

KING OF CRICKET

Chapter 20 - 20

The week had finally passed, and the air was thick with anticipation as I, Abhishek, Mayank, and Kamal made our way to the MCA Training Ground. The moment we stepped in, the sheer number of players left me in awe. There had to be at least seventy or eighty of them, all selected from local tournaments. Although the Mumbai Knockout Tournament was initially planned, the MCA had opted to form a selection committee instead. Their goal? To pick the best players through intensive trials and prepare them for the U16 Vijay Merchant Trophy.

As we warmed up, stretching and jogging around the boundary line, a group of men in tracksuits entered the ground. They carried whistles around their necks and an unmistakable air of authority. From the way they held themselves, it was clear—they were either coaches or selectors.

One man, positioned in the center of the group, stepped forward. His voice boomed across the ground as he called us to assemble. "Everyone, gather here!"

The chatter among the players died instantly as we hurried to form a semicircle around him. His sharp gaze swept over us before he began speaking. "Welcome to the trials for the U16 Vijay Merchant Trophy. This trophy, as many of you know, is one of the most prestigious tournaments for budding cricketers in India. It's a platform where legends have been made. Yet, for the last six years, Mumbai has failed to lift this trophy. That is unacceptable."

A ripple of unease passed through the crowd, but it was quickly replaced by determination.

He continued, "Today, we begin the process of selecting eighteen players who will train rigorously for the next year to represent Mumbai in the U16 Vijay Merchant Trophy. Remember, this is not just a trial—it's an opportunity to prove you have what it takes to bring glory back to Mumbai."

His words ignited a fire within me. This wasn't just about cricket anymore; it was about being part of something bigger, something historic.

With that, the trials began.

Day 1: Initial Assessment

The selectors divided us into groups, assigning us to different nets for the batting and bowling drills. My group was among the first to take the batting test. As I padded up, I could feel the weight of the moment pressing down on me.

The selector stationed at our net called out, "First batter, in!"

I stepped forward, gripping my bat tightly. The net was surrounded by bowlers of varying styles—fast, medium, and spin. As I took my stance, I could hear the chatter behind me, whispers of the players observing.

The first ball came flying in—a fast delivery. I reacted instinctively, meeting it with a straight bat, the ball pinging off the middle.

"Good timing," the selector remarked, making a note on his clipboard.

The next few deliveries tested me with a mix of lengths—short-pitched balls that I pulled confidently and good-length deliveries that demanded precise footwork. Then came the spinners.

"Watch the flight, Aarav," I muttered to myself as the leg-spinner tossed one up. I danced down the track, driving it elegantly past the imaginary fielders.

"You play spin well," the selector commented, glancing up briefly from his notes.

As the session continued, I grew more confident. Every shot, every adjustment to the bowlers, felt like a step closer to my goal.

Next came the bowling drills. I wasn't a regular bowler, but I could manage a few medium-paced deliveries. As I ran up to bowl, I focused on accuracy, trying to hit the top of off-stump. My pace wasn't extraordinary, but I landed the ball consistently in the right areas.

"Not bad," the selector said. "Work on your follow-through."

Fielding drills followed shortly after. We were made to take catches at slips, under the high sun, and throw down stumps from various angles. My heart pounded as I sprinted to cut off a ball, diving full-length to prevent it from crossing the boundary line.

"Good athleticism," one of the coaches noted.

By the end of the first day, my muscles ached, but I felt a quiet sense of accomplishment.

Day 2: Fitness and Agility Tests

The second day was grueling. Fitness assessments began early, with a series of shuttle runs and the dreaded yo-yo test. As I lined up with the others, I could feel the tension.

"Ready? Go!" the coach yelled, blowing his whistle.

We sprinted back and forth, the beeping sound marking the intervals. Each lap became progressively harder, but I pushed through, my lungs burning and legs screaming for rest.

"Come on, Aarav!" Mayank yelled from the sidelines, cheering me on.

I gritted my teeth and made it to the final stage before collapsing onto the grass, drenched in sweat.

"Well done," the fitness coach said, noting my score.

The agility drills followed, testing our ability to change direction quickly. I wove through cones, leaped over hurdles, and dived to stop rolling balls. Every move demanded focus and precision.

Day 3: Endurance and Match Simulations

Endurance tests dominated the morning. A timed 2km run was the highlight. The track felt endless, and every step was a battle against my own limits.

"Keep going, Aarav!" Kamal shouted as he passed me.

I dug deep, refusing to give up. By the time I crossed the finish line, my chest heaved, and my vision blurred.

"Good effort," the coach said, handing me a water bottle.

In the afternoon, we were split into teams for match simulations. The selectors observed not just our skills but also our decision-making under pressure.

"Aarav, you're captain for this round," the coach announced unexpectedly.

The responsibility hit me like a bolt of lightning. As I set the field and guided the bowlers, I realized the importance of leadership. It wasn't just about making the right calls; it was about inspiring confidence in the team.

Day 4: Final Evaluations

The last day was a mix of all the drills we had undergone. This time, the selectors focused on consistency. Every shot, every delivery, and every fielding effort mattered.

As I waited for my turn, Abhishek nudged me. "Nervous?"

"A bit," I admitted. "But it's now or never."

When my turn came, I stepped onto the field with a renewed sense of purpose. Every ball I faced, every throw I made, was fueled by the desire to make it into the final eighteen.

By the end of the fourth day, exhaustion had taken over, but there was a sense of camaraderie among us. We had pushed each other, competed fiercely, and learned together.

As we sat on the grass, waiting for the final announcement, Mayank whispered, "No matter what happens, this has been incredible."

I nodded, gazing at the selectors, who were deep in discussion. Whatever the outcome, I knew I had given it my all. And for now, that was enough.