

Cricket 40

Chapter 40

The room was dimly lit, and the soft glow of lights filtered through the curtains as a young man of around 16 or 17, lay on his bed, surrounded by a collection of trophies and medals glinting in the soft glow of his room's lighting. Each one was a testament to his grit, determination, and countless hours of effort. Aarav stared at the ceiling, his mind filled with the memories of his journey so far. His life had taken a turn he never anticipated, and as he reflected on his past, a faint smile tugged at his lips.

He recalled a pivotal moment in 2015 when his world seemed to collapse. The conversation with Coach Rahul Dravid at the National Cricket Academy replayed vividly in his mind. It was the day his name wasn't announced for the U19 World Cup squad. At the time, the rejection felt like a cruel injustice, a shattering blow to his aspirations. But Dravid's words echoed even now:

"If you fail once but continue to work hard, you'll rise even higher than before. Setbacks shape legends, Aarav."

Aarav smiled faintly, shaking his head. Dravid's wisdom was timeless. He realized how true those words had been. That one conversation had ignited a fire within him, a relentless drive to prove himself to the cricketing world.

The days following that meeting were challenging. Aarav had bid farewell to Abhishek and his NCA friends, boarded a flight back to Mumbai, and reunited with his parents.

Aarav still remembered the day he returned to Mumbai after his exclusion from the U19 World Cup team. It was one of the darkest days of his young life, but his parents stood by him unwaveringly. As he walked out of the airport, his mother embraced him, whispering, "This is just the beginning, beta. The world hasn't seen your potential yet." His father patted his back and said, "Tough times don't last, but tough people do."

In the weeks that followed, Aarav worked hard to rebuild his confidence. He trained rigorously, pushing his limits every day. But nothing lifted his spirits more than a call he received a month later from Coach Rao.

"Aarav, how are you?" the familiar voice greeted him.

"Coach Rao! I'm fine. How about you?" Aarav replied, his voice tinged with surprise.

"I'm doing well, son. Listen, I'm back with Mumbai's Ranji Trophy team and have been following your progress. We're gearing up for the Ranji Trophy, and I want you to be part of the Mumbai squad. Are you ready to give it your all?"

Aarav's heart skipped a beat. He couldn't believe his ears. "Yes, coach! I'm ready! I won't let you down."

And just like that, his life took a new turn. The very next week, Aarav joined the Mumbai team's camp, where Coach Rao laid out a grueling schedule for him. Aarav's days became a blend of rigorous training, physical conditioning, and mental strengthening. His schedule was grueling: waking up at dawn, warming up, team drills, personal sessions with Coach Rao, and finally unwinding with his teammates. But Aarav didn't mind the grind. He knew he had to work harder than ever before.

His days started at dawn with a warm-up routine, followed by hours of training at the academy. He worked with the team during group sessions and had personal training sessions with Coach Rao, focusing on refining his bowling speed, accuracy, and variations.

Initially, Aarav struggled to regain control over his pace. The raw speed he had gained from mimicking Dale Steyn's technique often left him erratic. Balls would sail wide or lose their swing entirely. But Aarav was determined. With 1.5 months of relentless practice, he mastered the art of controlling his deliveries. He became a bowler who could seamlessly combine pace with precision, earning the admiration of his teammates and coaches alike.

Soon, he became Mumbai's one of the most promising bowler, capable of turning matches around.

During training, Aarav formed bonds with players destined for greatness. Shreyas Iyer, SuryaKumar Yadav, Shivam Dube, Shardul Thakur, and Prithvi Shaw. These friendships would become invaluable as they embarked on their Ranji Trophy campaign together.

The season began with a match against Gujarat at Mumbai's iconic Wankhede Stadium. Aarav wasn't included in the playing XI initially, which he understood. But fate had other plans. One of the bowlers just before the sustained an injury, and Aarav was called up to replace him. It was the opportunity he had been waiting for, and he grabbed it with both hands.

Stepping onto the Wankhede Stadium pitch for his debut, Aarav felt a surge of determination.

"I won't waste this chance," he whispered to himself.

In his debut match, Aarav bowled a fiery spell, taking five wickets and restricting Gujarat to a modest total. His batting performance was equally impressive as he smashed a quickfire 72 runs. Mumbai won the match comfortably, and Aarav's performance became the talk of the cricketing circles.

From that match onwards, Aarav became irreplaceable. Mumbai started their campaign with a commanding win against Gujarat. Under the leadership of captain Aditya Tare, they advanced to the knockout stages with six wins and just one loss. Aarav's performances were sensational, both with the bat and the ball.

They marched into the knockout rounds with confidence. In the quarterfinals, Mumbai faced Bengal at Eden Gardens in Kolkata. Aarav shone once again, picking up seven wickets in the match and scoring a vital 189 runs to guide his team to victory.

The semifinals saw Mumbai take on Punjab at the PCA Stadium in Mohali. It was a closely fought contest, but Aarav's all-round brilliance tilted the game in Mumbai's favor. His innings of 164 runs under pressure and a four-wicket haul in the second innings proved decisive.

The grand finale was held at Saurashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Rajkot. Mumbai faced Saurashtra, a team known for its resilience and depth. Aarav delivered a masterclass in both batting and bowling. He scored a career-best 408 runs in the first innings and claimed a six-wicket haul, ensuring Mumbai lifted the Ranji Trophy.

Aarav's stats were jaw-dropping: 1,509 runs in 20 innings, with a highest score of 408. On the bowling front, his 78 wickets made him a standout performer. He was hailed as the next big thing in cricket, and experts began comparing him to legends.

His meteoric rise didn't stop there. Aarav was soon drafted into Mumbai's squad for the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, India's premier domestic T20 competition. The core team remained the same, and Aarav's performances reached new heights. Aarav adapted to the shorter format seamlessly, finishing as the tournament's highest run-scorer with 555 runs and 18 wickets. Once again, he was named Player of the Tournament, solidifying his reputation as one of India's brightest young talents.

With every match, Aarav's confidence grew. But amidst the celebrations, he never forgot the lessons from his past. He remained grounded, knowing that hard work and humility were the keys to sustained success.

As Aarav lay in bed that night, surrounded by his trophies and medals, he couldn't help but feel grateful. His journey had been a rollercoaster of emotions, but every twist and turn had shaped him into the person he was today. With dreams of donning the Indian jersey and representing his country on the international stage, Aarav knew this was just the beginning of his story.