

Cricket 97

Chapter 97

The disappointment of the loss against Chennai Super Kings still lingered in our minds, but there was no time to dwell on it. The IPL was a long tournament, and one match didn't define our season. We had four days before our next game, this time at our home ground, the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bangalore. It was a much-needed break, but not one for relaxation—we had to put in the hard work if we wanted to bounce back.

While we were still processing the loss, a plane from South Africa was making its descent into Bangalore's Kempegowda International Airport. Inside it, a tall figure sat by the window, lost in thought. As soon as the plane landed, security personnel swiftly surrounded him, escorting him to a waiting black SUV. Without much delay, he was taken straight to the team hotel. His journey had been exhausting, and he knew the next day would be even more demanding. For now, rest was a priority.

For us, the night after the match was spent analyzing our mistakes. After a quick dinner, I sat with ABD and Virat bhaiya, watching the highlights of the game. "We were 20 runs short," Virat said, shaking his head. "On that pitch, if we had managed 160, we could've squeezed them."

ABD nodded, sipping on his protein shake. "The middle overs hurt us. We need to rotate the strike better. No more getting stuck against spin."

I listened intently. This was the mindset that separated great players from the rest. They didn't sulk after a loss—they analyzed, adapted, and improved.

The next morning, at precisely 11 AM, our team boarded the flight to Bangalore. The mood was a mix of determination and exhaustion. Some players dozed off, while others listened to music or watched movies on their tablets. I found myself staring out of the window, visualizing my performance in the next game. I wanted to make an impact—not just with the ball, but with the bat too.

Three hours later, we touched down in Bangalore. As we stepped out of the airport, a crowd of RCB fans had gathered to welcome us. Their energy was infectious. They chanted our names, waved banners, and cheered as we made our way to the team bus. Bangalore truly loved its cricket, and Chinnaswamy was our fortress.

Once we reached the hotel, we were given some time to rest. I took a quick shower, then headed to the lounge where some of the players were already gathered. "Snacks are here, boys!" Chahal announced, pointing at a table loaded with sandwiches, fruits, and protein bars.

"Don't finish everything before I get there," I joked, grabbing a plate.

As we ate, we chatted about everything from cricket to movies. It was moments like these that helped us bond as a team. Win or lose, we stuck together.

Just as we were getting comfortable, a message popped up in our team group chat.

"Meeting in the conference room in 10 minutes. Attendance mandatory."

We exchanged glances. A meeting right after arrival? That was unusual.

Curious, we all made our way to the team's meeting room. As we entered, we saw the coaching staff standing at the front, along with a tall figure in a black hoodie. The room fell silent. The hooded man turned around, revealing a familiar face.

ABD grinned. "Well, well, look who's back."

Dale Steyn.

The South African pace legend was finally here. He had just flown in from South Africa, and despite his tired eyes, there was an unmistakable fire in them.

Aarav [POV]

Dale. Freaking. Steyn.

I froze mid-step. My brain completely short-circuited.

"Guys," I whispered, my voice barely audible. "That's... that's Dale Steyn."

Nobody paid attention to me. I grabbed Chahal's arm and shook him. "Bro, do you understand who that is? That's Dale Steyn. The Phalaborwa Express. The man who made reverse swing an art. The guy who—"

Chahal smirked. "Haa haa, we know. Relax."

"Relax?" I nearly shouted, now getting everyone's attention. "How can I relax? This is Dale Steyn! I literally have watched every spell of his! Do you know what it feels like to watch your idol in front of you? This man—this absolute legend—has shattered stumps for fun! And now he's standing right there! How are you guys just standing normally?"

Everyone laughed. Even Virat bhaiya and ABD chuckled, clearly entertained by my fanboy moment. Meanwhile, I had completely lost control of my words.

"Sir—uh—Dale bhai—uh—Mr. Steyn—I mean—Sir, you don't understand how big of a fan I am! I have tried copying your bowling action in my backyard! I have analyzed your 2010 spell against India like it's a sacred text! You are—"

Steyn raised his hand, suppressing a grin. "Whoa, whoa, take a breath, mate."

I inhaled sharply and let out a nervous laugh. "Sorry, sorry. It's just... you're Dale Steyn. And I'm talking to Dale Steyn. This is the greatest moment of my life."

Everyone burst out laughing again, while I stood there, feeling like a schoolboy meeting his cricketing hero. Steyn stepped forward and patted my shoulder.

"Well, Aarav," he said, smiling, "if you've studied my spells so much, I expect you to knock some heads over in the IPL."

Virat then calmed Aarav and took control of the meeting.

Virat stood up, clapping his hands. "Boys, you all know who this is. We don't need introductions. But what I will say is this—when Dale Steyn is in your bowling attack, you walk taller. He brings aggression, experience, and a never-back-down attitude. And that's exactly what we need."

The room erupted in applause. Steyn smiled, rubbing his hands together. "It's good to be back," he said. "I've missed this. And I've missed terrorizing batsmen."

Laughter followed, but there was an underlying seriousness to his words. This wasn't just a warm welcome—it was a warning to the opposition.

Coach stepped forward. "Alright, we have four days before the next match. These aren't rest days. We'll be training hard because Chinnaswamy is different from Chepauk. The ball comes on better here, but the boundaries are shorter, which means bowling needs to be precise. We're going to have dedicated net sessions, fielding drills, and strategy meetings."

We all nodded.

The meeting continued for another half an hour, with the coaches discussing specific plans for the next game. Once it was over, we broke off into groups. Some players went to the gym, while others hit the pool to recover.

I decided to get some sleep because tomorrow, training was going to be intense.

And I wanted to be ready.

The past four days had been nothing short of brutal. Training sessions were intense, almost military-like, with Dale Steyn personally supervising the fast bowlers. His presence alone made us push beyond our limits. His words still echoed in my head:

"Fast bowling is an attitude. You don't just run in and bowl. You charge in like a predator, ready to destroy the prey."

It was thrilling. It was exhausting. And I loved every second of it.

Each day, we trained harder—working on our weaknesses, testing strategies, and preparing for the next battle. Our upcoming match against Mumbai Indians was going to be a war. MI was stacked with legends—Rohit Sharma, Yuvraj Singh, Bumrah, Hardik Pandya, Pollard. Defeating them wouldn't be easy, but we were ready.

As the four days came to an end, the evening of the match arrived.

Chinnaswamy Stadium was electrifying. The sea of red and blue filled the stands, fans screaming their lungs out. It was RCB's home ground, and we were playing for our people. The atmosphere alone could give anyone goosebumps.

The playing XI was announced.

"Virat Kohli (c),

Parthiv Patel,

Aarav Pathak

AB (WK)✈ ,

Klassen ✈ ,

Pawan Negi,

Washington Sundar,

Tim Southee↗□,

Yuzvendra Chahal,

Dale Steyn ↗□,

Mohammed Siraj"

MI won the toss and decided to bat first. No surprises there—they had a strong batting lineup, and they wanted to put up a massive score.

As we took the field, the adrenaline kicked in. The roar of the crowd, the floodlights illuminating the pitch, the smell of freshly cut grass—it was cricket at its finest.

First Innings: Mumbai Indians Batting

Rohit Sharma and Quinton de Kock walked in.

Virat Bhaiya tossed the ball to Dale. "Let's start with fire."

Dale smirked. "That's all I know."

First ball—absolute thunderbolt, 146 kmph. De Kock barely managed to defend it.

Second ball—another missile, outside off. This time, a thick edge, but it raced to the boundary.

Mumbai had a strong start, rotating strike well. Rohit, as always, looked in prime touch, driving and pulling with elegance.

Then, in the 4th over, I was called to bowl.

I took a deep breath, staring at the pitch. Time to strike.

First ball—back of a length, angling in. Rohit nudged it to square leg for a single.

I adjusted my field, focused on de Kock.

Next ball—short, rising awkwardly. He went for the pull but mistimed it completely! The ball ballooned up... and ABD dived forward at midwicket, hands stretched—GOT HIM!

First wicket down! The crowd exploded!

I clenched my fist, letting out a roar. This was just the start.

Rohit continued his innings, playing smart, calculated shots. Yuvraj Singh joined him, and the two legends built a solid partnership. Rohit's cover drives were a treat, while Yuvi's elegance made batting look effortless.

After a few tight overs, Virat handed the ball to Dale again. And the legend delivered.

A fiery in-swinging yorker. Boom. Rohit's stumps shattered.

Chinnaswamy erupted!

From there, we kept MI under control. I took one more wicket, dismissing Krunal Pandya with a sharp bouncer that he edged behind. Chahal spun his magic, taking two crucial wickets, and Siraj added one to his tally.

By the end of 20 overs, Mumbai Indians posted 187/8.

A challenging target, but not impossible.

Second Innings: RCB Batting

Virat Bhaiya and Parthiv Patel walked in to open.

The chase had to be steady, but we lost our first blow early.

Virat Bhaiya got run out at just 11 runs. A miscommunication while running between the wickets, and MI pounced. Silence in the stadium.

Parthiv Patel tried to steady the innings, hitting a few boundaries, but then... disaster struck again.

Boom. Stumps shattered.

Parthiv was bowled out on 19.

RCB was 34/2 in 5 overs.

Now, it was my turn.

I walked in, gripping my bat tightly. The weight of expectations settled in, but I blocked everything out.

ABD walked up to me at the non-striker's end. "Deep breaths, kid. Play your game."

I nodded.

The bowler, Lasith Malinga, marked his run-up.

First ball to me—short of a length, outside off.

I let it go. I needed to settle.

Next ball—slightly fuller. I stepped forward and nudged it for a single. First run on the board.

ABD, ever the genius, rotated the strike, easing the pressure.

Then came Jasprit Bumrah.

The challenge was real now.

His first ball to me—a sharp bouncer. I swayed back just in time.

The next ball—yorker, deadly accurate. I barely dug it out.

Pressure was mounting. I hadn't scored a boundary yet.

Then, a golden opportunity. A short ball. My eyes lit up.

I got into position and pulled—BANG!

The ball rocketed over midwicket and into the stands!

The crowd erupted!

The commentator's voice boomed, excited:

"Yeh sirf chhakka nahi tha, yeh toh elaan tha! Aarav Pathak keh raha hai, main yahan dominate karne aaya hoon!"

("This wasn't just a six, this was a declaration! Aarav Pathak is here to dominate!")

My heart pounded. The adrenaline, the roar of the stadium, the pure thrill of the moment—it was everything I had dreamed of.

ABD grinned from the other end. "That's more like it."

From there, we built a strong partnership.

ABD started playing his signature unorthodox shots, while I rotated strike, waiting for my chances. I focused on timing, placement, and keeping calm under pressure.

The runs started flowing. The required rate was under control.

As the innings progressed, I reached 42 runs before mistiming a sweep shot against Rahul Chahar.

A top edge. Krunal sprinted in, diving forward—caught.

I walked back, disappointed but proud. I had given my all.

ABD continued fighting, but despite our efforts, MI's bowlers tightened their grip. The chase slipped out of our hands.

In the end, we fell short.

MI won in 19.2 overs with 4 wickets in hand.

A bitter loss, but not the end.

As I sat in the dressing room, exhausted, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

I looked up—it was Dale Steyn.

"You played well today," he said. "But you're capable of much more. Don't settle for 'good.' Chase greatness."

I nodded. His words hit deep.

This was just the beginning. The tournament had only started. And I wasn't going to stop until I made history.