

## Cricket 27

### Chapter 27

The sun beat down relentlessly as the players returned from the drinks break, and the tension in the air was palpable. Mumbai had been relentless with their bowling, keeping Gujarat on the back foot. Aarav, the Mumbai captain, had the ball in hand and was gearing up to deliver. His eyes gleamed with determination as he adjusted the field. A slip cordon of three, a gully, and a short leg—it was as aggressive a setup as one could hope for.

Aarav charged in for his first delivery of the over. The ball pitched just outside off on a good length and swung away slightly. The batter, unsure whether to play or leave, poked tentatively. The ball kissed the edge of the bat and flew sharply to second slip, where Kamal dove low to his left, snatching it inches off the ground. The team erupted in joy, and Aarav pumped his fists in celebration. It was a beauty of a delivery, the kind that left spectators marveling at the skill of the bowler.

The new batter, Gujarat's captain Sonu Kumar, walked in to a roar from the dugout. His team needed him, and he knew it. Sonu took his time to mark his guard, exuding calm amidst the chaos. Aarav, brimming with confidence, ran in for the next ball, a sharp in-swinger on middle stump. Sonu played it with soft hands, dropping it at his feet. It was a statement of intent from the Gujarat skipper—he wasn't going down easily.

What followed was a display of grit and class as Sonu Kumar, alongside his partner, began to rebuild. The Mumbai bowlers maintained their discipline, testing the batters with tight lines and deceptive variations. Kamal, returning for his second spell, was exceptional. His ability to move the ball off the seam troubled the batters constantly. In the 35th over, Kamal struck again.

He bowled a length delivery that angled in, forcing the batter to play. The ball jagged away at the last moment, taking the outside edge. This time it was Aarav who pouched the catch at first slip. Kamal had his second wicket, and Gujarat was three down.

But Sonu was unfazed. He found an able ally in their number five, and together they frustrated the Mumbai bowlers. Sonu played with a calm head, punishing anything loose while defending resolutely against the good balls. The partnership began to blossom, adding 78 runs in 22 overs. Karan, Mumbai's off-spinner, was brought back into the attack to break the stand.

In his third over of this spell, Karan delivered. He tossed one up beautifully, enticing the batter into a drive. The ball dipped and spun sharply, sneaking through the gate and crashing into the stumps. Karan's celebration was subdued but intense—he had delivered just when his team needed him the most.

Mumbai kept up the pressure. Aarav brought himself back into the attack and immediately started causing problems. In his next over, he dismissed Sonu's partner with a delivery that would make any bowler proud. Pitching on off-stump, the ball turned sharply and kissed the edge of the bat on its way to the keeper. Another wicket down, and Mumbai was clawing their way back into the game.

Sonu, though, was a wall. He played with elegance and authority, reaching his half-century with a glorious cover drive. The crowd applauded generously—it was a knock of immense character. But he wasn't done. Batting with the tail, Sonu shifted gears, hitting boundaries at will. Karan, however, wasn't letting up.

In the 80th over, Karan struck twice. First, he trapped the Gujarat number eight in front with a quicker one that skidded on. Then, just two balls later, he tossed one up outside off. The batter, looking to defend, only managed to edge it to slip. Gujarat was now seven down, and Karan had four to his name.

Aarav brought himself back for another spell, and this time he had Sonu in his sights. The Gujarat skipper was on 119, looking unstoppable, but Aarav had a plan. He bowled a series of short balls, pushing Sonu back into his crease. Then, out of nowhere, Aarav pitched one up. The ball swung in late, breached Sonu's defense, and sent the stumps cartwheeling. It was a moment of brilliance from the Mumbai captain, and Sonu walked back to a standing ovation.

With Sonu gone, the Gujarat innings began to unravel. Kamal returned to bowl the 101st over and cleaned up the tailender with a pinpoint yorker. The batter had no chance—it was fast, straight, and devastating.

The final wicket fell in the 105th over. Aarav, fittingly, took it. A flighted delivery outside off tempted the batter into a big shot. The ball turned sharply, took the edge, and was caught brilliantly at slip by Karan. Gujarat was bowled out for 329.

As the umpire removed the bails, signaling the end of the day's play, the Mumbai players walked off the field, exhausted but proud of their effort. The Gujarat captain's century had been the highlight of the day, but Mumbai's bowlers had shown incredible skill and determination to take nine wickets on a tough batting surface.

The day ended with a sense of anticipation for what lay ahead. Both teams had played their hearts out, and the battle was far from over.

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The night at the MCA dorm was quiet but filled with anticipation. After a spirited team meeting, Mumbai's players chatted strategies deep into the night. The plan was simple: approach the chase methodically, build partnerships, and start their Vijay Merchant Trophy campaign with a commanding victory. The team dispersed to their rooms, sharing moments of camaraderie before calling it a night. With alarms set for 7 a.m., everyone understood the importance of rest. Tomorrow was another day to shine.

Morning arrived, and the players rose with a sense of purpose. Breakfast was quick but energizing, with the chatter revolving around the match. By 9:00 a.m., the team was at the ground, warming up under the clear morning sky. The pitch looked the same as yesterday—hard, with a hint of movement for the

bowlers early on. Mumbai's openers, Abhishek Sharma and Raghav Joshi, looked composed as they walked out to bat. Gujarat's Shivam was ready with the new ball, his eyes scanning the field for early breakthroughs.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen! Welcome back to Day 2 of this enthralling contest in the Vijay Merchant Trophy between Mumbai U16 and Gujarat U16. With Gujarat putting up a respectable 329 on the board, it's time for Mumbai's reply. At the crease are two of Mumbai's finest, Abhishek Sharma and Raghav Joshi, facing the challenge of Shivam and the new ball."

Shivam marked his run-up, the ball shimmering under the morning sun. The first delivery was full and swinging away. Abhishek leaned forward with a straight bat, stroking it gently to mid-off. No run, but a sign of confidence.

The second ball was short and rising, aimed at the batter's ribs. Abhishek swiveled and pulled it crisply behind square for four. The ball raced to the boundary as the crowd erupted in cheers.

What followed was a display of disciplined batting. Shivam continued probing, mixing his lengths and angles, but both openers looked in fine touch. Abhishek, compact in defense, showed excellent judgment, leaving anything outside off.

Raghav, on the other end, got into his groove quickly. In Shivam's second over, a slightly overpitched delivery outside off was punished. Raghav leaned into the drive, timing it sweetly through extra cover for four. It was textbook batting—a pure joy to watch.

The first hour was all about survival and capitalizing on loose deliveries. Gujarat's second bowler, Harsh, replaced Shivam after a couple of overs. Harsh, a left-arm medium pacer, tried to exploit the angle, but Raghav was unfazed. A full delivery angling in was clipped off his pads for three. Abhishek, at the other end, greeted Harsh with a punchy back-foot drive through point for four.

The partnership began to flourish. Abhishek brought up his fifty in the 20th over, reaching the milestone with a flick to fine leg. His innings was a masterclass in patience and precision, blending elegance with aggression. Raghav wasn't far behind. He, too, reached his half-century soon after, pulling a short ball with authority to the mid-wicket boundary.

Mumbai's score kept ticking. By the 30th over, they had crossed the 100-run mark, and Gujarat's bowlers were searching for answers. Shivam came back for another spell but was met with the same resolve. Abhishek greeted him with a cracking straight drive, the ball racing past the bowler to the boundary.

"Ah, what a shot! That's as straight as they come. Abhishek Sharma showing exactly why he's so highly rated. That balance, the timing—it's pure artistry."

Harsh tried to keep things tight, but Raghav was in a zone of his own. A short ball outside off was cut late, bisecting the two fielders at point and gully. It was a shot of pure class, leaving even the opposition applauding.

By the 35th over, Mumbai was comfortably placed at 113 without loss. Abhishek stood at 51, calm and composed, while Raghav was on 61, brimming with confidence. The drinks break couldn't have come at a better time for Gujarat.

As the players took a breather, the buzz in the stands was electric. Mumbai had set the tone for their chase, with their openers playing brilliantly. The partnership not only laid a solid foundation but also sent a strong message to the opposition: Mumbai was here to dominate.

The day had just begun, but the intensity on the field promised another riveting chapter in this enthralling contest.