

Cricket 89

Chapter 89

The four-day break between matches felt like a gift and a challenge. The first day, we decided to step away from cricket and enjoy the beauty of New Zealand. The morning air was crisp, carrying the faint aroma of coffee and fresh grass. The team gathered early, laughter echoing in the lobby as everyone seemed eager to unwind.

Shikhar Bhaiya, ever the friendlier, suggested we explore a nearby coastal trail, followed by lunch at a quaint seaside café. "We deserve a little downtime, don't we?" he said, with a grin lighting up his face. Everyone agreed, and we set off in a couple of vans, joking and teasing each other on the way.

The trail was breathtaking. The waves crashed against the rocks in rhythmic bursts, seagulls glided overhead, and the salty breeze invigorated our senses. Rohit Bhaiya, always the entertainer, started imitating seagulls, much to everyone's amusement. "If this cricket thing doesn't work out, you've got a bright future as a comedian," Kuldeep said, laughing.

We posed for group photos, climbed a few rocks to get a better view of the horizon, and just let ourselves be. The conversations were light—childhood memories, favorite movies, and, of course, a bit of banter about who had the best selfie angles. It was refreshing, a reminder of the camaraderie that made us more than just teammates.

Lunch was equally memorable. Kane Williamson had suggested the café, and the food didn't disappoint. Fresh seafood, hearty soups, and some indulgent desserts later, we were all thoroughly satisfied. "I think I've eaten enough to last me a week," Shikhar said, leaning back in his chair.

The next day, I woke up with a renewed sense of purpose. The break had been rejuvenating, but my mind was already back on cricket. After breakfast, I headed to the nets, determined to work on my bowling. The coaches and support staff were there, ready to assist.

The practice session was intense. I focused on line and length, working tirelessly to perfect my variations. The ball was coming out well, and I could feel the rhythm building. Between overs, I discussed strategies with the bowling coach, trying to dissect the weaknesses of the New Zealand batting lineup.

By the end of the session, my body was tired, but my spirit was soaring. I stretched out on the grass, letting the sun warm my skin as I caught my breath. Just as I was about to head back to the dressing room, a familiar ding echoed in my head.

"Congratulations, host," the system's voice announced. "Your reward, Super Gun, has been completely calibrated with your body and is now ready for use in matches."

The words jolted me upright. "Finally!" I exclaimed, my heart racing with excitement. I had been waiting for this moment ever since the system first hinted at the Super Gun. It was a special ability that allowed me to bowl at incredible speeds with pinpoint accuracy, a game-changer that could tilt any match in our favor.

"How does it work now?" I asked eagerly, my thoughts racing.

"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." the system replied. "However, remember, bowling in a net session is different. It's calibrated to help your body adapt, but you must be strategic when using it in a match."

I nodded, absorbing the information. The possibilities flooded my mind. A perfectly placed Super Gun delivery could dismantle any batsman. The thought of Kane Williamson or Ross Taylor facing it filled me with anticipation. I spent the rest of the day visualizing scenarios, planning how and when to unleash this new weapon.

The next day, I returned to the nets to test it out. The first time I activated the ability, it felt like an extension of myself—a seamless blend of power and precision. The ball zipped through the air, swinging late and clipping the top of the off stump. The coaches stared, wide-eyed, as if they couldn't believe what they'd just witnessed.

"What was that?" the bowling coach asked, walking up to me with a mixture of awe and curiosity.

"Just something I've been working on," I replied, keeping the system's secret to myself.

By the time the session ended, I had a newfound confidence in my abilities. The Super Gun wasn't just a novelty; it was a weapon that could redefine my bowling. I couldn't wait to see how it would fare against New Zealand's best.

That evening, as I lay in bed, my mind was a whirlwind of strategies. Should I use it early in the innings to set the tone, or save it for the death overs when the batsmen were looking to attack? I thought about the pressure situations, the clutch moments where one delivery could change the course of the game.

I could almost see it—Guptill on strike, expecting a regular delivery, and then the Super Gun ripping through his defenses. The thought made me grin. This was why I loved cricket: the endless possibilities, the thrill of the contest, the chance to rise to the occasion.

The four-day break was almost over, and the next match loomed large. But this time, I felt ready—more than ready. I wasn't just going to play; I was going to dominate. And with the Super Gun in my arsenal, I knew I had what it took to make a difference.

The day of the fifth match dawned with a crisp, refreshing breeze, and the excitement in the air was palpable. I could feel the buzz all around as we headed to the ground, the chatter of the team mixed with the distant hum of spectators already gathering. I was particularly eager to bowl, the itch to get the ball in my hand and make a difference burning inside me. But first, there was the toss.

As the captains strode out, Kane Williamson looked calm and composed. Rohit Sharma, leading us once again, matched his demeanor with an easygoing smile. The coin went up, spun in the air, and when it landed, Kane had won the toss. He didn't hesitate for a second. "We'll bowl first," he announced, his decision firm and confident.

We took it in stride, knowing the challenge of setting a target against New Zealand's disciplined bowling lineup. Rohit and Shubman Gill padded up and made their way to the crease, the crowd roaring as they took their positions.

The first few overs were tentative. The New Zealand bowlers stuck to tight lines, not giving the batsmen much room. Rohit and Gill seemed content to bide their time, waiting for the bowlers to error. But the patience soon gave way to pressure.

In the fourth over, Matt Henry ran in with his usual energy, the ball gripped firmly in his hand. He doesn't bowl too close to the stumps, making it tricky to pick the angle. This delivery was full, angling in on middle and off. Rohit, squared up completely by the late swing, was beaten. The ball crashed into his off-stump, rattling it violently. Rohit stood there for a moment, stunned, before turning back towards the pavilion. The scoreboard read 8/1.

As Rohit's wicket fell, my heart quickened. It was my turn to step up. Jogging out to the crease, I focused on keeping my mind steady. The crowd's noise faded into the background as I adjusted my gloves, taking in the field placements.

Gill was on strike for the next over, facing Trent Boult, who was brimming with confidence. Boult delivered a short ball outside off, his first attempt to test Gill. It was an opportunity to score, a rare moment after a tight leash of deliveries. Gill went for it, attempting to go up and over the slips. For a split second, it seemed like a well-timed shot. But the ball carried further than expected, straight to the third man. A sharp intake of breath rippled through the crowd as Gill's dismissal became evident. Boult had his prize. Gill had scored only 6. The scoreboard now read 12/2.

Ambati Rayudu entered next, greeted by a charged-up Matt Henry. At the other end, I was gearing up to steady the innings, but it wasn't to be. In the 11th over, Henry produced a length delivery on off-stump. I pushed at it without moving my feet, the ball holding up just enough to mess with my timing. It looped up gently to cover, where it was pouched without trouble. My heart sank as I walked back to the pavilion. 17/3.

From there, Rayudu and MS Dhoni had the Herculean task of rebuilding. The duo dug in, leaving no stone unturned in their efforts to steady the innings. Dhoni, with his unparalleled composure, anchored one end while Rayudu gradually opened up at the other. Boundaries were hard to come by, but their deft placement and quick running between the wickets kept the scoreboard ticking.

By the time the innings reached the halfway mark, the score had inched past 100. The partnership between Rayudu and Dhoni was blossoming, their experience shining through. Rayudu, in particular, played with a sense of responsibility, driving through the covers with precision and pulling anything short with authority.

In the 30th over, Rayudu brought up his fifty with a crisp drive through mid-off. He raised his bat to acknowledge the cheers from the crowd and his teammates. Dhoni, standing at the non-striker's end, clapped appreciatively. "Good one, Ambati! Let's keep this going," he said with his characteristic calm.

As the overs progressed, the duo shifted gears. Dhoni began finding the gaps with surgical precision, while Rayudu launched a couple of powerful shots over the infield. The partnership had crossed 100, and the scoreboard looked far healthier.

However, just as it seemed like India was poised for a big finish, Dhoni fell for 45, trying to accelerate further. His departure brought Vijay Shankar to the crease. Shankar, fresh and determined, joined forces with Rayudu to ensure the momentum didn't dip.

Rayudu continued his masterclass, reaching 90 before an attempted slog sweep against Mitchell Santner brought his downfall. The ball skied high, and Kane Williamson settled underneath it, making no mistake. Rayudu walked back to a standing ovation. His knock had laid the foundation for a respectable total.

Shankar and Kedar Jadhav then took charge, adding crucial runs in the death overs. Jadhav's cameo of 34 included some audacious shots, while Shankar's steady 45 provided much-needed stability. The tailenders chipped in as well, with Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal managing a few boundaries to push the total further.

When the innings ended at 252, there was a sense of satisfaction. It wasn't a towering total, but it was competitive, given the conditions. The dressing room buzzed with discussions about the bowling strategies for the second innings. Everyone knew the game was far from over. We had to bowl out of our skins to defend this total.

As we prepared to take the field, I felt a surge of determination. This was our moment to make a statement, and I was ready to give it everything I had.

As the team gathered in the dressing room before the second innings, I could feel the anticipation in the air. With Bhuvneshwar Kumar ruled out due to injury, the responsibility of opening the bowling was handed to me. It was a moment I had dreamed of for a long time—leading the charge with the new ball, setting the tone for the defense of our total. The pressure was immense, but so was the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

The crowd roared as I marked my run-up. The first over was crucial, and I was determined to make every ball count. I started with four outswingers, each one pitching in the channel just outside off-stump. Munro was watchful, leaving most deliveries alone. On the fifth ball, I decided to change my line and went for an inswinger. Munro anticipated it well and defended it back to me. The final ball was another dot, and I ended my over without conceding a run.

From the other end, Shami came steaming in, delivering a maiden over. It was the perfect start—tight, disciplined, and building pressure on the New Zealand openers.

As I prepared for my second over, my mind raced with strategies. I decided to vary my lengths but kept my line outside the off-stump, targeting the fifth or sixth stump. The first four balls tested Munro's patience, as he either left them or played with soft hands. Then, an idea struck me. I called upon the system, silently asking, "Turn on Super Gun."

The system's voice echoed in my mind, cool and mechanical. "Activating Super Gun."

I felt a surge of energy as I got ready for the fifth delivery. Taking my run-up with a heightened sense of purpose, I pitched the ball perfectly on the fourth stump. The moment it left my hand, I knew it was special. The ball zipped through the air at an electrifying pace—144 km/h, much faster than my usual deliveries. It swung late, deceiving Munro completely. He barely had time to react before the ball crashed into the off-stump. The sound of timber reverberated across the ground.

Munro stood there, stunned, staring at the wreckage of his stumps. The crowd erupted, and I let out a roar, pumping my fists aggressively. My teammates rushed toward me, patting me on the back. It was a magical moment—a blend of skill, technology, and sheer determination.

The momentum was now with us. Shami bowled another tight over, keeping the pressure intact. I continued to attack from the other end, mixing up my deliveries to keep the batsmen guessing. In my third over, I set up Henry Nicholls with a series of outswingers before surprising him with a sharp inswinger that hit him on the pads. The appeal went up, and the umpire raised his finger. Another wicket was mine.

New Zealand's innings saw moments of resistance, particularly from Kane Williamson. The skipper batted with finesse, timing the ball beautifully and finding the gaps with ease. However, the spin duo of Chahal and Kedar Jadhav made life difficult for the middle order. Chahal, in particular, bowled with precision, extracting turn and bounce from the surface. He claimed three vital wickets, including that of Williamson, who fell to a brilliant googly.

Shami and Vijay Shankar chipped in with crucial breakthroughs, ensuring that New Zealand never gained full control of the chase. Kedar Jadhav's golden arm worked its magic once again as he picked up a key wicket in the middle overs.

I returned for my final spell in the 40th over, determined to finish strong. With the Super Gun activated, I unleashed another fiery delivery, this time clocking 146 km/h. The ball swung in late and uprooted the off-stump of Colin de Grandhomme. The roar of the crowd was deafening as I celebrated my third wicket.

New Zealand's innings ended in the 45th over, bowled out for 217. It was a collective bowling effort, with each bowler contributing significantly. I finished with figures of 3 for 35 in 8 overs—a performance I would cherish forever. Shami took two wicket, Vijay Shankar claimed another, and Chahal's three-wicket haul was the highlight of the spin department.

As we walked off the field, I felt a deep sense of satisfaction. The team gathered for a quick huddle, sharing high-fives and words of encouragement. The match wasn't over yet, but we had given ourselves a real chance. The chase ahead would be tough, but our spirits were high.

The game had finally come to a conclusion, and it was nothing short of exhilarating. India had chased down New Zealand's target with resilience, and the dressing room was alive with celebrations. Ambati Rayudu, with his composed innings, was rightly awarded the Man of the Match. But what came as an even greater surprise to me was being named the Player of the Series.

As my name was announced, a surge of emotions coursed through me. This was my debut series, and to stand here amidst world-class cricketers receiving such a prestigious accolade was surreal. I walked up to the podium amidst cheers from the crowd and the warm applause of my teammates. The bright lights of the cameras felt blinding, but the pride in my heart outshone them all.

The interviewer, a well-dressed gentleman with a polished demeanor, handed me the microphone.

"Congratulations, Aarav, on being named the Player of the Series in your debut. What are your thoughts right now?"

"Thank you so much," I began, my voice steady despite the butterflies in my stomach. "This feels like a dream. Playing for India was always my ultimate goal, and to perform well in my very first series is beyond anything I could have imagined. I'm incredibly grateful to my teammates and the support staff for trusting me and giving me this opportunity."

"Your performance was nothing short of extraordinary, both with the bat and the ball. Tell us about your mindset going into this series."

"I just wanted to stay focused on the basics. Playing for the country comes with immense pressure, but I told myself to take it one ball at a time. Whether it was batting or bowling, my goal was to contribute to the team's success in whatever way I could."

"Your spell with the ball today, especially the dismissal of Munro with that fiery delivery, was remarkable. What was going through your mind at that moment?"

"Well, Munro is a dangerous batsman, and I knew we had to get him early to set the tone." I added with a chuckle, earning a laugh from the audience. "It felt incredible to see the stumps shatter and hear the crowd roar."

"One final question, Aarav. How do you see your future with Team India after such a phenomenal start?"

"I'm just taking it one step at a time. There's so much to learn and improve on, and I'm fortunate to have such experienced players around me to guide me. My aim is to keep working hard and contribute to more wins for India."

The interviewer nodded with a smile. "Well said, Aarav. Congratulations again, and we wish you the best for your future."

As I stepped off the podium, feeling a mix of relief and joy, I heard a familiar, playful voice call out behind me. "Hi, hello! Reporting live from Chahal TV! Aarav, please don't run away!"

I turned around to see Yuzvendra Chahal holding a mic—well, it was more like a spare bat wrapped in tape pretending to be a mic—and wearing an exaggerated journalist's expression.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Chahal began, addressing an imaginary camera, "this is Yuzvendra Chahal, your favorite reporter, and today we have the new star of Team India, the one and only Aarav! Aarav, tell us, how does it feel to break so many stumps and hearts today?"

I burst out laughing. "It feels great, Chahal bhai. But I think you've broken more hearts with your dance moves on the field."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," Chahal replied, pretending to flip imaginary long hair. "Now, the people want to know, what is the secret of your super-fast delivery! Is it a magical cricket ball? Or did you eat something special?"

"Well," I said, playing along, "it's all thanks to the secret training program. But don't tell anyone—I don't want the opposition to know!"

Chahal nodded sagely. "Very mysterious, Aarav. Lastly, how do you plan to celebrate this victory? Will you dance with me?"

"If you lead the way, I'll follow," I said, laughing.

Chahal pointed the bat-mic to the imaginary audience. "There you have it, folks! A true gentleman, a deadly cricketer, and a future dance partner. This is Yuzvendra Chahal signing off. Stay tuned for more exclusive interviews on Chahal TV!"

The entire team was in splits by the time Chahal was done, and it was moments like these that made all the hard work worthwhile. It was a day I would never forget—a day filled with pride, camaraderie, and pure joy.