

Cricket 74

Chapter 74

Two months of intense pre-practice sessions had passed in the blink of an eye. Aarav, Navdeep, Ankit, and the other young players had built a strong foundation under the guidance of coaches like Ashish Nehra and Gary Kirsten. The bond among the squad was growing stronger, but the excitement reached new heights when the senior players finally arrived.

The day began with Aarav walking into the McChinnaswamy Stadium for the first time. The grandeur of the venue, the lush green outfield, and the iconic stands gave him goosebumps. This was RCB's fortress, a place that had witnessed countless battles and roaring fans.

As Aarav stepped onto the ground, he noticed the senior players warming up. Captain Virat Kohli was stretching with AB de Villiers and Brendon McCullum, their camaraderie evident in their laughter. Tim Southee and Colin de Grandhomme were jogging along the boundary line, while Yuzi Chahal was joking with Moeen Ali and Corey Anderson near the nets. The presence of these legends was almost surreal.

Aarav joined the group with a mix of awe and excitement. Virat spotted him and waved. "Ah, our young speedster is here! Welcome to Chinnaswamy, Aarav," he said, walking over to shake his hand.

"Thank you, bhaiya," Aarav replied, trying to keep his nerves in check.

AB de Villiers joined in, placing a hand on Aarav's shoulder. "We've heard great things about you from Virat. Looking forward to seeing you in action."

"Thank you so much," Aarav said, feeling a surge of confidence.

Brendon McCullum, with a smile, added, "Just don't bowl too fast at me in the nets, alright?"

The banter broke the ice, and Aarav felt embarrassed thinking was this ragging.

with chats and funs practice sessions shifted into high gear with the full squad now present. The coaching staff and management were determined to get everyone into peak condition before the IPL began.

Under Ashish Nehra's supervision, Aarav and the other bowlers practiced their variations. Tim Southee, with his vast experience, took Aarav aside.

"Your pace is impressive," Southee said. "But T20 cricket is as much about smarts as it is about speed. Focus on your yorkers and slower balls. They're match-winners."

Aarav nodded, soaking in the advice. He worked on perfecting his yorkers, with Southee occasionally stepping in to adjust his grip or release.

Meanwhile, Yuzi Chahal, ever the prankster, shouted from the sidelines, "Aarav, don't bowl those yorkers to me in the nets, okay? I still want to have my toes intact!"

The group burst into laughter, and Aarav couldn't help but grin.

In the batting nets, Virat and AB took turns facing the bowlers. Watching them up close was a masterclass in itself. Aarav bowled a few deliveries to Virat, who played each one with effortless precision.

"Good line and length," Virat said after one particularly tight over. "But try adding a bit more aggression. Make me uncomfortable."

Encouraged, Aarav bowled a sharp bouncer that forced Virat to duck. The captain smiled as he straightened up. "That's more like it!"

AB de Villiers was next, and his unorthodox style left Aarav in awe. No matter where he pitched the ball, AB found a way to send it to the boundary.

"Don't overthink," AB advised. "Sometimes, the simplest strategies are the most effective."

From the side lines Tim Southee came to me, and said "don't bowl him naturally, him getting out is likely due to his mistake, not all bowlers could bowl a delivery in which he gets out without his own mistake!"

Fielding drills were led by Brendon McCullum, who brought his trademark energy to the session. Aarav was paired with Corey Anderson for a direct-hit drill.

"Keep your eyes on the stumps, not the ball," Corey said, demonstrating the technique. Aarav quickly adapted, and by the end of the session, he was consistently hitting the stumps.

After practice, the squad gathered in the team lounge for a bonding session. Virat addressed the group.

"This is our year," he began, his voice filled with determination. "We have the talent, the experience, and the hunger to win. But what will make the difference is how well we play as a team. Support each other, push each other, and most importantly, enjoy the game."

AB added, "And don't forget to have fun. A happy team is a winning team."

The evening ended with laughter, stories, and a renewed sense of purpose. Aarav felt proud to be part of this family and more motivated than ever to prove himself.

As Aarav walked back to his room that night, he reflected on the day. Practicing at Chinnaswamy, learning from legends, and being part of a team with such incredible players felt like a dream come true.

But Aarav knew this was just the beginning. The real challenge would begin in 15 days when the IPL kicked off. And he was ready to give it everything he had.

Lying in bed, Aarav stared at the ceiling, his thoughts wandering through the highs of the day—meeting the senior players, practicing at Chinnaswamy, and becoming part of a legendary franchise. But as his mind started to settle, a nagging thought emerged.

"Wait a minute," he muttered, sitting up abruptly. "Where the hell is my U-19 World Cup reward?"

He had been so caught up in the IPL whirlwind that he had completely forgotten about it. He shook his head, annoyed at himself. That reward was supposed to be important, something special the system had promised when he led his team to glory in the World Cup.

"System," he called out, his voice laced with frustration.

The familiar monotone voice responded, "Yes, host?"

"Where is my reward for winning the U-19 World Cup?" Aarav demanded.

There was a brief pause before the system responded in a deadpan tone, "You didn't ask for it."

Aarav's jaw dropped. "What? That's ridiculous!"

The system, unfazed by his irritation, replied, "Rules are rules, host."

Sighing, Aarav rubbed his temples. "Fine, I'm asking now. Give me my reward."

"Ding!" the system chimed, and Aarav suddenly felt a sense of anticipation.

"Congratulations, host, on winning the U-19 World Cup. Your reward is very good. Here are the details:

Reward 1: Super Gun

Can be used four times in a T20 match, with one use per over. Can be used five times in an ODI, with one use every two overs. Can be used once per 10 overs in Test match. Effect: Using Super Gun increases your bowling speed by 5-10 km/h during that over.

Reward 2: Shake the Future

Quantity: 2 Effect: By shaking hands with any two players, you will gain two random skills or qualifications from each of them.

That is all."

For a moment, Aarav sat frozen, his mind trying to process the information. Then, slowly, a grin spread across his face. "No way," he whispered. "This is... insane!"

His eyes sparkled as he focused on the first reward—Super Gun. He imagined what it would mean to add an extra 5-10 km/h to his bowling speed. At the highest level, such a boost could turn him from a promising young bowler into an unstoppable force.

He quickly began analyzing it in detail.

"This is beyond incredible," Aarav thought, sitting upright, his mind racing with possibilities.

"If I use this in a T20 match, I can dominate an over entirely. Imagine bowling at 145 km/h or even faster! Batsmen would struggle to react, let alone score runs. And the best part? I can use it four times in a match. That means four critical balls where I can dictate terms—powerplay, middle overs, death overs—any time I need to swing the game in our favor."

Aarav could already visualize the panic in the batsmen's eyes as he unleashed fiery deliveries one after another.

"But the real beauty," Aarav muttered to himself, "is how adaptable this is for other formats."

For ODIs, he could use the Super Gun five times, once every two overs. "That's perfect for spreading my impact across the innings," he thought. "I can take crucial wickets in different phases—maybe one in the powerplay, two in the middle overs, and two at the death. Opponents would have no clue what hit them!"

Test cricket, of course, was a different beast altogether. Only one use per match seemed limited, but Aarav saw the logic. "Test cricket is all about endurance and precision. Using it strategically—like when the team desperately needs a breakthrough—could turn the tide of the game."

Aarav's mind shifted to the potential downsides. "Okay, let's think this through," he said. "The boost in speed is incredible, but will it impact my control? Bowling faster means there's less margin for error. And if I lose accuracy, I could end up being expensive, which defeats the whole purpose."

He made a mental note to test this reward extensively in practice sessions before deploying it in a real match.

Another thought struck him. "What about wear and tear on my body? Bowling at a higher speed requires more effort, even with this system's help. I'll need to work on my fitness even more to ensure I don't get injured."

Despite the challenges, Aarav couldn't help but feel thrilled. The Super Gun was like having a secret weapon in his arsenal—one that could be the difference between victory and defeat.

Then his attention shifted to the second reward: Shake the Future.

"Now this is just ridiculous," Aarav said aloud, laughing in disbelief. "I can literally steal skills by shaking someone's hand? Who comes up with this stuff?"

The implications were staggering. He began to think about the possibilities.

"Imagine shaking hands with Virat Kohli. What if I get his ability to chase down targets or his insane consistency? Or AB de Villiers—what if I pick up his 360-degree shot-making ability? Hell, even a skill like Brendon McCullum's fast playing technique would be a game-changer!"

The system's description was vague about what kind of skills he could gain—it could be technical, mental, or even something as specific as a particular shot or delivery. Aarav realized this added an element of unpredictability.

"Only two uses, though," Aarav mused. "That means I need to choose wisely. Do I go for established legends, or do I pick younger players with raw talent and potential?"

The timing of the reward also intrigued him. "Should I use it now, during the IPL, when I'm surrounded by world-class players? Or should I save it for later, when I might need a specific skill to overcome a challenge?"

He weighed the pros and cons, deciding to keep this reward in reserve until he had a clearer strategy.

As he lay back down, Aarav couldn't stop smiling. These rewards weren't just perks—they were game-changers. The Super Gun could elevate his bowling to elite levels, while Shake the Future offered a chance to gain skills that could set him apart in every format of the game.

He reached for his phone and opened his Instagram. His followers had skyrocketed since joining RCB, and his notifications were flooded with messages from fans and well-wishers. Aarav chuckled. "They have no idea what's coming."

Before drifting off to sleep, he made a mental note to test the Super Gun in the next practice session. "Tomorrow's going to be interesting," he thought, his excitement building for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

The road to greatness was just beginning, and Aarav Pathak was ready to embrace every twist and turn with open arms.