

Cricket 199

Chapter 199

The next few matches were nothing short of a dream run for Royal Challengers Bangalore. The team looked fluid, focused, and hungry, and at the center of it all was Aarav Pathak—India's golden boy and Glenn Maxwell the unstoppable all-rounder duo whose confidence and calm had begun to define RCB's rhythm.

Match 3: RCB vs Rajasthan Royals

The sun hung heavy over Wankhede as Aarav walked in after a brisk start from Padikkal. RCB had lost Kohli early, but there was a spark in Aarav's eyes that spoke of intent. The first few balls were watchful, and then it began—the clean strikes, the effortless drives, the whip of the wrists sending balls racing past cover. AB de Villiers watched from the dugout, smiling. Aarav was in that rare zone where timing seemed instinctive.

Commentators were alive with energy:

Aakash Chopra: "This young man! Every time he plays, he makes batting look like poetry. Just 20, and he's rewriting consistency in T20 cricket."

By the 18th over, Aarav was on 76 off just 34 balls, his bat a blur, his focus razor sharp. Every boundary felt like punctuation in a statement—RCB weren't here to participate; they were here to dominate. RCB posted 205 on the board, and Rajasthan, despite Sanju Samson's fighting 60, fell short by 38 runs. Aarav was Player of the Match—again.

Match 4: RCB vs Mumbai Indians – The Perfect Chase

This was one of those nights when everything felt cinematic. The floodlights, the quiet hum of strategy, and then pure brilliance. Devdutt Padikkal and Virat Kohli opened, and by the tenth over, it was clear that RCB wouldn't need anyone else.

Padikkal's drives were silk, Kohli's placement surgical. They complemented each other like rhythm and melody. When Padikkal raised his bat for a century, Kohli hugged him tight mid-pitch, the crowd roaring in approval. Kohli's own 72* from 47 balls carried RCB home without a wicket lost.

It was domination—10 wickets. No nerves. No mistakes. Just pure class.

In the dressing room, laughter echoed. Maxwell teased Padikkal, "You're stealing Aarav's spotlight, mate." Aarav grinned, tossing his cap, "Nah, he's earned this one. That was art."

Match 5: RCB vs Delhi Capitals – The Thriller

The next clash, at Ahmedabad, turned into a nerve-racking classic. RCB had posted a modest 163, with Aarav's quick 31 holding the innings together after early wickets. But it was the final over that became legend.

Delhi needed 4 runs in 6 balls. Aarav Pathak took the ball.

Jatin Sapru (Commentary): "It's Pathak with the ball. Can he pull off something miraculous again?"

Ball 1: Yorker! Dot ball. Rishabh Pant tried to squeeze it, but Aarav's pace and length were perfect.

Ball 2: Full, driven straight to mid-off. Another dot. Kohli shouted from covers, "Come on, Aarav! Two more dots and they'll crumble!"

Ball 3: Slower one, Pant mistimed, single taken. 3 off 3 now.

Ball 4: New batsman on strike. Bouncer! He goes for a hook—top edge, and Siraj takes it safely near fine leg. The crowd erupts.

Ball 5: Aarav breathes, wipes sweat, and runs in. Yorker again! Batsman digs it out. Only one run. 2 off 1 now.

Ball 6: Aarav stands at the top of his run-up. Kohli at mid-off gestures, "Keep it straight."

He bowls—a slower ball outside off. Pant reaches for it, thick edge, it flies... straight to AB de Villiers behind the stumps! Caught!

RCB win by 1 run.

The stadium exploded, even in limited capacity. Kohli sprinted toward Aarav, arms wide. "That's my boy!" he shouted, tackling him into a hug. The team piled on. It wasn't just a win; it was grit, control, and belief.

Virender Sehwag (Commentary): "Yeh ladka pressure nahi maantaa! (This guy doesn't feel pressure!) What an over, what a player!"

Match 6: RCB vs Punjab Kings – The Calm After the Storm

Coming off the emotional high of Delhi, RCB looked composed, almost serene. Batting first, they were 70/2 when Aarav walked in. From ball one, his timing was effortless again. He pulled, drove, flicked, and once, danced down the track to launch Ravi Bishnoi over long-on for a monstrous six that made the crowd gasp.

Maxwell joined in later, but this was Aarav's show. He reached 50 in 30 balls and finished with 66 off 37. The innings was a lesson in pacing and precision. RCB ended with 191/5, and Punjab, despite Mayank's 60, never got close.

The final margin: 34 runs.

In the post-match chat, Harsha Bhogle asked, "Aarav, every time RCB's in trouble, you seem to play differently. What changes?"

Aarav smiled, towel around his neck, "Nothing really, sir. I just imagine the crowd cheering—even when there isn't one. That sound keeps me going."

The Afterglow

Four straight wins. Four statements.

The dressing room vibe was electric yet grounded. Kohli was proud, but he kept the fire alive: "Remember, champions don't celebrate halfway."

Maxwell joked, "Mate, we'll run out of trophies for Player of the Match at this rate," glancing at Aarav, who pretended to shrug it off, though the gleam in his eyes betrayed how much it meant.

The RCB squad had rhythm, spirit, and balance. Every victory was a story, every celebration a memory, every Aarav Pathak innings another page in what was becoming one of the greatest IPL seasons ever.

And yet—deep down—he knew this was only the beginning.

The announcement came on May 2, 2021. The Board of Control for Cricket in India released a statement that shook fans and players alike—the IPL 2021 was suspended indefinitely due to the rising COVID-19

cases. The bio-bubble that once felt impenetrable had been breached. For Aarav Pathak, who had been on fire that season, the news brought mixed feelings. RCB was dominating, and the team was in the form of his life. But at the same time, the pandemic outside was growing worse. Somewhere deep down, he knew this pause was necessary.

When he reached home, the silence felt odd. After weeks of practicing, adrenaline-pumping moments, and constant travel, being back in his own room felt like stepping into a different world. His kit bag lay in the corner, unopened. For the first few days, he didn't touch a bat or ball. He slept long hours, scrolled aimlessly through social media, and spent time with his parents who were just happy to see him home safe and have long talks with shradha.

But rest never lasts long for a player built on rhythm. On the seventh day, his phone buzzed—a call from the BCCI. The message was clear and crisp: "Congratulations, Aarav. You've been selected for the ICC World Test Championship Final against New Zealand at Lord's."

Aarav's heartbeat quickened. This was it. His first ICC event. A dream every cricketer lived for. A chance to etch his name in history.

That night, he sat in his balcony, the evening breeze carrying a mix of excitement and nervousness. His father joined him, smiling softly. "Lord's, huh?" he said, pride gleaming in his eyes.

Aarav nodded, still lost in thought. "It's huge, Papa. The World Test Championship final. Kohli bhaiya, Rohit bhaiya, Rahane bhaiya... all of them have been there before. But me... this is my first ICC finals game."

His father chuckled, "First or fifth, the ball doesn't know your experience. It only knows how you bowl or how you bat."

Aarav smiled at that. Those words stuck with him.

On May 14, Aarav reached the BCCI headquarters in Mumbai—the familiar team hotel where India's cricketers gathered before any big tour. The place buzzed with energy despite the strict COVID protocols. Masks, sanitizers, thermal checks—it was the new normal. Yet behind every covered face was the same old hunger for victory.

Virat Kohli, now more than a captain, was a figure of calm leadership. As soon as Aarav entered the lounge, Kohli looked up from his coffee, grinned, and gestured him over. "Come here, champ," he said warmly.

Aarav took a seat beside him. "Bhaiya... feels unreal. I mean, the WTC Final..."

Kohli leaned back, eyes sharp but kind. "You've earned it, Aarav. Every run, every wicket. Remember last year? You were carrying RCB, and now, you're carrying the flag. ICC final or not, the game is still the same."

Aarav hesitated. "But bhaiya, ICC tournaments... everyone say the pressure's different. I've never been on that stage before."

Kohli smiled knowingly. "Do you know who scored the most Test runs this year?"

Aarav blinked. "Me"

"Exactly," Kohli replied. "And who took the most wickets as a pacer?"

Aarav thought for a second and laughed nervously. "Also me, I think."

"Then stop doubting yourself. You've already proven you belong. The world's watching you now, but don't play for them. Play for yourself, for the team, for that flag on your chest."

Aarav's anxiety began to ease. Just then, Rohit Sharma and Shubman Gill walked in, carrying plates of snacks. Rohit grinned, "What's going on here? Kohli giving another motivational speech?"

Kohli smirked. "Just making sure our young star doesn't overthink the occasion."

Gill laughed, sitting down beside Aarav. "Bro, you'll be fine. It's Lord's, man! The atmosphere alone will give you goosebumps."

Rohit leaned forward, his tone playful but serious underneath. "Just remember, the first few over at Lord's tells you everything. Watch the slope. It'll make the ball talk if you do."

They chatted for nearly an hour—about cricket, about memories, about life inside the bubble. It didn't feel like a meeting of superstars. It felt like brothers talking before battle.

The next morning, May 15, the team gathered at dawn to depart for London. The airport felt eerie—empty terminals, double-masked security staff, and distant flashes of cameras. The BCCI had arranged a charter flight. Aarav found his seat beside Gill, who was already watching highlights of New Zealand's last Test match.

"Look at that swing," Gill muttered, pointing at Trent Boult's spell. "England conditions will suit them."

Aarav nodded, his mind already mapping out bowling plans. "If there's movement, I'll love it. But we'll need patience. Test matches at Lord's are about control, not aggression."

"Sounds like Kohli bhaiya rubbed off on you," Gill joked.

Aarav grinned. "Maybe a bit."

Seven days of quarantine in London tested everyone's patience. Stuck in their hotel rooms, the players relied on indoor cycling, resistance bands, and online team meetings. But Kohli kept the energy alive. Every night, he would organize short tactical discussions and mental conditioning sessions. Aarav, meanwhile, spent hours visualizing—the seam position, the length, the line.

Finally, after the isolation ended, the team stepped out to practice at the Lord's nets. The air smelled of wet grass, the kind unique to English mornings. Aarav felt his heart race as he walked through the historic pavilion. He'd seen it a thousand times on TV, but being there... it was something else. The green outfield stretched endlessly, the slope almost imperceptible to the eye but very real to the ball.

Kohli gathered the team in a huddle. "This is history, boys. This is where legends are made. We've worked too hard to come this far. Let's make every delivery, every session count."

The next few days were intense. The nets echoed with the sound of leather on willow. Aarav bowled tirelessly, perfecting his rhythm. His pace, control, and swing impressed the coaching staff. Even Bumrah and Shami exchanged shock to see the amount of swing with pace.

In the evenings, the team played two inter-squad games, as planned. Kohli made sure everyone got match practice. In one of those matches, Aarav scored 84 runs and picked up four wickets, sending a clear message—he was ready.

One night, Aarav stood on his hotel balcony, gazing at the distant London skyline. His phone buzzed—a message from Kohli: "Sleep early, champ. Big stage ahead. Trust your game."

Aarav smiled. He replied with a simple, "Always, bhaiya."

As he looked up at the cloudy night sky, he whispered to himself, "Lord's... I'm ready."

The weight of the tricolor felt heavy but beautiful on his chest. Tomorrow would be the start of something special—the biggest match of his life. And this time, he wasn't the young rookie anymore. He was Aarav Pathak—the one who turned opportunities into milestones.