

Cricket 63

Chapter 63

As I padded up and prepared to step onto the field, I glanced down at my bat. The MRF sticker gleamed under the sunlight, a reminder of the legacy I was now a part of. Adjusting my gloves, I took a deep breath. This was my moment. I had waited for this for months, and now, it was time to lead by example.

Jaiswal stood at the crease, looking calm and composed as always. I walked up to him, tapping my bat against the pitch. "Let's build something big here, Jais. Rotate the strike, take our time, and then we'll go big."

He nodded with a small grin. "Let's make them regret bowling first, captain."

The English bowlers were disciplined in their line and length initially, but it was clear they underestimated us. The first few overs were all about settling in. I leaned forward to defend a good-length delivery, feeling the sweet spot of my bat connect with the ball.

"Good, Aarav!" Jaiswal called out from the non-striker's end.

By the eighth over, the timing began to click. I punched a backfoot drive through the covers for four, the ball racing past the fielders and drawing loud cheers from the crowd.

In the next over, Jaiswal showed his class, stepping out to a spinner and lofting the ball over mid-on for a boundary. "There we go!" I shouted, fist-pumping the air.

We began rotating the strike seamlessly, keeping the scoreboard ticking. When a short ball came my way, I didn't hesitate. Leaning back, I unleashed a powerful pull shot that sailed over the square-leg boundary for six. The crowd erupted, and I felt the adrenaline surging.

Jaiswal wasn't far behind. Facing a slower delivery, he danced down the track and smacked it straight back over the bowler's head for another six.

"Perfect timing!" I said, meeting him at the middle for a fist bump.

By the 15th over, we were both seeing the ball like a football. I flicked a full delivery off my pads through mid-wicket for four, and in the next over, played a graceful late cut past the slips for another boundary.

Jaiswal, on the other hand, was playing with flair. He stepped inside the line of a bouncer and ramped it over the keeper's head, leaving the English captain frustrated. Then, he drove a half-volley through extra cover, the ball whistling past the fielder.

"Keep this going, Jais! We're building something special here," I encouraged.

As we approached the 25th over, I knew I was closing in on a milestone. With every run, the crowd's cheers grew louder. Facing a medium-pacer, I spotted a full delivery outside off and smashed it through the covers for four. The sound of the bat meeting the ball was pure music.

"Century for Aarav Pathak!" the announcer's voice boomed across the stadium. I raised my bat, acknowledging the roaring fans and my teammates who stood clapping in the dugout. Jaiswal walked over, patting my back.

"Congrats, skipper. But don't stop now. Let's pile it on."

"Right back at you," I replied with a grin.

Jaiswal wasn't far behind. In the 29th over, he pulled a short delivery through midwicket for four to bring up his own century. He raised his arms, soaking in the applause as I clapped from the other end.

"Brilliant, Jais! That's the way to do it."

From then on, the shots kept flowing. I played an inside-out lofted drive over extra cover for six, followed by a perfectly timed straight drive past the bowler for four. Jaiswal executed a stunning reverse sweep off the spinner, sending the ball racing to the boundary.

We were in complete control, dominating the English attack with every shot. It felt like we were in a dream, and the crowd's energy only pushed us further.

"Let's make this count," I said to Jaiswal during a mid-over chat. "We're setting the tone for the entire tournament."

"Agreed," he replied. "Let's keep going until they find a way to stop us."

The 33rd over began with Jaiswal on strike. He had been phenomenal, but the English bowlers were determined to make a breakthrough. Their medium-pacer bowled a slower delivery on a good length, and Jaiswal misjudged the pace, attempting to loft it over mid-on. The ball caught the toe-end of his bat and ballooned into the air.

The fielder at mid-on ran back and completed a sharp catch. Jaiswal stood at the crease for a moment, visibly frustrated. As he walked back to the pavilion, the crowd gave him a standing ovation. He had scored a magnificent 114 off 94 balls, and his contribution had set the stage for a big total.

I met him near the boundary line. "Great knock, Jais. You've laid the foundation for us," I said, patting his shoulder.

"Get us to 350, skipper," he replied with a grin before disappearing into the dugout.

Tilak Verma was the next man in. I gave him a quick nod as he walked to the crease. "Let's keep the momentum going," I told him, adjusting my gloves.

Tilak started cautiously, rotating the strike and giving me the bulk of the deliveries. I continued to attack, smashing a wide delivery through point for four in the 34th over. In the next over, I launched a towering six over long-on, the ball sailing into the stands.

Tilak joined the action with a beautifully timed pull shot for four, but his innings was short-lived. In the 36th over, he tried to play across the line to a full delivery and missed, the ball crashing into his stumps.

"Unlucky, Tilak," I said as he walked past me.

The vice-captain, Shubman Gill, strode to the crease, exuding confidence. "Let's build a strong finish," he said, tapping his bat on the ground.

We focused on rotating the strike initially, keeping the scoreboard ticking. By the 43rd over, I was nearing another milestone. With a flick off my pads, I brought up my 150. The crowd erupted, and I raised my bat, acknowledging their support.

Gill walked up to me with a wide grin. "150, huh? You make it look so easy."

I chuckled. "Team first, Gill. Let's finish strong."

However, my innings came to an end in the very next over. Trying to accelerate, I attempted a lofted drive off a slower delivery but couldn't clear the fielder at long-off. The catch was taken, and I walked back to the dugout amidst thunderous applause. My 152 off 128 balls had been a captain's knock, setting the tone for the innings.

Gill and Dhruv Jurel, our wicketkeeper, took charge from there. The two rotated the strike effectively, picking up quick singles and the occasional boundary. Gill showcased his class with a gorgeous straight drive for four, while Jurel played a delicate late cut past the keeper for another boundary.

The English bowlers tried everything to break the partnership, but Gill and Jurel were resolute. In the final two overs, they shifted gears, smashing three boundaries and a six to push the total past 330. but in the last ball of the inning Gill handed the catch in the midwicket, but no problem he did the required work he had to do.

As the innings ended, the scoreboard read 333/5. It was a formidable total, and as we walked back to the pavilion, the atmosphere in the stadium was electric.

"Well done, boys!" I said, high-fiving Gill and Jurel. "Now let's finish the job with the ball."

After a 30-minute break, the team gathered in a huddle, our spirits high and ready to defend the target. This was just the beginning of our World Cup journey, and we were determined to make it count.

The Indian team walked onto the field with an air of confidence. The energy was palpable as we took our positions, ready to defend the target of 333. I gathered the team in a huddle, making sure everyone was focused.

"Let's keep it tight, boys," I said, looking each player in the eye. "A few good overs, and the pressure will mount on them. Stick to the plans, and we've got this."

Arshdeep took the new ball, running in with his usual rhythm. His first delivery was full and swinging away, and the batsman, Tom Banton, drove it elegantly through the covers for four. The crowd roared, and I clapped my hands, urging Arshdeep to keep his focus.

"Good ball, Arsh! Just keep it there," I said, walking up to him.

However, the England openers, Banton and Jack Davies, seemed intent on attacking. Banton flicked the next ball off his pads for another boundary, and in the next over, Shivam Mavi was greeted with a thunderous pull shot that raced to the fence.

By the time Kartik Tyagi came on to bowl the fourth over, England had raced to 40 without loss. Kartik bowled with pace and aggression, hitting the deck hard, but Davies was equal to the task, slashing him through point for four.

The three bowlers tried everything—length balls, short deliveries, and even slower ones—but the English openers were relentless. By the end of the 10th over, the score was a daunting 92/0.

I took the ball in the 11th over, knowing it was time to step up. The team needed a breakthrough, and as captain, it was my responsibility to deliver.

As I marked my run-up, I glanced at the fielders, making subtle adjustments to the placements. "Keep it tight on the off-side," I told Jaiswal at point.

My first delivery was a textbook outswinger, pitched on a good length and shaping away from the right-handed Banton. He leaned forward but decided to let it go. The ball zipped past the bat and into Jurel's gloves.

"Good shape, skipper!" Jurel encouraged from behind the stumps.

The second and third deliveries were similar—outswingers just outside the off-stump. Banton, aware of the movement, chose not to play at them.

On the fourth ball, I slightly overpitched, inviting the drive. Banton obliged, but the ball found the edge and raced past the slip cordon for four. I cursed under my breath but clapped my hands, trying to stay positive.

"Stay patient, Aarav," Gill said, walking up to me. "Your wicket is coming."

I nodded, taking a deep breath. The fifth ball was another outswinger, wider this time, and Banton let it go.

The moment had come. For the sixth delivery, I adjusted my grip slightly, setting up an inswinger. I charged in, my focus razor-sharp, and delivered the ball with precision. It pitched on a good length and jagged back sharply into the batsman.

Banton, expecting another outswinger, was caught off guard. He tried to flick it but missed, and the ball struck his pads right in front of the stumps.

"HOWZAT!" I roared, along with the entire team. The umpire's finger went up almost instantly, and the breakthrough was ours.

I pumped my fist in celebration as my teammates swarmed around me. Banton looked visibly disappointed as he walked back to the pavilion.

"Brilliant delivery, skipper!" Arshdeep said, patting me on the back.

With Banton gone for a well-made 48, the England captain, Harry Brook, walked out to the middle. The crowd erupted, sensing a key moment in the match.

Brook was calm and composed as he took his guard, but I was determined to keep the pressure on. My first delivery to him was a fiery bouncer that he ducked under, showing no signs of discomfort.

The battle had just begun, and I knew it was going to be a test of nerves and skills. The game was alive, and we were ready for the fight.

Ravi Bishnoi came into the attack with his characteristic confidence, ready to bring his variations into play. I took a moment to set the field for him. "Ravi, start with a good-length googly outside off," I said, gesturing towards the slip cordon. "Gill, move to gully. Let's crowd Davies' off-side and wait for the mistake."

Ravi nodded, his focus sharp. His first ball was on point, a well-disguised googly that Jack Davies defended watchfully. The next two balls followed suit—tight, probing lines that forced the batsman to play defensively.

I walked up to Ravi after the third ball. "He's playing safe, but stay consistent. Let him feel the pressure. The mistake will come."

I jogged back to slip, positioning myself perfectly. Ravi's fourth ball was a quicker one, slightly fuller, drawing Davies into a drive. The batsman misjudged the turn, and the ball took the edge. It flew quickly to my left, and instinct took over. I dived, stretching my hand out, and the ball stuck cleanly.

"Got him!" I yelled as my teammates erupted in celebration. The crowd roared as Davies walked back, visibly frustrated.

Gill ran up to me, patting my back. "Captain leading by example! What a catch, Aarav!"

Bishnoi pumped his fist in the air. "Perfect setup, skipper!"

The fall of Davies brought Liam Banks to the crease. He took guard with a determined look, but I could sense the tension.

I handed the ball back to Ravi and said, "One over of control. Keep it tight and build the pressure."

Banks defended the first two balls with a solid technique. Ravi, disciplined as ever, kept the line tight. On the fourth ball, Banks pushed at a delivery slightly outside off, but there was no run. The pressure was mounting, and I knew it was time to strike again.

When my turn came to bowl, I walked to my mark with purpose. "Settle in, lads," I called out, signaling for a deep square leg and mid-on to be ready. "Let's go for the jugular."

My first delivery to Banks was a probing outswinger, tempting him to drive, but he left it alone. The second ball was straighter, and he defended it cautiously.

On the fourth ball, I switched gears. I delivered a perfect inswinging yorker that tailed in at the last moment. Banks was late on the shot, and the stumps went flying. The crowd went wild as I clenched my fists in celebration.

"Bowled him!" Jurel shouted, running up to high-five me.

"That's how it's done, boys!" I said, gathering the team around. "Let's keep this intensity."

Next in was Will Jacks, a power hitter known for his aggressive style. I knew he would try to dominate early, so I decided to keep him on the back foot.

I started with a fiery bouncer, forcing Jacks to awkwardly fend it off. The ball took a top edge and lobbed into the air. Tilak Verma, stationed at deep backward square, sprinted towards the ball, covering a lot of ground. The crowd held its breath as Tilak, running backward, dived full length and took an incredible catch.

The stadium erupted in cheers as Tilak held up the ball triumphantly. I ran toward him, giving him a celebratory hug.

"Incredible catch, Tilak! That's the spirit we need!"

"All thanks to your setup, skipper," Tilak replied, grinning.

The scoreboard read 115/4, and the momentum had shifted completely in our favor. The team huddled together, the energy electric.

"Brilliant comeback, boys," I said. "Stay sharp and keep hunting for wickets. We're not letting them breathe."

The captaincy was showing its magic, and the Indian team was back in the driver's seat. The comeback was on, and the opposition felt the pressure of an Indian team firing on all cylinders.

With the critical breakthroughs we managed early on, our bowlers sensed blood. The energy in the field was electric, every player fully invested in the mission to dominate. England's middle-order tried to stabilize the innings, but our bowlers kept the pressure on.

Ravi Bishnoi continued to weave his magic, using his variations to keep the batsmen guessing. Arshdeep Singh, having been expensive in his initial spell, came back with renewed focus and bowled disciplined lines, forcing the batsmen to play defensively. Shivam Mavi, ever-reliable, mixed up his lengths effectively, choking the run flow.

Captain Harry Brook, though, proved to be England's shining light. He played with a calm head, dispatching loose deliveries to the boundary and keeping England's hopes alive. His partnerships with the middle and lower order kept the chase from falling apart entirely. Brook showcased his immense talent, timing his shots perfectly and placing the ball into gaps with precision.

The 89 runs he scored were a testament to his determination and skill, but he lacked the necessary support from his teammates. Kartik Tyagi's fiery pace proved too much for England's lower order, as he delivered a stunning yorker to clean up the stumps of Adam Finch, ending a promising partnership.

Arshdeep, in his second spell, found his rhythm, claiming two wickets in quick succession. A well-directed bouncer saw Ethan caught behind by Jurel, while a sharp inswinger dismantled the stumps of their lower-order batter.

As the wickets tumbled, England's hopes dimmed. Ravi Bishnoi picked up his second wicket of the match with a perfectly flighted delivery that deceived Tom Hartley, who tried to loft it over mid-on but ended up holing out to Tilak Verma.

The final blow came in the 45th over when Shivam Mavi delivered a full, straight delivery that clean bowled England's last batter. The team erupted in celebration as the English innings folded at 234.

The players huddled on the field, hugging and cheering as the scoreboard flashed the result. The 99-run victory was a statement—a resounding declaration that India was here to dominate.

I walked up to Harry Brook as the teams shook hands. "Great innings, mate. You played a captain's knock," I said, offering a handshake.

"Thanks, Aarav. Your team played brilliantly. That catch at slip really turned the tide," Brook replied graciously.

The camaraderie between the two captains was a moment of mutual respect, a reminder of the spirit of the game. As we walked off the field, the Indian supporters in the stands erupted in chants of "India! India!"

The first match of the World Cup was ours, and it was a statement of intent. We had the momentum, the belief, and the firepower to take on anyone. This was just the beginning of our journey to bring the trophy home.