

## Cricket 81

### Chapter 81

The Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, the premier T20 tournament in Indian domestic cricket, was the next big challenge. The format was fast-paced and thrilling, testing both mental acuity and physical fitness. Walking into the dressing room for the first match felt like a reunion, as I saw familiar faces—Shreyas Iyer, Suryakumar Yadav, and Shivam Dube—players I had shared the field with before. The camaraderie was palpable, and our shared experiences created an unspoken bond.

The first match was against Jharkhand, a team known for its aggressive brand of cricket. As we gathered in the team meeting before the match, the energy in the room was infectious. Aditya Tare, our captain, gave a rousing pep talk, emphasizing the need to start the tournament on a strong note. His words echoed in my mind as we took the field.

Batting first, our openers gave us a steady start. When I walked in at number three, the scoreboard read 45 for 1 in the fifth over. The pitch was a bit slow, making shot selection crucial. I took my time to settle in, rotating the strike with quick singles and the occasional boundary. Suryakumar joined me after the fall of the second wicket, and his presence was a calming influence. We complemented each other well, finding gaps in the field and keeping the scoreboard ticking.

By the time I was dismissed for 43 off 29 balls, our team had a solid platform to build on. The innings was a mixture of calculated risks and well-timed aggression, and I was pleased with my contribution. The team eventually posted a competitive total of 170 runs, thanks to some late fireworks from Shivam, who smashed 25 runs off just 12 balls.

As we prepared to defend our total, the bowlers huddled together to discuss strategies. Jharkhand had some dangerous hitters, and early wickets were crucial. I took the ball in the powerplay, determined to make an impact. My first over was tight, conceding only six runs, and I could feel the pressure mounting on their batsmen. In my second over, I got the breakthrough, dismissing their opener with a delivery that spun sharply and crashed into the stumps.

The joy of taking a wicket in a T20 match is unparalleled. The roar of the crowd, the high-fives from teammates—it's a moment of pure adrenaline. My second wicket came in the middle overs when I outfoxed their number four batsman with a flighted delivery. The dismissal was a turning point, as it slowed down their scoring rate.

Despite some resistance from their middle order, our bowlers held their nerve. Jharkhand needed 20 runs off the last over, but our pacer, Aakash, bowled brilliantly, conceding only six runs. We won the match by 13 runs, and the celebrations began. The dressing room was a mix of relief and elation, and Shreyas made sure to acknowledge everyone's contributions in his post-match speech.

The victory was a perfect start to the tournament, setting the tone for the matches to come. Personally, the match reaffirmed my belief in my abilities as both a batsman and a bowler. The Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy was just beginning, and I was determined to make it a memorable campaign.

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After our opening victory against Jharkhand, the tournament moved quickly, and the next challenge was Punjab. They had a well-balanced squad, and the anticipation for the match was high. However, the day didn't go as planned.

We batted first, and I walked in early after losing an opener in the second over. Punjab's bowlers were disciplined, and the pitch offered a bit of swing under the lights. I struggled to find my rhythm, managing only 22 runs off 17 balls before being caught at long-on trying to accelerate. Suryakumar held the innings together with a composed 62, but we only managed 145 on the board—a score that felt below par.

Our bowling effort started strong, with Shivam and Navdeep picking up early wickets, but Punjab's middle order, led by their captain, stitched together a steady partnership. When I came in to bowl, I tried to break the partnership, but their batsmen played cautiously. I bowled a decent spell, taking one wicket for 24 runs in my four overs, but it wasn't enough. Punjab chased down the target with two overs to spare, handing us our first loss of the tournament. The dressing room was somber, but our captain Aaditya reminded us to stay focused, as we still had games to play.

The loss fueled our determination, and the next match against Rajasthan saw a reinvigorated team take the field. Rajasthan batted first, and our bowlers put on a show. I struck in my first over, dismissing their opener with a in-swing that beat him completely. Later, I got their captain caught at slip with an edge, finishing with figures of 3 for 19 in four overs. It was one of those days where everything clicked, and we restricted Rajasthan to 132.

Chasing the target, I was promoted to open the innings. My job was to provide a quick start, and I did just that, smashing 48 runs off 27 balls. It was a knock filled with clean hits and clever placements. Partnering with Suryakumar, we added 85 runs for the second wicket, setting the tone for an easy chase. We wrapped up the game in 16 overs, bouncing back in style.

The momentum carried us into the match against Karnataka, a team filled with experienced players. They batted first, and it was a tough challenge on a batting-friendly surface. Their openers gave them a blistering start, but our bowlers pulled things back in the middle overs. I dismissed their in-form batsman with a flighted delivery that induced a false shot, finishing with figures of 2 for 28 in my four overs. Karnataka posted 182, a challenging total.

The chase was intense. I came in at number three and started cautiously, rotating the strike and building partnerships. When the asking rate climbed, I shifted gears, hitting a series of boundaries and a towering six. I scored 64 off 38 balls before getting caught at deep mid-wicket. Suryakumar and Shivam finished the job with some brilliant stroke play, guiding us to victory in the final over.

With that win, we secured our spot in the finals. The atmosphere in the dressing room was electric. Shreyas congratulated everyone, emphasizing how the team effort had brought us this far. For me, these matches were a testament to resilience—bouncing back after a loss, delivering under pressure, and contributing with both bat and ball. The final awaited us, and we were ready to give it everything.

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The much-anticipated final of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy brought us to Eden Gardens, an iconic venue pulsating with history and charged emotions. Facing Delhi, we knew the challenge ahead was formidable. They had been consistent throughout the tournament, with a solid batting lineup and a lethal bowling attack. The pitch, as expected, was bowler-friendly, with a hint of movement under the lights. Winning the toss, Delhi opted to bat first.

Our bowlers started well, sticking to their plans. The new ball was swinging, and Aakash struck early, dismissing their opener in the second over. However, Delhi's middle order proved resilient, especially their captain, who anchored the innings with a calculated 48 off 42 balls. They rotated the strike smartly and punished any loose deliveries. I was brought into the attack in the middle overs, and on my third ball, I deceived their in-form batter with a slower one, getting him caught at long-on. My spell read 4 overs, 1 wicket for 23 runs—a satisfying contribution in a high-pressure game.

Delhi finished with 153 runs on the board—a competitive total, but not insurmountable. The mood in our camp was optimistic yet cautious. Tare our captain, reminded us to respect the conditions and take it one ball at a time.

Chasing 154 in a final was never going to be easy on a pitch offering assistance to the bowlers. Our openers walked in amidst loud cheers, but the early overs turned the game against us. One of our openers, Bista, struggled to get going and was dismissed after laboring to just 1 run off 6 balls. The scoreboard pressure began to mount, and the Eden crowd seemed to weigh on us as the wickets tumbled.

I walked in to bat at a precarious situation, determined to steady the ship. The ball was swinging and gripping, making timing difficult. I started cautiously, focusing on building a partnership. The pressure was intense, but I found my rhythm after hitting two back-to-back boundaries off a spinner in the seventh over. Slowly but surely, I began to impose myself, picking gaps and finding the occasional boundary to keep the scoreboard ticking.

Surya joined me at the crease, and together, we formed a gritty partnership. The two of us tried to take the game deep, knowing that a few overs could change everything. I reached my half-century in 36 balls, a fighting knock under challenging circumstances. But as the asking rate climbed, I attempted a risky shot off a slower ball and holed out at long-off. My 52 runs were not enough to turn the tide completely in our favor, though they gave us hope.

Surya tried valiantly, hitting a few boundaries, but Delhi's bowlers were disciplined and relentless. They kept varying their pace and length, making it hard to score freely. The lower order struggled to handle the pressure, and wickets kept falling at regular intervals.

In the end, we fell short, managing only 129 runs in our 20 overs. Delhi emerged victorious, lifting the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy amidst loud celebrations. For us, it was a bitter pill to swallow.

The dressing room was silent after the match, a stark contrast to the buzz and energy before it. Captain addressed the team, acknowledging everyone's efforts and emphasizing that such moments were part of the journey. Personally, it was a mix of emotions—disappointment over the loss, pride in my contribution, and a burning desire to improve and come back stronger.

The Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy might not have ended in triumph for us, but it was a tournament filled with lessons, growth, and unforgettable moments. As we packed our bags and left Eden Gardens, one thought dominated my mind: this was just the beginning.

