

## Cricket 28

### Chapter 28

As the drinks break ended, the players regrouped and returned to the field. Gujarat's captain decided it was time for a tactical shift. Both ends were handed to spinners, hoping the slower bowlers would unsettle Mumbai's rhythm. The pitch, slightly worn from a day and a half of play, promised some turn and variable bounce.

Abhishek and Raghav, with their steady partnership, resumed the chase. The first over from Gujarat's off-spinner was tight, probing the off-stump line with a fielder at slip and another crouched at short leg. Abhishek negotiated the over with caution, pushing the ball into gaps for singles.

In the second over, the left-arm spinner came into the attack. His first delivery was a flighted beauty, dipping sharply and drawing Raghav forward into defense. The next ball was fuller, and Raghav flicked it elegantly to square leg for two. The crowd buzzed with excitement; the battle between bat and ball was heating up.

But the third over brought a breakthrough for Gujarat. The left-arm spinner tossed one up on the middle stump, luring Abhishek into a drive. The ball turned just enough to catch the edge, flying sharply to the slip fielder, who took a brilliant low catch. Abhishek was out for a well-made 59. The Gujarat players erupted in celebration as the Mumbai dressing room fell silent.

Raghav, standing at the other end, walked over to console his partner. The crowd acknowledged Abhishek's innings with warm applause as he walked back.

The Mumbai captain, Aarav, strode to the crease, greeted with an encouraging pat from Raghav. Aarav started cautiously, getting his eye in with a couple of solid blocks and a crisp flick for a single. The spinners continued to attack, and the pressure mounted.

After four more overs, another wicket fell. Raghav, looking to accelerate, stepped out to the left-arm spinner and lofted the ball toward the mid-wicket boundary. For a moment, it seemed destined to clear the ropes, but the fielder at the boundary line timed his jump perfectly, grabbing a stunning catch. Raghav's valiant knock ended at 68.

Mumbai found themselves in a tricky position. Aarav, now joined by Ishaan Deshmukh, had to rebuild. The two batters played sensibly, rotating the strike and punishing loose deliveries. Aarav was the picture of composure, blocking with soft hands and pouncing on anything short. Ishaan, on the other hand, was a sturdy presence, playing a steady role in support.

By the end of the day, Mumbai had steadied the ship. Aarav reached his fifty in patient fashion, a captain's knock full of grit and determination. Ishaan contributed 30 runs in 99 balls, his stoic defense proving invaluable. With 121 runs needed and eight wickets in hand, Mumbai was in the driver's seat.

The players retired for the night, the Mumbai camp buzzing with optimism. A few words of encouragement were shared before the team headed to the dorm for much-needed rest. Tomorrow was the day to seal the deal.

Morning came, and the players were back at the ground, ready to resume. Aarav and Ishaan walked out to resume the innings. The first ball of the day, however, brought heartbreak for Mumbai. Ishaan edged a sharp delivery to gully, and Gujarat celebrated early. Ishaan walked back, disappointed but proud of his contribution.

Vishal joined Aarav at the crease, and the two batters immediately got to work. Aarav shouldered the responsibility, playing each ball on its merit. The Gujarat bowlers tried everything—spin, pace, and reverse swing—but Aarav was immovable. Vishal, at the other end, provided solid support, picking singles and dispatching anything loose.

Aarav reached his maiden first-class century with a delightful on-drive for four. The crowd erupted in applause, and his teammates rose to their feet in the pavilion. Aarav raised his bat to acknowledge the cheers, the moment etched in his memory forever.

"What a moment for the young captain! A century in a crucial chase, leading from the front—this is the stuff dreams are made of."

Vishal's contribution was equally crucial. His steady knock of 60 runs kept the pressure off Aarav, allowing the captain to play freely. The partnership between the two anchored Mumbai's chase, and as the scoreboard ticked closer to the target, the tension in the Gujarat camp was palpable.

In the 55th over of the day, Aarav clipped a full delivery through mid-wicket, the ball racing to the boundary. With that shot, Mumbai had chased down the target. The players rushed onto the field, embracing Aarav and Vishal as the crowd erupted in cheers. Mumbai had started their Vijay Merchant Trophy campaign with a memorable win.

After the match, Aarav was awarded the Man of the Match for his exceptional performance.

"It was a team effort," Aarav said during the post-match interview. "Abhishek and Raghav gave us a great start, and Ishaan and Vishal supported me brilliantly. This century is special, but it's just the beginning. We have a long way to go in this tournament."

The interviewer smiled and asked, "What was going through your mind when you walked out to bat at a tricky situation?"

"I just wanted to stay calm and take it one ball at a time," Aarav replied. "Cricket is a game of partnerships, and today, we built some crucial ones. Credit to the bowlers, too—they kept us in the game yesterday."

As the players celebrated in the dressing room, the victory felt like a statement. Mumbai was here to dominate, and this win was just the beginning.