lift the trophy? Kamal with the new ball—here we go!"

The first few overs were a mixed bag. The Nashik openers found the occasional boundary, but Kamal and Yash kept them in check.

"Straight drive, and that's four! Beautiful shot, but the Shivaji Park boys won't mind this. They're keeping things tight overall."

In the fifth over, Aarav made a bold move. He brought in Rohan, the team's star spinner, during the powerplay. The gamble paid off almost immediately.

"Rohan flights it up... SIX! Oh, the batsman's taken him on. But wait... he's gone again... and it's OUT! Brilliant comeback from Rohan. That's the breakthrough Shivaji Park needed!"

What followed was a procession. Rohan and Kamal ripped through the Nashik Warriors' lineup, each wicket celebrated with wild cheers from the crowd.

"Oh, he's bowled him! That's a ripper from Rohan. The batsman had no clue!"

"Edged... and taken! Kamal joins the party. This is turning into a rout."

By the 19th over, it was all over.

"Last ball... and that's it! Clean bowled! Nashik Warriors are all out for 219. Shivaji Park Academy wins by 45 runs and takes home the trophy!"

The crowd erupted in celebration as the Shivaji Park players lifted the trophy high. Medals were handed out, and the announcer's voice captured the emotion of the moment.

"What a journey it has been for these young lads. They've shown grit, determination, and immense talent. Remember the names, folks. These are stars in the making!"

As the team gathered for a photo with the trophy, Aarav couldn't help but smile. This was just the beginning. The Mumbai Knock Selection Tournament awaited, and the dream of the Vijay Merchant Trophy was one step closer.