

## Cricket 88

### Chapter 88

The fourth match of the series brought with it an air of excitement and change. With several senior players rested to manage workloads, the team saw new faces stepping up to seize the opportunity. Rohit Sharma was handed the reins as captain for the day, a role he carried with his usual charm and calm demeanor. Among the young players making their mark, it was Shubman Gill's turn to shine. The young talent was presented with his debut cap in a heartfelt moment by none other than Rohit himself.

As the team gathered in the huddle before the start, Rohit held out the cap to Shubman, a warm smile on his face. "Gill, this is your moment. Wear this cap with pride, and just remember—you've worked hard to be here. Trust yourself and play your natural game," Rohit said, placing the cap on Shubman's head.

Gill beamed, his eyes reflecting a mixture of pride and determination. "Thank you, Rohit bhaiya. I'll give it my all," he replied, his voice steady despite the emotions welling up within him.

Rohit clapped him on the back. "That's the spirit, champ. Now let's get out there and put on a show!"

The toss was soon conducted, and Rohit called it right, opting to bat first. The decision was met with cheers from the Indian camp as the openers, Rohit and Shubman, padded up.

The atmosphere in the stadium was electrifying as the two walked out to the middle, the tricolor flags waving in the stands and the crowd chanting their names. The partnership was off to a steady start, with Rohit taking on the role of the anchor and Shubman showing flashes of his fluent stroke play.

However, it wasn't all smooth sailing. The New Zealand bowlers, led by Trent Boult, kept things tight, not allowing the Indian openers to settle into a rhythm. The first six overs yielded only 20 runs, a testament to the discipline of the bowling attack.

Then came the seventh over, and with it, a moment that sent shockwaves through the Indian dressing room. Boult, returning for his third over, was bowling with precision and pace. The third ball of the over was pitched just outside off, shaping away slightly. Rohit, sensing an opportunity to break the shackles, leaned into the shot, aiming for a booming drive through the covers.

The crack of the bat meeting the ball was sharp, and for a moment, it seemed as though the ball would race away to the boundary. But Boult, in an extraordinary display of athleticism, flung himself to his left in his follow-through. The ball seemed to hang in the air as Boult stretched every sinew, his eyes fixed on it with unwavering focus.

The stadium held its breath.

Rohit, standing at the crease, watched anxiously, his bat still mid-air from the follow-through of his shot. The fielders and the crowd alike were frozen, their gaze locked onto Boult's outstretched hand.

And then it happened. Boult's fingers clasped around the ball as he tumbled to the ground, completing the catch in a spectacular dive. For a heartbeat, there was silence, as though everyone was processing what had just unfolded.

Then, the roar erupted.

Boult, rising to his feet with the ball held aloft, was mobbed by his teammates, their celebrations a mix of disbelief and jubilation. Rohit, meanwhile, stood at the crease for a moment, his expression unreadable. He tapped the ground with his bat before slowly walking off, acknowledging the crowd with a slight nod.

In the Indian fans area, there was a mixture of disappointment and admiration. "That's Boult for you," someone muttered. "What a catch."

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As Rohit Sharma walked back to the pavilion, the crowd's energy seemed to shift. The chants of his name softened, replaced by the murmur of anticipation. It was my turn to step onto the pitch. Gripping my bat tightly, I adjusted my gloves and jogged towards the middle, my heart pounding but my focus razor-sharp.

Reaching the crease, I exchanged a quick fist bump with Gill. His eyes reflected determination and a hint of relief at seeing a familiar partner at the other end. "Let's keep it steady," he said with a small smile, adjusting his helmet.

"Got it," I replied. "You're looking solid out here."

The next few overs were a test of patience and precision. The New Zealand bowlers, aware of the need to capitalize on Rohit's early dismissal, tightened their lines and lengths. Gill and I played cautiously, focusing on rotating the strike and finding the occasional boundary when opportunities arose. The scoreboard ticked along steadily, and we began to build momentum.

By the 17th over, Gill was looking increasingly comfortable. His timing was impeccable, and his confidence grew with each stroke. Facing Ish Sodhi, he danced down the track to a well-flighted delivery and lofted it elegantly over mid-off. The ball raced to the boundary, bringing up his maiden fifty in style. The crowd erupted in applause, and I joined in, clapping my bat against my gloves.

"Well played, champ!" I called out, walking up to him. "First of many. Keep going."

Gill grinned, visibly pleased but grounded. "Thanks, bhai. Let's keep the partnership going."

However, cricket is as much a game of highs and lows as it is of skill and strategy. In the very next over, disaster struck. Bracewell, bowling with precision, delivered a ball that skidded off the surface. Gill, trying to guide it towards third man, misjudged the angle and edged it straight to the keeper. The appeal was immediate, and the umpire's finger went up.

Gill's shoulders slumped as he turned and began the long walk back to the pavilion, his score reading 52 off 65 balls. I felt a pang of disappointment watching him leave but quickly shook it off. There was still a long way to go, and the team needed me to step up.

Rayudu was the next to walk in. A seasoned campaigner, he was expected to provide stability in the middle overs. Unfortunately, his stay at the crease was short-lived. Bracewell, riding high on confidence, bowled a sharp off-break that turned sharply. Rayudu, playing down the wrong line, missed it completely, and the stumps lit up. A golden duck.

The crowd fell silent, and I tightened my grip on the bat. The pressure was mounting.

Kedar Jadhav was the next to join me at the crease. Known for his unorthodox style and ability to anchor an innings, he walked in with calm confidence. We exchanged a quick nod as he took guard.

"Let's stabilize innings, Bhaiya," I said, meeting his gaze.

"Don't worry, we've got this," he replied, his voice steady.

The 20th over was bowled by Mitchell Santner, and it was a maiden. Kedar chose to play cautiously, shouldering arms to a series of deliveries that spun sharply and tested his technique. From the non-striker's end, I watched closely, assessing the bowlers and planning my approach for the next few overs.

The weight of expectations hung heavily in the air, but I knew that moments like these defined a cricketer's journey. As I prepared to face the next ball, I reminded myself of one thing: every great inning begins with a single stroke. The game was far from over, and the next chapter was ours to write.

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As the game progressed into the 26th over, I was nearing a personal milestone. Batting on 49, I faced Colin de Grandhomme, who had been maintaining tight lines. The field was set to cut off singles, but I found a gap, nudging the ball towards mid-wicket and sprinting for a quick single. As I crossed the crease, the umpire signaled a run, and the crowd erupted. I raised my bat towards the stands and then to the dressing room, acknowledging the cheers for my fifty. It was a hard-earned milestone, coming off 59 deliveries, and though I was pleased, I knew the job was far from done.

At the non-striker's end, Kedar walked up to me, patting my back. "Well played, champ," he said, offering a reassuring smile.

However, the game of cricket is often unpredictable, and the next over proved it. Trent Boult returned to the attack, brimming with aggression. His very first ball was a teasing outswinger, and I managed to let it go. The second delivery, though, was fuller and drew me into the shot. I leaned forward to drive, but the ball kissed the edge of my bat and flew towards the slip cordon. Time seemed to slow as Tom Latham dove to his left, his outstretched hand grabbing the ball just inches above the ground.

For a moment, I froze, hoping against hope that the catch had been grassed. But the umpire raised his finger, confirming the dismissal. My heart sank as I turned and began the slow walk back to the pavilion. The crowd applauded my effort, but the sting of disappointment overshadowed the noise. I glanced at the scoreboard—52 runs to my name—but it felt incomplete, like there was more I could have done for the team.

The innings began to unravel after my departure. Kedar, who had been playing cautiously, tried to up the ante but was undone by Ish Sodhi's flight and turn, holing out to long-on for 14. The middle order crumbled under pressure, with Bracewell and Boult wreaking havoc. Ambati Rayudu's dismissal for a duck earlier had already set a precarious tone, and now even the experienced players seemed unable to steady the ship.

By the 35th over, we were 127 for 8, and the writing was on the wall. The tailenders came in with little to lose, showing grit and determination. Yuzvendra Chahal, in particular, surprised everyone with his resilience. Known more for his bowling, Chahal dug in and scored a gritty 18 runs off 37 balls, finding the boundary twice with cheeky late cuts that drew cheers from the crowd.

Despite his efforts, the end came swiftly. In the 41st over, Boult bowled a fiery yorker that uprooted the stumps of our last batter. The scoreboard read 146 all out in 40.5 overs, well below a par total. Boult finished with figures of 5 for 32, and Bracewell's 3 for 28 had further cemented New Zealand's dominance.

As we trudged back to the dressing room, the atmosphere was heavy with silence. Rohit, ever the optimist, tried to lift spirits. "Tough day, boys. But we'll learn from this. Let's focus on the bowling now," he said, his voice steady but firm.

I slumped into my chair, replaying my dismissal in my mind. The applause for my fifty felt like a distant memory now, overshadowed by the collapse that followed. Yet, deep down, I knew this was just one chapter in a long journey. The game wasn't over, and there was still a chance to fight back in the second innings.

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The second innings began under the floodlights, and I stood at the top of my mark, gripping the ball tightly. The pitch, though a bit sluggish, still offered some movement for the bowlers. The crowd roared as I prepared to deliver the first ball of New Zealand's chase. My heartbeat steadied as I focused on my target, the off-stump, and ran in. The first over was precise, a maiden, with Martin Guptill unable to find gaps. Every dot ball was met with applause from the Indian fans, giving me a boost of confidence.

From the other end, Khaleel Ahmed took the ball and bowled the second over. His pace and bounce troubled the batsmen, and he conceded just one run, maintaining the pressure. As I prepared for my second over, I could see the determination in Guptill's eyes. He was itching to break free, but I wasn't going to make it easy for him.

The over started well, with two dot balls and a single on the third delivery. Then, on the final ball of the over, I decided to try a slower one, something I had been practicing in the nets. Henry Nicholls was on strike, and I saw him shift his weight early, expecting pace. I released the ball, watching it loop and dip, deceiving him completely. He mistimed the shot, sending the ball high into the night sky. For a moment,

everyone held their breath as the ball hung in the air. Shubman Gill, stationed at mid-off, settled under it and completed a comfortable catch.

The team erupted, running towards Gill and me. The wicket brought life back into the match, and I felt a surge of adrenaline as I celebrated with my teammates. The scoreboard now read 5 for 1, and we were off to a great start.

Kane Williamson, the New Zealand captain and one of the finest batsmen in the world, walked in next. The stadium buzzed with anticipation as he took guard. "Stay sharp, boys," Rohit Bhaiya shouted from the slips, clapping his hands to keep everyone on their toes.

Khaleel and I continued bowling in tandem, keeping the pressure on for the next few overs. By the eighth over, we had restricted New Zealand to 28 runs, and the energy on the field was electric. But Guptill and Williamson began to find their rhythm. Their partnership started to take shape, and they rotated the strike effortlessly while punishing the occasional bad ball.

By the 15th over, the New Zealand scoreboard showed 78 for 1. Guptill was playing with characteristic aggression, while Williamson was the picture of composure. They built their partnership with precision, frustrating our bowlers and slowly tilting the match in their favor.

The breakthrough came in the 22nd over, when Yuzvendra Chahal was brought into the attack. He flighted a delivery that tempted Williamson to drive, and the ball spun just enough to take the edge. Rohit Sharma, positioned at first slip, dived to his right and plucked the catch out of thin air. Williamson departed for a well-made 43, and the crowd erupted in celebration.

But any hopes of a collapse were quickly dashed as Ross Taylor walked in and picked up where Williamson had left off. Taylor and Guptill formed a solid partnership, mixing caution with aggression.

Guptill reached his half-century with a powerful pull shot off Khaleel, and the two batsmen continued to chip away at the target.

By the 35th over, New Zealand was within touching distance of victory. Guptill fell short of his century, dismissed for 61 by a quick delivery from Chahal that caught him off guard. But Taylor, now set on 39, ensured there were no further hiccups. With a crisp drive through the covers, he brought up the winning runs in the 39th over. The New Zealand dugout erupted in celebration as the players rushed onto the field to congratulate Taylor and his teammates.

After the match, we lined up for the customary handshake. As I approached Ross Taylor, he extended his hand with a warm smile. "Good bowling, mate. That slower one to get Henry was a beauty," he said.

"Thanks, Ross. Great knock," I replied, trying to mask my disappointment with a polite smile.

Kane Williamson, ever the gentleman, patted my shoulder as he passed. "Keep at it. You've got a lot of potential," he said, his words carrying genuine encouragement.

As the team huddled in the dressing room, Rohit Sharma addressed us. "Tough loss, guys, but there's a lot to learn from this. We had our moments, but consistency is key at this level. Let's focus on the next game and come back stronger."

I sat quietly, replaying the match in my mind. The highs of getting a wicket and bowling economically were overshadowed by the frustration of watching the game slip away. But amidst the disappointment, there was a fire within me—a determination to improve, to rise, and to contribute more meaningfully in the matches to come.