

## Cricket 65

### Chapter 65

The sun rose over the stadium as we prepared for our match against Afghanistan. With a solid win against Australia behind us, our spirits were high, and we were determined to carry our momentum forward. Winning the toss, I decided we'd bat first, aiming to post a commanding total and set the tone for the game. The pitch looked like a batter's paradise, flat with just enough bounce for stroke-making, and the outfield was lightning quick.

As the openers, Yashasvi Jaiswal and Prithvi Shaw, stepped out, the team cheered them on from the dressing room. Afghanistan's bowlers, led by their captain Naveen-ul-Haq, were ready to test our top order. The first over was a tight one from Naveen, mixing up his length and pace to keep Prithvi on his toes. However, Jaiswal made his intentions clear in the second over, driving a half-volley from Wafadar Momand through the covers for a stunning boundary.

The pair began to settle in, rotating strike effectively and punishing anything loose. By the end of the powerplay, India had raced to 50 without loss, with Jaiswal leading the charge. His exquisite timing and fearless approach frustrated Afghanistan's bowlers, while Prithvi played the perfect supporting role, finding gaps and keeping the scoreboard ticking.

The real fireworks started in the 12th over. Facing Zahir Khan, Jaiswal unleashed a series of dazzling strokes, including a six over long-off that left the crowd in awe. Prithvi, not one to be left behind, joined the party in the next over by lofting Qais Ahmad for a maximum over midwicket. Together, they put on a stellar opening stand of 112 runs before Mujeeb Ur Rahman broke the partnership in the 18th over, trapping Jaiswal LBW for a well-made 65 off 54 balls.

I walked in at number three, determined to capitalize on the strong foundation laid by the openers. Mujeeb and Qais tried to stifle me with tight lines, but I countered with aggressive intent, striking boundaries off anything short or overpitched. Prithvi, however, fell soon after, bowled by Azmatullah Omarzai for 48, narrowly missing his half-century.

With the score at 135 for 2, Shubman Gill joined me at the crease. The duo of Naveen and Zahir tried to create pressure, but Gill and I quickly turned the tide with smart batting. We focused on singles and twos, exploiting the gaps, and whenever the bowlers erred, we punished them with boundaries. In the 25th over, I brought up my fifty with a crisp pull shot off Naveen, and the team applauded from the dugout.

Gill, too, found his rhythm, timing his shots beautifully. In the 30th over, he danced down the track to Qais and launched him over long-on for six, sending a clear message that we were in control. The partnership swelled to 80 runs before I fell in the 34th over, caught behind off Naveen-ul-Haq for a gritty 78.

Gill continued to anchor the innings, supported by Tilak Varma, who chipped in with a quick 22 off 15 balls. The Afghan bowlers seemed to lose their edge as India piled on the runs. Gill brought up his half-century in the 38th over with a flick off his pads that raced to the boundary.

The final overs saw Riyan Parag and Dhruv Jurel take charge, smashing the Afghan bowlers to all parts of the ground. Parag's innovative strokes and Jurel's brute power added 45 runs in the last three overs, taking India to a mammoth total of 321 for 6 in 50 overs.

As we walked off the field, the dressing room erupted in applause. It was a clinical batting display, and the scorecard reflected our dominance. We knew we had set a daunting target for Afghanistan, and now it was time for our bowlers to seal the deal.

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With a formidable total of 321 runs on the board, the Indian bowling attack was raring to go. As we huddled up on the field, I rallied the team with a simple message: "Let's finish what we started. Pressure them, stay sharp, and let's dominate."

Afghanistan sent their openers Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Ikram Alikhil to face our fiery bowling unit. With the new ball in hand, Arshdeep Singh steamed in to deliver the first over. Gurbaz, Afghanistan's star batter, showed intent early, flicking Arshdeep for a boundary to fine leg. But Arshdeep, ever the competitor, tightened his line, finishing the over with a series of dot balls.

At the other end, Shivam Mavi started with a mix of pace and swing. Gurbaz, trying to replicate his earlier aggression, mistimed a pull shot, only for the ball to fall short of midwicket. The Afghan openers managed to put up 34 runs in the first five overs, taking advantage of the field restrictions.

In the seventh over, Mavi provided the breakthrough we needed. Alikhil, looking to drive on the up, edged a full delivery, and I dived low at first slip to complete a stunning catch. Mavi roared in celebration as the team surrounded me. Alikhil walked back for just 10 runs. The breakthrough injected energy into the team, and the pressure began to mount on Afghanistan.

Gurbaz, however, remained defiant, smacking Mavi for a six over long-on in the ninth over. But Mavi had the last laugh, bowling a beautiful in-swing in his next over that rattled Gurbaz's stumps. Gurbaz departed for 39, leaving Afghanistan at 58 for 2.

I decided it was time to take matters into my own hands. Grabbing the ball in the 12th over, I set an aggressive field with two slips and a short leg. My first over was all about testing the batter's patience, and it worked. I bowled five outswingers to Ibrahim Zadran, who cautiously left them all. On the sixth ball, I went for an inswinging yorker. Zadran misjudged it completely, and the ball crashed into his pads. A loud appeal followed, and the umpire raised his finger. First wicket for me! Zadran was out for 8, and Afghanistan was struggling at 62 for 3.

Next came their captain, Naveen-ul-Haq, to steady the ship. But my rhythm was on point. In my third over, I bowled a sharp bouncer that Naveen tried to fend off, only to glove it to the keeper. Dhruv Jurel, behind the stumps, took a sharp catch, and Naveen was dismissed for just 5 runs.

With Afghanistan reeling at 68 for 4, Ravi Bishnoi was introduced into the attack. Bishnoi worked his magic in the 18th over, bowling a googly that completely deceived Darwish Rasooli, who edged it to Jurel. Bishnoi struck, and Rasooli walked back for 21.

At 89 for 5, the Afghan resistance looked fragile. I returned to bowl the 20th over and claimed Azmatullah Omarzai, who tried to loft a full delivery but ended up skying it to Yashasvi Jaiswal at deep midwicket. The crowd erupted as I celebrated my third wicket.

Liam Scott and Qais Ahmad tried to form a partnership, but Mavi returned for his second spell and ended Scott's resistance with an inswinging delivery that took out his middle stump. Scott departed for 35, leaving Afghanistan at 130 for 7.

As the pressure mounted, I struck again in the 28th over, dismissing Connor Sully with a sharp inswinger that trapped him LBW. It was my fourth wicket, and I was now on a hat-trick. Though the hat-trick didn't materialize, I cleaned up the innings in the 30th over, bowling Matthew Willans with a perfect yorker to claim my fifth wicket.

Afghanistan folded for just 159 in 31.2 overs. Mavi finished with 3 wickets, Bishnoi took 1, and Arshdeep chipped in with 1 to complement my five-wicket haul.

As the team celebrated a comprehensive win, I couldn't help but feel immense pride in how we had executed our plans perfectly. Another victory under our belt, and the momentum was firmly in our favor as we advanced further in the tournament.

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with this we qualified for the knockout stage and from here we can't lose any match. our next match is with New Zealand, after 4 days. The Match was to be happened in Melbourne and that we are going to win for sure.

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The tension was palpable as India faced New Zealand in the quarter-final of the tournament. Stakes were high, and as captain, I had to make a crucial decision after winning the toss. With the pitch promising early movement for the bowlers, I opted to bowl first, confident in our bowling lineup's ability to restrict the opposition. New Zealand's skipper, Rachin Ravindra, appeared calm as he led his team to bat under the bright morning sun.

Finn Allen and Max Chu opened for New Zealand, and the pair walked to the crease with determination etched on their faces. Arshdeep Singh took the new ball, starting with a sharp inswinger that Allen defended solidly. The second ball, a short delivery, was dispatched to the square leg boundary, signaling Allen's aggressive intent. Arshdeep adjusted his line and bowled a tight over to limit further runs.

Shivam Mavi took the ball from the other end and immediately found some swing. His first over was testing, with Chu struggling to read the movement. However, Chu capitalized on a half-volley in the next over, sending it racing through covers for a beautiful boundary. Both openers looked set to build a partnership, and by the end of the powerplay, New Zealand had put up 48 runs on the board.

In the 11th over, Kartik Tyagi struck the first blow. Chu, attempting an ambitious cut shot, edged the ball to Jurel behind the stumps. The wicketkeeper made no mistake, and Chu departed for 18 runs. This early

breakthrough brought Connor Sullivan to the crease, but Allen continued to dominate, bringing up his fifty with a glorious pull shot off Mavi in the 13th over.

I introduced Ravi Bishnoi in the 15th over, hoping his variations would break the partnership. Allen, however, danced down the track to loft Bishnoi over mid-on for a six. Bishnoi responded brilliantly, bowling a googly that deceived Sullivan, who played onto his stumps for 14 runs.

With two wickets down, Rachin Ravindra, the New Zealand captain, came to the crease. His intent was clear from the start as he rotated the strike and punished loose deliveries. Allen, on the other hand, continued his aggressive approach, smashing Tyagi for consecutive boundaries in the 20th over.

In the 25th over, I decided to bring myself into the attack. I started with a few outswingers to Allen, who defended carefully. On the fifth delivery, I bowled a slower ball that Allen misjudged, attempting a big shot. The ball went high into the air, and Shaw at mid-off took a well-judged catch. Allen's innings ended at 66 runs, leaving New Zealand at 136 for 3.

Katene Clarke joined Ravindra, and the duo steadied the ship. Clarke took time to settle, but Ravindra began to accelerate, punishing anything short or wide. In the 33rd over, Clarke tried to take on Bishnoi but ended up miscuing a lofted shot. The ball soared into the air, and I sprinted backward from cover to complete a stunning catch. Clarke departed for 22, leaving New Zealand at 182 for 4.

Ravindra, however, was in sublime form. He reached his fifty in the 35th over with a perfectly timed drive through the covers. He soon began to dominate the Indian bowlers, playing exquisite shots all around the ground. Bishnoi struck again in the 38th over, dismissing Dale Phillips, who edged a googly to Jurel. Phillips walked back for 12, and New Zealand was now 210 for 5.

With Ravindra in full flow, New Zealand crossed the 250-mark in the 44th over. He reached his century in style, pulling Arshdeep for a four. The applause from the crowd was thunderous as the New Zealand

captain raised his bat. Todd Watson supported him well, chipping in with quick singles and the occasional boundary.

Tyagi returned in the 47th over to dismiss Watson with a yorker that rattled his stumps. Watson's contribution of 18 runs helped steady the lower order. In the 48th over, I brought myself back into the attack. On the second ball, Ravindra attempted a slog sweep but was caught by Gill at deep midwicket. Ravindra's outstanding knock of 121 came to an end, leaving New Zealand at 287 for 8.

Bishnoi and Arshdeep wrapped up the tail in the final two over. Felix Murray was bowled by Bishnoi, and Matthew Fisher was caught behind off Arshdeep's delivery. New Zealand was all out for 298 in 49.5 overs. The total was formidable, but we believed it was chaseable if we batted smartly.

As we walked off the field, I gathered the team in a huddle. "Great effort, boys. Ravindra played brilliantly, but we've got the depth to chase this down. Stay focused, and let's take it one ball at a time," I said, instilling confidence in my teammates. The chase awaited, and we were ready for the challenge.

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India's chase against New Zealand in the high-stakes quarterfinal began under a cloud of anticipation. The target of 299 required a mix of composure and aggression, and as Prithvi Shaw and Yashasvi Jaiswal walked out to open the innings, the energy in the stadium was electric.

The first over from Todd Watson set the tone. His sharp outswinger to Jaiswal tested the batter's patience, and although Jaiswal managed to get off the mark with a quick single, Watson was relentless. At the other end, Felix Murray bowled with precision, troubling both openers with his tight lines. In the third over, disaster struck. Murray pitched one slightly fuller, and Jaiswal attempted an ambitious drive but edged it straight to first slip. The dismissal left India at 7 for 1, and the pressure was on.

I grabbed my bat and stepped onto the field. Walking toward the crease, I felt the weight of the moment but also the determination to anchor the chase. Watson greeted me with a bouncer first up, and I swayed out of its way. I took my time settling in, focusing on building a partnership with Shaw.

Prithvi began to open up, hitting a glorious straight drive off Murray in the sixth over. The ball raced past the bowler, giving us much-needed momentum. In the following overs, Shaw continued to play with elegance, cutting and pulling with precision. He reached his fifty in the 14th over, pulling Watson to the square leg boundary to a standing ovation from the crowd.

However, Shaw's innings came to an end shortly after. Attempting to flick Murray to the leg side, he mistimed the shot, and the ball ballooned into the air. Rachin Ravindra sprinted in from midwicket to take the catch, leaving Shaw out for 55. India was 98 for 2, and the chase was still a daunting task.

I decided to call Shubman Gill up the order, changing the plan slightly. Gill, always dependable, walked out with a calm demeanor. We quickly settled into a rhythm, rotating the strike and punishing loose deliveries. In the 20th over, Gill leaned into a cover drive off Kaylum Boshier, sending the ball racing to the boundary. My confidence grew as well, and I dispatched a short ball from Ravindra over deep midwicket for a massive six.

The partnership flourished. Gill and I shared an understanding, running quick singles and twos, keeping the scoreboard ticking. In the 26th over, I reached my fifty with a crisp pull shot off Boshier, the ball finding the gap at midwicket. The crowd erupted, but I knew the job was far from done.

By the 30th over, the required run rate had climbed slightly, but Gill was in fine touch. He pulled Watson for a boundary and followed it up with a delicate late cut that raced to third man. At the other end, I took charge, hitting Ravindra for consecutive boundaries in the 32nd over—a straight drive and a flick past midwicket. The pressure was now shifting to the New Zealand bowlers.



Gill, unfortunately, fell in the 35th over. He attempted to loft Murray over mid-off but couldn't get the elevation. The fielder made no mistake, and Gill was out for a well-made 44. India was 202 for 3, still needing 97 runs to win. I took a moment to compose myself before Tilak Varma joined me in the middle.

Tilak started cautiously, taking time to get used to the conditions. Meanwhile, I continued to attack selectively. In the 38th over, I lofted Ravindra over long-on for a six, bringing the equation down further. Tilak joined the act soon after, smashing a cover drive off Watson that brought the crowd to its feet.

With the partnership gaining momentum, I reached my century in the 40th over, cutting Murray to the point boundary. I raised my bat to the crowd, acknowledging the applause but staying focused. The target was within reach, and I was determined to see it through.

Tilak began to accelerate as well, pulling Boshier for a six in the 43rd over. Our running between the wickets was sharp, and the boundaries flowed steadily. By the 48th over, India needed just 20 runs. I ensured there were no slip-ups, driving Watson elegantly for two consecutive fours.

In the penultimate over, Tilak sealed the game with a powerful straight drive that raced to the boundary. India chased down the target with three balls to spare, finishing at 299 for 3. My unbeaten 151 and Tilak's composed 41 not out were the backbone of the innings.

The victory was celebrated with immense joy, but we knew the bowlers had set the foundation earlier.

As the Indian captain, I felt immense pride in the team's collective performance. We were through to the semifinals, and this victory was a testament to our grit, determination, and belief in each other.