

Cricket 79

Chapter 79

The match against Chennai Super Kings was one of the most anticipated fixtures of the season. It wasn't just a clash between two teams; it was a battle of titans. The rivalry, the electrifying atmosphere, and the expectation of high-octane cricket made this encounter a must-watch. As we stepped into the stadium, the roar of the crowd was deafening. Chants of "RCB! RCB!" mixed with "CSK! CSK!" created a cacophony that sent chills down my spine.

Virat bhaiya won the toss and chose to bat first. The pitch looked like a belter, and we knew a high score was necessary against a team like CSK. Quinton de Kock and Virat bhaiya walked out to open, the crowd already at fever pitch. De Kock started well, piercing the field with a couple of crisp boundaries. Virat, on the other hand, was uncharacteristically cautious.

The innings took a turn in the fourth over when Virat bhaiya mistimed a pull shot off Deepak Chahar and was caught at mid-wicket for just 9 runs. The crowd fell silent momentarily before erupting again as AB de Villiers walked to the crease.

Quinton and AB steadied the ship, with Quinton playing his elegant strokes and AB unleashing his unorthodox brilliance. By the 10th over, we were 90 for 1, and it was time to accelerate. Just as Quinton reached his half-century off 37 balls, he tried to sweep Ravindra Jadeja and got trapped in front of the stumps.

My turn had come. I walked out to bat, the crowd buzzing with anticipation. The scoreboard read 101 for 2, and it was my chance to prove myself on a big stage. Facing Dwayne Bravo, I felt the adrenaline pumping. The first ball was a slower one, and I read it perfectly, flicking it over square leg for a six.

From there, everything clicked. I began timing the ball effortlessly, dispatching it to all parts of the ground. Bravo's slower balls, Jadeja's sharp spin, and even Chahar's yorkers—none of it seemed to matter. In the 16th over, I reached my fifty in just 16 balls with a towering six over long-on. The crowd erupted, and I raised my bat, feeling a mix of pride and gratitude.

At the other end, AB continued his carnage, smashing bowlers with disdain. Together, we added 84 runs in just 34 balls before I mistimed a wide yorker from Bravo and was caught at deep cover. AB followed soon after, getting bowled by Chahar for a spectacular 68 off 30 balls.

By the end of our innings, we had put up a formidable total of 207 runs. The dressing room was buzzing with energy, and Virat bhaiya patted me on the back.

"Fantastic knock, Aarav. That's how you step up in big games," he said.

After a quick break, it was time to defend the total. The plan was clear: early wickets were crucial. Umesh Yadav struck in the very first over, removing Faf du Plessis with a beauty that clipped the off-stump. In the third over, I was handed the ball.

Facing me was Shane Watson, a seasoned campaigner. The first ball was a dot, the second a single. The third delivery, I pitched it just short of a length, angling in. Watson tried to pull but was beaten by the pace and the ball crashed into the stumps. I roared in celebration, pumping my fists as the crowd went wild. Virat bhaiya ran up to me, yelling, "That's the energy we need!"

CSK were reeling at 22 for 2, and we felt we had the upper hand. Suresh Raina and Ambati Rayudu tried to rebuild, but Raina fell to Chahal in the eighth over, leaving CSK at 58 for 3. The next man in was MS Dhoni.

The atmosphere shifted immediately. The chants of "Dhoni! Dhoni!" filled the stadium as the CSK captain walked out with his trademark calm demeanor. Rayudu, meanwhile, continued his solid knock, rotating the strike and punishing loose deliveries.

The game turned on its head in the 14th over. Dhoni launched into an assault, smashing Chahal for two sixes and a four in a single over. The required run rate, which had climbed to over 13, began to drop.

Rayudu joined the party, reaching his fifty with a six off Siraj. The partnership grew stronger, and suddenly, 207 didn't seem like an unachievable target. I came back to bowl the 17th over, but Dhoni was unstoppable. He pulled, drove, and lofted with precision, sending the ball to the boundary at will.

In the final over Mohammed Siraj came to bowl, CSK needed 16 runs. The crowd was on its feet, the tension palpable. Dhoni faced the first ball and sent it sailing over long-on for a six. The next delivery was a wide yorker, and he sliced it for four past point. With six needed off four balls, he finished it in style, smashing a flat six over mid-wicket.

CSK had chased down 207 with Dhoni unbeaten on 70 off 34 balls and Rayudu contributing a stellar 82 off 53. The stadium erupted in celebration for CSK's victory, even as we stood there, gutted.

Back in the dressing room, the mood was somber. Virat bhaiya addressed the team.

"Don't let this defeat bring you down. We played well, but sometimes the opposition plays better. Learn from this and come back stronger," he said.

As disappointing as the loss was, I couldn't help but admire the brilliance of Dhoni and Rayudu. It was a reminder of why cricket is the game of glorious uncertainties.

The IPL journey continued with its rollercoaster of emotions, victories, and setbacks. After the loss against CSK, we regrouped as a team, determined to keep pushing forward. The remaining matches of the league stage were intense, with each game feeling like a battle. The highlight of this phase for me came against the Mumbai Indians, where I smashed the fastest fifty in IPL history—just 14 balls.

That game against MI was electrifying from the very first ball. Batting first, we lost early wickets, and by the time I came in, the scoreboard read 34 for 2 in the fifth over. The team needed momentum, and I was ready to provide it.

The first ball I faced from Jason Behrendorff was short and wide. I leaned back and sliced it over point for a six. The crowd roared, and I felt the adrenaline surge through me. The next delivery was fuller, and I drove it straight down the ground for another boundary. Behrendorff adjusted his length, but I was already a step ahead. A slower ball was dispatched over deep mid-wicket, and the energy in the stadium was electric.

"Unbelievable hitting! Aarav is on fire!" the commentator exclaimed.

In the blink of an eye, I reached 50 runs in just 14 balls. A combination of boundaries, sixes, and a few quick singles had brought me to the milestone. The crowd erupted as I raised my bat, soaking in the applause. Virat bhaiya clapped from the dugout, smiling proudly.

After my whirlwind knock, we posted a total of 212. The bowling unit backed it up with a disciplined performance, and we secured a crucial victory against one of the strongest teams in the league.

This win reignited our campaign. The dressing room was buzzing, and Virat bhaiya gathered everyone around.

"This is the energy we need! Aarav, that was sensational. But remember, it's not about individual performances—it's about the team. Let's carry this momentum forward," he said.

From there, the victories and losses balanced out, but our consistent performances ensured we secured third place on the points table. The top four teams—Sunrisers Hyderabad, Chennai Super Kings, Royal Challengers Bangalore, and Kolkata Knight Riders—made it to the knockouts. For RCB fans, this was a moment of pride.

What made this season even more special for me was my personal performance. By the end of the league stage, I was the third-highest run-scorer in the tournament. The Orange Cap was tantalizingly close, but being among the top three felt like an incredible achievement. More than that, I was the proud holder of the Purple Cap, leading the charts as the highest wicket-taker.

The recognition from fans, teammates, and cricket pundits was overwhelming. Everywhere I went, people talked about my contributions with bat and ball. During an interview, one of the reporters asked, "Aarav, how does it feel to be both a top scorer and the Purple Cap holder? This dual achievement is the first time in IPL history!"

I smiled and replied, "It's an honor, but cricket is a team sport. Individual achievements are great, but the ultimate goal is to win games for the team. I'm just happy I could contribute to RCB's success."

As we prepared for the knockouts, the atmosphere in the dressing room was a mix of excitement and determination. Virat bhaiya, with his experience and leadership, kept everyone grounded.

"Knockouts are a different ball game," he said during a team meeting. "It doesn't matter how well we've played in the league stage. What matters is how we perform now. Stay focused, stay hungry."

The build-up to the eliminator was intense. Social media was flooded with predictions and analyses. Fans debated whether this could be RCB's year. For me, it was about staying calm and doing what I did best—performing under pressure.

Off the field, the camaraderie within the team was incredible. AB de Villiers shared tips on handling pressure, while Yuzi Chahal kept the mood light with his jokes. The bond we shared as a team was one of the reasons for our success.

On the eve of the eliminator, I took a moment to reflect. Standing on the balcony of my hotel room, looking out at the city lights, I felt a mix of gratitude and determination. This journey had been nothing short of a dream, but I knew the job wasn't done yet.

With the knockouts ahead, it was time to give everything I had—for the team, for the fans, and for the badge on my jersey. The stage was set, and I was ready.

Eden Gardens was buzzing with anticipation as the eliminator between RCB and KKR loomed. The iconic ground, draped in the hues of both teams, resonated with chants and cheers. Virat bhaiya walked out for the toss, exuding confidence. He called it right and opted to bowl first. The decision was met with a roar from our dugout.

"This is our chance to dominate early," Virat bhaiya said as he addressed the team before we took the field. "Let's keep it tight, stay aggressive, and get those early breakthroughs."

The pitch was a typical Eden Gardens surface, offering some assistance to the seamers early on while promising plenty of runs later. I partnered with Umesh Yadav to open the bowling, knowing that KKR's power-packed top order could wreak havoc if allowed to settle.

The first over was tight, with Umesh hitting the right lengths and not giving Narine room to free his arms. When my turn came, I decided to focus on accuracy and pace. My second ball swung sharply into Narine, beating his bat and hitting him on the pads. The umpire raised his finger without hesitation.

"First blood for RCB! Aarav strikes, and Narine has to go!" echoed the commentary.

Chris Lynn tried to counterattack, but Umesh wasn't having it. He set Lynn up with a series of short balls before delivering a fuller one that Lynn edged to the slips. The crowd erupted, and we knew we had the momentum.

KKR's scoreboard read 22 for 2 when Robin Uthappa walked in. He looked uneasy from the start, fending off deliveries from me and Umesh with no conviction. In the sixth over, I bowled a slower one that dipped just in time to catch Uthappa off guard. He mistimed his shot, and the ball went straight to mid-off.

"Three down for KKR! Aarav is on fire tonight!"

Yuzi Chahal joined the party soon after, dismissing Nitish Rana for a mere 3 runs with a beautifully flighted delivery that turned sharply, catching Rana off balance and resulting in a simple stumping.

Despite the early setbacks, KKR's captain Dinesh Karthik stepped up to steady the innings. He found a reliable partner in young Shubman Gill, and the duo started rebuilding cautiously. They rotated the strike effectively and punished the loose deliveries, inching KKR closer to a respectable total.

By the time the 15th over ended, KKR had reached 130 for 4. Virat bhaiya handed me the ball for the 16th over, trusting me to break the partnership. I knew this was the moment to step up.

The first ball was a fiery yorker that Karthik somehow dug out. The next delivery was a slower one, and Karthik, trying to clear the boundary, mistimed his shot. The ball went high in the air, and AB de Villiers, stationed at long-on, took a stunning catch.

"Got him! Aarav gets the big fish, Dinesh Karthik!"

Shubman Gill was still looking dangerous, but I wasn't done. Two balls later, I bowled a length delivery that swung late, deceiving Gill and crashing into his stumps. The Eden Gardens crowd fell silent as I celebrated with a roar.

"That's four wickets for Aarav! What a spell from the youngster!"

I finished my spell with figures of 4 overs, 36 runs, and 4 wickets. Exhausted but elated, I watched as Andre Russell took charge from there. From the very first ball, it was evident that Russell was in no mood to hold back. His powerful strikes left us scrambling for answers. Even the best deliveries were dispatched to the stands with ease.

Russell's carnage brought KKR to 173 for 7 by the end of their 20 overs. His unbeaten 56 off 23 balls was nothing short of sensational, and we knew chasing this total wouldn't be easy.

As we walked back to the dressing room during the innings break, Virat bhaiya rallied the team. "Russell played a blinder, but this is a chaseable target. Let's stick to our plans and back ourselves. We've got the firepower."

The pressure was immense, but we were ready to fight. The eliminator wasn't over yet.

The chase began under the lights of Eden Gardens, the crowd roaring with excitement and anticipation. Virat bhaiya and Quinton de Kock walked out to open the innings, with a determined look on their faces. The target of 174 wasn't astronomical, but the pressure of an eliminator meant every run would be hard-earned.

The first over was tight, with Sunil Narine giving nothing away. De Kock managed a single off the third ball, rotating the strike to Virat bhaiya. The RCB skipper, as always, looked calm yet aggressive, picking up two quick boundaries in the next over to set the tone.

However, disaster struck in the third over. De Kock, attempting a risky single, misjudged the throw from Andre Russell and found himself short of the crease. The bails lit up, and the crowd erupted as KKR drew first blood. De Kock's early dismissal for 1 was a blow, but we knew the job was far from done.

I was next. With a deep breath, I walked onto the field, gripping my bat tightly. The weight of the occasion bore down on me, but I reminded myself of Virat bhaiya's words: "Stay in the moment. Play your game."

As I took guard, I could hear the commentators analyzing the situation. "This is a big stage for the young Aarav. He's shown promise throughout the tournament, but this is where champions are made."

Virat bhaiya gestured to me from the non-striker's end, urging me to stay calm. The next few overs were about rebuilding. Virat took the lead, finding gaps and keeping the scoreboard ticking, while I focused on getting my eye in.

By the sixth over, the powerplay had yielded 42 runs, but the loss of De Kock meant we were slightly behind the required rate. It was time to shift gears. I smashed Kuldeep Yadav for a flat six over long-on, followed by a crisp cover drive for four. Virat bhaiya joined the assault, cutting and pulling with precision.

The partnership began to take shape, and the crowd, though predominantly in favor of KKR, couldn't help but applaud the quality of cricket on display. By the 10th over, we had crossed the 80-run mark, and the momentum seemed to be swinging in our favor.

But then, the twist. Virat bhaiya, on 46, attempted a big shot off Narine, only to mistime it. The ball soared high but fell straight into the hands of the fielder at deep mid-wicket. The stadium erupted, and I stood there momentarily stunned. Losing Virat at such a crucial juncture was a massive blow.

AB de Villiers walked in, and the crowd's cheers turned into deafening roars. If there was anyone who could turn the game around, it was Mr. 360 himself. AB wasted no time, dispatching Lockie Ferguson for consecutive boundaries. His intent was clear: keep the pressure on the bowlers.

I tried to complement him, focusing on rotating the strike and finding the odd boundary. But the KKR bowlers tightened their lines, and the required run rate began to climb. The pressure was mounting, and it finally got to me.

On 39, I mistimed a pull shot off Ferguson, and the ball found the fielder at deep square leg. Frustrated, I walked back to the pavilion, knowing I had let the team down.

AB, however, continued to fight. His shots were a masterclass in improvisation and timing. A scoop over fine leg for six, a reverse sweep for four—he was putting on a show. But even AB couldn't do it alone.

Corey Anderson joined him but struggled to get going. After a brief cameo of 9, Anderson fell to a slower delivery from Russell. The equation now read 40 runs needed off 18 balls, with AB and Washington Sundar at the crease.

AB took on Narine in the 18th over, smashing a massive six over long-off, but the spinner had the last laugh. A quicker delivery caught AB off guard, and he was bowled for a valiant 46. The crowd, stunned into silence for a moment, erupted again as KKR sensed victory.

Washington Sundar tried his best, hitting a couple of boundaries in the final over, but the target proved too steep. RCB fell short, finishing at 165 for 7.

The KKR players celebrated wildly, knowing they had secured their place in the next round. Our dugout, in contrast, was a mix of disappointment and exhaustion.

As I walked back to the dressing room, the reality of elimination sank in. Virat bhaiya, though visibly upset, gathered the team and addressed us. "We gave it our all," he said, his voice steady. "This season showed what we're capable of. Keep your heads high because this is just the beginning for many of you."

The loss stung, but his words reminded us that cricket, like life, is a journey of ups and downs. And while this chapter ended in heartbreak, there was always another season to look forward to.

The IPL season had finally come to a close, and what a journey it had been. After the ups and downs, nail-biting finishes, and moments of pure brilliance, it was Chennai Super Kings who emerged victorious, claiming their title once again. Their experience, consistency, and composure under pressure had been unmatched, and the sight of MS Dhoni lifting the trophy under the floodlights was a reminder of the legend's undying legacy.

Kane Williamson, with his calm demeanor and incredible batting form, deservedly took home the Orange Cap for being the tournament's top scorer. His leadership for Sunrisers Hyderabad had been exemplary, and he had anchored their innings time and again, proving why he was one of the best in the world. On the other hand, the Purple Cap was clinched by Rashid Khan, the Afghan sensation, who had

outshone everyone with his brilliance with the ball. His ability to turn games on their head with his leg-spin was nothing short of magical, and he had edged me out by just one wicket to claim the honor.

Although I missed out on the Purple Cap, my efforts throughout the season did not go unnoticed. When my name was announced as the Emerging Player of the Season, the entire crowd cheered for me. I walked up to the stage, my heart pounding, and received the award amidst a thunderous round of applause. Standing there with the trophy in my hands, I couldn't help but reflect on how far I had come.

The moments of self-doubt, the relentless training sessions, and the pressure of performing on the biggest stage—it had all been worth it. I remembered the early days of the tournament, when I was just another young player trying to find his footing, and now I stood recognized as one of the brightest talents in the league.

During the post-season gala, players from all teams mingled, sharing laughs and stories of the season gone by. Kane Williamson approached me, his smile as warm as ever. "Congratulations, Aarav. You've had a phenomenal season," he said, shaking my hand. "Your energy on the field and your performances have been inspiring to watch."

"Thanks, Kane," I replied, feeling a mix of pride and gratitude. "Coming from you, that means a lot. Congratulations on the Orange Cap—you've been unstoppable this season."

Later, I had a brief chat with Rashid Khan as well. "You've been amazing, Aarav," he said with a grin. "One wicket difference, eh? Maybe next time!"

"Next time, for sure," I laughed, knowing it was all in the spirit of competition.

The evening was filled with joy and camaraderie, a celebration of the sport that had brought us all together. As I returned to my room that night, the Emerging Player trophy placed carefully on my table, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude. The season had been a rollercoaster of emotions, but it had also been the most memorable experience of my life.

Though the disappointment of missing out on the trophy and the Purple Cap lingered slightly, I knew this was just the beginning of my journey. The lessons I had learned, the friendships I had built, and the memories I had created would stay with me forever. Most importantly, the season had taught me that with hard work, belief, and the right attitude, anything was possible.

As I looked out of my window at the night sky, I whispered to myself, "This is just the start, Aarav. The best is yet to come."