

Cricket 62

Chapter 62

The day of our first World Cup match had finally arrived, but the game was scheduled for a late afternoon start at 4 PM. The entire morning stretched ahead of me, filled with anticipation. As I prepared for the pre-match photoshoot, I couldn't help but glance at my kit.

My eyes lingered on my bat, its glossy surface adorned with the iconic MRF Genius sticker. A wave of pride surged through me, and a small smile played on my lips as I thought back to how this all came to be.

A few weeks earlier, when I was at home during my break, I had received a call from the BCCI. It wasn't unusual for the board to contact players, but this time it was different. The official on the line informed me that MRF was interested in sponsoring me.

Hearing this, my heart skipped a beat. MRF was a legendary name in cricket sponsorship, associated with icons like Sachin Tendulkar and my personal idol, Virat Kohli. This was more than just a deal; it was a badge of honor.

I immediately informed my parents, who were thrilled but also practical. "We should approach this professionally," my mother advised. "Let's involve a lawyer to ensure the terms are clear and in your best interest."

A week later, the meeting was set up. We were seated in a private conference room at a sleek corporate office in Mumbai. On one side of the table sat the MRF representatives—Mr. Mehta, the Head of Sponsorships, and a couple of his colleagues. On our side were my parents, our family lawyer, and me.

After the usual pleasantries, Mr. Mehta began, "Aarav, it's an honor to have you here. We've been closely following your performances, and we're extremely impressed. MRF has a long history of partnering with the best, and we believe you have the potential to carry that legacy forward."

"Thank you," I replied, trying to keep my tone steady despite the excitement bubbling inside me.

Mr. Mehta then outlined the terms of the sponsorship. "We're proposing a two-year deal. The contract will include an annual sponsorship fee of ₹1 crore for using our brand on your bat and kit. Additionally, we'll require you to appear in two advertisements per year."

Our lawyer leaned forward, carefully reviewing the document. "This is a significant opportunity for Aarav, but we need to clarify a few points. First, regarding the advertisements—what kind of content and locations are expected? We want to ensure they align with Aarav's values and his schedule."

Mr. Mehta nodded. "Absolutely, we understand. The advertisements will focus on promoting our Tyres, with no controversial or unrelated content. We'll also coordinate with Aarav's calendar to avoid conflicts with his matches or training."

"Good," the lawyer continued. "Secondly, can you elaborate on the clauses about branding? For example, if Aarav chooses to use a different bat model, how would that affect the sponsorship?"

One of the MRF representatives chimed in, "As long as the bat prominently displays the MRF logo, he is free to choose any model he's comfortable with. We want him to perform at his best."

My father, who had been quietly listening, spoke up. "This all sounds promising, but Aarav is young and focused on his game. We don't want this partnership to distract him from cricket. How will you support him in maintaining that balance?"

Mr. Mehta smiled reassuringly. "That's an excellent point, Mr. Pathak. We're not just looking for a face to represent our brand; we want to support Aarav's journey. Our team will handle all the logistical details, ensuring minimal disruption to his cricketing schedule."

My mother added, "One last thing—if Aarav gets injured or is unable to play for an extended period, what happens to the sponsorship?"

"We've included a provision for that," Mr. Mehta explained. "In such cases, the sponsorship will remain active, but we'll adjust the requirements for advertisements and branding based on his recovery timeline. We want this partnership to be fair and supportive."

Throughout the discussion, I listened intently, occasionally nodding or chiming in with a question. As the terms became clearer, I felt a growing sense of responsibility. This wasn't just about wearing a logo; it was about representing a legacy.

"I'm honored by this opportunity," I finally said, addressing the MRF team. "Sachin Tendulkar and Virat Kohli have inspired me throughout my career, and to share this connection with them is truly special. I'm committed to upholding the values of this partnership."

After the lawyer gave the green light and my parents nodded in approval, it was time to sign the contract. The MRF team handed me a sleek pen, and I carefully wrote my name on the dotted line.

As I handed the pen back, Mr. Mehta extended his hand. "Welcome to the MRF family, Aarav. We're excited to see you achieve great things."

"Thank you," I replied, shaking his hand firmly.

A few days later, the partnership was officially announced, and my social media was flooded with messages of congratulations. Fans and friends alike celebrated this milestone, and the sight of my bat with the MRF logo became a symbol of my journey so far.

As I stood there in my room on match day, the memories of that meeting filled me with pride and determination. The MRF logo on my bat wasn't just a sticker; it was a reminder of the faith people had in me and the legacy I was now a part of.

I picked up the bat, gave it a slight tap on the ground, and smiled. Today was the day to prove my worth once again.

The photoshoot area was buzzing with energy as the team gathered, all decked out in our iconic blue jerseys. The atmosphere was a mix of excitement and nerves; this was not just any team photo. It was the World Cup squad, and each one of us understood the weight of what that meant.

As we assembled, I took a moment to glance at everyone, their faces glowing with anticipation. Grinning, I clapped my hands to grab their attention. "Alright, boys, listen up. We're not here to just smile and pose. Let's make these photos legendary. I want everyone to channel their inner gangster—

serious faces only. When people look at this photo, I want them to think twice before facing us on the field!"

Shubhman Gill, standing next to me, raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Gangsters, huh? That's the vibe we're going for?"

"Absolutely," I replied, adjusting my jersey collar with mock seriousness. "If they're intimidated just by our photos, we've already won half the battle."

Yashasvi Jaiswal laughed but quickly straightened his face, trying to look fierce. "You mean like this?" he asked, narrowing his eyes and puffing his chest.

"Perfect," I said, pointing at him. "Now, everyone, follow Jaiswal's lead."

The photographer gave us a thumbs-up as he captured shot after shot of our squad standing tall, arms crossed, faces set in determination. The blue of our jerseys gleamed under the lights, and I could already imagine these images being plastered across newspapers and screens worldwide.

After the photoshoot, the ICC media team approached me for an exclusive interview. The crew set up a small stage with lights and cameras, and I was ushered to a chair in the center. The interviewer, a polished man in a suit, greeted me with a warm smile.

"Aarav Pathak, the captain of Team India," he began, shaking my hand. "First of all, congratulations on leading the team to the World Cup. How are you feeling about this monumental moment?"

I leaned back in the chair, exuding calm confidence. "Thank you. It's an honor, no doubt. Leading India is not just a role; it's a responsibility. I feel ready, and more importantly, the team feels ready. We've worked hard to get here, and now it's time to execute."

Interviewer: "This team has a mix of experienced players and some fresh faces. How do you see the dynamic working out on the field?"

Aarav: "It's a perfect balance. The experienced players bring wisdom and composure, while the younger ones bring energy and fearlessness. Together, it's a lethal combination. We've bonded well over the past few weeks, and that synergy is going to be our biggest strength."

Interviewer: "Your individual performance over the last year has been exceptional. Do you feel any added pressure to lead by example, both as a captain and as a player?"

Aarav: "Pressure is part of the game. But for me, it's never about personal milestones; it's about contributing to the team's success. If my runs or wickets help us win, that's all that matters. And as a captain, my role is to ensure that every player feels supported and ready to give their best."

Interviewer: "India has always been a cricket-crazy nation. Millions are watching you and the team right now. How do you handle the expectations of such a massive fanbase?"

Aarav: "It's true, the love for cricket in India is unparalleled. But I see it as motivation rather than pressure. When you know that millions are cheering for you, it gives you an extra boost. At the same time, we focus on what's in our control—playing good cricket. The results will follow."

Interviewer: "Let's talk about preparation. What has been the focus during the training sessions leading up to the World Cup?"

Aarav: "Preparation has been holistic. It's not just about skills; it's about mindset, fitness, and team strategy. We've analyzed our opponents, worked on specific scenarios, and ensured that every player is versatile. The goal is to be ready for anything the game throws at us."

Interviewer: "Your first match is against England, a strong team with a rich cricketing history. What's your strategy going into that game?"

Aarav: "England is a formidable opponent, no doubt. But we're not focused on their strengths; we're focused on ours. We have a plan for every player, and we'll adapt as needed during the game. The key is to stay aggressive and play fearless cricket."

Interviewer: "Do you believe this team has what it takes to win the World Cup?"

I paused for a moment, letting the weight of the question sink in. Then, with unwavering confidence, I said, "We're not here to participate; we're here to win. Every single player on this team shares that mindset. We've prepared, we've strategized, and we're going to give it our all. Winning this World Cup isn't just a goal; it's a belief. And we're going to make it happen."

Interviewer: "Finally, Aarav, what would you say to the fans who are eagerly waiting to see Team India in action?"

I smiled, looking straight into the camera. "To all the fans out there, thank you for your unwavering support. You're the reason we play with so much passion. Keep believing in us, because we're going to

give you moments to celebrate and memories to cherish. This World Cup is as much for you as it is for us."

The interview wrapped up, and as I stood up to leave, the crew applauded. "That was fantastic, Aarav," the interviewer said, shaking my hand again.

"Thank you," I replied, already shifting my focus to the match ahead.

Back with the team, the atmosphere was electric. The photoshoot had set the tone, and the interview had further solidified my resolve. As the afternoon approached, we gathered in the dressing room, each of us putting on the finishing touches to our gear. The first match was just hours away, and I could feel the collective energy building.

"Alright, boys," I said, gathering everyone in a huddle. "This is it. The first step in our journey to glory. Play hard, play smart, and remember—we're here to win."

A unified roar erupted from the team as we broke the huddle. The time for talk was over. It was time to let our game do the talking.

Under the bright skies of Sydney, the air was electric with anticipation as the two teams gathered at the center for the toss. The stadium buzzed with the energy of fans waving flags and cheering, ready for the clash between India and England in their opening match of the U19 World Cup. Standing at the pitch, microphone in hand, I set the scene with my signature gusto.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Sydney Cricket Ground for Match 2 of the ICC U19 World Cup! It's India versus England—two cricketing powerhouses ready to battle it out. Joining me here are the captains: Aarav Pathak from India and Harry Brook from England, along with our match referee, Michael Cook. Let's get straight to it!"

Referee Cook stepped forward, holding the coin. "Aarav, Your call."

Aarav glanced at his English counterpart, Harry Brook, flashed a confident smile, and called, "Heads."

Cook tossed the coin high into the air, and every eye followed its descent. It landed with a resonant clink on the turf.

"It is tails. England wins the toss."

Harry Brook stepped forward, shaking Aarav's hand firmly before turning to me for his interview.

"Harry, congratulations on winning the toss. What's the decision, and what's the thought behind it?"

"We're going to bowl first," Harry said with confidence. "The conditions look good for seam bowling early on, and we want to make the most of it. Also, we back ourselves to chase anything down later under lights."

I nodded, appreciating his clarity. "You've got a strong squad and some momentum coming into this match. What's the message to your boys today?"

Harry's smile widened. "The message is simple: stick to our plans, stay aggressive, and enjoy the moment. We've prepared well, and it's time to execute."

He stepped aside as Aarav moved in, a steely determination in his eyes despite the toss outcome.

"Aarav, you'll be batting first. Happy with how things have turned out?"

"Absolutely" Aarav said with a slight smirk. "We were ready for either scenario. Batting first gives us the chance to put runs on the board and dictate the game. Our mindset is clear: play positive cricket and set a challenging total."

"India's batting has been a talking point, especially with you at the helm. Any specific strategy for this England attack?"

Aarav's confidence was palpable. "The strategy is simple—play to our strengths. We respect their bowling, but at the same time, we know what we're capable of. It's about getting a good start and building partnerships. And rest assured, we're going for a big score today."

The two captains exchanged another handshake, each looking firmly into the other's eyes, a silent battle of wills playing out before a single ball had been bowled.

"Alright, there you have it, folks! England wins the toss and opts to bowl first. It's all set up beautifully for what promises to be a cracker of a contest. Stay tuned as the action unfolds!"

As the teams headed back to their respective camps, the tension hung thick in the air. This wasn't just another game; it was a statement match, the start of a journey to World Cup glory. And everyone in the stadium could feel it.