

## Cricket 23

### Chapter 23

January 15, 2014 – First Day at MCA Academy

The day I had been eagerly awaiting finally arrived. The morning was crisp, with a slight chill in the air. I reached the MCA Academy with my cricket bag slung over my shoulder, my mind buzzing with excitement and a tinge of nervousness.

As I stepped onto the academy grounds, I spotted Abhishek waving at me from the far side of the field. Beside him stood Kamal, with an easy smile, and Mayank.

"Hey come here, you are late again as usual" Abhishek teased as I joined them.

"Yeah, yeah," I said, rolling my eyes but smiling. "it won't happen again!."

We chatted for a while, catching up and sharing our excitement about finally being part of the MCA program. The academy itself was awe-inspiring—a sprawling ground with lush green turf, multiple practice nets, and even a small gym area.

Suddenly, a whistle pierced the air, loud and sharp. Startled, we turned to see a man in his late 40s striding towards us. He had a commanding presence—tall, broad-shouldered, and with an intensity in his eyes that immediately silenced our chatter. Behind him followed a group of about 12 people, each carrying a clipboard or some cricketing equipment.

"Form a line!" the man bellowed, his voice carrying across the field.

We scrambled into position, standing shoulder to shoulder, all 18 of us. He stood before us, hands on his hips, surveying us like a general inspecting his troops.

"I am Coach Aditya Rao," he began, his voice firm and authoritative. "Some of you might have heard my name. I've been a Ranji player and later a coach for the Ranji-winning team. But let me make one thing clear—I am not here to bask in past glories. I am here because the Mumbai U16 team has not won the Vijay Merchant Trophy in six years. That ends now."

His words hung in the air, heavy with expectation.

"You are the best talents Mumbai has to offer," he continued, pacing in front of us. "But talent means nothing without discipline, hard work, and the will to push yourselves beyond your limits. I will push you, challenge you, and yes, sometimes even break you. But if you stick with me, I promise you'll come out as better cricketers—and better individuals."

He paused, letting his words sink in before gesturing to the team behind him. "This is my support staff. Each of them has a specific role—fitness trainers, bowling coaches, batting coaches, fielding experts, and even a sports psychologist. They are here to make you better. Respect them, listen to them, and learn from them."

The introductions began, with each staff member briefly explaining their role. From Mr. Rajan, the bowling coach with 20 years of experience, to Ms. Priya, the sports psychologist who emphasized the importance of mental strength, it was clear that we were in expert hands.

Once the staff introductions were done, Coach Rao turned back to us. "Now, I want to know about you. One by one, introduce yourselves. Name, role, and any achievements you think are worth mentioning."

Abhishek stepped forward confidently. "I'm Abhishek Nair. I'm an opener and a left-arm spinner. I've played in the Zonal tournament and took 9 wickets in five matches."

The coach nodded, making a quick note on his clipboard.

The introductions continued, each player sharing their name and cricketing credentials. Finally, it was my turn.

"I'm Aarav Pathak," I began, standing tall. "I'm a top-order batsman, usually coming in at one down. I'm also a left-arm fast bowler. I was the highest run-scorer in the Zonal selection tournament and captained both my Zonal team and my school club team to victory."

Coach Rao's eyes lingered on me for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then he nodded and moved on to the next player.

Once everyone had introduced themselves, Coach Rao gave us a brief respite. "You have 30 minutes to get to know each other. You'll be spending a lot of time together, so start building those bonds now."

We broke off into smaller groups, and I found myself chatting with a few teammates.

we chatted about the facilities and got to know each other's name and what do they play and what's there expectation and other things.

As we chatted, the initial nerves faded, replaced by a sense of camaraderie. It felt good to be among peers who shared the same passion and drive for the game.

After the break, Coach Rao called us back. "Alright, warm-up time. Four laps around the stadium. Go!"

We took off, the sound of our shoes pounding against the ground filling the air. The laps were grueling, but I pushed through, determined to make a good impression.

Once the warm-up was done, we gathered near the pitch, breathing heavily.

"Good start," Coach Rao said. "Now, let's see what you're made of."

One by one, we were called to showcase our skills. When my turn came, I felt a surge of anticipation.

First, the coach tested my bowling. I ran up, delivered a few overs, and focused on hitting the right areas. Then it was time to bat. I faced a mix of deliveries—bouncers, yorkers, and everything in between—while trying to showcase my technique and temperament.

After about 20 minutes, the coach called me over.

"You're like a diamond, Aarav," he said, his tone thoughtful. "But even diamonds need polishing to shine their brightest."

I stared at him, unsure how to respond.

He coughed and continued, "Your batting is excellent, especially your defense and ability to leave balls outside off. I've been reviewing videos from the trials, and you've improved significantly."

A smile crept onto my face, and I nodded in acknowledgment.

"Your fielding is remarkable—quick reflexes, sharp throws. And your bowling is impressive for an all-rounder. But here, we don't settle for average. We'll train you to be the best. I want you to be a complete player—someone who can walk into the team as a pure batsman or a pure bowler."

I felt a surge of pride but stayed composed, nodding again.

"One more thing," he added. "Your experience as a captain is a huge plus. Only three other players here have captained their teams in the Zonal tournaments. I'll be watching you closely for a potential leadership role."

"Thank you, sir," I said, my heart swelling with determination.

He nodded and moved on to the next player, leaving me to process his words.

As the sun began to set, we wrapped up the day with a team huddle.

"This is just the beginning," Coach Rao said, his voice carrying a mix of sternness and inspiration. "We have a long way to go, but I believe in each and every one of you. Let's bring the trophy back to Mumbai."

The team let out a cheer, united by a common goal. As I walked off the field, tired but exhilarated, I knew this was the start of something incredible. The journey ahead would be tough, but I was ready to give it everything I had.

This was more than just cricket—it was a chance to prove myself, to grow, and to make my dreams a reality. And I wasn't going to let it slip away.