

Cricket 96

Chapter 96

The energy at the Chepauk Stadium was electric. The sea of yellow roared as the players walked out onto the field. It was a much-awaited clash—Royal Challengers Bangalore versus Chennai Super Kings, and the entire cricketing world was glued to their screens.

The coin went up, and Virat Bhaiya, with his usual confident demeanor, called correctly. "We'll bat first," he announced to the match referee with a firm smile.

As we prepared to start the innings, Virat Bhaiya and Parthiv Patel walked to the center. Virat adjusted his gloves, his eyes scanning the field. Parthiv, short and stocky, chatted briefly with him before taking his stance. The crowd roared louder as Deepak Chahar marked his run-up.

The first over was cautious. Deepak swung the ball both ways, testing the batters. Virat, ever the perfectionist, nudged one to the leg side for a quick single. In the second over, he unleashed a straight drive that sent the ball screaming to the boundary. The RCB dugout erupted in applause.

"Classic Kohli," I muttered to myself, watching from the dressing room.

But then came the third over. Harbhajan Singh was handed the ball, and the crowd cheered loudly for the veteran spinner. He had been CSK's trump card on spin-friendly pitches like this one.

Virat faced him with determination. The first ball was a dot, the second pushed to mid-off. On the third ball, Harbhajan floated it slightly shorter, spinning it into Virat. Recognizing the length, Virat transferred his weight back and went for a fierce pull shot.

Time seemed to slow. The ball was struck well, but it didn't have the distance. Ravindra Jadeja at deep midwicket didn't move an inch. He steadied himself under the ball, calm as ever, and cupped it safely.

The crowd erupted. Chepauk was a volcano of yellow jerseys celebrating their hero Harbhajan.

"Sixteen for one," the commentator announced, his voice tinged with surprise. "And Harbhajan Singh has drawn first blood. The big fish, Virat Kohli, is gone!"

In the dugout, there was silence. Virat walked back slowly, visibly disappointed. His shoulders were slightly slumped, but as he crossed the boundary line, he straightened up, maintaining his usual poise.

I stood up and grabbed my bat. My heart was pounding in my chest. This was it—my second IPL season with being in main 11 from the start. I adjusted the MRF gloves, took a deep breath, and jogged out to the middle. The roar of the crowd was deafening, but I focused on the 22 yards ahead of me.

Parthiv walked up to me as I reached the crease. "Take your time, Aarav," he said, patting my back. "Play your natural game. No rush."

I nodded, then Parthiv scanned the field. Harbhajan had a sly smile on his face as he prepared to bowl the last ball of the over. Parthiv defended it confidently, ensuring there were no unnecessary risks.

The over ended, and from the other end came the man everyone feared in the death overs but this time he came in Powerplay—Dwayne Bravo. He marked his run-up with his usual swagger, the ball glinting in his hand under the floodlights.

I adjusted my helmet and took my stance. This was the moment I had been waiting for—a fresh start in the IPL.

The first ball was quick, a full delivery, which I blocked solidly. The second was a dot ball, and I could feel the pressure building.

Bravo ran in for the third delivery, and I could sense it would be short. My grip on the bat tightened as he released the ball. It rose sharply, aimed at my chest—a classic bouncer.

Time seemed to slow down as my body reacted instinctively. Flashback of my training and system reward for Pull shots kept revolving in my mind, how to keep the body position best for the perfect pull shot, I shifted my weight back, my eyes locked onto the ball. The roar of the crowd faded into the background, replaced by the sound of my heartbeat and the leather slicing through the air.

As the ball approached, I swiveled on my back foot, pulling it with all my power. The connection was perfect. The crack of the bat meeting the ball echoed through the stadium.

The ball soared into the night sky, clearing the deep square-leg boundary with ease. For a moment, there was stunned silence in the crowd, followed by a collective gasp and then thunderous applause.

The commentator's voice boomed:

"Yeh shandar pull shot dekhne layak hai! Ekdum aag hai iss ladke mein!"

("This spectacular pull shot is worth watching! This boy is absolute fire!")

"Itna confidence, itni shiddat! Aarav Pathak ne dikhaya apna dam IPL ke pehle hi match mein!"

("Such confidence, such determination! Aarav Sharma has shown his mettle in his very first IPL match!")

"Ye Aarav, yaha pe RCB ka Kaurav hai aur aane vale Bharat ka Gaurav hai!"

("Aarav, is RCB's Warrior and future India's Proud player!")

// ("You know who could say these lines")

The RCB dugout erupted in cheers. I could see Virat Bhaiya clapping vigorously, a proud smile on his face.

Parthiv walked over to me, grinning. "What a shot, Aarav! You've announced your arrival!"

I smiled, adjusting my helmet. The adrenaline coursing through me was like nothing I had ever felt before.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Bravo smirking, shaking his head. He clapped sarcastically and walked back to his mark.

The next few deliveries were tight, with Bravo varying his pace and length. I defended patiently, waiting for the loose ball.

As the innings progressed, Parthiv and I built a steady partnership. The crowd's energy kept us going, even as the spinners tightened their grip in the middle overs.

The roar of the crowd in Chepauk was deafening, almost as if the very air vibrated with the fervor of the fans. Chennai Super Kings, the yellow fortress, had been a nearly impenetrable stronghold for years, and it was no secret that any team coming to play here faced an uphill task. The combination of the scorching Chennai heat, the dusty pitch, and the phenomenal spin attack led by the likes of Ravindra Jadeja, Imran Tahir, and the ever-reliable Harbhajan Singh made it one of the most daunting places to play in the IPL.

But despite the odds stacked against them, RCB wasn't going to back down. The energy was palpable in the dressing room as the players suited up for the game.

In the tenth over of the innings, Harbhajan again came into bowl. Aarav, perhaps a little too eager, stepped down the wicket to sweep the ball but missed it. The ball, which didn't come on as expected, wasn't easy to sweep. He tried again in the same over, but this time, the ball hit the top edge.

Aarav's eyes widened in disbelief. He had been too early on the shot, not giving himself the time to adjust to the pitch's conditions. The ball flew high, almost like it was suspended in the humid air for a fraction of a second before falling towards midwicket. Jadeja was right there, positioned perfectly. Even though the ball was hit with little force, it was high enough that Jadeja had to move a few steps to his left and dive forward. His hands clasped around the ball with ease, and there was no doubt in his mind. He wasn't going to drop it.

The CSK crowd erupted as Jadeja completed the catch. It was the kind of moment that crushed the spirit of many a visiting player at Chepauk. But for RCB, this was just the beginning of the fight. Aarav Pathak was dismissed for a 44 runs, but his contribution had been valuable in getting the team off to a start in difficult conditions.

AB de Villiers, always calm under pressure, had steadied the ship. The South African was his usual self, elegant and powerful, managing to accumulate runs while the other batsmen fell. Alongside him, Parthiv Patel had played a handy knock of 28, but with both of them at the crease, the score still didn't look like enough to challenge CSK's formidable batting line-up.

By the time RCB reached 138 for 8 at the end of 20 overs, it was clear that they had fought valiantly but hadn't posted a score that would instill too much fear in the CSK dugout.

The team knew it was time for them to step up with the ball. The equation was simple: bowl tight, restrict boundaries, and most importantly, get quick wickets. And for RCB, it was crucial to make the most of the opportunity early on.

Virat Kohli, always one to lead from the front, had a quiet word with his bowlers. As the strategy was discussed, Aarav, now more focused than ever, prepared himself for the first over of the chase. He had taken his time to think about what had gone wrong with his dismissal and had learned from it. He wasn't going to let this chance slip away.

Aarav bowled the first over with precision, sticking to his line and length. The ball, for the most part, was controlled and did not give the CSK batsmen any chance to capitalize. The first over yielded only two runs, and the crowd's mood started to shift. The pressure of the chase was slowly creeping in on CSK. Aarav's confidence was evident in the way he held his composure under the intense scrutiny of Chepauk's crowd.

Tim Southee came in next, and it was his over that brought some relief for RCB. His first over was a six-run affair. Southee, with his experience, was bowling smartly, mixing in slower deliveries and Yorkers. With the batsmen still getting used to the pace of the wicket, it was clear that RCB was trying to take control of the game. But the real breakthrough came in the fourth over, when Aarav Pathak, after a of tidy bowling, found his moment.

Shane Watson, the seasoned Australian veteran, was at the crease. The weight of experience was supposed to help CSK get over the line. But Aarav wasn't going to let Watson take charge so easily. He had been watching Watson's every move, and he knew that if he could get him early, the game would open up for RCB.

Aarav bowled a perfect length delivery, just outside the off-stump, and Watson, looking to come down the track, misjudged the delivery. The ball, a bit shorter than he expected, cramped Watson for room. Trying to pull the ball to the on-side, Watson ended up misjudging the length, and the ball hit the edge of his bat before crashing into the stumps. Aarav's celebrations were intense but brief. It was a big wicket for RCB, and Watson, the lynchpin of CSK's middle order, was dismissed for just 15 runs.

The next few overs were hard-fought, but RCB kept their focus. Despite that, the challenge remained. Suresh Raina, always dangerous on his home ground, played a fantastic knock. He anchored the innings

with a brilliant 66 runs, mixing both aggression and caution. Raina was the key to CSK's chase, and RCB was desperate to get him out before he could take the game away from them.

But the partnership between Raina and Kedar Jadhav was strong, and the pair gradually inched CSK closer to the target. Despite RCB's efforts, the game seemed to be slipping away as the runs continued to flow, and the total was now within reach.

In the end, RCB gave their all, but the target of 138 proved just too small. CSK chased it down in 19.2 overs, finishing the match with 4 wickets in hand. The final blow came when Kedar Jadhav hit a boundary, sealing the game for CSK. Despite RCB's efforts, including the crucial wickets taken by Aarav, it was Raina and Jadhav who ultimately guided CSK to victory.

As the players from both teams shook hands, there was a sense of respect between the two sides. CSK had done what they do best—win at home. For RCB, it was a bitter defeat, but they knew they had fought hard. Aarav walked off the field, disappointed but with his head held high. He had given it his all, taking two key wickets, including that of Watson and Jadeja, but in the end, it was CSK's home advantage and experience that had won out.

The day was long, and the match had lived up to its billing. But for RCB, this defeat was a reminder of the ruthlessness of CSK at Chepauk. The challenge of playing here was something every team had to face, and on that day, it was CSK who had emerged victorious.