

Cricket 72

Chapter 72

On the crisp morning of January 13, 2018, Bengaluru was alive with energy as Aarav made his way to the pre-practice ground assigned for the Royal Challengers Bangalore session. The New Year celebrations had barely faded, and the city was buzzing, ready for the upcoming IPL season. Aarav, dressed in his RCB practice jersey, with his kit carried a mix of excitement and nerves as he prepared for his first physical session with the team.

Flashback

The day after his introductory video conference with the RCB team, Aarav decided to share the video asked by the Managements. Sitting in his room, he recorded a heartfelt video:

"Hey everyone, I'm so excited to share that I've been picked by Royal Challengers Bangalore for the IPL this year! It's a dream come true to be part of this amazing team and to play alongside legends like Virat Kohli and AB de Villiers. Thank you for all your love and support so far—this is just the beginning!"

He ended the video by tagging RCB's official account and sharing it across his social media platforms. Within hours, the video began trending. RCB reposted it with the caption:

"Welcome to the RCB family, Aarav! Can't wait to see you shine this season. ❤️🔥 #PlayBold #RCB"

The reaction was overwhelming. Aarav's Instagram followers skyrocketed from 450k to over 1.34 million within a week. Fans flooded his comments with messages of support and excitement, and Aarav couldn't help but feel motivated.

But amidst the social media buzz, Aarav received an official notice from RCB management. The letter read:

Dear Aarav Pathak,

We are thrilled to have you on board. As part of our preparation for the IPL season, you are requested to report to Bengaluru for a pre-practice session on January 13, 2018. This session will include a mix of players and coaching staff to help you acclimate to the team environment.

Looking forward to seeing you on the field!

Warm regards,

Siddharth Sharma

Head of Cricket Operations, RCB

The Present

The crisp Bengaluru morning was alive with anticipation as Aarav made his way to the pre-practice ground. With his kit bag slung over his shoulder, he entered the iconic RCB training facility, a place where legends had honed their craft. Dressed in his newly issued RCB training gear, Aarav couldn't help but feel a rush of pride. The field stretched out before him, immaculate and ready for action.

As he stepped onto the ground, Aarav immediately spotted the coaching staff. Gary Kirsten, the legendary South African batsman and current batting coach, stood near the nets, deep in discussion with Ashish Nehra, the bowling mentor. Their presence alone was enough to inspire awe in Aarav, but he quickly steadied himself. To the side, Siddharth Sharma, the head of cricket operations, was busy coordinating drills with the junior coaches.

Among the players on the field, Aarav recognized a few faces. His fellow newbie Navdeep Singh was warming up with stretches, while Aniruddha was engaged in catching practice with Washington Sundar. Ankit Chaudhary, another promising youngster, was doing bowling drills. The senior players were notably absent, off representing their respective international teams, but the energy on the field was still electric.

Taking a deep breath, Aarav walked onto the field with confident strides. His entrance didn't go unnoticed, and heads turned as he approached the group.

"Good morning, everyone!" Aarav said with a warm smile, setting his kit bag down and greeting each of the coaches and players with respect.

Gary Kirsten was the first to respond. "Ah, Aarav Pathak. Welcome! I've heard a lot about you. Let's see what you've got today."

"Thank you, sir. It's an honor to be here," Aarav replied earnestly.

Ashish Nehra added with a characteristic grin, "Just don't overdo, as many youngsters try to show off to show off that they are best."

Aarav seriously said, "sure sir."

Siddharth Sharma approached with a clipboard in hand. "Aarav, great to have you here. Today's session is light, just a warm-up for the season. Get comfortable and enjoy yourself."

Aarav nodded before turning to greet the players. "Navdeep, Aniruddha, Washington, Ankit—it's good to see you guys. Looking forward to practicing together."

Navdeep grinned. "Same here, Aarav. Let's show them what we've got."

Aniruddha chimed in, "Ee Sala Cup Namde!"

The group shared a laugh, breaking any initial tension.

The practice began with stretching and light warm-up drills. Aarav quickly integrated himself into the team dynamics, participating in catching practice and honing his fielding skills. Under Gary Kirsten's watchful eye, Aarav batted in the nets, working on his technique. His strokes were precise and powerful, drawing nods of approval from the coaching staff.

Later, Ashish Nehra joined him in the bowling nets, offering tips on fine-tuning his deliveries.

"Keep your wrist firm on release, Aarav. That'll help with your line," Nehra advised.

"Yes, sir," Aarav said, making the adjustments and immediately seeing better results.

Throughout the session, Aarav maintained his composure, balancing his excitement with focus. The camaraderie among the players was already building, and by the end of the day, Aarav felt like he belonged.

As the session wrapped up, Coach Gary Kirsten addressed the group. "Good work today, everyone. Keep this energy up. Aarav, Navdeep, Aniruddha, Washi, Anki—you guys are settling in well. We're excited to see what you bring to the team this season."

Aarav thanked him and exchanged high-fives with his fellow players before heading off the field. This was only the beginning, but Aarav was determined to make the most of his opportunity and prove himself on this grand stage.

The training ground buzzed with focused energy as Aarav, clad in his RCB gear, prepared for a specialized bowling session under the watchful eyes of Ashish Nehra. Aarav couldn't help but feel a mix

of excitement and nervousness—after all, Nehra was one of the sharpest minds in fast bowling, and this was a chance to refine his skills to IPL standards.

"Alright, Aarav," Nehra said, gesturing for him to step onto the pitch. "Let's see what you've got. Warm up with a few deliveries, and we'll go from there."

Aarav nodded and took his run-up. His first ball was aimed at a good length, slightly angling into the imaginary right-handed batsman. The pitch smacked against the practice stumps, and Nehra studied it closely. Aarav bowled a few more, mixing up lengths and line, while Nehra measured his performance using a radar gun.

"Not bad for your age," Nehra said, looking at the screen. "128 km/h. Your average speed so far is around 126 km/h. But to compete in the IPL, especially against world-class players, you'll need to consistently touch at least 135 km/h and above. We'll get you there."

Aarav was eager. "What do I need to work on, sir?"

Nehra walked up to him, holding a cricket ball in his hand. "First, your wrist position during release. See this?" He demonstrated, holding the ball with the seam upright and flicking it with a firm but controlled wrist snap. "This angle ensures that you extract maximum swing and pace. Right now, you're losing some speed because your wrist is slightly off."

Aarav imitated Nehra's demonstration. "Like this?"

"Exactly! Now, run up and bowl with that adjustment."

Aarav went back to his mark, visualizing the change. As he ran in, he focused on his wrist position, snapping it firmly upon release. The ball zipped through, landing on a perfect length and swinging late.

"Better!" Nehra called out. "128.5 km/h. Small adjustments, big impact. Let's keep going."

For the next hour, Aarav bowled tirelessly in the nets. Nehra observed every delivery, occasionally stepping in to adjust his grip or run-up stride. The feedback was immediate and constructive.

"Your follow-through is a bit stiff. Try to relax after delivery—it'll give you better momentum," Nehra said.

"Yes, sir," Aarav replied, tweaking his posture.

As the session progressed, Aarav's deliveries became more consistent. Nehra introduced drills to fine-tune Aarav's accuracy while working on his pace. One such drill involved setting up a single stump and challenging Aarav to hit it while maintaining his speed.

"Don't aim for pace alone," Nehra advised. "Controlled aggression wins games. Even the best batsmen struggle against well-directed deliveries at good speeds."

By the end of the first day, Aarav was exhausted but thrilled. He could already feel the difference in his bowling, and Nehra's expertise was invaluable.

Over the Next Fourteen Days

Each day began with intense fitness drills to build Aarav's stamina and core strength, essential for maintaining speed over long spells. Nehra incorporated a variety of exercises, from sled pushes to resistance-band training, all aimed at enhancing Aarav's explosive power.

In the nets, Aarav practiced swinging the ball both ways, alternating between inswingers and outswingers. Nehra often stood behind the stumps, providing instant feedback.

"Your outswinger is coming along nicely, but watch the seam position," Nehra said on the third day, tossing the ball back. "It's tilting slightly. Keep it upright."

Aarav nodded, adjusting his grip and rolling his fingers more precisely. The next delivery curved away beautifully, missing the imaginary edge by a whisker.

"That's the one!" Nehra clapped. "Now, replicate that. Repetition builds muscle memory."

On the final day of the training block, Nehra decided to test Aarav's progress with the radar gun. Aarav bowled his heart out, focusing on every detail Nehra had taught him. As the ball left his hand, it zipped through with a satisfying thud against the stump.

Nehra glanced at the radar gun and grinned. "132.8 km/h. You've done it!"

Aarav couldn't hide his excitement. "Really, sir?"

"Yes, and more importantly, your accuracy hasn't dropped. This is IPL-level bowling, Aarav. Keep working, and you'll trouble some of the best batsmen out there."

The session ended with Aarav thanking Nehra. "Sir, I can't thank you enough. This has been incredible."

Nehra patted him on the shoulder. "The hard work is yours, Aarav. The IPL is a grind, but you've got what it takes. Just stay hungry."

Walking off the field, Aarav felt an immense sense of accomplishment. He was no longer just a promising young bowler; he was ready to step onto the grand stage and take on the world's best.

The RCB training ground was alive with the sound of bats striking balls and coaches shouting instructions. Aarav walked towards the nets, his batting gear gleaming under the morning sun. Today marked the start of his batting session with Gary Kirsten, RCB's batting coach. Aarav felt both excited and nervous—this was a rare opportunity to learn from a master of the game.

Gary, with his calm demeanor, approached Aarav with a smile. "Ready to get to work, Aarav?"

"Yes, sir! I've been looking forward to this," Aarav replied, gripping his bat firmly.

Gary gestured towards the nets. "Alright, hop in. Let me see where you're at. Play naturally—no pressure."

Day 1: Assessing Basics

Aarav stepped into the nets, facing a mix of throwdowns and bowling from local bowlers. His footwork was confident, and he played each delivery with focus. Gary stood behind the netting, analyzing every movement—the backlift, stance, follow-through.

After a solid 20 minutes, Gary walked over. "Good technique, Aarav. Your basics are sound, but there's room for improvement. Your head leans slightly away on backfoot shots, which can affect your balance. Let's fix that first."

Gary demonstrated, positioning his body to show how Aarav could keep his head steady while transferring weight to the backfoot. Aarav practiced the motion without the ball, then resumed batting. By the end of the session, his backfoot punches were crisper and more controlled.

"Great start," Gary said. "We'll build on this tomorrow."

Day 2-3: Building Confidence Against Pace

The next two days focused on handling pace, as Aarav faced quicker bowlers and short-pitched deliveries.

Gary introduced drills involving tennis-ball throwdowns to simulate bouncers. "Stay tall and use soft hands to guide the ball down. The goal is to stay in control, not dominate every delivery," he explained.

Aarav worked tirelessly, ducking, swaying, and occasionally hooking the ball. Gary encouraged him to take calculated risks but emphasized patience.

"Good hook shot," Gary said after one particularly well-timed pull. "But remember, placement is as important as power. Let's work on that tomorrow."

Day 4: Mastering Placement and Strike Rotation

Gary set up cones around the nets, marking gaps in an imaginary field. "Today, we'll focus on finding the gaps. T20 is all about maximizing runs without taking unnecessary risks," he said.

Aarav was tasked with hitting the ball into specific areas, avoiding the fielders while maintaining control. Gary observed his approach, occasionally stepping in to adjust his grip or stance.

"Loosen your bottom hand slightly for those flicks," Gary advised. "It'll give you more control and precision."

By the end of the session, Aarav was consistently threading the ball through the cones, a noticeable improvement in his strike rotation.

Day 5: Facing Spin

On the fifth day, Gary brought in local spinners to challenge Aarav. "Spin can be tricky, especially in the middle overs. Let's see how you handle it," he said.

Aarav started cautiously, stepping forward to smother the spin. Gary noticed his hesitation and paused the session.

"Don't let the spinner dictate terms," Gary said. "Use your feet—either get to the pitch of the ball or go deep into your crease. Commit to the shot."

With Gary's guidance, Aarav began stepping out confidently for lofted drives and rocking back for late cuts. The turning point came when he danced down the track and smashed a straight six, earning an approving nod from Gary.

"That's how you do it," Gary said with a grin.

Day 6-7: Power Hitting

With the basics solidified, Gary shifted focus to power hitting. "T20 demands big hits, but timing and technique are what make them effective," he said.

Gary set up a drill using weighted balls to enhance Aarav's power. Aarav was instructed to focus on clean, straight hits, ensuring his follow-through was fluid.

"Don't try to muscle it," Gary advised. "Let the bat do the work. Focus on timing."

Aarav practiced tirelessly, sending the ball sailing over the nets. By the end of the seventh day, his confidence in clearing the boundary was sky-high.

Day 8: Simulated Match Practice

On the final day, Gary organized a simulated match scenario. Aarav was tasked with chasing a target, alternating between rotating the strike and hitting boundaries.

Gary monitored closely, shouting instructions and providing real-time feedback. "Great placement, Aarav! Now finish strong!"

In the final overs, Aarav faced a slower delivery and executed a perfect scoop over fine leg, sealing the imaginary win. The team members watching from the sidelines erupted in applause.

Gary approached Aarav, patting him on the back. "You've come a long way in just eight days. Your versatility and composure are impressive. Keep this up, and you'll be a force to reckon with."

Aarav thanked Gary, his heart swelling with pride and gratitude. Walking off the field, he felt ready—not just to play in the IPL but to excel at the highest level. The journey had just begun, but he knew he was on the right path.