

## Cricket 22

### Chapter 22: A New Beginning

The New Year began with joy and laughter in the Pathak household. Our entire family gathered for a traditional celebration, complete with delicious food and heartfelt conversations. After dinner, we sat around the table, reflecting on the past year.

"This year was big," my mom said, her voice tinged with emotion. "Aarav's selection for the Vijay Merchant Trophy is a dream come true."

"We're just getting started, Ma," I said, smiling.

"And 2014 will be even bigger," my dad added, raising his glass of juice for a toast. "Here's to new opportunities and brighter horizons."

We clinked our glasses, and the room filled with cheers. Deep down, I felt a surge of determination. I wanted to make them proud.

### January 3, 2014 – Signing the MCA Forms

The day started early, as my parents and I, along with Abhishek and his family, made our way to the MCA office. The building was bustling with activity, with cricketers of all ages and their families milling about.

A friendly-looking MCA official greeted us as we approached the reception desk. "Good morning. You must be here for the Vijay Merchant Trophy formalities."

"Yes," my dad replied. "Both Aarav and Abhishek have been selected."

"Congratulations!" the official said warmly. "Follow me, and I'll guide you through the process."

We were led to a spacious room where a stack of documents awaited us. The official handed my parents a packet each. "These are the registration forms. Please read them carefully before signing."

As my parents skimmed through the papers, the official continued, "This document includes details about travel arrangements, accommodation during tournaments, and the responsibilities of the association versus the parents. It also outlines the terms of being part of the MCA program."

My mom looked up, her brow furrowed slightly. "Could you clarify the part about schooling? It says something about an MCA-affiliated school."

"Good question," the official replied. "We recommend that players take admission in an MCA-affiliated school. These schools have special arrangements for cricketers, such as flexible schedules and access to tutors if they miss classes due to training or matches."

"That sounds great," my dad said, nodding. "But will Aarav be able to focus on both academics and cricket?"

"We've seen it work well for other players," the official assured him. "The school ensures that academics don't take a backseat, but the primary focus is cricket. It's a big step, but it's designed to nurture young talent."

As my parents filled out the forms, they chatted quietly, discussing the logistics.

"This is a huge opportunity for Aarav," my dad said, glancing at my mom. "But it's also a big responsibility for us."

"I know," she replied. "We'll need to think about travel costs, accommodation during tournaments, and maybe even hiring a mentor to guide him."

"It'll be worth it," he said firmly. "Aarav has the talent, and we need to support him in every way we can."

"Do you think he's ready for this?" she asked, her voice tinged with concern.

"He's more than ready," my dad said, smiling. "Have you seen the way he trains? He's determined. And with the MCA's support, he'll only get better."

Once the forms were completed, the official reviewed them and explained the next steps.

"These forms are now officially part of the MCA records," he said. "By signing, you agree to the terms, which include mandatory attendance at training sessions, representing Mumbai in all U16 matches, and maintaining discipline both on and off the field."

"What about injuries?" my mom asked. "What if Aarav gets hurt during a match or training?"

"We have medical coverage for all players," the official assured her. "But preventive measures are a priority. Our coaches emphasize proper techniques and physical fitness to minimize injury risks."

Satisfied, my parents signed the forms, and Abhishek's parents did the same.

"Congratulations," the official said, shaking hands with all of us. "We're excited to have Aarav and Abhishek on board. Training starts on January 15th, so be prepared."

With the MCA training camp still days away, I decided to use the time to get a head start. Our farmhouse had a small cricket pitch, and my dad had recently installed a bowling machine—a surprise gift after my selection.

That morning, I woke up at 5:30 a.m., eager to start my day. After a quick breakfast, I headed to the pitch.

My primary focus was on bowling and fielding. With my SS talent and KL Rahul's batting development, I knew I had the foundation to excel, but I wanted to perfect Cheteshwar Pujara's defensive technique.

The bowling machine hummed to life as I set it to deliver medium-pace balls. For the next hour, I practiced leaving deliveries and defending with a straight bat, honing my patience and precision.

Around mid-morning, Abhishek arrived. "Thought I'd join you," he said, grinning. "Can't let you get all the practice."

"Perfect timing," I said, tossing him a ball. "Let's work on fielding drills."

We spent the next two hours practicing catches, dives, and run-outs.

"You know," Abhishek said during a break, "this is just the beginning. The Vijay Merchant Trophy is going to test us in ways we can't even imagine."

"I know," I replied. "That's why we've got to be ready—physically, mentally, everything."

"And we will be," he said, his determination mirroring my own.

January 5-14, 2014 – A Routine of Discipline

The following days settled into a strict routine. Mornings began with fitness drills at the farmhouse, followed by intense cricket practice. Afternoons were spent at school, balancing academics with my growing cricket commitments.

In the evenings, I returned to the pitch, focusing on specific skills. One day it was defensive batting, the next it was bowling variations or fielding under pressure.

My parents were incredibly supportive, ensuring I had everything I needed. My mom packed nutritious meals to keep my energy up, while my dad often joined me at the farmhouse, offering tips and encouragement.

### A Glimpse of the Future

As the days passed, I felt myself growing stronger, more focused, and more determined. The Vijay Merchant Trophy loomed ahead like a mountain waiting to be climbed, and I was ready to conquer it.

Abhishek and I often talked about our dreams during practice. "One day, we'll look back at this moment and realize it was the start of something great," he said.

"And we'll be grateful for it," I replied. "For every practice session, every challenge, every victory."

Together, we were stepping into a new world—a world of opportunities, challenges, and endless possibilities. And we were ready to make it ours.