

## Cricket 180

### Chapter 180

The sun rose early over Sydney, casting its golden light upon the iconic skyline and the historic Sydney Cricket Ground, the venue for the third Test match between India and Australia. The stands slowly filled with a sea of blue and gold jerseys, anticipation buzzing in the summer air like static.

As both teams warmed up under the clear blue sky, there were major talking points echoing through the stadium. David Warner, with his signature bravado, had returned to the Australian XI, adding depth and aggression to the top order. On the Indian side, the news that had fans cheering the loudest was the return of Rohit Sharma to the Test squad. The Hitman was back, opening the innings alongside the promising Shubman Gill.

Australia won the toss. Tim Paine's decision was swift—bat first. The pitch looked firm, offering true bounce, with signs it might turn as the game wore on. It was a typical Sydney wicket, one that demanded resilience and offered reward to both batters and spinners.

The first day's play began under perfect conditions. Warner, making his comeback, started cautiously but soon found his rhythm. Slashing through covers, dancing down the track—he was a man on a mission. But just as he looked set for a big one, he was undone by a sharp delivery from Jadeja. Caught at short cover for 62, Warner's return was lively but short-lived.

Then came the partnership that threatened to break India's back.

Steven Smith and Marnus Labuschagne dug in, blending flair with focus. Smith, ever the unorthodox craftsman, flicked, nudged, and carved his way into the nineties. Marnus was equally efficient, rotating the strike with precision. The duo frustrated the Indian bowlers, taking the score past 200.

But it was a moment of brilliance from Aarav that turned the tide.

With Labuschagne on 91, Aarav bowled a teasing line just outside off, drawing Marnus forward. The ball found the edge and nestled into Pant's gloves. The roar from the Indians was deafening. Then came an even greater moment—Smith, batting on 131, attempted a risky second run and paid the price. A laser throw from Jadeja at point found him short of the crease. Run out. Australia's spine had cracked.

The rest of the innings unraveled quickly. Bumrah picked up one crucial wicket with his reverse swing, while Aarav added two more scalps to his tally, finishing with 3 for the innings. Jadeja spun a web around the tail, claiming 3 wickets in total. Siraj chipped in with one. Ashwin, surprisingly, remained wicketless despite bowling 30 overs with his trademark control.

Australia were bowled out for 338 in 105.4 overs. Respectable, but not insurmountable.

When India came out to bat, all eyes were on the returning Rohit Sharma.

Opening with Gill, the pair looked steady. Rohit was timing the ball well, flicking off his pads and punching through the covers. But just as he was beginning to assert himself, Josh Hazlewood produced a peach—full, seaming away, kissing the edge of Rohit's bat. Gone for 26.

In walked Aarav.

He received a loud cheer from the Indian fans, many of whom now wore jerseys with his name. Together, Gill and Aarav began the rebuilding phase. They played with caution but pounced on the loose

deliveries. Gill's straight drives were elegant; Aarav's cuts behind point, surgical. It wasn't flamboyant, but it was smart cricket.

Their partnership of 97 runs steadied India's innings. Both batsmen reached their half-centuries, bringing smiles in the dressing room. But the celebration was short-lived. Cummins returned for a fiery second spell.

First, a bouncer that surprised Gill—he mistimed his hook and was caught at fine leg. Then, a delivery that nipped back in sharply, trapping Aarav on the pads. Both fell for 50, and suddenly the scoreboard looked vulnerable again.

What followed was a frustrating collapse. Hanuma Vihari and Ashwin were both run out—poor calling and brilliant fielding from the Aussies. Pant tried to counter-attack but fell to Lyon. Rahane held his end briefly before nicking off to Starc.

India were bowled out for 244 in 100.4 overs.

A trail of 94 runs. Not catastrophic, but certainly a deficit that put the pressure back on.

Pat Cummins was the chief destroyer, picking up four wickets with relentless precision. Hazlewood took two, while Starc and Lyon chipped in with one each. The two run-outs added salt to India's wounds.

As the players walked back, the Australian team wore a satisfied look. The crowd erupted, applauding their bowlers for executing the plan to perfection. Meanwhile, in the Indian camp, there was no panic—just silent determination.

Aarav sat alone at the edge of the players' balcony, watching the Aussie openers pad up for their second innings. The game was still alive, and he knew the coming days would demand more than just skill. They would demand heart, patience, and the will to fight back.

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The Sydney sun beat down on the pitch with unrelenting intensity as the third day of the third Test resumed. The Australian camp, confident and animated, took to the field for their second innings, knowing a substantial lead would put India on the back foot. With the series hanging in the balance, each run and every wicket carried the weight of a nation's expectations.

### Australia's Second Innings

Australia began cautiously but soon found themselves in early trouble. Ashwin, ever the master of guile and deception, struck quickly by dismissing David Warner. Warner, attempting a risky sweep, completely misread the length and was trapped LBW. Silence descended on the SCG as the Indian players burst into an animated huddle, celebrating a crucial early breakthrough.

Moments later, Mohammed Siraj delivered a delivery full of pace and bounce that caught the edge of Will Pucovski's bat. The ball flew sharply to slip, where Rahane completed the catch with composed ease. Australia was two down early and the Indian camp sensed opportunity.

But then came the duo of Marnus Labuschagne and Steven Smith—Australia's most dependable pair. With graceful drives and careful footwork, they stitched together another strong stand. Marnus played

with his usual enthusiasm, scampering between the wickets, and Smith seemed immovable at the crease. For a while, they blunted the Indian attack.

But Aarav had other plans. Introduced for his second spell into the attack in the second session, he bowled with venom. His energy was electric. In this Spells's third over, he delivered a ball that angled in and then straightened, catching Labuschagne off-guard. The edge flew to Pant who made no mistake. Out for 73.

Then, in a moment of brilliance, Aarav returned to send Matthew Wade back to the pavilion for just 4. It was a full delivery that curved late, uprooting the off-stump. Wade could only watch in disbelief.

Smith, however, carried on and completed yet another gritty half-century. His innings was a masterclass in patience and precision. But Ashwin, sensing the urgency of a breakthrough, tossed one up wider. Smith, looking to dominate, advanced down the track but misread the flight. Pant whipped off the bails with a sharp stumping.

Cameron Green emerged as the anchor in the final session. Calm and composed, he found boundaries and rotated strike seamlessly. His knock of 84 was crucial in stretching Australia's lead. Eventually, Tim Paine declared the innings closed at 312/6, setting India a daunting target of 406 runs.

### India's Chase Begins

As the Indian openers walked in, the crowd roared with anticipation. The final innings of the Sydney Test had begun.

Shubman Gill, elegant and confident, started positively, flicking boundaries and looking assured. However, his innings was cut short at 31 when Josh Hazlewood induced an edge that was snapped up by Tim Paine.

Rohit Sharma stood tall, guiding deliveries through gaps with grace. He reached his fifty with a pull shot that raced to the boundary. But just as he seemed set to anchor the innings, Pat Cummins bowled a beauty that angled in and straightened late, clipping the top of off-stump. Rohit departed for 52.

Aarav walked in, the weight of the chase resting on his shoulders. Batting with purpose, he rotated the strike and occasionally unleashed powerful drives. A particular straight drive off Starc drew applause from even the Aussie fans.

He reached his fifty with a flick to deep square and raised his bat solemnly. But just as he looked to push further, Hazlewood delivered a perfect yorker that snuck under his bat and shattered the stumps. Aarav was gone for 77.

India was still a long way from the target. The middle order struggled—Rahane fell for 4, Hanuma Vihari labored for 23 before edging to the slips.

With the scoreboard reading a grim 228/6, all eyes turned to Rishabh Pant and Ravichandran Ashwin. What followed was a masterclass in resistance and resolve.

Pant, known for his flair, mixed caution with aggression. His reverse sweeps, wristy flicks, and occasional lofted shots frustrated the Australians. Ashwin, on the other end, was the perfect foil—stoic, composed, and unyielding.

The two batted session after session, absorbing pressure and inching India closer to an improbable draw. The pitch turned, the fielders closed in, and the bowlers kept charging. But the partnership endured.

When Pant brought up his century with a delicate late cut, he raised his arms to the skies, eyes glistening with emotion. Ashwin, still defiant on 49, gave him a quiet nod.

The final overs ticked away. Australia tried every trick in the book. But the Indian duo stood firm. When the final ball of the day was bowled and the match ended in a draw. It wasn't a win, but it felt just as sweet.

### Aftermath

India had pulled off a miraculous save. With the series now standing at 2-0, the visitors were just one Test away from an unforgettable clean sweep in Australia. The mood was jubilant, the dressing room alive with laughter and celebration.

Aarav sat quietly for a moment, towel draped over his shoulders, watching his teammates rejoice. He knew the job wasn't done. But for tonight, they had earned their moment of peace. Of pride. Of belief.

History was knocking.

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The echo of cheers from the Sydney crowd had barely settled when the Indian team, though drenched in sweat and effort, was summoned for the customary post-match press conference. The series now stood at 2-0 in India's favour, and with one Test remaining, the mood was a curious mix of anticipation and satisfaction.

The conference room brimmed with journalists from around the globe. Flashbulbs popped, mics were adjusted, and cameramen jostled for the perfect angle. Three chairs had been arranged at the front dais. Team India's acting Test captain Ajinkya Rahane walked in first, composed as always. Ravi Shastri, towering and charismatic, followed with a knowing smile on his face. Aarav stepped in third, still wearing traces of his game-day.

The room fell silent as the moderator gave a brief introduction and opened the floor for questions.

An Australian journalist was first. "Ajinkya, do you think the draw today feels like a win, given the target and the situation you were in?"

Rahane nodded. "Yes, definitely. We were under pressure. The target was steep, but the way Pant and Ashwin played, it showed our intent. I think it speaks volumes of our character."

Another reporter from England chimed in, directing his question to Aarav. "You played a crucial role in both innings. How are you feeling mentally and physically going into the final Test?"

Aarav took a moment, adjusting the mic. "It's been intense. The pitches here test you in every way. But I feel good. Honestly, the way this team fights, it motivates you every single session."

Ravi Shastri added with his usual flair, "And that's the hallmark of this Indian side—resilience. We're not here to participate. We're here to win."

The room responded with a mix of chuckles and nods. A few hands shot up again.

"Next question from Vimal Kumar" the moderator called out.

Rahane visibly perked up. "Vimal bhai, kaise ho?" he said with a smile.

Vimal grinned back, adjusting his glasses. "Main badhiya, Rahane. And amazing game by the team."

He turned to Aarav. "Aarav, your consistency in this series has caught global attention. Many are calling you the future face of Indian cricket. How do you handle that kind of pressure?"

Aarav chuckled modestly. "Well, pressure toh hota hi hai... but I try not to carry it to the crease. I think more than anything, it's about contributing to the team in whatever way possible. Titles, praise, they come and go. But a win, a fightback, that stays with you."

Just as Vimal prepared to ask a follow-up question, a small buzz rippled across the media pit. Several journalists had their heads down, eyes on their phones. A light murmur followed.

The moderator looked confused for a moment, then a representative from the BCCI whispered in his ear. Vimal, the reporter stood up and gently continued:

"Ladies and gentlemen, a quick announcement before the next question. We've just received confirmation that Virat Kohli and Anushka Sharma have welcomed their baby girl about thirty minutes ago. Both mother and daughter are healthy and doing well."

A moment of stunned silence, and then applause erupted around the hall.

Aarav's eyes lit up. "Seriously? The baby's here?!" he asked, leaning forward, excitement flashing across his face.

Vimal beamed. "Just confirmed now! It's a girl."

Ravi Shastri grinned, his voice booming. "Mubarak ho, Team India has a new little fan already!"

Even Rahane laughed heartily. "Virat will be the happiest man in the world today."

Aarav tried to suppress his grin but couldn't.

The interview wrapped up soon after, with smiles all around. As they stepped down from the stage, Aarav hung back for a moment, typing out a quick congratulatory text. But something told him that wouldn't be enough.

He slipped into the hallway just outside the conference room, found a quiet corner, and hit the call button.

"Calling... Virat Bhaiya."

The phone rang just once before being picked up.

"Aarav!" Virat's voice rang with joy.

"Bhaiya! Congratulations! I'm so happy for you, I just heard the news!"

"Haan yaar, it happened so fast. I'm still shaking. She's... she's perfect, Aarav. Absolutely perfect."

Aarav laughed, heart full. "I can imagine. What's her name? Or still deciding?"

"Still deciding," Virat chuckled. "Anushka says we wait till we see her properly tomorrow morning."

"You'll be an amazing dad, Bhaiya. And trust me, she's already India's most loved baby."

They chatted a little longer—not about cricket, not about matches or milestones—but about baby clothes, sleepless nights, and the surreal feeling of holding a new life in your hands.

For Aarav, that call wasn't about star players or captaincy legacies. It was a reminder that behind every fierce warrior on the pitch was a human, filled with dreams, love, and heart.