

Cricket 55

Chapter 55

The air felt electric as we followed Coach Ravi Shastri into the training camp. My heart raced with a mix of excitement and nerves. This wasn't just any cricket ground—it was a haven of legends. Everywhere I looked, I saw players I had idolized for years. There was Shikhar Dhawan, casually leaning on his bat with that trademark grin, KL Rahul tying his shoelaces with calm precision, and Cheteshwar Pujara in the corner, deeply engrossed in conversation with Ajinkya Rahane.

And then, as my eyes wandered further, they locked onto the man himself—Virat Kohli. Captain Kohli. King Kohli. He was practicing shadow strokes, his focus unshakable. Nearby, Hardik Pandya and Ravindra Jadeja were sharing a laugh while Pant—Rishabh Pant—my old teammate from the U19 days, chatted animatedly with Ashwin. Ishant Sharma and Bhuvneshwar Kumar stood in a group, discussing something with serious expressions.

It was surreal, standing there among these giants of cricket. But before I could take it all in, I noticed something else. The moment Coach Shastri walked in, the room seemed to shift. Conversations paused, heads turned, and all eyes were on him—and on us, the two newcomers trailing behind him.

I could feel their stares, a mix of curiosity and perhaps a hint of judgment. What had we done to deserve this spot here? It was a question I could see in their eyes, and it was one I intended to answer.

As we continued walking, a familiar voice cut through the murmurs.

"Aarav!"

I turned instinctively and spotted Pant bounding toward me, his face lit up with excitement.

"Pant!" I grinned, feeling a wave of relief wash over me.

"Man, look at you!" he said, grabbing my shoulder. "From U19 to here, huh? Feels insane, doesn't it?"

"You have no idea," I said, laughing.

He started firing questions at me. "How's it been? How does it feel captaining the U19 squad? And what's with these scores I've been hearing? Fifty after fifty!"

"It's been surreal," I admitted. "But let's not forget you're the one who broke into the senior team first. What's that been like?"

Pant smirked. "Let's just say the pressure is real, but so is the fun. You'll see."

Before I could respond, Coach Shastri's booming voice interrupted.

"Pant! Give the boy some space," he said, his tone half-joking. "We're not here to exchange life stories."

Pant stepped back, throwing me a playful wink. "We'll catch up later," he said, before retreating to his spot.

Coach turned to address the room. "Alright, listen up!" he called, his voice commanding immediate attention. "We've got two new faces joining us for this camp. Meet Aarav and Arshdeep. Both of them have been tearing it up in the limited-overs circuit, and now they're here to train with us and assist you in bowling. They are U19 team star fast bowlers who were instrumental in defeating England in the ODI series 2-1 and the T20 series 3-0. Arshdeep is a left-arm medium pacer, and Aarav is a left-arm pacer. Both of them will bowl to you in the nets until Bumrah and Shami return from their rest. Treat them like you would any teammate—push them hard, but also guide them. Got it?"

A few murmurs of agreement rippled through the group, and I could feel the weight of their gazes once again.

"Alright," Shastri continued, clapping his hands. "Enough chit-chat. Let's get to work!"

The players dispersed, some heading to the nets, others to the gym or warm-up sessions. Arshdeep and I were assigned to the nets, where Kohli and Rahane were already batting. Watching them up close was mesmerizing.

The air in the training camp was thick with anticipation for me and Arshdeep as Arshdeep and I were assigned to the nets. This was the moment I had been dreaming about—the chance to bowl to legends like Virat Kohli and Ajinkya Rahane. As we made our way to the nets, I could see them warming up. Kohli was shadow batting, his movements precise and deliberate, while Rahane adjusted his gloves, exuding an aura of calmness.

I couldn't contain my excitement any longer. I walked over to Kohli, my heart pounding. "Sir... I mean, Virat sir, you're my favorite player. You're my idol. It's such an honor to meet you!" I blurted out, my words tumbling over each other.

Kohli looked up and smiled warmly. "No need for all that 'sir' business," he said, his tone light. "Just call me Virat or Virat bhaiya, whatever you're comfortable with."

"Virat bhaiya it is, then," I replied, grinning from ear to ear.

For the next few minutes, I animatedly chatted with him, asking about his preparation routines, how he handled pressure, and what advice he had for young cricketers like me. Kohli answered every question with patience, sharing insights that left me in awe.

Just then, Rahane walked into the nets, his presence calm yet commanding. I quickly introduced myself to him as well. "Rahane sir—uh, Ajinkya bhaiya," I corrected myself with a nervous chuckle. "It's amazing to meet you. Would it be okay if I got your autograph and a photo later?"

"Of course," Rahane replied, smiling. "But first, let's see what you've got in the nets."

With that, it was time to get to work. Kohli took his place at the crease, and Pant crouched behind the stumps, ready to keep. Arshdeep and I took turns bowling, alternating deliveries to keep the batsmen on their toes. Pant was just there to see us, as he has already trained and he just told that he would be practicing wicketkeeping skills, so he was behind the wickets.

Ball 1: Me

I started with a good-length delivery outside off, trying to find some movement in the air. Kohli leaned into a picture-perfect cover drive, the ball racing to the boundary in no time.

"Nice shot, Virat bhaiya," I said, retrieving the ball.

He grinned. "Thanks, Aarav. Now let's see if you can surprise me."

Ball 2: Arshdeep

Arshdeep came in next, sending down a sharp in-swinger. Rahane defended it solidly, the sound of the ball hitting the middle of the bat echoing in the nets.

"Good ball," Rahane said, nodding his approval.

Ball 3: Me

This time, I decided to go for a yorker. I ran in, my heart racing, and delivered the ball right at the base of the stumps. Kohli was quick to react, digging it out with precision.

"Almost got me there," he said, giving me a thumbs-up.

Ball 4: Arshdeep

Arshdeep went for a bouncer, and Rahane ducked under it effortlessly.

"Not bad, Arsh," Pant called from behind the stumps. "But you'll have to do better to trouble this guy."

Ball 5: Me

I decided to test Kohli with an off-cutter. As the ball pitched and deviated slightly, Kohli went for a drive but missed it entirely. The ball clattered into the stumps.

"Bowled him!" Pant shouted, jumping up in excitement.

Kohli looked back at the stumps, then turned to me with a smile. "Well bowled, Aarav. That was a beauty."

I could hardly believe it. I had just bowled out Virat Kohli!

Ball 6: Arshdeep

Arshdeep followed up with an out-swinger to Rahane, who elegantly guided it to the slip region. No edge, but it was a close call.

Ball 7: Me

Now it was my turn to bowl to Rahane. I went for a short-of-a-length delivery, and Rahane tried to pull it but misjudged the bounce. The ball hit the top of the stumps.

"Clean bowled!" Pant shouted again.

Rahane nodded in acknowledgment. "Good ball, Aarav. Keep it up."

The session continued like this for the next three hours. Arshdeep and I experimented with different line and lengths, trying to outthink Kohli and Rahane.

At one point, I bowled a slower ball to Kohli, who mistimed his shot. The ball hit the pads, and Pant immediately appealed for an LBW. The coach, acting as the umpire, raised his finger.

"That's two wickets for Aarav," Pant said with a grin. "Kohli bhaiya, you're in trouble today."

Kohli laughed. "Let's see if he can get me again."

And I did. A few overs later, I bowled a quick delivery that took the outside edge of Kohli's bat and flew straight to Pant.

"Caught behind!" Pant declared, holding up the ball.

By the end of the session, I had bowled Kohli four times—twice clean bowled, once LBW, and once caught behind. For Rahane, I managed to get him out three times, all bowled. Arshdeep was equally impressive, troubling both batsmen with his swing and bounce.

When the session finally ended, Kohli walked over to me, shaking his head with a smile. "You've got some serious skills, Aarav. Keep working hard, and you'll go far, and I think we would soon be playing together."

"Thank you, Virat bhaiya," I said, feeling a rush of pride.

Rahane also came over, patting me on the back. "Good session. And don't forget to remind me about that photo and autograph."

I grinned. "I won't, Ajinkya bhaiya."

As Arshdeep and I walked off the field, exhausted but exhilarated, I couldn't help but feel that this was just the beginning. Training with the Indian team was an opportunity of a lifetime, and I was determined to make the most of it.

After the intense training session, Arshdeep and I were completely drenched in sweat, but our spirits were soaring. As we walked back to the dressing room, we were greeted by some of the players who had been watching our bowling in the nets. Kohli and Rahane were already there, cooling down and chatting casually.

"Come here, Aarav!" Kohli called out with a grin. "You earned this today."

I hurried over and pulled out my phone. "Virat bhaiya, Ajinkya bhaiya, can I take a selfie with you both?"

"Of course!" Kohli said, putting his arm around my shoulder, while Rahane stood on my other side with his usual calm demeanor. I snapped the photo, grinning like a child who had just won his favorite toy.

After that, I made my way around the dressing room, getting selfies and autographs from every player present. Shikhar Dhawan's playful grin, KL Rahul's stylish pose, Pujara's serene smile, and Hardik Pandya's confident thumbs-up—each photo felt like a treasure. I even managed to get Ishant Sharma, R Ashwin, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, and Rishabh Pant to scribble their signatures on my cricket notebook. Ravi Shastri added a special message: "Keep dreaming big, kid!"

As I was about to put my phone away, Kohli approached Arshdeep and me. "Hey, you two. Join us for dinner tonight in the team dinner room. It'll be a good chance to unwind and meet everyone properly."

We nodded enthusiastically. "We'd love to, Virat bhaiya!" I replied.

"Great. Get freshened up and be there at 8," Kohli said before walking off to join the others.

Back at the hotel, Arshdeep and I were buzzing with excitement. We quickly showered and got ready, each of us choosing our best casual outfits. "Can you believe this, Aarav? Dinner with the entire Indian team!" Arshdeep said as he fixed his collar in front of the mirror.

"It still feels unreal," I replied, grabbing my phone to make sure it was fully charged. I wasn't going to miss a single moment.

We reached the team dinner room right on time. The atmosphere inside was warm and lively, with laughter and conversation filling the air. Kohli was seated at the center of a long table, surrounded by the likes of Shikhar Dhawan, KL Rahul, Pujara, Rahane, Hardik Pandya, Ashwin, Pant, Ishant Sharma, and even Ravi Shastri. The coaching staff and support team were also present, chatting and enjoying themselves.

As soon as we entered, Rishabh Pant spotted us. "Aarav, Arshdeep! Over here!" he called, waving us over.

We joined him, and he immediately launched into a playful explanation of the spread before us. "This, my friends, is what keeps us in top shape. Healthy and diet food, loaded with nutrition," Pant said, gesturing to the array of dishes on the table.

There were colorful salads, grilled chicken, quinoa bowls, roasted vegetables, and a variety of fresh fruits. For drinks, there were smoothies, coconut water, and freshly squeezed juices. Pant pointed to each item as if he were giving a guided tour. "This salad has avocados and nuts—great for healthy fats. The grilled salmon is packed with protein and omega-3s. And these quinoa bowls? Perfect carbs for sustained energy."

"Does everything here have a purpose?" Arshdeep asked, clearly impressed.

Pant laughed. "Pretty much. Even the desserts are healthy. See that fruit parfait? No sugar, just honey."

Kohli chimed in from across the table. "We have a cheat day once in a while, but most of the time, this is how we eat. Discipline off the field translates to performance on it."

I nodded, taking it all in. This wasn't just dinner; it was a glimpse into the life of professional cricketers.

As the laughter and chatter at the dinner table continued, Virat Kohli turned his attention to me, a curious expression on his face. "So, Aarav," he began, his tone casual yet inquisitive, "Coach Ravi was telling me that you're an allrounder."

I smiled, nodding. "Yes, Virat bhaiya. I'm a batting allrounder."

His eyes narrowed slightly, and he tilted his head, as though trying to process what I'd just said. "Wait. You bowl with such pace and precision, swinging the ball both ways, and you're telling me you're a batting allrounder?"

I chuckled nervously, nodding again. "That's right."

He leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. "Now you've got me intrigued. How exactly did you end up identifying yourself as a batting allrounder when you can bowl like that? Tell me more."

Feeling both flattered and slightly on the spot, I decided to answer honestly. "Well, I've always enjoyed batting more. It's what I grew up loving, just like most kids in India. Even though I enjoy bowling, there's something about batting—being out there in the middle, taking on the bowlers, and building an innings—that just clicks with me."

Virat raised an eyebrow. "Interesting. But what about your feats? If you're saying batting is your forte, I'm curious to know what you've accomplished."

I smiled, leaning forward a little. "Well, my most recent highlight was an unbeaten 179 against England in an ODI. Before that, I scored the highest number of runs in the Ranji Trophy for a single season. The same goes for the Vijay Merchant Trophy and the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy—I led the charts there too."

The table went quiet as Virat's eyes widened, clearly impressed. "You're telling me you topped the batting charts in all those tournaments? And you're still out here swinging the ball like it's second nature?"

"I try my best," I said with a shrug, trying to stay humble.

Virat let out a low whistle. "Man, you must really love batting to focus on it more than bowling with that kind of talent. I'm not saying it's a bad thing—just that it's rare to see someone so good at one skill choose to emphasize the other."

"True," I admitted. "Bowling gives me joy too, and it's great to get wickets, especially when they're crucial. But I've always dreamed of being the guy who wins games with the bat."

At this point, Rishabh Pant chimed in, grinning mischievously. "Don't let this guy fool you, Virat bhaiya. I've seen him bat—and yeah, he's good. But when he bowls, he's like a different beast. Once, in the U19 days, he swung a ball so much it completely missed the batter and hit the stumps from behind them. Even the umpire was confused!"

The whole table burst into laughter, and Virat joined in, shaking his head. "You're an enigma, Aarav. A true modern cricketer. If you keep developing both skills, you'll be a game-changer."

"I'll do my best," I replied earnestly.

"You've already impressed everyone in the nets today," Ajinkya Rahane added. "If you keep playing like that, you'll be wearing this jersey in no time."

The words of encouragement from these cricketing icons filled me with pride and determination. I couldn't wait to prove myself further—not just as a bowler or a batsman, but as someone who could contribute to the team in every possible way.

As the evening progressed, we got to chat with each player. Dhawan told us stories about his funniest on-field moments, Rahul gave tips on handling pressure during international games, and Pujara shared insights about playing long innings in Test cricket. Hardik Pandya, ever the entertainer, cracked jokes that had the whole table laughing, while Ashwin discussed strategies for bowling on different types of pitches. Ishant Sharma and Bhuvneshwar Kumar talked about their experiences with injuries and recovery, emphasizing the importance of mental strength.

Kohli and Rahane, as always, were encouraging and approachable, making us feel like we belonged. Even Ravi Shastri shared a few anecdotes from his playing days, his booming voice commanding attention.

By the end of the night, Arshdeep and I felt like we had not only learned a lot but also formed bonds with the team. As we left the dinner room, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of gratitude. This was more than a dream come true—it was the beginning of something extraordinary.