

Cricket 64

Chapter 64

The anticipation for our second World Cup match against Australia was palpable. The crowd at the stadium was a sea of blue and yellow, and the atmosphere was charged with energy. As both teams took to the field for the toss, the spotlight shifted to the captains. Cameron Green, Australia's tall and confident skipper, stood across from me as we exchanged pleasantries.

Match referee Joe Williamson initiated the toss proceedings. I called heads, and the coin landed in our favor. "We'll bat first," I announced confidently. The interviewer approached me as we stepped aside.

"Aarav, you've chosen to bat first. What's the strategy here?"

I smiled and replied, "The pitch looks good for batting, especially in the first half. We want to set a challenging total on the board and let our bowlers take control under the lights. We're here to dominate."

The interviewer turned to Cameron Green. "Cameron, you'll be bowling first. Are you happy with that?"

Green nodded. "Yes, definitely. There's a bit of moisture on the pitch, and our bowlers are ready to exploit it. Early wickets will be the key for us."

The customary handshakes followed, and we headed to our respective dugouts. As the opening pair, Yashasvi Jaiswal and Prithvi Shaw, walked out to the middle, I gave them a quick pep talk. "Stay focused, play your shots, and get us off to a solid start."

The Australian bowlers came out firing on all cylinders. Their opening duo bowled with venom, extracting movement off the pitch and creating pressure from the get-go. Prithvi, trying to counterattack, edged one to the slips and was dismissed for just 2 runs in the third over. The early breakthrough sent ripples through the dressing room.

I padded up and walked to the crease. The roar from the Indian supporters was deafening as I adjusted my gloves and took guard. The Australian bowlers tried to intimidate me with short deliveries, but I was determined to steady the ship. Jaiswal was struggling to find his rhythm and, in the fifth over, fell for just 5 runs, trying to play a big shot over cover but only managing to find the fielder.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, I called for a change in the batting order and signaled for Shubman Gill to join me. "Gill, we need to rebuild. Let's play smart cricket and build a partnership," I told him as he arrived at the crease.

Gill nodded, his expression calm and resolute. Together, we began the painstaking task of stabilizing the innings. The Australian bowlers kept probing, but we responded with solid defense and well-placed singles. Whenever they erred in line or length, we punished them. A crisp drive through the covers, a flick to the boundary off my pads, and a powerful cut shot past point were some of the shots that showcased my intent.

Gill, on the other hand, was elegance personified. His timing was impeccable as he threaded gaps with ease. A straight drive off Cameron Green and a delicate late cut against the spinner were standout moments in his innings.

The partnership began to blossom. The scoreboard ticked over steadily as we rotated the strike and put away the bad balls. The crowd, initially subdued after the early wickets, began to find its voice.

By the 20th over, we had brought some stability to the innings, and our partnership crossed the 100-run mark. Gill walked up to me and said, "We're doing well, Aarav. Let's keep this going till the 40th over."

I nodded, determined to convert my start into a big score. But as the innings progressed, fatigue began to set in. The Australian bowlers maintained their intensity, peppering me with bouncers and yorkers.

In the 37th over, on 96, I tried to guide a slower delivery past point but ended up edging it to the wicketkeeper. The Australian fielders erupted in celebration, and I walked back to a standing ovation from the Indian fans. I scored 96 in 148 balls, a slow and steady inning. Disappointed but proud of my contribution, I handed the baton to the middle order.

Gill took charge after my dismissal, playing with maturity and intent. He brought up his half-century with a stunning pull shot that sailed over the square-leg boundary. However, his innings came to an end in the 39th over when he was caught at long-off trying to accelerate. His 75 off 110 balls was crucial in keeping us in the game.

The rest of the batting lineup struggled against Australia's disciplined bowling. Despite some resistance from Tilak Verma, Dhruv Jurel and Riyan Parag, we managed to scrape together 244 for 9 in our 50 overs. It wasn't a massive total, but it was competitive, considering the pitch's nature and our bowling strength.

As we walked off the field, I gathered the team in the dressing room. "It's not the biggest total, but we've got the bowlers to defend this. Stay sharp in the field, and let's make every run count."

The players nodded, their determination evident. It was time to step up and make our mark with the ball.

The tension was palpable as the Indian team took the field to defend their total of 244. With Australia's formidable lineup, the game was poised for a thrilling contest. The Indian bowlers, fired up by the pep talk in the dressing room, were ready to give their all.

The Australian openers, Cameron Green and Jake Fraser-McGurk, walked out to a loud cheer from their supporters. Green, towering and composed, was the key wicket, and we all knew it. Arshdeep Singh took the new ball and started with a probing line, moving the ball both ways. Green, however, was in sublime touch. His commanding presence was evident as he struck crisp drives through cover and straight back past the bowler. By the fourth over, he had already raced past 20 runs, and we knew we had a battle on our hands.

Jake Fraser-McGurk, on the other hand, seemed shaky. In the sixth over, Arshdeep bowled a brilliant yorker that Green dug out, but the ball ricocheted off his bat towards point. Reacting quickly, Arshdeep sprinted to collect the ball and threw it directly at the non-striker's end, finding Fraser-McGurk well short of his ground. The Indian players erupted in celebration as the first wicket fell, leaving Australia at 39 for 1.

Kartik Tyagi was brought into the attack in the 10th over. With pace and precision, he kept the batters guessing. Mackenzie Harvey, the new man in, was trapped LBW for just 4 runs by an in-swinging delivery that struck him plumb in front. Kartik followed this up with a peach of a delivery to Lachlan Hearne in his next over. The ball angled in and straightened after pitching, beating Hearne completely and clipping the top of the off stump. Australia was reeling at 45 for 3.

The dangerous Green, however, continued his assault. He kept the scoreboard ticking, pulling and cutting anything short and driving with authority. But just when it seemed like he would carry the innings single-handedly, Arshdeep delivered the breakthrough. A full delivery aimed at the off stump

sneaked through Green's defense, shattering the stumps. Green's gritty 75 runs had kept Australia alive, but his dismissal in the 22nd over at 97 for 4 was a massive blow.

With Green gone, the middle order crumbled under pressure. Oliver Davies, trying to steady the ship, edged a delivery from me to Jaiswal at slip. The ball flew quickly, but Jaiswal reacted brilliantly, taking a sharp catch to send Davies back for just 2 runs.

At 105 for 5, Patrick Rowe and Liam Scott attempted to rebuild. Rowe struck a few boundaries, but Kartik Tyagi struck again, inducing an edge that was safely pouched by Jurel behind the stumps. Rowe departed for 21 runs, and Australia was 120 for 6.

The introduction of Ravi Bishnoi brought immediate rewards. Liam Scott, who had played a resilient knock of 35, was caught behind by Jurel off a beautifully tossed-up delivery. Bishnoi's variations proved too much for the Australian tail.

Connor Sully came in and tried to slog his way out of trouble but mistimed a slower ball from me. The ball skied high, and Jurel, under pressure, took a clean catch. Sully managed just 5 runs.

Shivam Mavi cleaned up Todd Murphy with a searing in-swinging yorker, leaving Australia at 158 for 9. With just one wicket remaining, it was my turn to finish things off. A well-set field and a deceptive slower ball sent Matthew Willans packing as the ball crashed into the stumps. Australia was all out for 159.

The Indian players stormed the field in jubilation, celebrating a well-deserved victory. It was a comprehensive performance, with the bowlers leading the charge and ensuring that the target remained out of Australia's reach. The 85-run win boosted our confidence as we moved closer to securing a spot in the knockout stages.