

Cricket 43

Chapter 43

The morning was cool, and the light breeze carried the scent of freshly cut grass. After a day of rest and acclimatizing to the academy environment, I was ready to dive headfirst into action. Coach Rahul Dravid had arranged a team introduction session. Standing beside him was Abhishek, a mischievous grin plastered on his face.

"Alright, boys," Coach began, his calm but firm voice cutting through the chatter, "I want you all to welcome Aarav Pathak back to the fold. Many of you know him from his earlier days here or his exploits in domestic cricket. This is a big year for us, and I expect every one of you to work hard and make the most of this opportunity."

Abhishek stepped forward with a mock seriousness that made everyone chuckle. "Allow me to introduce Aarav Pathak—the star of first-class cricket, my best friend, and hopefully the guy who'll buy me and everyone else dinner as he's rich and famous."

The laughter that followed broke the ice. Over the next hour, I got to know the team better. While I connected with many, a special camaraderie began forming with Ravi Bishnoi, Arshdeep Singh, Yashasvi Jaiswal, and Tilak Verma. We hit it off instantly, sharing stories and jokes that made it feel like we'd known each other forever.

After the introductions, Coach decided it was time to test my form. "Aarav, grab your gear," he said with a knowing smile. "Let's see what you've got."

I suited up and made my way to the center of the practice ground. The team's bowlers, along with some coaching staff, were ready to bowl at me. As I took my stance, the familiar weight of the bat in my hands felt comforting.

The first delivery was a sharp bouncer from Kartik Tyagi. I swayed back effortlessly, allowing the ball to pass harmlessly by.

"Good leave," Coach remarked, nodding.

The next ball was pitched fuller. I stepped forward and drove it elegantly through the covers. The ball raced to the boundary, and a few players clapped in appreciation.

"Classy!" Abhishek shouted from the sidelines.

The bowlers adjusted their lengths, trying to unsettle me. An inswinger from Arshdeep aimed for my pads, but I flicked it nonchalantly past midwicket, the ball thudding into the boundary cushions.

"Wow, that was smooth!" Yashasvi exclaimed.

The spinners were up next. Ravi Bishnoi bowled a well-flighted delivery outside off-stump. I leaned into the shot, lofting it over extra cover for a one-bounce four.

"Man, he's on fire!" Tilak said, visibly impressed.

For the next 30 minutes, I played every delivery on merit, mixing solid defense with attacking strokes. A pull shot against a short ball drew cheers, while a delicate late cut had everyone applauding. By the end of the session, the team was buzzing.

"Boss, are you even human?" Abhishek teased as I walked off the pitch, wiping sweat from my brow.

"Just lucky," I replied with a grin.

But the tests weren't over. Coach handed me the ball next, and I was tasked with bowling for 20 minutes. My first delivery was to Shubman Gill, one of the most technically gifted players on the team. I ran in, my focus sharp, and delivered a fiery in-swinger that shattered his stumps.

"Whoa!" Gill exclaimed, looking back at the wreckage of his wicket. "What was that?!"

The others laughed, but as I continued bowling, it became evident that my pace was troubling them. A few mistimed shots and edges later, the coach called it a day.

"Impressive, Aarav," Coach said, his approval evident. "You've worked on your bowling too. That's good to see."

Over the next week, we dove into rigorous training sessions. The days were long and grueling, but the bond within the team grew stronger. Everyone pushed each other to be better, and the camaraderie made even the toughest drills enjoyable.

When it was time for a break, I returned home to focus on my Class 12 board exams. The BCCI ensured that everything was in place for us to study while keeping up with our training. The three weeks passed in a blur of textbooks and late-night revisions, but once the exams were over, it was back to the academy.

For the next two months, we trained relentlessly, refining our skills and working on our strategies. May arrived, and with it came a heightened sense of anticipation.

One evening, we gathered in the team conference room. I had been asked to take the lead in analyzing the team's performance and discussing areas for improvement.

Standing in front of the whiteboard, I addressed the team. "Alright, guys, let's talk about our weaknesses and how we can turn them into strengths. Gill, let's start with you. When you're defending, you sometimes extend your bat too far away from your body. That increases the chances of edging to the slips or the keeper. Try to keep the bat closer to your body and soft hands on defense."

Gill nodded, taking mental notes. "Got it. I'll work on that."

"Yashasvi," I continued, "your footwork against spinners is solid, but sometimes you get caught in two minds. Be decisive—either go down the track or commit to the back foot. Half-measures can get you into trouble."

The discussion went on, each player contributing their thoughts and taking feedback constructively. Just as we were wrapping up, Coach Dravid walked in, a smile on his face.

"Good to see you boys so engaged," he said. "But now, let's focus. I have some important news."

We all straightened up, eager to hear what he had to say.

"The schedule for this year has been finalized," he began. "First, we'll play three ODIs and two T20s against England in England. Then, we return home for two ODIs and one Test against South Africa. After that, we head to Bangladesh for three T20s. And finally, the big one—the Under-19 World Cup. It starts in September and runs through October, hosted in Australia."

Excitement buzzed through the room. Playing in England and Australia, two of cricket's most iconic settings, was a dream come true.

"But that's not all," Coach added, his smile widening. "The BCCI and the coaching staff have decided on the captain for this team. And I'm pleased to announce that Aarav Pathak will be leading us."

The room erupted in cheers and applause. Abhishek was the first to reach me, pulling me into a bear hug.

"Captain Pathak!" he exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear.

Ravi, Arshdeep, Yashasvi, and Tilak followed suit, offering their congratulations.

"Speech, speech!" someone called out, and the room echoed with laughter.

I stood, feeling a mix of pride and humility. "Thank you, everyone. It's an honor to lead this team. But remember, this isn't about me—it's about us. We've worked hard to get here, and we'll work even harder to achieve our goals. Let's give it everything we've got."

The cheers grew louder, and in that moment, I felt ready to take on the world with this incredible team by my side. England awaited, and we were prepared to give them a battle they'd never forget.