

## Cricket 61

### Chapter 61

The long break had finally come to an end. Both Abhishek and I boarded a flight to Bengaluru, heading for the National Cricket Academy (NCA). Our flight, though slightly delayed, managed to get us to the city without much hassle. As soon as we landed, Abhishek headed straight to the NCA for the camp. However, I had some personal errands to take care of first—specifically, delivering a paper to the Bengaluru office.

"Don't take too long, Captain," Abhishek teased as we parted ways at the airport. "We've got work to do!"

"Go ahead," I replied with a smirk. "I'll meet you there soon."

After submitting the paper at the office, I hopped back into the Range Rover that had been arranged for me. The drive to the NCA was smooth, and as I approached the facility, I couldn't help but feel a sense of nostalgia and pride. This place was more than just a training ground; it was where dreams were forged, and talent was honed.

As the car rolled up to the gates, I noticed a small group of young boys gathered there, their eyes wide with excitement. They looked fresh-faced, full of hope and determination—the kind of energy that reminded me of my early days.

I stepped out of the Range Rover with a casual yet confident air, slinging my bag over my shoulder and retrieving my kit from the trunk. Just as I started walking toward the gate, one of the kids hesitantly stepped forward.

"Aarav sir... err, Aarav Bhaiya," he began, stumbling over his words. "I'm Harshit Rana. I'm a new player here at the academy. I joined to prepare for the U19 World Cup in the future."

His words caught me off guard, but in a good way. The genuine admiration in his voice reminded me of why I played the game—not just for personal success, but to inspire the next generation.

I smiled at him. "You can just call me Bhaiya," I said, trying to ease his nervousness.

His eyes lit up, and he nodded enthusiastically. "Aarav Bhaiya! I've watched all your matches. I'm a fast bowler too, and you're my idol. I want to be like you one day."

Hearing those words filled me with a mix of pride and responsibility. "That's great, Harshit," I said, giving him an encouraging nod. "Work hard, stay focused, and always believe in yourself. The U19 World Cup is a big stage, but if you're dedicated, you'll get there."

He beamed at my words, clearly thrilled to be having this conversation. We chatted for a few more minutes, with him asking about my training routines and how I handled pressure during games. I kept my answers simple but honest, hoping to give him something valuable to hold onto.

"Alright, Harshit," I said finally, adjusting my bag on my shoulder. "I need to head inside now, but I'll see you around. Keep working hard, okay?"

"Yes, Bhaiya! and Best of Luck for the upcoming World Cup!" he replied, standing a little straighter, his face full of determination.

I gave him a small wave before continuing toward the main building. As I walked away, I couldn't help but glance back at the group of kids, all of them now talking animatedly, likely about their brief encounter with me. It was humbling to know that I had become someone's inspiration, someone's role model.

With that thought in mind, I entered the NCA, ready to get back to work. It was time to focus and prepare for the challenges ahead, not just for myself, but for everyone who believed in me.

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After entering the NCA, the first thing I did was head straight to my assigned room. The journey had been tiring, and I was in desperate need of a shower. The cool water washed away the fatigue of travel, refreshing my mind and body. Once I was done, I decided to meet up with my close friends—Gill, Jaiswal, and Arshdeep.

"Finally back to the grind," Gill said, leaning back in his chair as we gathered in the lounge area.

"Yeah, but it feels good, doesn't it?" Jaiswal added with a grin. "The break was nice, but I was starting to miss all this."

Arshdeep chuckled. "Speak for yourself. I could've used a few more days of doing absolutely nothing."

We all laughed, the camaraderie as natural as ever. After catching up for a while, I excused myself to get some much-needed rest. Tomorrow was a new day, and I wanted to be ready for whatever came next.

The next morning, my phone buzzed with a message from the coach. I rubbed my eyes and squinted at the screen.

Coach: "I'll be late today due to some official work. Make sure the team is comfortable, especially the two new additions—Umran Malik and Devdutt Padikkal."

I replied with a simple, "Got it, Coach."

By the time I was fully dressed and ready, Gill and Arshdeep were already waiting for me outside my room. "What's the plan?" Gill asked as we started walking down the hallway.

"Coach wants me to make sure the new guys feel at home," I said. "Umran Malik and Devdutt Padikkal are joining us today."

Arshdeep nodded. "It'll be good to have them around. Both are solid players."

As we made our way to the main training area, I spotted Umran and Devdutt standing together near the nets. They were deep in conversation, and I could just make out snippets of what they were saying.

Umran Malik's POV:

"Bro, can you believe we're playing under Aarav Pathak?" Umran said, his voice filled with awe. "The guy's a beast—scoring runs, taking wickets, leading the team like he's been doing it for decades."

Devdutt Padikkal nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it's crazy. He's just same age as us but look at what he's achieved. Multiple centuries in ODIs and test, so many wickets in T20s, ODIs and Test and so many domestic records and now he's captaining the World Cup squad. It's inspiring."

Umran grinned. "And intimidating. Imagine bowling in the nets and having him smash you for sixes. He's got that perfect mix of aggression and skill."

Devdutt laughed. "True, but have you seen how he handles pressure? It's like he thrives on it. That's what I want to learn from him—how to stay calm and perform when it matters most."

"I'm telling you," Umran said, his tone serious now, "playing under him is going to be something else. He's the kind of captain who'll push you to be your best but also have your back no matter what."

Devdutt smiled. "Yeah, I'm looking forward to it. Let's just make sure we don't let him down."

[POV END]

I couldn't help but smile as I approached them, having overheard their conversation. "Morning, guys," I said, extending a hand.

Both of them straightened up, clearly a bit nervous but trying to play it cool.

"Morning, Captain," Umran said, shaking my hand firmly.

"Good to finally meet you in person," Devdutt added, his tone respectful.

"Same here," I replied. "Welcome to the team. Don't worry about fitting in—we're all here to support each other. Just focus on your game, and everything else will fall into place."

They both nodded, visibly more relaxed after the brief interaction. We spent the next few minutes chatting casually before diving into the day's routine. It was shaping up to be a good start, and I could already sense the positive energy these two were bringing to the squad.

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We didn't linger after our brief chat. The day was young, and it was time to get to work. As the captain, I had to set the tone for the rest of the squad, both old faces and new. Training wasn't just about physical preparation; it was about mentally aligning ourselves for the challenges ahead.

We walked toward the main ground, and the bustling energy was contagious. Coaches and trainers were already out on the field, setting up different stations. Nets were ready, fielding drills were marked, and the bowling machines were calibrated.

"Alright, guys!" I called out, clapping my hands to get everyone's attention. "Let's start with the basics. Warm-ups first. Gill, you're in charge of leading the routine".

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We began with a light jog around the ground, followed by dynamic stretches. The usual stretches for shoulders, hamstrings, quads, and wrists were accompanied by lunges and high knees. This part of training always felt like the calm before the storm. Everyone was focused, yet the mood was relaxed.

Once we were warm, the drills became more intense. Sprinting circuits were next, where we pushed ourselves to cover short distances as fast as possible. By the end of it, I was already sweating, my muscles activated and ready for the main sessions.

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Coach gestured toward the nets. "Aarav, you're up first. Focus on your drives and footwork today. Bowlers, mix it up—some spin, some pace."

I grabbed my bat and helmet, heading to the center net. My first opponent was Arshdeep. He had a knack for exploiting even the smallest weakness, and I knew he wouldn't go easy on me.

"Ready, Aarav?" he teased, spinning the ball in his hand.

"Bring it," I shot back, adjusting my stance.

The first delivery was a short one, aimed at my chest. I stepped back quickly, swiveling to pull it toward square leg. It connected beautifully, the sound of the ball meeting the bat ringing out across the ground.

"Nice shot, Captain!" one of the boys called out.

Arshdeep smirked. "Not bad, but let's see how you handle this."

His next ball was a perfect yorker. I barely managed to dig it out, the bat just kissing the ball as it rolled harmlessly away.

"Good one," I acknowledged, resetting my stance.

After Arshdeep, Umran stepped in. His raw pace was his weapon, and he didn't hold back. The ball zipped past me before I could even react, and I had to grin.

"Fast!!" I said.

"Thanks, Aarav Bhaiya. But try hitting this one!"

The next few balls were a mix—bouncers, slower deliveries, and good-length balls. I focused on my timing and footwork, making sure I played each ball on its merit.

Finally, it was time for spin. Ravi Bishnoi came into the attack, his wrist spinning the ball with deceptive speed. He got me once, the ball slipping through the gap between bat and pad to clip the stumps.

"Clean bowled!" he shouted triumphantly.

I laughed, tapping my bat on the ground. "Good one, Ravi. Let's go again."

The session continued for a while, and by the end, I felt satisfied with the time I'd spent in the nets.

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Next, it was my turn to bowl. As an all-rounder, I prided myself on contributing equally with bat and ball. The focus today was on accuracy and variations.

Coach set up a single stump in the middle of the pitch, challenging me to hit it consistently. "Aarav, let's work on those yorkers and slower deliveries," he said.

I started with a few warm-up deliveries, focusing on my rhythm and run-up. Once I felt comfortable, I aimed for the base of the stump.

The first ball was a yorker, and it missed by mere inches. The second delivery was better, clattering into the base with a satisfying thunk.

"Good! Now mix in a slower one," Coach called.

I adjusted my grip, delivering a slower ball that deceived even the coach standing behind the stumps.

"Perfect. Keep that in your arsenal."

The session also included bowling to live batsmen. Gill and Jaiswal padded up, ready to face me. My strategy was to vary my lengths, keeping them guessing. A bouncer here, an off-cutter there—it was all about finding the right balance.

Gill managed to loft one of my deliveries over mid-on for a boundary, but I got my revenge with an inswinger that clipped his pads.

"LBW!" I shouted, grinning.

"Lucky one, Captain," he said, shaking his head.

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Finally, we moved on to fielding. It was often overlooked but arguably one of the most crucial aspects of the game. We started with basic catching practice, using tennis balls shot at high speed to test our reflexes.

Coach ramped up the difficulty, introducing a drill where we had to dive to stop balls hit into the gaps. The ground was hard, and every dive left a mark, but the effort was worth it.

"Come on, Aarav! Show them how it's done," Gill called out.

I sprinted to my right, diving full-length to stop a ball that was destined for the boundary. The impact with the ground sent a jolt through my body, but I held onto the ball.

"Brilliant stop!" Coach said, clapping.

The last drill involved direct hits. Cones were placed around the field, and we had to aim at a single stump from different angles. I managed to hit the target on my second attempt, earning cheers from the team.

By the time we wrapped up, the sun was high in the sky, and we were all drenched in sweat. The cool-down session was much needed, involving light stretches and a slow walk around the field.

As we sat down for a team meeting, Coach addressed us. "Great work today, everyone. Training like this is what will make the difference in crunch moments. Keep this intensity up, and we'll be ready for any challenge."

I nodded in agreement, feeling a sense of pride in the team's effort. As we dispersed, I couldn't help but look forward to what lay ahead. The grind was tough, but the rewards were worth it.

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The two weeks of practice at the NCA had been grueling but rewarding. We worked hard on perfecting our skills, syncing as a team, and building the mental fortitude needed for the World Cup. When the time came to leave for Australia, the excitement in the squad was palpable.

We boarded the plane to Sydney with a mix of anticipation and nerves. The flight itself was long but comfortable, and most of us spent it either catching up on sleep or going over strategies. I sat beside Abhishek, who, as always, found a way to crack jokes and keep the mood light.

"Are you ready to show the Aussies what we're made of?" he asked, nudging me with his elbow.

"Always," I replied with a grin. "But first, we've got England. Let's focus on them."

The rest of the squad was scattered across the cabin. Gill was buried in a cricket strategy book, Jaiswal was scrolling through a playlist on his phone, and Arshdeep was chatting animatedly with Umran about bowling techniques.

After what felt like an eternity, the announcement came over the intercom: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are now preparing to land in Sydney, Australia. The local time is 9:30 a.m."

As the plane descended, I caught my first glimpse of the Sydney skyline through the window. It was a breathtaking sight—the iconic Opera House, the Harbour Bridge, and the vast expanse of the city sprawling beneath us.

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The moment we stepped off the plane, a cool breeze greeted us. The weather was perfect, a pleasant contrast to the heat we had left behind in India. Cameras flashed as we exited the airport, with a few fans and journalists gathered to capture the team's arrival.

"Welcome to Australia, boys!" a local fan shouted, waving an Indian flag.

We waved back, smiling as we made our way to the team bus. The hotel wasn't far from the airport, and we were soon checking in and settling into our rooms.

After a quick rest, we gathered in the conference room for a team briefing. Coach Rahul Dravid stood at the front, a map of the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) displayed on the screen behind him.

"Our first match is against England," he began, his tone calm yet authoritative. "They're a strong team, but so are we and we recently defeated them, but don't be overconfident regarding that. The conditions here are different from what we're used to, so use the next few days to acclimate. Focus on field placements, bowling lengths, and adapting to the pitch."

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With a couple of days before the match, we had some free time to explore the city. A small group of us—Gill, Jaiswal, Abhishek, and I—decided to visit the Sydney Opera House and take a walk around Circular Quay.

The Opera House was even more magnificent up close. We stood there for a while, soaking in the view and taking pictures. Abhishek, ever the jokester, pretended to perform an opera, drawing laughs from all of us.

"Maybe you should stick to cricket," Jaiswal teased.

We also stopped by a café to try some local delicacies. The Australian coffee was a hit, and we couldn't resist snapping a few more pictures to share on social media.

The next day, we headed to the SCG for our first practice session. Walking onto the historic ground gave me chills. The lush green outfield, the towering stands, and the buzzing atmosphere—it was the perfect setting for a high-stakes match.

Coach divided us into groups to focus on specific skills. The bowlers worked on hitting the right lengths, while the batsmen practiced against simulated conditions to prepare for England's pace-heavy attack.

I spent extra time in the nets, working on my pull shots and cover drives. Facing the likes of Arshdeep and Umran in the nets was no joke, but it was exactly the kind of preparation I needed.

Fielding drills were just as intense. Coach emphasized direct hits and catching under pressure, knowing how crucial these would be in a match against England.

By the end of the session, we were exhausted but satisfied with the progress we had made.

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Back at the hotel, we had another team meeting to finalize our strategy. Coach and the support staff had analyzed England's strengths and weaknesses, and we discussed how to exploit them.

"They have a strong top order," Coach pointed out. "But their middle order can be vulnerable under pressure. Bowlers, focus on early breakthroughs. Batsmen, stay patient and build partnerships."

As the meeting wrapped up, I felt a surge of confidence. The team was ready, and I was eager to lead them onto the field.

The night before the match, I found myself staring out the window of my hotel room. The city lights twinkled in the distance, and the weight of the responsibility I carried as captain began to sink in.

Abhishek knocked on the door and walked in, plopping onto the couch.

"Nervous?" he asked.

"A little," I admitted. "But more than that, I'm excited. This is what we've been working for."

He nodded. "You'll do great. We all will. Just focus on the game and trust the process."

I smiled, feeling a sense of calm. Tomorrow was the beginning of something big, and I was ready to give it my all.