

Cricket 192

Chapter 192

The empty stands at Chepauk Stadium on February 5, 2021. Aarav Pathak sat in the dressing room, his whites pristine but unworn for the match, the scent of linseed oil and fresh turf wafting in from the field. At twenty, with stats that screamed for inclusion—829 runs in five Tests at an average of 135, 26 wickets to boot—he had expected to slot into the playing eleven. But the return of Cheteshwar Pujara, the wall of Indian batting, had reshuffled the deck. Kohli and coach Ravi Shastri had agonized over it, as whispers in the team bubble revealed. "Aarav's form is otherworldly," Shastri had said in a huddle, his voice gravelly. "But Pujara's experience on spinning tracks... we need that anchor." Aarav understood the logic—cricket was a team game, not a solo spotlight—but the sting of omission burned like the Chennai sun on exposed skin. He watched from the sidelines, heart pounding in sync with the game's rhythm, feeling the dual pull of hero and human: the prince benched, identity in flux.

The first Test unfolded over five grueling days, a battle of attrition on the red-soil pitch that cracked and turned as the match wore on. England won the toss and batted, their openers Rory Burns and Dom Sibley grinding out a solid start against Ishant Sharma and Jasprit Bumrah. But it was Joe Root who stole the show, his bat carving poetry from the chaos. Root's 218 in the first innings was a masterclass—elegant drives piercing the off-side, deft sweeps against Ashwin, his feet dancing like a maestro on the dusty track. England's 578 was a mountain, built brick by brick over two days, the scoreboard ticking relentlessly as Indian fielders wilted under the humid heat. Sweat soaked jerseys, the scent of sunscreen and exertion thick in the air.

India's reply faltered. Rohit Sharma sparkled with 161, his pulls off Jofra Archer cracking like thunder, but the middle order crumbled. Pujara, expected to be the glue, failed spectacularly—ducked out in the first innings, edging a seamer from Ben Stokes to the keeper, and another duck in the second, a tentative prod caught in the slips off Jack Leach. Kohli fought with 72, Rahane added grit, but 337 and then 192 in pursuit of 578 was never enough. England enforced the follow-on after declaring at 178 in their second dig, their spinners Leach and Moeen Ali exploiting the deteriorating pitch, balls fizzing and bouncing unpredictably. By February 9, it was over—England victorious by 227 runs, a massive blow to India's home invincibility. Aarav watched the final wicket fall, Bumrah caught behind, the English players erupting in hugs while the Indian camp fell silent. Disappointment gnawed at him; had he played, could his all-round prowess have turned the tide? The media frenzy post-match amplified his isolation—headlines screaming "Root's Double Ton Crushes India," speculation about selections swirling like the dust on the outfield.

In the bubble's confines at The Leela Palace, emotions ran raw. Team meetings dissected the loss: Kohli's intensity palpable, his eyes fierce as he addressed the squad. "We learn, we adapt. Pujara, back to nets" But whispers grew—Aarav's omission debated. On February 11, two days before the second Test, the announcement came: Aarav in the playing eleven, replacing Pujara at number three. "Your time, kid," Shastri said, clapping Aarav's shoulder, the coach's grip firm and reassuring. Excitement surged through Aarav, mingled with pressure—the legacy of batting at three, following icons like Dravid. He dove into training, the Chepauk nets his forge. Mornings started with shadow batting, feet shuffling on the cracked practice pitches, imagining Leach's left-arm spin. Afternoons: bowling spells, his left-arm fast-medium seaming under the sun, targeting cones for accuracy. Sweat poured, muscles screamed, but emotional depth fueled him—growth from sidelined talent to pivotal force, balancing fame's glare with inner resolve. Teammates rallied: Shubman Gill bantered, "Prince at three? Game over for England." Loyalty shone, easing the isolation.

February 13 dawned clear, the stadium alive with anticipation for the second Test. The pitch, relaid but still red and dry, promised turn from day one. Crowds filed in, horns blaring outside, the aroma of street-side vadai and filter coffee drifting over the walls. Aarav dressed in the changing room, the crisp white jersey hugging his frame, heart thumping as he laced his boots. The toss: Kohli and Root at the center, presenter mike in hand, cameras flashing. The coin spun, glinting in the sun—heads, India wins. "We'll bat," Kohli declared, voice steady, the decision bold on a track expected to deteriorate.

Rohit Sharma and Shubman Gill strode out, bats tucked under arms, the new ball gleaming cherry-red in Stuart Broad's hands. England fielders scattered, Root clapping encouragement, the slip cordon—Burns, Sibley, Stokes—crouched like predators. Aarav watched from the stands, nerves electric, his spot at three looming. Broad's first ball: a probing length outside off, Rohit leaving with a watchful eye, the ball thudding into Buttler's gloves with a sharp smack. The over built tension—inswingers nipping, outswingers curving, the pitch offering early bounce. Gill faced Stone next, the pacer's run-up thunderous, ball whistling past the edge.

In the commentary box, Mark Butcher, Harsha Bhogle, and Nick Knight adjusted their headsets, the hum of broadcast equipment a steady backdrop to the tension building on the field.

"Welcome back to Chepauk for the second Test between India and England," Harsha Bhogle's voice boomed through the airwaves, warm and insightful as always. "India have won the toss and elected to bat on what looks like a challenging surface. Rohit Sharma and Shubman Gill opening, and Stuart Broad with the new ball. Mark, what do you make of this decision?"

Mark Butcher leaned in, his British accent crisp. "Bold from Kohli, Harsha. This pitch will deteriorate, but India's spinners could feast later. England will want early wickets with their seamers—Broad, Archer, Stone. Olly Stone making his Test debut in India; that's pressure."

Nick Knight chimed in, analytical. "Absolutely. Gill's been in form after Gabba, but Broad's experience could test him."

Out on the pitch, Rohit and Gill took guard, the new cherry gleaming in Broad's hand. The first over passed uneventfully—probing lengths, watchful leaves, the ball thudding into Buttler's gloves with a sharp smack. Tension coiled like a spring. Then came Olly Stone, replacing Broad at the other end, his run-up smooth and purposeful.

"Stone into the attack," Bhogle noted. "Good length first up to Gill—defended solidly. Second ball, a touch fuller, pushed to mid-on for no run."

The third ball: Stone steamed in, the ball pitching on a good length outside off, nipping back sharply. Gill, judging it to go over or past, shouldered arms—a fatal miscalculation. The ball crashed into his front pad, knee roll high, and umpire Nitin Menon's finger shot up without hesitation. Gill didn't review, head bowed as he trudged off, dejected, the scoreboard frozen at 0/1 after 1.3 overs.

"Oh, misjudgment from Gill, and Stone has a wicket in his first over of Test cricket in India!" Butcher exclaimed, voice rising. "No hesitation from Menon, and Gill doesn't review either. Good-length ball, nipping in from not too far outside off, and Gill fatally shoulders arms. The ball hits him on the front pad, on the knee roll, and there's little chance of it missing the stumps from there. Hitting the top of off according to ball-tracking. England strike early!"

Bhogle added, "That's a blow for India. Gill looked so assured in Australia, but here, on home soil, out for a duck. Pressure now on the incoming batsman."

As Gill walked back, kit bag slung low, the empty stands amplified the silence—no cheers, no boos, just the distant hum of the city beyond the walls. Aarav Pathak emerged from the pavilion, his whites crisp, bat tucked under his arm. The walk to the crease felt eternal, spikes crunching on the outfield grass, heart pounding in his ears. At twenty, the "Prince" tag weighed heavy, but after being benched for the first Test, this was vindication. Graphics flashed on screens worldwide: Aarav's Test stats—5 matches, 829 runs, 4 centuries, 4 half-centuries, average 135.

"My god, look at these numbers," Knight marveled, his tone laced with awe. "And that too, these stats are from Australia, in his debut series! Five Tests, 829 runs at 135—four centuries, four fifties. That's not just good; that's Bradmanesque. Harsha, how do you fit a player like this into the side?"

Bhogle chuckled warmly. "You don't leave him out twice, Nick. Aarav's all-round ability adds depth, but his batting is pure class. Watch his stance—it's evolved since Australia. More upright, feet closer, ready for spin. This could be a defining innings."

Aarav reached the crease, nodding to Rohit. "Steady, bhaiya. We've got this," he said, voice low but firm. Rohit grinned back. "Play your game, kid. No rush."

Aarav took guard, scratching his mark in the dust, the umpire's shadow falling long. The empty stadium felt intimate, almost haunting—the wind whispering through the stands, the faint creak of advertising boards. He adjusted his gloves, the leather sticky with sweat already, focus narrowing to a pinprick. Olly Stone marked his run-up for the fourth ball of the over.

"Stone to Aarav, first ball," Butcher narrated. "Wide yorker line, swinging away late..."

Aarav moved forward fluidly, wrists snapping like a whip, the bat meeting the ball with a pure, resonant crack. It raced through the covers, finding the gap perfectly, scorching the outfield for four.

"Ohh! What a beauty!" Bhogle erupted, delight evident. "This is beauty from Aarav. Cover drive on his very first ball for a four! Amazing shot. Look at that footwork—forward, balanced, wrists rolling over. England's fielders chase in vain. India off the mark emphatically."

Knight agreed. "Sublime. That's confidence. After being left out last Test, Aarav announces himself. England will rue that loose delivery."

The boundary settled Aarav's nerves, adrenaline surging like a wave. He tapped his bat, eyes on Stone, the pitch's rough patches already visible underfoot. Aarav rotated strike next ball, a quick single to mid-on. Over two: Broad back, probing outside off. Aarav left judiciously, the ball whooshing past, Buttler's gloves snapping shut.

Broad's next: fuller, inviting the drive. Aarav leaned in, pushing to cover for two, legs pumping, the outfield fast despite the heat. "Good running," Rohit called.

"India 7 for 1 after two overs," Bhogle updated. "Aarav looks composed. Mark, his left-arm pace could be key later, but right now, it's all bat."

Butcher nodded. "He's an all-round gem. That average—135!—speaks volumes. England need to unsettle him early."

Over three: Archer into the attack, his bouncer barrage expected. First ball whistled short, Aarav ducking gracefully, the ball sailing harmlessly. Next, length—defended to point. The partnership built: Rohit flicking Archer for four through midwicket, the crack echoing emptily. Aarav responded with a straight drive off Stone in the fourth over, three runs, the ball slowing near the rope.

By over five, score 20/1. Tension eased into rhythm. Commentators wove the narrative: "Rohit's looking ominous," Knight said. "Pulls Stone for six! Over midwicket, into the empty stands. That's his strength."

Aarav's turn: over six, Broad angling in. He clipped off his pads for four, fine leg chasing futilely. "Exquisite timing," Bhogle praised. "Aarav's wrists—pure silk. India racing now."

"Smart from Aarav," Butcher observed. "Not letting Leach settle. His stance change helps—better against turn."

The morning session flowed, overs ticking like a clock. By over 10, 42/1—Rohit 25, Aarav 15. Interactions peppered: Rohit advising mid-over, "Watch the bounce." Aarav nodding, sweat dripping from helmet.

Over 12: Stokes on, aggressive. Short ball—Aarav hooked for four, top edge flying safe. "Risky, but effective," Knight noted. "Aarav's not afraid."

"15 overs in the game and India 60/1," Bhogle said. "This pair rebuilding beautifully after Gill's early exit."

Drinks break: water gulped cold, towels wiping brows. Resuming, Rohit accelerated—sweeping Leach for six, crowd-less cheers imagined. Aarav matched, punching Stokes for four through point.

Over 20: 78/1. Archer bounced back, bouncer barrage. Aarav swayed, then pulled for two. "Gutsy," Butcher commended.

The session's climax: over 25, Rohit reaching 50 with a boundary off Broad, fists pumping. Aarav, on 35, drove elegantly for four. "Class from the Prince," Bhogle enthused.

By over 28: tension spiked—Leach nearly had Aarav, edge flying wide of slip for two. "Close!" Knight exclaimed.

Over 30: lunch called. India 106/1—Rohit 56, Aarav 46, extras 4. The pair walked off, satisfaction etched.

In the dressing room, Kohli clapped. "Solid, lads." Aarav sat, towel over head, emotions swirling. As forks clinked on plates, Aarav felt the turning point—prince rising, legacy forging.

The lunch interval at Chepauk Stadium, felt like a brief pause in a storm that was just beginning to build. Aarav Pathak sat in the dressing room, the cool air from the fans drying the sweat on his neck, the scent of fresh sandwiches and fruit mingling with the lingering smell of turf and leather from the morning session. At 106 for 1, with Rohit on 56 and himself on 46, India had laid a solid foundation, but the red-soil pitch was already showing signs of wear—cracks widening under the harsh sun, dust puffing up with every footfall. The empty stands outside loomed like silent witnesses, no crowd to cheer or jeer, just the faint hum of the city beyond the walls and the occasional cry of a seagull from the nearby sea. Aarav sipped water from a bottle, the liquid cool against his dry throat, his mind a whirl of focus and reflection. Being at number three after missing the first Test was a chance to prove himself, but the pressure of legacy weighed heavy—the eyes of the team, the nation, even if unseen here, watching through screens.

Kohli walked over, his captain's presence steady and intense, clapping Aarav on the shoulder. "Good start, kid. Keep it simple out there. The pitch will turn more—play late, trust your game."

Aarav nodded, his voice calm but laced with determination. "Got it, skipper. Rohit bhaiya and I are in rhythm. We'll build."

Rahane added from across the room, his quiet wisdom cutting through the chatter. "Watch Stokes—he'll come hard after lunch. Short stuff to test you."

The words stuck with Aarav as he finished his meal, a simple plate of rice and vegetables that grounded him in the moment. Emotionally, this innings was more than runs; it was growth—from the boy who burst onto the scene in Australia with those staggering stats (829 runs at 135 average, four centuries) to a man balancing the hero's spotlight with personal truths.

As the umpires signaled the end of lunch, Aarav and Rohit reentered the ground, the sun now a blazing orb overhead, casting short shadows on the outfield. The grass felt warm under their spikes, the pitch's

cracks more pronounced, like veins on weathered skin. Ben Stokes had the ball, his all-rounder energy crackling—tattooed arms pumping as he marked his run-up, England's fielders spreading out with renewed purpose. Root adjusted the slips, Buttler crouching low behind the stumps. Aarav took strike, the mark he scratched earlier still visible in the dust. He tapped his bat twice, the wood echoing softly, settling into his stance—upright, balanced, eyes locked on Stokes.

The first ball after lunch: Stokes charged in, the ball pitching outside off on a good length, seaming away just enough. Aarav watched it closely, shoulders relaxed, and let it go harmlessly to the keeper. The thud into Buttler's gloves was sharp, but Aarav felt no rush—patience was his ally here.

"Good leave," Rohit murmured from the non-striker's end, a quick nod of approval.

Next ball: Stokes adjusted, aiming for the body, short and rising fast. Aarav's instincts kicked in—he swiveled, pulling hard, the bat connecting with a meaty crack. The ball soared high into the air, arching toward the deep square leg boundary. Time slowed; Aarav's heart raced—was it too high? Would it carry? The fielder raced back, but the empty stands swallowed it whole, the ball crashing into the seats for a huge six.

The team pavilion erupted in claps, even without a crowd, the sound carrying across the field. Aarav stood tall, a quiet smile breaking through.

With that six, Aarav reached 52—his fifty in style. He raised his bat toward the Indian pavilion, a simple gesture, no flair, just acknowledgment of the team's faith. Kohli and Shastri stood applauding, Rahane smiling wide. Emotion welled up: pride mixed with relief, the weight of expectations lifting slightly. This was inner growth—from athlete chasing numbers to a human embracing the moment, balancing love's quiet support with cricket's loud demands.

The over continued, Stokes bowling full next—Aarav drove straight for two, legs pumping smoothly. Score now 114/1. Rohit rotated strike with a single, keeping the momentum.

Over 31: Jack Leach back, his left-arm spin flighting temptingly. Rohit defended the first two, then swept hard for four, the ball racing to the boundary rope. "Shot!" Rohit called to himself, grinning at Aarav.

Aarav faced the last two: Leach looped one up, turning sharply—Aarav danced down, lofting over mid-on for four, the connection pure, the ball bouncing once before the rope.

The partnership crossed 120, a milestone that felt solid in the humid air. Stokes returned, but Aarav clipped a loose ball off his pads for three, midwicket chasing. Rohit pushed for two next over, their running sharp, breaths steady despite the heat.

By over 35: 135/1. The pitch's deterioration showed—odd balls keeping low, dust exploding on impact. Leach nearly had Rohit, an edge flying wide of slip for two. "Close," Aarav said mid-pitch, fist-bumping Rohit. "Stay sharp."

Archer replaced Stokes, his pace venomous. Short ball—Aarav pulled again, this time for four, deep backward square chasing in vain. The crack echoed, satisfaction blooming.

Over 40: 160/1. Rohit reached 70 with a straight six off Moeen, bat raised briefly. Aarav applauded from the other end, their bond evident—no words needed.

Later, Stokes bounced Aarav short, the ball rearing—Aarav gloved it, but it looped safe over the keeper for four leg byes. "Lucky," Aarav muttered, resetting.

The session wore on, sun dipping slightly, shadows lengthening. By over 45: 185/1. Leach trapped Rohit lbw? Review showed umpire's call, out for 82. Rohit walked off, shaking head, patting Aarav's back. "Carry on, kid."

Kohli entered, intensity radiating. They built slowly—singles, twos, Aarav reaching 70 with a cover drive off Broad, elegant and timed.

Tea approached: over 50, 210/2. Aarav on 78, Kohli 25. The empty stands felt less lonely now, the innings a testament to resilience.

Post-tea, England attacked. Stokes got Kohli edging to slip for 32—230/3. Rahane joined, steady. Aarav reached 90 with a sweep off Leach, crowd-less but fulfilling.

Heartbreak in over 55, Archer yorked Aarav—bowled for 92. Stumps rattled, Aarav frozen, then trudged off, bat under arm. Disappointment stung, missed a 100, to celebrate on Indian soil raise bat to the camera to the crowd which is in front-off the screen to see his celebration.

Then the ended day one at 300/6, Aarav's knock the backbone. In the dressing room, hugs awaited. Emotion peaked: growth from omission to hero, balancing worlds. The empty Chepauk whispered of more to come—a turning point etched in red soil.