

## Cricket 26

### Chapter 26

It's the 23rd of February, a bright and sunny morning at the MCA Cricket Ground, and the crowd is buzzing with excitement as we gear up for the fifth match of the Vijay Merchant U16 Tournament. This is the first game for both teams, Mumbai U16 and Gujarat U16, and the stakes couldn't be higher. The players are out on the field for the toss, and the captains, Aarav Pathak from Mumbai and Sonu Kumar from Gujarat, are ready.

The coin goes up, and it's Aarav who wins the toss.

Interviewer: "Aarav, congratulations on winning the toss! What's the plan today?"

Aarav: "Thank you. The conditions look favorable for the bowlers early on, so we'll bowl first. We want to take advantage of the fresh pitch and restrict Gujarat to a manageable total."

Interviewer: "Sonu, you're going to bat first. Your thoughts on the game plan?"

Sonu Kumar: "It's a good batting surface. Our aim is to build partnerships and post a competitive total. We know Mumbai is a strong side, but we're ready for the challenge."

The announcer takes over as the captains walk back to their teams.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have 30 minutes before the start of play. Both teams have brought in fresh faces this season, and their trial performances were nothing short of spectacular. This is the first West Zone match, and for those unfamiliar, this zone includes Mumbai U16, Gujarat U16, Maharashtra U16, Saurashtra U16, Goa U16, and Baroda U16. Each team plays one three-day match against the others, with a single inning per team. The format demands consistent performance, and today is crucial for both Mumbai and Gujarat."

As the players take their positions on the field, the energy is palpable. Kamal Kumar, the young left-arm medium pacer, takes the new ball for Mumbai. Aarav has set a fiercely attacking field: four slips, a gully, and a point close in, ready to pounce on any mistake.

First Over:

Ball 1: Kamal runs in, the ball lands on a good length, and the batter defends solidly.

Ball 2: A touch fuller this time, shaping away slightly. The batter shoulders arms.

Ball 3: Tight line and length again. Defended back down the pitch.

Ball 4: Banged in short, but the batter sways away comfortably.

Ball 5: A good-length delivery outside off, and this time the batter drives, but straight to the fielder at point.

Ball 6: Full and straight, defended back to Kamal.

A maiden to start things off—a dream beginning for Mumbai.

Amit Dubey takes the ball for the second over. Another medium pacer, Amit has a knack for extracting movement off the seam.

Second Over:

Ball 1: A length delivery angling in, tucked to mid-wicket for a single. Gujarat is off the mark.

Ball 2: Amit adjusts, keeping it just outside off, and the batter leaves it alone.

Ball 3: A straighter line, clipped to square leg, but no run there.

Ball 4: A sharp bouncer! The batter ducks under it quickly.

Ball 5: A touch fuller, and the batter goes for the drive, but mistimes it to mid-off.

Ball 6: Pitched up, defended off the front foot.

Amit keeps it tight, conceding just one run.

The Mumbai bowlers stick to their plans. Kamal and Amit bowl four overs each in their opening spells, maintaining relentless pressure. By the eighth over, Gujarat has crawled to 12/0.

The next change sees Rahul Pawar come into the attack. A right-arm off-spinner, Rahul is known for his ability to bowl dot balls consistently. His first over is a maiden, drawing applause from the crowd.

At the other end, Siddharth Shetty, the team's premier fast bowler, starts his spell. Siddharth charges in with aggression, clocking impressive speeds. The batters struggle to adjust to his pace, and although Siddharth doesn't pick up a wicket, his spell is economical. After 16 overs, Gujarat's score is a modest 34/0.

The ball is handed to Karan Patil, Mumbai's off-spinner, and he strikes in his very first over!

Karan's First Over:

Ball 1: A flighted delivery on off-stump, the batter lunges forward but misses.

Ball 2: Quicker and flatter, defended on the back foot.

Ball 3: A beautiful off-spinner! The batter edges it to first slip, and Aarav takes a sharp catch. The crowd erupts! Gujarat loses their first wicket.

Ball 4: Another flighted delivery, defended cautiously.

Ball 5: Fuller and on middle stump, driven back to the bowler.

Ball 6: Dot ball, as the batter plays it back defensively.

Karan follows it up with a maiden over, keeping the pressure on.

Aarav decides it's time to bring himself into the attack. The captain strides in confidently, adjusting the field as he prepares to bowl.

Aarav's Spell:

Ball 1: Aarav starts with a good-length ball on off-stump, defended solidly.

Ball 2: A shorter delivery, pulled to square leg for a single.

Ball 3: Aarav floats one up, inviting the drive. The batter obliges but finds the fielder at mid-off.

Ball 4: A quicker one, beaten outside off!

Ball 5: Slightly shorter, punched off the back foot, but no run there.

Ball 6: A dot to finish the over, as the batter defends it back.

Aarav and Karan bowl in tandem for the next six overs each, keeping Gujarat's batters in check. By the 28th over, Gujarat is at 61/1. The drinks break is called, and the players eagerly grab some relief under the scorching summer sun.

After the break, Kamal Kumar returns to the attack, fresh and raring to go.

Kamal's Return Spell:

Ball 1: A good-length delivery swinging in, defended off the front foot.

Ball 2: Short and wide, slashed through point for four! Gujarat finally finds the boundary.

Ball 3: Back to a tighter line, the batter lets it go.

Ball 4: A sharp bouncer, fended awkwardly to square leg.

Ball 5: Fuller and on middle stump, clipped to mid-wicket for a single.

Ball 6: Dot ball to finish, defended resolutely.

At the other end, Siddharth Shetty takes charge.

Siddharth's Spell:

Ball 1: A fiery yorker! The batter digs it out just in time.

Ball 2: A good-length ball, driven straight to mid-off.

Ball 3: A back-of-a-length delivery, the batter defends on the back foot.

Ball 4: Full and swinging away, left alone.

Ball 5: Another yorker, this time squeezed to short cover. No run.

Ball 6: Dot ball to end the over, as the batter blocks it solidly.

Mumbai's bowlers keep Gujarat under the pump, ensuring the scoreboard moves at a snail's pace. By the end of the session, Gujarat is 75/1 in 35 overs, and the game hangs in the balance.

As the players head off the field for drinks, the crowd buzzes with anticipation for what's to come. The commentators summarize the session:

"It's been a gripping morning session, with Mumbai's bowlers putting on a masterclass of discipline and control. Gujarat has managed to hang in there, but they'll need to accelerate post-drinks break if they want to set a competitive target. Aarav Pathak's captaincy has been spot on so far, and the battle between bat and ball is far from over." And Mumbai need some wickets if they want to continue in the game as Gujarat's forming a Partnership.

The 20 minutes promises more twists and turns, as both teams aim to seize control of this tightly contested game.