

Cricket 202

Chapter 202

The morning light over Lord's was crisp, almost silver, as if the sky itself wanted to stay neutral in this contest of wills. The flags fluttered lazily, a chill breeze bending the long shadows across the outfield. India's openers, in spotless whites, walked down the pavilion steps, the sound of spikes clicking against the old stone echoing faintly beneath the balcony.

From the stands came the low murmur of anticipation — the rustle of raincoats, the hiss of steam from takeaway coffee cups. A few Indian fans already sang softly, "Jeetega bhai jeetega," their voices carried by the London wind.

Jatin Sapru's voice rose through the broadcast.

"Good morning from Lord's — a new dawn, a new story waiting to unfold. India trail by 163. Can they build something special here?"

Rohit Sharma marked guard first, eyes scanning the slope. At the other end, Shubman Gill twirled his bat, face calm but bright with that flicker of youthful energy. Behind them, the field shimmered green and treacherous — the kind that looks beautiful until the ball moves half a millimeter.

Trent Boult began from the Pavilion End, his run-up smooth, left arm cutting through the cool air. The first delivery swerved late, hissing past Rohit's bat. Pant's shout from the balcony broke the tension — "Shabash, Rohit bhai!" — followed by the clapping rhythm of the crowd.

Boult angled across again. Rohit, still as a statue, pressed forward — and then leaned into a drive through extra cover. Crack! The sound ricocheted around Lord's. Four runs. The first of India's innings, the first release of the morning's held breath.

Nasser Hussain chuckled softly into the mic.

"That's a brave stroke early on. But that's Rohit for you — trust in the hands, trust in the balance."

Gill, stylish as ever, mirrored the calm. Southee came on from the Nursery End, using the slope perfectly. He tested him full and away, then back of a length. Gill left three in a row, head over off stump, a lesson in patience. On the fourth, Southee over-pitched — Gill's front foot glided, the ball raced through cover. Applause from the Indian section rose like birds startled into flight.

For half an hour, it was pure, delicate warfare — bat and ball in silent conversation. The Duke ball glistened, seamed, whispered. Rohit's bat made that clean, ringing sound every purist loves; Gill's defense was soft and precise. Together, they looked built for this morning.

Sangakkara's voice, smooth as silk, filled the commentary box.

"There's poetry in this patience. Watch how still Rohit keeps his head, how late he plays. That's the secret — time slows down for those in control."

But England's weather, and New Zealand's discipline, always ask again.

Southee, frowning slightly, switched his angle. Around the wicket now. Gill waited for that tempting half-volley that wasn't quite one. It curved just enough — edge! A sharp crack of wood, the faint nick like glass breaking. Watling flew right, gloves slicing the air — taken!

Gasps from the crowd, a groan from the Indian fans. Gill froze mid-stride, eyes closed a moment, before walking back. Southee raised an index finger skyward, modest but satisfied.

Hussain's tone sharpened.

"That's what happens here — you think it's a gift ball, it's not. The slope draws you in, and Southee cashes the cheque."

The scoreboard turned to 37/1. The applause for Gill's 14 faded into a respectful hush as a new name flickered up: A. Pathak .

Aarav Pathak stood in the MRF kit with new bat, Elegance Edition and he move just beyond the rope, inhaled deeply. The smell of damp grass and linseed oil filled his lungs. He could feel his heart thudding against the pads — steady, powerful. The noise of the crowd blurred into a single hum. Somewhere above, Kohli stood on the balcony, arms folded, eyes fixed.

Aarav tapped the bat on his toe guard twice — his ritual — and began the walk. Every step toward the middle felt heavier and lighter at once. The applause swelled, curious and warm. His shadow stretched long under the pale sun as he reached the crease.

Boult greeted him with the ball glinting crimson. First delivery: 137 kph, hooping in. Aarav's front foot planted firmly, bat met seam — a solid thud, nothing fancy, everything sure. Second: the perfect

outswinger. Aarav let it go, head unmoved, eyes following till it landed in Watling's gloves. Third: a touch shorter. Aarav waited, weight on the back foot, and unleashed a square-cut. The ball carved between point and gully, skimming the turf, streaking toward the rope.

Four.

Sangakkara's voice broke the moment like a smile.

"Ah, that's authority. His first boundary at Lord's, and look at that stillness — eyes level, wrists of silk."

Aarav didn't celebrate. Just breathed, adjusted gloves, and tapped down the pitch. In his mind, he was ten again, playing on cracked concrete lanes, pretending they were the green slopes of Lord's. This is it, he thought. Not just to belong — to matter.

Rohit walked down the pitch. "Good shot, kid. Stay in the moment," he murmured. Aarav nodded, eyes still on the ball in Boult's hand.

The next overs were battles of inches. Southee shaped it away; Boult brought it in. Aarav's bat came down like a gate closing — compact, deliberate. Every "no run" between them was whispered like code: "Haan." "Naah." "Wait."

Each delivery seemed slower, heavier with intent. The ball hissed past edges by millimeters; both batsmen leaned into defense as if carving sculpture out of air. When Rohit leaned forward and punched one through extra cover, it was the sound that thrilled more than the boundary — that clean crack, echoing against the Members' Stand.

Jatin Sapru summed up the spell.

"Every run has come with effort, every ball an examination. India 43 for 1, but they've earned respect."

Rohit Sharma 21*

Shubman Gill14

Aarav Pathak5*

Time crept toward the last overs of the session. The sun lifted higher, a shy warmth spreading over the grass. The Duke had lost a bit of its bite; still, Southee kept probing. Aarav played his last ball of the session off the back foot, dead-batting it to point. The umpire's arm rose.

Drinks.

The applause was gentle at first, then fuller — admiration for the restraint, for the control. Rohit and Aarav touched gloves.

"Solid, mate," Rohit said, smiling under his helmet. "Keep this going."

Aarav exhaled, glancing at the scoreboard one last time before walking back:-----

The hum of the crowd had mellowed into a steady pulse by the time the players returned after break. The sun had escaped from the morning's cloud cover, turning the famous Lord's outfield into a shimmering canvas of emerald and gold. The Indian section was louder now — tricolours waving, faint drumbeats rolling through the stands, voices calling out names that echoed across the Pavilion.

Score: India 43 for 1. Rohit Sharma 21*, Aarav Pathak 5*.

The Duke ball, twenty overs old, had lost a hint of its menace. But in England, even a gentle ball can whisper danger if you grow careless.

Rohit tapped his bat, shadowed the stance. Aarav stood beside him, calm and compact, eyes steady on Southee marking his run-up. There was a quiet pact between them — survive first, then sculpt.

Southee began the session from the Pavilion End, his white shoes gliding over the turf. The first ball after lunch seamed away — Aarav watched, left it late, and the ball kissed Watling's gloves. A murmur of approval came from the commentary box.

Isa Guha: "Beautiful judgement again from Aarav Pathak. He's been unflappable. Look how early he picks the seam out of the hand."

Aarav didn't look at the scoreboard. He didn't need to. His rhythm was forming — defence, leave, soft hands. Then Southee overpitched; Aarav flicked delicately through midwicket. The sound was pure — leather and timing. The ball rolled across the lush grass, kissed the boundary rope.

In the balcony, Kohli clapped once, muttered, "That's class, Aarav."

At the other end, Rohit found his balance. A short-arm jab through cover, a dab to third man — the rhythm of restraint giving way to small bursts of control. By the time India reached 75 for 1, the initial tension had evaporated into something resembling quiet dominance.

Dinesh Karthik: "This is Kohli cricket — pressure is a privilege. You feel it, but you also own it."

Aarav smiled faintly at Rohit after a single. "Ball's getting soft." Rohit grinned. "Then let's make them pay."

Boult's spell ended. Kyle Jamieson, all six-foot-eight of him, entered like a storm held in check. His first over to Aarav was probing — angling in, seaming away. Aarav answered with silence, letting three balls go, defending the fourth, and finally caressing the fifth through extra cover for two.

Then, Neil Wagner came on. The crowd leaned forward. Wagner's eyes gleamed with mischief — short balls were coming.

He banged one in at Rohit's ribs. Rohit swivelled, picked it up beautifully, and sent it sailing over fine leg. Six runs. The crowd roared.

Ian Bishop (voice booming): "From fear to focus — India have weathered the storm. What we're watching is belief take shape at Lord's."

Aarav was feeding off it now — one smooth straight drive, the sound ringing clean; a crisp cut behind point; quick singles punched into the gaps. Rohit's fifty came up soon after — a lean bat raise, no flourish. Aarav tapped gloves with him, a quiet smile between equals.

Bishop: "These two have absorbed pressure and are now dictating it. This is Test cricket at its finest."

Every shot felt symphonic. The crowd's hum merged with the rhythmic sound of bat meeting ball. Flags fluttered. The slope glinted.

The partnership rolled past 80. The noise from the Indian crowd turned into a chant:

"In-dia! In-dia!"

The scoreboard blinked 120 for 1. Lord's — once draped in English calm — now pulsed with Indian rhythm.

Southee returned, bowling with old cunning. One ball angled away, caught Aarav's edge — dropped short of slip. A collective gasp. He exhaled deeply, tapped the pitch, reset.

Next over, Jamieson went full and fast. Aarav leaned forward, perfectly balanced, and drove it back past the bowler. The ball sliced through mid-off, kissing the rope with quiet finality.

He didn't roar. He just lifted his bat, looked up at the Lord's balcony. Kohli's fist pump said it all.

Dinesh Karthik: "Aarav Pathak — fifty in a World Test Championship Final, at Lord's! Write that down in gold!" Bishop: "His 8th 50. He plays like a man writing his own prophecy."

He touched gloves with Rohit again. But the moment of joy was brief — cricket's balance always returns.

Jamieson's next over to Rohit was sharp. A hint of bounce, the seam nibbling away. Rohit, half a fraction early on the drive, nicked it — Nicholls at gully, safe hands.

The crowd applauded, rising to its feet. Rohit's 63 had been poetry until it ended mid-sentence.

Isa Guha: "A classy innings comes to an end. But India — they've already planted their roots."

Score: 132 for 2.

The Lord's crowd stirred as Virat Kohli strode in — chin high, gum rolling, bat twirling like a sword. He took guard. Looked around. Settled.

The first ball — a short one from Wagner. Kohli ducked, smiled, then looked up at the bowler with that unspoken dare: "Try again."

From the other end, Aarav leaned on his bat, breathing slower now. "We'll take them apart later," he murmured.

Kohli smirked, eyes gleaming. "That's the plan."

Jamieson, tired but relentless, kept probing; Kohli's response was pure class — a backfoot punch that whistled through cover. The crowd gasped, then roared.

Aarav followed with a soft glide to third man, rotating strike, keeping rhythm. They were building, inch by inch, as the clock slid toward tea.

Aarav's Inner Rhythm

Aarav's hands were beginning to ache from the constant tension of the bat handle. He didn't care. Every ball was a battle, every moment a test of belonging. He could feel the heartbeat of the ground — the crowd's hum, the rustle of flags, the click of the scoreboard.

He remembered Kohli's words from training few days ago:

"At Lord's, you don't play the occasion. You command it."

Now he understood. This wasn't just a match — it was a declaration.

He felt the weight of every Indian watching — every fan, every dream — and still, his breath stayed even. Calm. Focused.

At 152 for 2, the umpires removed their hats. The bell for tea rang.

Aarav and Kohli touched gloves once more and began their walk back. The crowd stood and clapped them off — a sound warm and continuous.

The camera followed them as they disappeared up the stairs — one veteran, one future — both walking into the light of Lord's Pavilion.

Ian Bishop (final line): "Every now and then, the game gives us a glimpse of the future. Aarav Pathak isn't waiting for it — he's already here."

The afternoon warmth had mellowed into the golden calm of an English evening. Long shadows stretched over the immaculate outfield of Lord's, and the hum of the crowd had risen into an expectant

chorus. The air carried both comfort and tension — the scent of roasted coffee, the rhythmic clap of applause, and the promise that something timeless was unfolding under the sinking sun.

India 152 for 2.

The pair walked back onto the field to applause that rolled through the ground like gentle thunder. The scoreboard might have been even, but the spirit of the contest — it was beginning to tilt.

Michael Atherton: "This is what you dream of — Kohli and Pathak, together at Lord's, batting as if the world depends on it."

Sunil Gavaskar: "Two men at different stages of their journeys — one proving he still leads, the other proving he belongs."

Boult began from the Nursery End, the ball new enough to glisten under the soft glow. The first delivery was pitched up — shaping away. Aarav leaned in, meeting it with a cover drive so pure that the crowd gasped before it clapped. The ball skidded past the ropes, silk through green. Kohli grinned, walked down the pitch, and said, "That sound — it's why we play."

Boult and Southee bowled with renewed discipline, but Kohli and Aarav were now dancing to their rhythm. The footwork was assured, the calls sharp. Kohli clipped one off his pads for two; Aarav punched through point, scampering for quick singles. Every run felt deliberate, every movement rehearsed.

The partnership crossed fifty; applause rippled through the stands, flags fluttering high in the breeze.

Gavaskar: "Every time he hits one through cover, the sound is pure music. Aarav Pathak is writing a love letter to Test cricket."

Jamieson returned, towering over the pitch, angling in steep bounce. Kohli responded with audacity — two back-foot punches in quick succession, the ball rocketing to the fence. He was nearing fifty, eyes glowing under his helmet's rim.

Then — Jamieson struck.

A fraction late on the back foot, Kohli nicked one that kissed the seam and wobbled toward Watling's gloves. The catch was soft, final. Kohli froze, looked up toward the sky — that quiet pause of disbelief. As he walked back, he turned once to Aarav, nodding firmly.

Atherton: "Jamieson again breaks through. But this partnership might have already changed the shape of this final."

Kohli gone for 48. India 205 for 3.

Aarav, still, didn't flinch. He took a sip of water, adjusted his gloves, and whispered to himself: "Reset."

Ajinkya Rahane joined, calm and composed, the veteran anchor to Aarav's rising flame. Together, they began to rebuild — softly, carefully. Rahane's first boundary was a silken drive past mid-off; Aarav

followed with a flick through square leg, running two under the applause of Lord's members in the Pavilion.

The partnership began to tick again. Aarav, now into the 70s, looked untouchable. His footwork against Southee was immaculate, his awareness supreme. He left balls late, defended softly, attacked only when invited.

Then came Wagner — the merchant of hostility. Short-pitched, snarling energy. His bouncers thudded into the turf, rising toward Aarav's ribs. Aarav responded with serenity. One bouncer sat up; Aarav swiveled and hooked it over fine leg. Four. The crowd erupted.

Craig McMillan: "He's answering fire with grace. What composure under pressure!"

Wagner snarled, Aarav smiled.

But Rahane wasn't as lucky. A delivery angled in, jagged back sharply — clipped the inside edge, rattled the stumps.

Wagner roared; Rahane looked back once at the shattered timber. Gone for 27.

Rahane gone for 27. India: 242 for 4.

The light dipped slightly. The noise softened. Aarav walked down the pitch, tapped his partner's shoulder on the way out. His mind: The mountain's still there. Keep climbing.

Rishabh Pant entered like a burst of sunlight. The crowd welcomed him with a cheer — energy reborn. Aarav smiled at him. "Easy," he whispered. Pant grinned. "Easy doesn't win hearts, bhai."

The first ball — a short one from Southee — Pant leapt, uppercut, and sent it flying over slips for four. The stands roared, his swagger alive. But the fire burned too bright too fast.

He danced down to Jamieson, tried to loft him over midwicket — mistimed. The ball swirled, descended into Taylor's hands at mid-on.

Silence for a beat.

Gavaskar: "You can't cage Pant's fire, but sometimes it burns too bright too fast."

Pant walked off shaking his head but paused beside Aarav, a hand on his shoulder.

Pant gone for 15. India 251 for 5.

The applause faded to a low murmur. The evening wind brushed across Aarav's face. He tightened his grip. The weight of India's innings now sat on his shoulders.

Ravindra Jadeja joined, his presence steady and measured. Aarav took the strike against Southee — now in his 14th over, tired but still dangerous.

The first delivery, full and wide, Aarav drove square — a punch, not a flourish — the ball streaked through point, racing to the rope. He was into the 90s now.

The entire Lord's crowd rose to its feet. Flags waved. Cameras zoomed in. Kohli, from the balcony, stood still, fists clenched.

Atherton: "He's 9 away from a Lord's century, in a WTC Final. That's a line that gives you goosebumps."

Aarav's heartbeat slowed. The noise receded. He could hear the faint murmur of his own breath.

Don't play for a hundred. Play for history.

The next few overs were quiet — defensive walls, soft hands, leaves outside off. Jamieson and Southee probed, but Aarav was stone.

The sun dipped lower, bathing Lord's in a halo of gold. The scoreboard glowed: India 263/5.

The umpires looked at their watches — last over of the day.

Boult ran in, smooth rhythm. Aarav left one, blocked another. The crowd held its breath. The final ball — full, swinging away — Aarav leaned forward, softest defence, the sound crisp, confident.

The umpire raised his arm. Stumps.

Lord's erupted in applause — not just from the Indian fans, but from every corner of the ground. The kind of applause reserved for Test innings that felt eternal.

India 278/5. India in Lead for 115 runs.

Aarav removed his helmet, hair damp with sweat, eyes reflecting the last rays of sun. His score: 91 not out.

Jadeja (12*) beside him, quiet smile. Kohli stood waiting at the boundary rope. No words were exchanged — just a tight embrace, pride glowing unspoken.

Gavaskar (voice trembling slightly): "This young man has shown what Test cricket is about — grit, grace, and glory."

As the players walked off, the crowd continued standing. Cameras followed Aarav as he looked up once more at the Lord's balcony — the same dream he'd carried since boyhood, now real under the golden light.

Atherton: "He's turned patience into poetry."

McMillan: "You can see it in New Zealand's faces — they've tried everything. But tonight belongs to Aarav Pathak."

And as the shadows stretched over the field and the crowd began to thin, one name echoed across the old walls of Lord's: AARAV! AARAV! AARAV!