

Cricket 25

Chapter 25

The mid-morning sun beat down relentlessly as Aarav Pathak adjusted his gloves and helmet, his bat resting against his pads. The lush green of the MCA practice ground stretched out before him, the sound of cricket balls hitting the pitch echoing across the field. Standing at the crease, he took a deep breath, steadyng his stance. Before him, the bowler prepared to deliver the next ball.

The fast bowler ran up, his strides purposeful, and with a flick of his wrist, the ball hurtled toward Aarav. It was a good length, pitched just outside off-stump. Aarav moved quickly, bending forward and meeting the ball with a perfectly timed defensive stroke. The ball ricocheted off the middle of the bat, rolling back toward the bowler.

"Well defended," shouted one of his teammates from the sidelines, clapping enthusiastically.

The bowler retrieved the ball and jogged back to his mark, giving way to another bowler. This one had raw pace, and Aarav knew the next delivery would test his reflexes. Sure enough, the ball zipped toward him, short of a length. Aarav leaned into it, executing a textbook cover drive that sent the ball racing toward the boundary ropes.

"Brilliant shot, captain!" a voice rang out, followed by a chorus of cheers from his watching teammates.

Aarav acknowledged their applause with a small nod, his focus unbroken. Over the next half hour, he faced a barrage of deliveries, each honing his skills further. Finally, as sweat dripped from his brow, he signaled for a break.

He walked off the pitch and headed to the locker room, removing his helmet and gloves as he went. The cool air inside was a welcome reprieve. Aarav reached for his phone, checking the date: February 21, 2015.

"System, show me my profile," he muttered under his breath.

A familiar interface flashed before his eyes.

Name: Aarav Pathak

Age: 14 years (Birthday: 31 August 2000)

Talent Level: SS (Rare)

Skills: Low injury risk, fast recovery, sleep fatigue healing

Bowling Type: Left-arm medium pace

Fielding Skill: Best fielder (78.23%) + Training Module

Height: 5'5"

Talent Development:

KL Rahul Talent: 73.00095% (Training Module active – estimated 1-2 years for 100% completion at current pace) Cheteshwar Pujara Test Match Technique: 67.235%.

Aarav smiled. The steady progress in his talent development filled him with pride. Every grueling practice session, every drop of sweat, was paying off.

"This year, Coach Rao is grinding us like soldiers preparing for war," Aarav thought, reflecting on the rigorous training schedule. They had already played three practice matches within their zone, securing wins against Saurashtra and Gujarat but suffering a loss to Baroda. That loss had ignited a new fire in the team, and they were more determined than ever to dominate the tournament.

Switching schools to an MCA-affiliated institution had also been a game-changer. The school's focus on sports training, coupled with minimal academic distractions, allowed Aarav to channel his energy entirely into cricket. The few special lectures before exams were sufficient for him to ace his studies—after all, his previous life as a double-degree graduate had made academics a breeze.

After a brief rest, Aarav returned to the nets. Donning his gear, he stepped up to face the bowlers once more. As he took his stance, two teammates—Raghav and Karan—sat behind the nets, watching intently.

"Watch this," Aarav muttered under his breath as the first delivery came his way. He played it with a crisp straight drive, the ball whizzing past the bowler.

"Captain's on fire today!" Raghav cheered, clapping loudly.

Over the next hour, Aarav practiced tirelessly, focusing on textbook shots: straight drives, cover drives, pulls, and flicks. Each stroke was met with applause from his impromptu audience.

After the session, Aarav headed to Coach Rao's office. The coach, a seasoned mentor with years of experience, was like a father figure to Aarav. He had guided Aarav from the basics to the most complex aspects of cricket, instilling discipline and strategy in equal measure.

"Come in, Aarav," Coach Rao said, gesturing for him to sit.

Aarav sank into the chair, stretching his arms. "Coach, I wanted to discuss our playing XI for the first match against Gujarat."

Coach Rao nodded, spreading a list of players on the table. "We've shortlisted the best, but I want your input as captain. Here's what we're looking at."

The two of them spent the next two hours analyzing strengths, weaknesses, and strategies. Other trainers joined in, contributing their observations. After intense deliberation, they finalized the playing XI:

Abhishek Sharma (Opener)

Raghav Joshi (Opener)

Aarav Pathak (Captain, All-rounder, Number 3)

Ishaan Deshmukh (Batter, Number 4)

Vishal Rathi (Batter, Number 5)

Karan Patil (All-rounder, Number 6)

Harsh Jadhav (Wicketkeeper, Number 7)

Rahul Pawar (All-rounder, Number 8)

Siddharth Shetty (Bowler, Number 9)

Amit Dubey (Bowler, Number 10)

Kamal Kumar (Bowler, Number 11)

Aarav leaned back, satisfied. "It's a solid lineup, Coach. I think we've got the balance we need to take on Gujarat."

Coach Rao smiled. "Good. Now, about the home ground advantage—MCA Stadium will be packed. Your fan following is growing by the day, Aarav. Over 100,000 on Instagram already!"

Aarav laughed. "The pressure's on, then. But we're ready. This team has the potential to go all the way."

Coach Rao nodded. "That's the spirit. Let's focus on sticking to our game plan. You'll lead them well, I'm sure."

As Aarav left the office, the evening sky was tinged with hues of orange and pink. The anticipation of the upcoming match thrummed through his veins. He knew the road ahead wouldn't be easy, but with determination, strategy, and teamwork, victory was within reach.

Walking back to the locker room, Aarav couldn't help but feel a surge of pride and responsibility. The team's success depended on his leadership, and he was ready to rise to the occasion.

The first match of the season was just days away, and Aarav Pathak, captain of the Mumbai U-16 team, was determined to make it a memorable one.