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Foreword

The term 'sport' stands for dedication, persistence, and most importantly – passion. It is this passion that inspires a person to persevere in the fruition of their dreams. A sport without passion is the same as a man without a heart. Cricket is one such sport with a legion of impassioned followers. The sport fires up the hearts of the young and the old cricketers alike, and inspires the spectators, who have honoured it with their devoted following. Cricket is the real Indian dream factory. Fortunes are made, stories are written.

One such story is that of Virat Kohli, the man who has become the throbbing heart of this longlived sport. He began swinging the bat at an early age, and rose through the ranks because of his zeal and unique style of playing the sport. His style, whether it pertains to batting or his personality, is much talked about. At the age of twenty-seven, he has already made a mark in sporting history and carved his name upon the minds of many cricket fans. His name is ubiquitous today, from the front page to the sports page at the end. Often portrayed as a youth icon, even the old legends of cricket see their young selves in him. This story is about Virat, the man of the moment. It seeks to present him from a fresh angle, combined with a rare ability for critical analysis.

There is a profound sense of surety in his work. He is aggressive and domineering on the field. I like this quality and the way in which he exhibits his talent. Few batsmen have been able to engage both the young and the old as this astonishingly committed cricketer.

From the moment he takes guard and gets into the business of scoring runs, Virat casts a spell on the audience. His opponents are also known to admire his remarkable ability in playing cricket the way it should be played. He bats on his terms and to me, that is the best feature of his game.

I have seen Virat grow as a cricketer. He possesses the confidence to craft his game under diverse conditions. He has been a brilliant student of the game, dedicated to giving his best and getting the best out of his team. The enthusiasm that he brings to the dressing room is infectious. Very few have the ability to stand out in a team game with such self-assurance and conviction as Virat. A leader with exceptional vision, he can withstand pressure and command the situation with a maturity that is rare.

His rise to the top job in Indian cricket has been well-deserved. The captaincy came with tremendous responsibility and added to his determination to be rated the best batsman in the world. Undoubtedly, Virat is one of the best batsmen in world cricket, given the consistency with which he has scored runs in all formats of the game.

Virat obviously had a great legacy to match up to, with illustrious performers like Sachin Tendulkar and M.S. Dhoni coming before him. However, it is fortuitous for Indian cricket that it has a champion like Virat to carry the team on his shoulders. These are testing times for Indian cricket, and I believe that the team, under Virat's captaincy, is poised to scale unmatched heights and rewrite the history of Indian cricket.

Cricketers have come and gone, but only a handful make their way into our hearts. They make you re-imagine the possibilities of the game and charm you with their astonishing abilities. It is left to us to wonder whether we enjoy only their presence, or see a legend in them, that will become indelibly etched in the history of the game. I can see Virat growing into a legend. He has the potential for becoming a benchmark for future cricketers.

Vijay Lokapally, an eminent cricket journalist and writer with *The Hindu*, has crafted this tale with his eye honed in the game of cricket over the years. I have always admired Lokapally's work, having known him for more than three decades. In my opinion, he is the right man to tell us the Virat story. Lokapally's credentials as a cricket writer are impeccable and few among the media know the game as well as he does. With an enviable experience of writing on all formats of the game and having toured all the cricketing nations, practically every ground, Lokapally's wealth of cricket wisdom is substantial. He brings to us a story that everyone has been waiting for. A superbly crafted narrative, this book will captivate the mind of the reader with its measured prose and attention to detail.

May 2016
Mumbai

Ravi Shastri

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A call from Gulu Ezekiel, the biggest fan of cricket on this planet and an author of many books on the game, put me on the job of writing the Virat Kohli story. A big thank you to him for getting me this opportunity.

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developing into a brilliant sports writer, easily the best I have seen in many years.

I owe a lot to India's best cricket writer R. Mohan. My old friends from the profession, G. Viswanath, Manoj Vatsyayana, Ashok Kumat, Debasish Dutta, Sumit Mukherjee, C. Rajshekhar Rao, V.V. Subrahmanyam, Sumit Ghosh and Jaydeep Basu have always encouraged me in my cricket journey.

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My wife Sunanda and son Akshay deserve the largest credit for this book. They ensured that I met the deadline and did my best to do justice to one of the finest ambassadors of the game in modern times.

Dear reader, over to you....

Vijay Lokapally

Introduction

We hardly saw him in Delhi. He was constantly engaged in outstation cricket matches. Then his appearances became few and far between once he announced his prowess at the national level. Virat Kohli is a talent that grew into a phenomenon, on the strength of his self-confidence that had one constant supporter – his coach Raj Kumar Sharma.

When Virat was making news in Delhi's local circuit, not much attention was paid to his exploits. I had known Raj Kumar from his playing days and it was through him that my interest in this lad grew. His big scores were a consistent part of the circuit that was hugely competitive, since Virat insisted on playing in the company of seniors.

'You have to see this boy,' Raj Kumar would plead. Of course, the junior cricket circuit was agog with raving talk that centred around this immensely gifted batsman. Gradually, Virat's ability to compile big scores with authority unfolded on the national circuit, and suddenly he was catapulted on to the national stage.

Raj Kumar's concern was what if he lost Virat to the sharks of the market. When India under-19 was playing a World Cup final in Colombo in 2006, the team hotel was besieged by agents waiting to sign up the players with prospective commercial value. Raj Kumar wanted to protect Virat from these market forces. Not that he doubted his pupil's commitment, but the boy was too young. Distractions were possible. To his delight, they did not exist in Virat's

dictionary. 'You will not get damaging reports about me,' Virat had assured his coach, and he stuck to his promise.

Delhi cricket has produced a stream of gifted players who found their way to the top through sheer hard work and persistence. Raman Lamba, Manoj Prabhakar, Ajay Sharma, Maninder Singh, Atul Wassan and K.P. Bhaskar, were among the early lot of youngsters who had secured their places in a dressing room full of achievers and stalwarts. Virender Sehwag later paved the way for even greater excellence and his contemporaries like Ashish Nehra, Vijay Dahiya, Mithun Manhas, Gautam Gambhir, Amit Bhandari and Rajat Bhatia did the state proud. They left a legacy for ambitious young guns like Shikhar Dhawan, Virat, Ishant Sharma and Unmukt Chand to follow.

That Virat was destined to serve Indian cricket was never doubted by his coach. However, I would be lying if I claimed to have foreseen Virat's growth. The enormity of his talent dawned gradually. It has been a pleasant experience to follow and report on his career, and my privilege to bring this story to you through the eyes and voices of some of his contemporaries and past masters of the game.

Sometimes, his aggression superseded his actual prowess in Delhi circles. I always thought these acts, especially the brazen show of temper, were not a true reflection of the Virat we had known. He was a compulsive competitor, who did not believe in conceding an inch. His dedication was unmatched – spending long hours in the nets under the scorching sun, only to hone a particular shot and work on his technique. He showed early promise that developed into a steely resolve to be the best.

Under the unsparing eye of his coach, Virat learnt to value his cricket. If there was a miniscule deviation from his dictated path, Virat was reprimanded, sometimes harshly with a 'square-cut' on his cheeks, by Raj Kumar. Virat began to look up to Raj Kumar after losing his father, Prem Kohli, at the age of eighteen. The senior Kohli had envisaged his son in India colours, and given Raj Kumar the

freedom and responsibility to nurture Virat, who was not even ten when he first walked in to the West Delhi Cricket Academy, with dreams of playing world class cricket.

I have had the privilege of interacting with cricketers from all walks of life – local, domestic and international – and Virat has come across as a determined young man, a consummate batsman of rare elegance, who strove to make his point with the assurance of a champion. He was a champion in his own way. He matched Sehwag in confidence, and never crossed the line, preferring to observe and learn from a distance rather than appear intrusive.

I have seen very few cricketers with the attitude that Virat brings to his cricket. He would not take things lying down – case in point, his verbal spat with Gautam Gambhir during an IPL match. However, he would also never lose an opportunity to show his admiration. Despite his so-called brash behaviour, a confidence boosting trick, I can vouch for Virat's reverence of senior cricketers. His respect for his seniors, his coach, or his family, forms a distinguishing feature of Virat's personality. He was never seen sprawled on the couch in the dressing room whether the seniors were present or not.

Virat does not suffer fools gladly. Even Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, a player's captain, refused to suffer fools. As captain, Virat has given ample indications of his talent to emerge as one of the greats. He is accommodating, always receptive to suggestions, loves a battle, and takes the onus to excel on himself. There are few like him in contemporary cricket, who put the team first. For those who chided him for being aggressive and demonstrative, his rise in world cricket is a resounding rebuttal. His exuberant celebration after every feat on the field is just a reminder to them that he is here to stay.

He has a wide range of interests, reading does not find a place unfortunately, but he is a powerful brand ambassador of modern cricket. He epitomises the significance of hard work and the benefits of fitness. His diet chart and a punishing fitness schedule are the secrets to his awesome stature in world cricket.

Virat may have seldom played Ranji matches for Delhi, but his heart beats for his state teammates. At every possible opportunity, when visiting home for a short break, you can find him rushing to the Ferozeshah Kotla and cheering his team from the dressing room balcony. He *cannot* stay away from the Kotla if he is in town and Delhi is playing. He never tires of reminding himself the role Delhi cricket had played in shaping his career. He would love to show his gratitude, but for a busy international schedule that takes him away from domestic cricket.

I have seen enormous changes in Virat in the last few years in terms of his attitude towards the game. He has a vision for Indian cricket. He is focused on serving the game in the same spirit that was characteristic of some of the greats in cricket. He worships cricket and the past masters, making every effort to understand its history and give it the exalted position it deserves. Cricket has come a long way from the times of Sunil Gavaskar and Bishan Singh Bedi, when a draw was as good as a victory. Virat symbolises the modern cricketer, a man resolved to win and entertain his audience. He is an icon for a new brand of cricket, positive and intense.

There are few players who are as involved in the game as Virat. His friends say that his energy to assimilate information is boundless. He wants to know everything about everything, and can be found engaged in unending conversations on cars, new business opportunities and discussions on the market.

His passion to acquire knowledge on recent cricketing trends keeps him busy on off days during tours, while his discipline to stay fit is unwavering. Nothing can shake his resolve. Not even his love for samosas and pakoras (deeply fried snacks). He was known to drink Coke all day. Now, he has gladly sacrificed all of that. He eats almonds and grams to maintain a healthy balance in eating, not to forget his fondness for salmon and couscous.

I am not surprised when his contemporaries insist he is 'very respectful' of old relationships. He does not have the airs of a

superstar when he runs into cricketers from his junior days. His attention to detail is amazing. We met once after he had returned from a visit to a Nike factory overseas, and he presented a vivid picture of every aspect related to sports equipment manufacturing. He could have set up a venture of his own, based on the information he had managed to gather and imbibe during his short trip.

How Virat has worked on his game is a grand narrative of its own, which he may love to write one day. He is a constantly evolving individual – from an enfant terrible to an enviable role model and a brand ambassador, inspiring the young and the old alike. There were some unfortunate incidents involving him on and off the field, but he was quick to make up and move on. The responsibility of captaincy has worked wonders for him, as he now comes across as a mature leader.

Virat has given us a whole new perspective on batting. He is a technician's marvel and a purist's delight. He can play with fluency in a Twenty20 match, get to a century without hitting a six, play proper cricket shots, and incredibly, as we saw in the 2016 IPL, achieve such a stupendous feat despite an injury in one hand. He batted with multiple stitches on his split left webbing to hit a hundred in a must-win situation against Kings XI Punjab. The stadium, including the opposition, gave him a standing ovation.

His popularity with the youth is unmatched. After Tendulkar, he has emerged as the greatest hit, even with those who do not follow cricket closely. He brings crowds to the Test venues, with children as his most vociferous supporters. He is equally courteous to those younger than him, as well as those much older than him. In the crowd of some cocky and vainglorious dreamers in Indian cricket, Virat stands out as a glowing and unpretentious exception, his batting achievements a testimony to his steadfastness to serve the game with dignity.

He is an ideal player for this generation, cheerful and producing result-oriented cricket. He is also a player for history, having planted

the saplings of success that will determine the future of world cricket. Test matches look like they are going to become a thing of the past, but Virat has emerged the possible saviour, an athlete proficient in sprints and also in clearing the obstacles with a gutsy approach. He has a long way to go but knows his course very well, precise and detailed. Virat, with his captivating presence on the cricket field, is a work in progress, and as the recent tour of the West Indies has shown, it is rapid progress, too. Virat the batsman and Virat the captain were on top of their games, the batsman's maiden Test double-ton setting up the captain's third successive Test series victory. Two of them have come overseas, in Sri Lanka last year as India won a series there for the first time since 1993, and now, when India have won more than one Test in a series in the Caribbean for the first time ever. For someone who places great emphasis on individual and team performances away from home, these results would have given Virat great joy, but he will not be satisfied because his pursuit of excellence is relentless.

Let us cherish his gifts to the game of cricket, the classics that he has invented at the crease with the firm assurance of rewriting every feat in the annals of the game. Hail King Virat!!

Prologue

His batting is a masterclass in the art of making runs. He was born to entertain, inspired by a maestro who lit up the world of cricket with his astonishing deeds. Sachin Tendulkar was the god of cricket, worshipped by his fans for enhancing India's image in a game that is a national obsession. Virat Kohli arrived to carry the legacy forward in his inimitable style. Tendulkar was a cricketer's cricketer. So is Virat, a phenomenon who has created a legion of frenzied followers in all formats of the game.

Some of Virat's innings have been hailed as masterpieces. Cricket has not seen a flawless batsman. Not even Don Bradman. Critics always point out the only other country he played in outside Australia was England. We don't know how he would have fared on the tricky spinner-friendly and low-bounce pitches of the sub-continent. He may well have succeeded for his technique was so water-tight, but we can never be sure. Bradman, however, is universally acknowledged as the best batsman ever – tackling the seam and swing in England and the bounce in Australia.

Virat, on his only tour of England in 2014, was a miserable performer, unable to come to terms with the bowlers who snared him on and outside off stump. An abysmal aggregate of 134 runs in ten innings was a sharp contrast to his 992 runs in sixteen visits to the crease in Australia. It set to rest all arguments on his position in the team. He was not short on technique or temperament. Form had deserted him in England. All batsmen, at some stage, suffer from poor form and loss of confidence. To Virat's benefit the phase came

early in his career and provided a realistic assessment of his abilities. That he recovered quickly speaks of his potential.

The Delhi boy engaged the attention of the cricket world right from his junior days when he smashed big scores, including double centuries, even before turning nineteen. Coaches were astounded by the punch that he packed into his strokes, mostly on the on-side before transforming into a delightful merchant of off-side shots. He did play across the line often, but he connected the ball firmly in its path and scored runs in abundance to quell any discussion on his technique. As he developed into a compact batsman, Virat's strokeplay assumed a touch of class.

Contemporary international cricket is embellished with sound batsmen like Virat, Joe Root of England, Kane Williamson of New Zealand and South African marvel AB de Villiers. The Virat-de Villiers show in the 2016 Indian Premier League (IPL) was a sight for the cricket gods and a veritable package of batting entertainment. This august foursome has endeavoured to ensure a pristine quality in batting, with Virat leading the pack in his domineering style.

Technique has been of paramount importance in shaping Virat's batting approach. His ability to innovate brings in an element of challenge that keeps his focus in place. It is his focus and tenacity that matter most to Virat. He is game for a battle at all times – ever keen to assume every possible responsibility on the field. The flexibility factor is not an ornamental quality. He often translates it into a compelling performance that can swing a contest on its head. Virat just loves it.

The twirl of the bat that marks his arrival at the crease suggests the man is in a hurry. His gait is rapid and confident – not the swagger of Viv Richards or a pensive amble to the middle of Sunil Gavaskar. They were contrasting images from the past of established masters in their field. Richards was destructive and Gavaskar a firm believer in grinding the opposition session by

session. Tendulkar was a combination of both. Virat promises to go beyond with his overwhelming drive to be the best in business.

Virat's strokeplay is stunning. The cover drive is his forte now. Try telling this to those who watched Virat bat in his influential years when he was a compulsive on-side player. He still enjoys the flick and the on-drive, but his strokes to the off have come to assume a majestic touch. The cover drive, whether struck on the rise or inside-out, is a last-moment alteration of his judgement. He selfadmittedly loves playing the shot with a flourish and finish that coaches would vouch for as the ideal – right out of the manual. AB de Villiers is a master of this shot, killing the good ball with disdain, and Virat is not far from attaining that standard – picking the length of the ball in a flash and uncorking shots that leave the opposition in a daze.

Virat did not have to be pushed at the training sessions. He would come to the nets with a plan and achieve his short-term goals only to translate them into huge feats during the season. The spark that he showed as a junior has only glowed brightly with time. 'Who would have believed Virat to have travelled this far. He was talented but he has surpassed all expectations. I have been pleasantly surprised,' exclaimed former India speedster Atul Wassan, the man chiefly responsible for drafting Virat into the Delhi team for the Ranji Trophy in 2006. Virat has since figured in just twenty-three first-class matches for Delhi because of his international engagements. Delhi has certainly missed him even as the Indian national team gained from his presence.

Virat began with the image of a flamboyant youngster, now and then coming up with an ostentatious performance, but committed to improving with every step. Little adjustments by Raj Kumar in technique and admonitions when he strayed, ensured he stayed on course. 'I concentrated on keeping the distractions away,' insisted Raj Kumar when reflecting on his pupil's formative years on the dusty cricket fields of Delhi. His student was seen as boorish by the cricket fraternity, but he was a misunderstood young man. Virat was

competitive and sometimes crossed the line but there was nothing to stop his rise – from a bubbly youngster to a tattoo-brandishing icon of India's youth. Chants of 'Viraaat, Viraaat' came to replace 'Sachin, Sachin' as Indian cricket underwent a remarkable transformation since the departure of stalwarts like Tendulkar, Sehwag, Rahul Dravid and V.V.S. Laxman.

Virat is the newly-crowned king of Indian cricket. The excitement that marked the arrival of Yuvraj Singh, and the likes of Suresh Raina and Rohit Sharma, has been overtaken by this champion of all formats, putting enormous pressure on him. The expectations when he takes guard often reach the sky because his fans expect the world of him. He knows it and responds by raising the bar every time he serves the team and self. There was a brief phase when he went haywire but hauled himself back into contention. His coach took him into confidence and cautioned him severely to mend his ways and mind his place in Indian cricket. His second coming was an eventful journey since he grasped the lessons from close quarters even as the dressing room lost some of the finest names to have served India.

The stigma of being casual gave way to a man committed to firm up his game. Gifted players like Maninder Singh, Sadanand Viswanath, L. Sivaramakrishnan are prime examples of young talent not living up to their promise and potential. Viswanath's playing career was over at 28 years of age in 1990, two years after he last played an ODI. Maninder quit at 28 too, a year after he played a Test against Zimbabwe at Delhi in 1993. Sivaramakrishnan, who beguiled the best batsmen in business with ridiculous ease, continued till 34, seven years after his last appearance for India. 'They were the most talented cricketers I have known and the biggest under-achievers too,' lamented Kapil Dev, one of the game's greatest all-rounders.

Virat, nearing 28, is steadfastly moving towards attaining an iconic status in world cricket. Past masters have lavished rich encomiums on his fascinating batting and leadership. The bad boy

image lies buried under the newly-found persona of possibly the best ambassador for the game. He was described as a cocky youngster, but not anymore. Virat is a mature cricketer with the right balance of aggression. True, he has indulged in some unsavoury episodes, with a fellow cricketer and a journalist, but has quickly learnt the lessons to move on to confirm the impression his coach insists – he is not artificial. He is not the one to allow anyone to take liberties with him.

If Shivaji Park in Mumbai produced some gritty cricketers, the West Delhi culture, with a relentless fight for space and recognition, has contributed towards moulding Virat into a tough individual. The hardships of his early life, the chaos in the bylanes of most of West Delhi, where you get nothing on a platter, meant that Virat was always in battle-gear, waiting to swing his kit over his shoulders and report for the match, riding on a rare confidence that no one can stifle his ambitions. He believed in being combative and has not changed a bit even when competing at the highest level.

Virat hates comparisons. It appears to him as a needless indulgence by the experts and the media to project him as superior and different. That Virat is different is known from his deeds. From the spectacular manner in which he asserts his domain in Tests and other forms of the game is proof of his vast progress. He triggers debates on his stature and it would be a folly to call him a complete player. He knows it too. The critics have the right to delay bestowing that crown on him because he needs to perform in England, play the seam and swing with the same alacrity and perfection he brings to his game when shining on the bouncy pitches of Australia and South Africa. It is apparent that he is very good when the bowlers hit the deck.

What strikes one the most is the way Virat paces his innings. He has learnt to alter his game when the ball swings, stops or seams. He is willing to play the waiting game, allow the ball to hit the bat, instead of going after it. Mohinder Amarnath was a master at leaving the ball. He could do it the whole day. But cricket has changed and

batsmen are now appreciated more if they play their shots. A ball should not pass unpunished unless it deserved the respect to be left alone. Virat is adept at altering the direction of the shot at the last moment. He can drive along the ground past cover or smack it inside-out over the fielder. He can also play the straight drive or a cover drive off the same length with a minute shift in footwork and wrists, the grip allowing him to generate that power. Countless times he has played a cover drive or a flick-drive to mid-wicket off the same length. It makes him special indeed.

Modern players have come to laud his aggressive mindset in Tests too, where he is looking to score with authority in front and square of the wicket than nudge the ball behind the stumps. His defence is as compact as that of Root and Williamson, but he scores above them when he falls back on his attacking instincts. He is always pumped up on the field, a deliberate ploy to bring the best from within himself. Off the field, he is calm and an obedient member of the family, absorbing the demands of one and all with a smile.

Virat takes great care to maintain his fitness and of course his body strength that comes from a strict regimen of exercises and diet control. His strength is evident in his shots. He possesses Tendulkar's balance at the crease, holding the bat with a lower grip like the master. Tendulkar's defence was better and Virat has toiled to reach that standard, looking to play with soft hands when confronted with a short ball to see it drop dead at his feet and blunting the spin with superb footwork. He is, however, different from Tendulkar when expressing his freedom of strokeplay. Virat has no fear of failure that sometimes bogged Tendulkar only because of the pressure the nation created.

When Tendulkar or Sehwag got out, the spectators would depart too. Virat does not command that coveted position yet. The contest, however, intensifies or dies depending on Virat's show with the bat. He is working towards attaining his peak as India's Test captain. The chorus to give him the job in the shorter formats too is growing. It is a

matter of time when he finds himself saddled with the colossal demands of a cricketmad nation. The only concern is Virat is yet to face poor time – a bad patch that tests an individual's resilience. Given his ability to adapt and innovate, his cricket may not encounter a dark period in a long time. Indian cricket needs a prosperous and vibrant Virat Kohli.

1



The Early Years

Other than playing an aggressive game, the common thread that runs among Sehwag, Gambhir, Ashish Nehra, Dhawan, Ishant and Virat is that all of them hail from West Delhi, an area in the national capital where the struggle for space and recognition is that much more intense. Lack of opportunities means youngsters have to jostle for a spot in the state squads that sets off a race, which often produces champions. Raman Lamba was a firm believer of this theory. Lamba introduced a trend that has given Delhi cricket a steady stream of international cricketers, with Virat being the most recent example.

The credit for putting Delhi on the national cricket map should go to Bishan Singh Bedi. He led a bunch of ambitious and talented cricketers, namely, Mohinder Amarnath, Madan Lal, Surender Khanna, Kirti Azad to challenge the hegemony of Bombay cricket.

Speaking of West Delhi boys, Sehwag, hailing from a middle-class background, was a role model for youngsters from economically disadvantaged sections who dreamed of making it big. His success story was the outcome of a fierce fight for recognition of his talents. He had little financial support or institutional aid to bank upon, other than the unstinting support from his family. Travelling three hours for a five-minute stint in the 'nets' steeled Sehwag's determination to be counted among cricket's best. When offered a

chance to demonstrate his skills in a match, Sehwag left his mark with a brand of cricket that set him apart. His sole aim was to destroy the attack and more often than not, he succeeded in leaving the bowlers embarrassed.

For most youngsters who were inspired by Sehwag, it did not matter if they lacked the best quality equipment. Their sole wish was a level playing field and when they got one, they delivered the goods. Gambhir was an exception, since his businessman-father could offer the necessary facilities at his disposal. Wassan, supported by a financially sound family, went to Sonnet Club, which was a trusted nursery for spotting and grooming talent among the non-elite in Delhi. However, he was part of a generation of middle-class cricketers – neither pampered nor falling short of going the long distance.

Sonnet Club, under the astute guidance of coach Tarak Sinha, encouraged competition at the club level. It nurtured a series of cricketers who went on to represent the state, as well as the country. When Wassan quit playing, he helped his club mate and a wily off-spinner, Raj Kumar, set up a coaching clinic. They aptly named it West Delhi Cricket Academy (WDCA). It was a happy coincidence that nine-year-old Virat, accompanied by his father Prem, walked up to Raj Kumar on a warm afternoon to learn proper cricket. Eight years later, as chairman of the Delhi senior selection committee, Wassan was to pick the boy for his first Ranji Trophy match in a hotly contested meeting.

May 30, 1998. This was Virat's first day at the WDCA. Prem Kohli was a lawyer, favourably disposed towards his younger son wanting to pursue cricket as a career. Although no one in the family had envisaged a future related to cricket for Virat, there was no doubt that the lad had set his heart on chasing his passion with due diligence. It was the year when Tendulkar played some of his best cricket. His impressive batting against Australia in Sharjah, during the Coca Cola Cup, had helped him amass a legion of fans for the

maestro-in-making, and Virat was one of them. Sachin was the reason why Sehwag played cricket. Sachin would also be the reason why Virat took to the game.

Less than a month after Sachin's exploits in Sharjah, the coaches at the WDCA welcomed this chubby boy. 'He was like most other boys; restless, enthusiastic, keen to get a stint in the nets. We really hadn't seen anything extraordinary,' recounted Raj Kumar. However, things changed dramatically in a couple of weeks. A few incidents that took place left a favourable impression on the coach. Gradually, he began to discover that Virat was a cut above the rest. What made him realise Virat's potential?

It was a throw. 'I remember vividly. He produced a throw that made heads turn. He was just nine, but the accuracy and power in that throw gave an indication that he had one quality – the feel for the game – and we lost no time in concentrating on Virat,' recalled Raj Kumar. His assistant, Suresh Batra was also stunned by the boy's powerful return from the boundary that had speed like a bullet into the wicketkeeper's gloves.

Within ten days of reporting at the WDCA, Virat was drafted into the playing XI for an under-14 match at the Springdales School. His coaches were astonished by a six flicked to midwicket, which confirmed Virat's remarkable talent. 'We were playing against Playmakers Academy, and it was a matting pitch. This boy casually picked the ball off his legs, and sent it soaring over midwicket. For someone who was not even ten, it was a tremendous shot to play,' said Batra. That match convinced Raj Kumar and Batra that this was a naturally gifted youngster waiting to be honed properly.

Sachin had also demonstrated such phenomenal talent when he had gone through the grind at Shivaji Park in Mumbai, under the direction of Ramakant Achrekar. Among the first to arrive for nets day after day, Sachin would be the last to leave the training ground in Dadar, a largely middle-class locality in India's commercial capital.

Sachin had to fight for a place – on the bus, aboard the local train, in a coaching clinic, and the local league.

So did Virat, born on 5 November 1988, to Saroj and Prem Kohli. The Delhi boy's challenge was to retain his focus and not to lose heart due to the nepotism and favouritism prevalent in junior cricket selections. He was almost close to being lost to the world of cricket because of the shenanigans of the Delhi and District Cricket Association (DDCA). The DDCA, firmly ensconced at the Ferozeshah Kotla, is notorious for its ways of functioning.

Unable to make an under-14 selection, which Virat missed for non-cricketing reasons, further fuelled his ambitions. Virat was anxious to make his mark as a player at the junior level. The selection would have been Virat's first step to achieving his goal, the first step towards playing representative cricket, and to take stock of opportunities for playing at big venues. He was relentless in the pursuit of his goal. No news had come of the team selection. In fact, the meeting at the DDCA seemed to have been highly contentious. It was well past midnight when the team was finalised for a match to be played the following day. Batra's phone rang at two in the morning. His heart missed a beat. A phone call at that late hour would obviously cause concern. Virat was on the other end, wanting to know his fate. The boy had missed the boat, not because of a lack of merit but for considerations other than cricket.

It took tremendous effort on the part of the coaches to console and convince Virat that all was not lost. His father was anxious. There had been offers made to him to move Virat to an influential club in order to ensure his selection. But Prem Kohli was confident that his son would overcome the appalling system rife with nepotism. Eventually, Virat would find his path just like a river that carves its route around obstacles. For how long could the DDCA have kept him down? Finally, Virat forced his way into the under-15 team the following season.

At the WDCA, Virat was easily the best talent on display by a long shot. 'He oozed talent. It was so difficult to keep him quiet. He was a natural in whatever he did and I was most impressed with his attitude. He was ready to bat at any spot, and I had to literally push him home after the training sessions. He just wouldn't leave,' remembered Raj Kumar, his mentor and guide. There was not a moment when Virat would sit idle. 'He had a bat or a ball in his hand at all times, and never wasted his time with the rest. I don't remember Virat coming to the nets late. He would report even when he was indisposed. It was impossible to keep him away from the academy,' added Raj Kumar.

Of course, there were plenty of occasions when he was admonished by the coaches. A few times, he received resounding reminders on his cheeks to drive home the importance of preserving his wicket. Virat, like a faithful pupil, absorbed those moments as part of his learning process. He never repeated a mistake.

It may surprise his fans today but Virat, according to his coaches, was a shy and unassuming student at the WDCA. 'He never raised his voice at any fellow trainee and his eyes only reflected reverence and obeisance,' said Batra. What separated Virat from the rest was his keenness to imbibe the lessons offered to him. 'He was inquisitive. It was not easy to convince him because he had so many questions and supplementary queries. Sometimes I would just fold my hands and ask him to spare me his unending quest for cricket knowledge. His grasping power was beyond his age,' revealed Raj Kumar.

His attentive nature at the WDCA worked well for Virat. He was amazingly focussed. 'We started the academy at the Xavier Convent and moved to St. Sophia's School (in Paschim Vihar). His father was the driving force behind Virat's obsession with cricket, but elder brother Vikas and sister Bhavna also played their part in supporting the naughty youngster's journey to wearing the India cap. He was

initially making steady progress, and then outstripped the others by a long margin,' said Raj Kumar.

One under-15 match in a local tournament remains unforgettable for Batra. It was held at Picnic Hut, in the Ashok Vihar area of North Delhi. Virat was twelve years old. The lad stunned his coaches and the opposition with a sparkling century. 'It was sparkling because the opponents saw stars during the day. He played some outstanding shots, the power and timing belonging to a higher class. We were convinced that day that this boy was going to make an impact in the world of cricket. Everyone present at the ground left in a trance after the Virat show,' said Batra.

Virat would not miss a match. His father drove him to far-flung venues on his two-wheeler and made sure the zeal to play cricket never ebbed. Virat was a diamond in the rough only for a short period of time. As he learned his lessons fast and integrated them into his game, Virat grew into an effective batsman. Sometimes, he surprised observers with his excellent combination of timing and power. His range of shots was developed on the strength of his strong self-belief. He played the pull and the drive with rare flourish, and came to be respected by the bowlers in the local circuit.

Raj Kumar did not have to worry about the abilities of Virat. 'He was fearless. He trained hard at the nets and took on the senior bowlers like a veteran.' At the first opportunity, Virat would look to pull the ball. There was fire in his stroke play. Training on matting pitches ensured he was quick to respond to the bounce and tame the ball with a rock-steady defence, or smash it with disdain. His shot selection was developed on the basis of his long nets sessions at the WDCA.

Virat's footwork was limited in the initial stages. With success in junior cricket, it improved to an extent where he began playing the cover-drive with a long stride. Even Sachin's stride, when playing the cover-drive, was short. But Virat loved to drive the ball, and the flick was a stroke he had mastered at a young age. He would whip the

ball with tremendous power that came from his wrists, along with a sensational timing of the ball. The square cut, Raj Kumar revealed, was not one of Virat's assets, but he added it to his repertoire late in the junior grade. His balance at the crease was undoubtedly an added quality that enhanced the calibre of his batting even as an under-15 cricketer.

Fitness was an uncompromising part of Virat's training schedule. If he was required to give up some delicacies, so be it. Virat was unsparing when it came to following a strict diet, and worked hard on his endurance and stamina. This ultimately helped him become the splendid runner between the wickets that he is today. The foundation was already strong for Virat to build on his cricket dreams. He had nursed a secret desire to go in for tennis, but cricket was the way forward because Raj Kumar kept him under a tight leash.

2



Making a Mark in Junior Cricket

Having missed the selection the first time, Virat worked furiously to force his way into the side. He was the most talked about young talent in Delhi, but the state selectors were not convinced. They were not sure if he was ready for stiffer challenges at the zonal level. However, nothing could have been more preposterous. The mandarins at the Ferozeshah Kotla took time to discover Virat's potential. Once his coach managed to swing their opinion, thanks to his dogged persistence, there was no stopping Virat as he prepared himself to chase his dreams.

His journey began in 2002 at the modest Luhn Cricket Ground, in Bilaspur district of Himachal Pradesh, with a Polly Umrigar Trophy match against the host. He batted fifty-nine balls and scored fifteen runs. He was obviously disappointed. Delhi umpire Devendra Sharma officiated in that game, with R.P. Singh, and had fond memories to share. 'I can recall a few rousing drives that he played on the on-side. He was the most enthusiastic player among both the teams, and there was a touch of brilliance in what he did at the crease. Even the style with which he asked for the guard displayed maturity. In later years, I saw him grow, and I must say he has learned his lessons well. I don't remember much about others, but I

can recall that he was the most busy and involved player on the field. It was a matting pitch amidst lovely environs. He got a few balls on the pad, but it was understandable. He appeared confident though.'

No wonder, Virat was the only one from that under-15 match to go on to play first-class cricket.

Sharma had many opportunities in later years of officiating in matches featuring Virat. 'His batting improved at a rapid pace. He added power to his shots, and some of the shots that he played at that age took one's breath away. His behaviour on and off the field was exemplary. I was once standing in a trial match, and I remember Virat walking up to me with a request. He sought my permission to leave the field because he had some pressing function at home. Honestly, he did not need the umpire's permission because it was just a friendly match. But it reflected his cricket grooming. Credit goes to his coaches.'

Virat's next outing was a precursor to his match temperament. The Palam ground in Delhi was the venue, and Virat, barely fourteen years old, found himself as the target of a boisterous Punjab bunch that had done its homework. 'We knew he was the guy to go after. We had heard about his ability to bat long, and the idea was to put him under pressure the moment he came to bat,' remembered Siddhartha Sharma, now a cricket scribe for a national newspaper and an avid follower of Virat's progress.

Any other youngster would have been rattled by the verbal assault from the Punjab close-in fielders, not Virat. 'He appeared to be the least perturbed. We realised soon that we could not break this boy. He was just going to cement his position to bat for longer. I remember his on-side play was top class, and he showed no signs of gifting his wicket to us under pressure. He had looked like a player of limited abilities, but his progress since then has been phenomenal,' noted Siddhartha. Virat batted 194 balls for his 41 before offering a catch at gully off seamer Bharat Lumba. When the teams met next,

in the Vijay Merchant Trophy at the same ground in November 2004, Lumba slammed a century batting at number nine.

Virat's first half-century in a national competition came at the Ferozeshah Kotla, when he cracked a 70 against Haryana in the next Umrigar Trophy match. One of his teammates was Ruushill Bhaskar, whose father – K.P. Bhaskar – was a stylish first-class batsman for Delhi. Virat ended his first season for Delhi under-15 on a disappointing note with scores of 37 and seven against Jammu and Kashmir. 'He had learned the lesson of putting a value on his wicket, and had promised to improve,' said Raj Kumar.

The 2003-04 season opened on a bright note for Virat. He was appointed the under-15 captain. He celebrated the occasion with a knock of 54, as Delhi scored an innings win over Himachal Pradesh. Ruushill too had a fruitful outing, as he responded with an innings of 70. Ruushill felt confident with someone like Virat as captain. It was clear that captaincy, even at that young age, was bringing out the best in Virat. The next match, against Jammu and Kashmir, earned him his maiden first-class century in a BCCI-conducted tournament. His 119 formed the basis of another innings victory. Arun Bhardwaj, a respected umpire and coach with the Sports Authority of India, was a prime-seat witness to that innings. 'I always look for technique when analysing a youngster and Virat gave me little reason to complain. He built his innings superbly and I came back home wondering if I had seen a future India batsman. If memory serves me right, there was hardly an appeal made against him. I had been told about this lad by some local umpires, and I saw him in action first-hand that day,' said Bhardwaj, the umpire of that match along with Rajan Seth, who also endorsed his partner's views. 'He looked like a special talent,' added Seth.

The match against Punjab in Patiala was much-awaited. This was the most fiercely contested fight in the north, much like the Bombay-Maharashtra rivalry in the west, Bengal-Bihar battles in the east, and the Tamil Nadu-Karnataka fixtures in the south. For Delhi, losing to

Punjab was unpardonable – even at the under-15 level. It was the last year in under-15s for Virat and Ruushill. Having excelled against Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir, it was natural for Virat to be charged up to take on Punjab. Punjab won the toss and posted a total tally of 399. For Virat, it was a challenge that would prove to be a test for his leadership. However, failure came his way. He was out for five and sank into his seat in the dressing room. Tears flowed down his chubby cheeks, as he refused to reconcile himself to the fact that he had failed when it would have mattered the most to succeed. ‘It showed how much he valued his wicket, and self-pride drove him to shoulder the blame. It was rare for Virat not to perform. And here, he just wouldn’t spare himself for not dominating Punjab,’ said Ruushill.

The process of evolving into a tactical competitor had already begun, as Virat produced one more century – 117 against Haryana at the Tau Devi Lal Stadium in Gurgaon. He followed it up with a 95 in the second innings in a drawn match. For Kamal Juneja, former Uttar Pradesh batsman and a first-class umpire, it was a revelation that he recalled with pride. ‘I had seen Virat at the Cambridge School (Rajouri Garden) where I was the coach. He would come with Raj Kumar and his coach would not stop raving about this boy from Paschim Vihar. Virat was a compulsive on-side player, and I vividly remember having him trapped at midwicket by one of my club’s best bowlers. The next time, however, he came prepared, and made a mockery of our plans. Talking about that knock at Tau Devi Lal stadium, I must say he was so fluent, so sure, and so positive. He wanted to win and that was the thing I remember most about him,’ said the 66-year-old Juneja.

Virat learnt a harsh lesson in cricket etiquette on a visit to Patiala during his first year in the under-17 league. It would prove to be a crucial phase in Virat’s journey of evolving into a batsman to watch out for. Raj Kumar had put in a polite word to Chaudhary to look after his ward. The two coaches had played together and there was little

for Virat to worry. He was not the captain, but he backed himself to find his way in the junior league. He was already a star, having performed in the under-15 league the preceding year. However, the star was soon brought down to earth by Chaudhary.

‘On the eve of the match before the practice, I noticed Virat relaxing on the field, arms crossed behind his head and lying on his back, surveying the others. He was behaving like a star. I announced the squad of twelve and did not name him in the list. Obviously, he was shocked. In the evening, I got a call from Raj Kumar. He sounded worried because Virat had informed him about not getting selected. I assured Raj Kumar that this was just to send the boy a strong message. I felt for Virat because we all knew his immense potential, and I was just making sure he realized his talent and responsibility. I told him you have been rested because you want to relax on the field. I picked him for the XI next morning, but he did not fare well in that match,’ Chaudhary said. Virat scored 18 and 21, as Delhi followed-on and scraped through to avoid defeat. Virat was determined to come back stronger in the next match after this poor show.

In fact, Virat arrived with this knock – a 420-ball essay worth an unbeaten 251 – at the Indira Gandhi Stadium in Una. Himachal Pradesh had compiled 366, and Delhi was two wickets down for zero. Chaudhary was worried about the possibility of Delhi conceding the first innings lead, but Virat walked up to him and calmed down the coach. ‘He said he would get us the lead. I was impressed with his confidence, and all of us settled down to watch a fantastic exhibition of controlled aggression. He displayed a wide range of shots, and especially won our hearts when he jumped out to the bowlers and hit them through cover. He played like a leader, and gave a glimpse of his temperament by playing his shots along the ground. He was hardly tired in that double century show,’ Chaudhary said in praise of Virat’s performance on the field.

Looking back, Bhardwaj's assessment of that knock was, 'Virat was composed throughout the match, and this was a sign of a fine batsman in the making. He was rarely perturbed in the innings that I saw from up close, and I was most impressed with his phenomenal match temperament. When Raj Kumar first brought him to me, I had said he would certainly play first-class cricket and the rest depended on his application. Virat had this ability to assert himself, the hunger to score, and the desire to succeed. I could see he was not going to compromise on hard work, and it was evident during that innings at Una. He used to be an introvert, but it was his bat that spoke for him. His tenacity was visible in his beautifully constructed double century. Seeing his game-sense, I was convinced I had made a wrong assessment of the lad previously. He was going to play more than just the Ranji Trophy, and I am so happy to note that I have been proved correct the second time.'

Virat did not fire in the next match against Haryana, but a 179 against Jammu and Kashmir at the Harbax Singh Stadium in Delhi was further proof of his brilliant form. The season had ended on a rousing note for Virat. He eagerly awaited his promotion to the under-19 league. He was rewarded the next year with a match against Haryana, in the under-19 one-day league. Hence, it was time to sing his swan song for the under-17 league before moving on.

He began with a bang – 227 against Punjab. 'A pity I was not there to watch him destroy the Punjab attack. I could visualise his radiant face on making such a strong statement after burying the opposition,' said Ruushill, who had now shifted his allegiance to Haryana. Virat's modest scores against Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Haryana, earned him a reprimand from his coaches. However, it was clear that he had reserved his best for the knockout stage.

Uttar Pradesh was given the stick at Eden Gardens when Virat crafted 120 off 291 balls against an incisive attack, which included Bhuvneshwar Kumar, who would become his trusted colleague in the

India team many years on. Bhuvneshwar accounted for six Delhi batsmen, but his effort came to nought against a determined Virat. The quarter-final victory pitted Delhi against Baroda, and gave Virat an opportunity to come up with a little gem of batsmanship on demand.

Baroda played to its strength of batting and challenged Delhi with a total of 332. It was a decent score on the Eden pitch. Chaudhary spoke to Virat, who was not the captain yet more than the captain. The team looked up to him. He promised the coach he would finish the job. And finish it he did in style – a 324-ball knock of 228. The Baroda bowlers did not get the slimmest chance, and Delhi was on its way to the final against Mumbai, to be played at the Jadavpur University ground. Virat contributed a first-innings half-century, as Delhi emerged champion with a five-wicket victory. The Delhi dressing room acknowledged Virat's consistent performances in shaping the title-triumph as his association with under-17 cricket came to an end on a glorious note.

It is during this phase that Virat earned a nickname – *Chikoo* (sapodilla). Why would anyone be called a *Chikoo*? Especially Virat of all people, a furiously competitive youngster, rarely sweet to his opponents and not at all soft as the fruit he was named after. Virat was one of the toughest individuals in the team and did not believe in conceding an inch.

Here's the story behind the strange nickname. The Delhi team was playing a Ranji Trophy match in Mumbai. Virat had not even played a total of ten first-class matches. He was part of a set-up that included players he had looked up to – Sehwag, Gambhir, Bhatia and Manhas. He was more than happy to be sharing the dressing room with them.

One evening, he returned to the hotel with his hair nicely cropped. He had spotted a fancy hair salon close by and given himself a new look. 'How is it?' he asked excitedly, as he ran into a couple of

younger colleagues. 'Not bad, you look like a *Chikoo*,' joked Ajit Chowdhary, the assistant coach, watching him from a distance.

The name stuck. *Chikoo*. His friends in the team called him *Chikoo*. Virat did not mind at all. 'He was still trying to find his feet in the big world of the domestic cricket circuit. He liked it when he got attention. I have not known a more competitive youngster. He was just hungry for more – runs and attention,' said Chowdhary, perhaps the only person other than Raj Kumar to have admonished Virat.

The world of under-19 cricket beckoned Virat. He was just a step away from a slot in the national team. The responsibility of captaining the India under-19 team, for the World Cup at Kuala Lumpur, was just the shot that he had needed.

In a development that boosted the image of Indian cricket, Ajitesh Argal was declared the Man of the Match at the Kinrara Academy Oval, Kuala Lumpur, as India won the ICC Under-19 World Cup. Argal bowled medium-pace and hailed from Baroda. It was a warm hug from skipper Virat Kohli that made his day, as his teammates cheered for him.

Virat, his goal clearly established, was destined to play in the big league and set new benchmarks. On the other hand, Argal got to play a sum total of ten first-class matches in the next seven years. The difference between their career charts highlights the precocious talent that Virat possessed, when compared to some of his contemporaries in that age group.

India had first won the under-19 world title in 2000, under Mohammad Kaif's captaincy. Maintaining an unbeaten record in the tournament, India had tamed host Sri Lanka in the final, with Yuvraj Singh crowned the Player of the Series. Graeme Smith (South Africa), Michael Clarke (Australia), Mitchell Johnson (Australia), Shane Watson (Australia) and Brendon McCullum (New Zealand), were some of the players who figured in this tournament and went on to make a mark in world cricket in the coming years.

In 2006, India, comprising Rohit Sharma, Ravindra Jadeja and Cheteshwar Pujara among others, made it to the final, again in Sri Lanka, but lost to Pakistan. David Warner (Australia) and Sunil Narine (West Indies) made their mark in the tournament. India won the next two editions in 2008 and 2012, the last one under Unmukt Chand, who struck an unbeaten 111 in the final against Australia. India's consistency saw the team make it to the 2016 final in Dhaka, but West Indies had the last laugh.

Even as the Indian juniors were winning the final in Kuala Lumpur, the senior team, led by M.S. Dhoni, drew motivation from the up and coming players and clinched the Commonwealth Bank Series in Australia two days after Virat lifted the Cup. A thrilled Virat dedicated the win to his late father. He told the AFP, 'He always wanted me to do something big for India, and I am sure this would have made him proud.'

At the end of the final, Virat shared the triumph with the rest of the team. 'It was a great effort by the whole team. I would particularly like to thank our coach (Dav Whatmore), who has been a great support system for us and taught us to believe in ourselves. I feel absolutely wonderful, I am happy, and I do not have words, we believed in ourselves and played as a unit. Marvellous effort by South Africa, a dream final, and thank you team South Africa.'

Virat's elevation as captain of the under-19 was the culmination of a process that had been set into motion by his coach. The target was to make an impact through the ranks, and reap the most from the junior circuit where a youngster learns his lessons the hard way. Failures are fraught with the danger of losing one's place, and comebacks become tough in the face of intense competition. Virat had concentrated on building on his good form, and made the most of it to cushion his bad patches.

Ahead of leaving for Kuala Lumpur, Virat promised himself the title and gave Raj Kumar reason to look forward to his ward returning with the trophy. Once the team secured its place in the final, Virat

requested Raj Kumar to fly down to Kuala Lumpur. The coach understood the significance of Virat's plea and rushed to the Malaysian capital. His presence meant the world to Virat. 'It was a big event and he needed my support. I just told him a few positive things,' said Raj Kumar.

Virat was confidence personified at the junior World Cup. In a promotional ICC video, he gave ample indications of his self-belief. 'I am Virat Kohli, right-hand middle-order batsman and right-arm quick bowler. My favourite cricketer is Herchelle Gibbs.' His choice of Gibbs was bewildering since Gibbs had done little of note to command such compliments. In the three years from 2005, Gibbs had had only one Test century to his name. Yet he was Virat's 'favourite' cricketer. But what his coach loved the most was Virat describing himself as a 'quick bowler'. Virat had hardly ever bowled with the new ball and shown any interest to become a fast bowler. But then it was impossible to keep Virat away from action and this was one such example of the captain assuming the role with such confidence. The same Virat bowled off-spin at the 2016 T20 World Cup and even got a wicket off the first ball.

There was an interesting first-ball reward involving Virat in 2011 and Abhishek Mukherjee ably described it on Cricketcountry.com. England, chasing 170 to win in a T20 match at Old Trafford, 'raced to fifty-eight for one in six overs when Munaf Patel struck: Craig Kieswetter hit the slower ball straight to Suresh Raina at cover. Eoin Morgan and Kevin Pietersen saw off the rest of the over quietly; England needed 110 from 78 balls when Dhoni threw the ball to Virat—perhaps the most famous of cricketers who had modelled his action on Chris Harris (well, at least it looked like it). Virat had not bowled before. He did not bowl a proper delivery first up, either. It was a wide down leg. Was it intentional? One could never tell. Whatever it was, it had found Pietersen outside the crease, and Dhoni, despite having a terrible summer behind the stumps until then, whipped the bails off in a flash. Kohli had started his Twenty20

International bowling career with a wide. His career figures read 0.0-0-0-1 at this stage.'

The Kuala Lumpur triumph was built on a strong sense of self-belief among the players. The eleven who figured in the final, went on to play first-class cricket – Taruvar Kohli, Shreevats Goswami, Virat, Tanmay Srivastava, Saurabh Tiwary, Manish Pandey, Ravindra Jadeja, Iqbal Abdullah, Pradeep Sangwan, Siddharth Kaul and Argal.

The final at Kuala Lumpur was interrupted by rain, and the Duckworth-Lewis rule was brought into play which saw India win by 12 runs. India lost five of the six tosses, but not the drive to win. As Kaul recalled, 'Virat was astonishingly aggressive and focussed. He hated losing. He simply talked about winning the final, and sometimes it would lead me to wonder if there was anything other than cricket that engaged his attention. Believe me, some of his planning looked so mature that we would be worried thinking about how to meet his demands. But he was so understanding and brilliant when it came to backing his players. He does not lose his cool if a bowler goes for runs at crucial stages. I have gained a lot from his encouragement. He was a perfect captain to have at that formative stage of my career, and most of the people in the team believed he was set to achieve a lot at the senior level.' The team did perform in the way that Virat had asked them to do, 'Let us play as a nation. Play the best game of your life.'

India won its matches against Papua New Guinea, South Africa, West Indies, England and New Zealand, on route to claiming the title. A century against the West Indies – 100 off 74 balls – brought him accolades. His aggregate for the tournament was 235, but it was his captaincy that caught the attention of most. 'I would treasure my hundred against the West Indies,' he was to comment later. However, one of the highlights of his stay at Kaula Lumpur was a visit to an orphanage that underlined the compassion he had for the under-privileged. 'At all such events there should be such outings

with children. It gives happiness to the children. We enjoyed playing with them.' Virat in the years to come would associate himself with such heart-warming ventures, sometimes as part of the senior team.

It was a wonderful culmination for Virat who had played twenty-eight under-19 ODIs and twelve under-19 Tests from 2006 to 2008. These competitions helped him become well-prepared for the senior league, and gave him an insight into the playing conditions overseas. He was rarely troubled by poor form in junior cricket. Virat has always acknowledged the well-planned tours that the Indian Board had chalked out for the young cricketers.

Virat and his boys were accorded a heroes' welcome on their return. A chartered flight brought the team to Bangalore where an open bus parade greeted the players. Among those who received the team was Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) president, Sharad Pawar, who had taken a personal interest in organising the arrangements, as well as in announcing a purse of fifteen lakh rupees to each member of the team.

Virat made a huge impression with his short speech at the function organised by the Karnataka State Cricket Association. 'We had faith in ourselves in lifting the cup. We have played as a team.' The most memorable words for the young India team came from former India captain Rahul Dravid. He called it a 'phenomenal achievement' and went on to glorify their performance. 'What you give us is hope. We can believe that the future of Indian cricket is bright, and I hope that you'll be part of a World Cup win someday. That should really be your goal and inspiration. I just want you to remember that of the boys who won the U-19 World Cup in 2000, only one member (Yuvraj Singh) was part of the (CB Series) winning team in Brisbane. It's something for you to think about. I played for the U-19s in 1991, and was the only one in my team to go on to play for India. This is the start of a critical phase in your lives. What you do from here on is what matters.' Dravid must have been pleased

that Tiwary, Pandey and Jadeja did wear the India colours, while Sangwan and Kaul came close too.

The under-19 experience went a long way in constructing Virat's overall development as a cricketer. He remembered what Raj Kumar had drilled into his mind, 'Treat every match as the career-deciding match.' For Virat, playing cricket was his first priority in life. From the moment he rose from his bed, to the time he returned to it, cricket was the only driving force. On the ground, he would not spend one idle moment. Once he took over as captain, he motivated the rest of his team, especially the aggressive brand of players. Virat had always believed that playing cricket on the offensive was the way forward.

At seventeen, he was touring Pakistan and grasping the importance of consistency. Scores of 63 and 28 gave him joy, as India beat Pakistan by 271 runs at Rawalpindi. India also won the next match by an innings and 240 runs, as Virat came up with a strokeful 83 in that victory. India went on to win the ODI series with Virat cracking a moraleboosting 80 in the last encounter at Lahore.

Tours to Malaysia, Sri Lanka, England, New Zealand and Australia, provided Virat the opportunity to test his potential on a variety of pitches. A tri-series in Malaysia in 2007 did not quite give him a stage to perform. He could only bat once in five matches, and score a single run against England, but he absorbed a lot. A century on the 2007 tour in New Zealand saw him grow enormously during the course of a knock of 113 at Lincoln. India drew the Test series 1-1. Within a month, Virat accompanied the under-19 team to Sri Lanka where he experienced moderate success. He participated in a tri-series in the island nation five months later, but went without a fifty in five matches. He came back strongly in the bilateral series against Sri Lanka, with scores off 144 at Colombo and 94 not out at Kandy. He had finally begun to enjoy his ability to bat for longer.

His contemporaries remember Virat constantly engaged in learning his lessons and making mental notes. He backed himself to

dominate and dominate he did. He was a player on a mission, a junior cricketer with a rare understanding of the game. He was always a step ahead of the rest because he took his cricket seriously. Most of his questions revolved around how the seniors approached the game, how they prepared, how much they practiced, and dealt with failures. Virat always had a complete roster of questions and would not be satisfied until he was given the right answers. Then again there would always be more questions the next day.

It was a critical phase in his career. He had to excel in his last year in the under-19 squad, even though he had already made his first-class debut and left an impact with that knock against Karnataka at Kotla. The national junior selectors had marked him for bigger roles and their only concern was his aggressive behaviour on the field. Often, it was seen that Virat would seek to confront the opposition, not always winning the battle. However, his involvement in the game was complete and that is what set him apart. He wanted to compete and win. As Kaul had remarked, 'Virat hated losing.'

The 2008 Emerging Players Tournament in Australia gave Virat's campaign a much-needed impetus. He was now under the scrutiny of the national selectors, entrusted with the task of selecting batsmen with the potential to graduate to the senior rank. Along with Virat, those who found favour with the selectors were Dhawan, S. Badrinath, Manoj Tiwary and Abhishek Nayar, considered as the strongest contenders for the team colours.

South Africa, New Zealand and Australia, completed the line-up for the tournament. New Zealand Emerging Players won the final against the Australian Institute of Sports in Brisbane by three wickets. Virat's best had come against the Kiwis when he hit an unbeaten 120 as an opener in the seven-wicket victory. David Warner of Australia (371 runs) and Dhawan (334 runs) topped the batting charts, with Virat at the ninth spot with an aggregate of 204 runs.

Virat was now ready to step into the big league and the opportunity came soon when he boarded the flight to Colombo with the senior Indian team for a five-match ODI series. It was the beginning of his tryst with world class cricket.

3



Boy to Man

There was turmoil in Delhi cricket. Some seniors were in the firing line of the state selectors as quite a few youngsters were waiting to break into the squad. There was discontent among the seniors. They felt their services to the team were being undermined, but the selectors insisted they had a job at hand – to give Delhi cricket a push in the right direction. The last Ranji Trophy title had come home in 1992, when Delhi dashed Tamil Nadu's dreams in the final at the Ferozeshah Kotla. The pressure was on the seniors and the message was loud and clear – perform or make way for the youngsters.

Vijay Dahiya, a Test wicketkeeper and a stalwart in the dressing room, was given a tough choice – announce retirement or face the axe. He chose to leave on his own terms, paving the way for Punit Bisht to assume the wicketkeeper's role. 'It is always better to go out on a high. I don't wish to block a youngster's way and it is the best time to leave. I don't want to be unfair to Punit. He must get the backing to settle into his job,' Dahiya had said. Dahiya's debut had come against Punjab in 1993-94. He had been a member of the North Zone teams, which won the Duleep and Deodhar Trophy in 1999-2000. He had played in two Tests and nineteen ODIs.

This was not the best time for Virat to take the plunge into first-class cricket, but it was hardly his call. He had made enough waves

to earn a place in the state senior team, and was keen to take the first step towards his ultimate goal of turning out in the India colours. Virat was over the moon when he was asked to report for the nets. It was in preparation for the Ranji Trophy season's opening league match against Tamil Nadu at the Kotla. There was another debutant in that game – fast bowler Ishant – who was destined to play international cricket alongside Virat.

Virat's first-class debut (23-26 November 2006) went unnoticed. On a placid pitch, M. Vijay, also playing his first first-class match, and S. Badrinath, his India mates in later years, helped Tamil Nadu make 347, which Delhi overhauled with ease through the centuries from Rajat Bhatia, Dahiya and Dhawan. Virat was caught behind for ten by Vikram Mani off Yo Mahesh. Interestingly, Mani made 52, in spite of a broken finger. However, Mani, in a bizarre case of Indian cricket's selection inconsistencies, never played again and is now reportedly settled in Auroville Ashram.

Yo Mahesh recalls the dismissal vividly. He will always be known as the bowler to take Virat's wicket for the first time in first-class cricket. 'It was a ball that straightened after pitching and took the edge,' said Mahesh. 'I had bowled to him a lot in junior cricket, in the nets, and always found him to be an aggressive batsman. He had a wide range of strokes even in junior cricket and his self-belief was amazing. He would announce and go out and win the match single-handed. I am not surprised to see Virat grow in stature and become the most feared batsman in world cricket.'

The next game, against Uttar Pradesh, saw Virat fall eight short of a half-century. Nevertheless, he made an impression. 'I remember his footwork. There was a certainty in his movements at the crease, and I liked his urgency to dominate. He played his shots and played them fearlessly,' said Rizwan Shamshad, a reputed batsman on the domestic circuit and a key member of the Uttar Pradesh team. Virat was now feeling comfortable with his cricket, and was happy to be a

part of the Delhi dressing room. His dreams were slowly becoming a reality.

It helped when Delhi played its third match too at Kotla. Ishant grabbed the limelight with his maiden five-wicket haul as Delhi rocked Baroda, with Mayank Tehlan shining with the bat. Tehlan had started his cricket career with a debut score of 176 against Maharashtra in December 2005, slamming 200 in his seventh first-class match. However, he failed to live up to his promise, while Virat, whose contribution was a modest 21 in that match, learnt a few important lessons that resulted in Delhi soon getting a young batting powerhouse.

Virat was on the edge now. Three matches had passed without a fifty to his name. His coaches counselled him rigorously. On his own, the boy had made up his mind to cement his place during his next visit to the crease. The opponent was formidable – former Ranji Trophy champion Karnataka. But Virat was prepared. The first day was spent on the field as Karnataka piled up 299 for three with Robin Uthappa cracking an unbeaten 161. Uthappa failed to add to his score the next day, but Karnataka took a firm grip by posting 446. They reduced Delhi to 103 for five, with Virat (40) and Bisht (28) occupying the crease, both raw to the challenge. Virat went home tired. His world would change that night as Prem Kohli passed away due to a cerebral attack on 19 December 2006.

His father was no more and Virat was inconsolable. His mentor, guide, and friend, was gone. From now on, he would have to continue on a solitary fight – take on the harsh world where talent was seldom the password for success. Not that Virat was dependent on extraneous factors, but he was rudderless on that dark night at home. The sombre atmosphere in the house prepared him to be more responsible and disciplined in his quest for cricketing glory.

He waited for dawn. It was winter and the wait stretched to a point where he became distressed. His family was concerned. The teenager needed a distraction to overcome the grief. The family

resolved that he had to resume his innings. Virat took the decisive step when he called Raj Kumar. The coach was in Sydney with the WDCA team, and was distraught upon hearing the sad development in Virat's life. 'I remembered his father bringing him to me with a request: I am leaving him in your care and you will be a coach and father figure for my son. I was speechless when Virat asked for my advice that early morning,' said Raj Kumar.

Given the precarious situation in which Delhi found itself, 103 for five, Virat was presented with a challenge that would test his mettle. 'I discussed the team's situation and promised to call him back,' recounted Raj Kumar. It was a tough decision to make, but Raj Kumar was firm. He knew what Virat had to do. 'Go and bat. The team needs you,' Raj Kumar advised the grieving Virat.

For Virat, it was a way of paying tribute to his father who had always supported his ambitions to be a cricketer. The sportsman within gave Virat the courage to face this irreparable personal tragedy, and he was off to the Ferozeshah Kotla to continue with his knock that had halted with the day's play at 40.

Mithun Manhas was leading Delhi, and had become reconciled to the fact that the first innings lead was hard to achieve. 'I normally reach Kotla at 7.45 but I don't know why I was at the stadium gate fifteen minutes earlier than my routine. When I reached the dressing room, I saw Virat sitting (on the bench in the corridor) and holding his head. I was worried,' remembered Manhas.

'What's wrong, *beta*?' asked Manhas. 'I lost my father,' the youngster mumbled.

'I was shocked and honestly did not know how to react,' Manhas recalled. 'This was a situation I had not experienced. There were just the two of us in that corridor, and I looked around for a while to see if I could get someone to help comfort the boy. There was no one.'

Manhas asked Virat to go home, but the latter responded promptly, 'I want to play.' The Delhi captain asked, 'Why? Why do you want to play?'

‘Sir, the atmosphere at home is heart-breaking. My family and coach also want me to continue with my innings. They have sent me to play,’ Virat told him in a matter-of-fact manner. ‘I was stunned by the boy’s dedication even in this hour of grief,’ said Manhas.

The dressing rooms soon filled up and routine preparations for the day’s play began. Word had spread about the tragedy that would irrevocably alter Virat’s life. The umpires – P.S. Godbole and M.S.S. Ranawat – took their positions, but not before they had learnt of Virat’s personal loss. ‘Chetan Chauhan (Delhi coach) had told us about Virat having lost his father. I felt for the boy and admired his commitment. Delhi was in a difficult position and here was a youngster trying his best to save his side from embarrassment. I knew it was love for cricket that had brought him to the ground. He looked so normal. There were no signs of pressure or grief. I was overwhelmed with emotion when he took the strike. As umpires, we were a bit disturbed, but his attitude to his job was praiseworthy,’ said Godbole.

Virat’s overnight partner, Bisht, was inspired by his teammate’s dedication. ‘I was also in my debut season just as Virat, but believe me he looked far more mature. I was speechless when we walked out to bat. Normally, we would have chatted, but this was a very difficult time. He was like a zombie for the initial period. His face was expressionless, and I felt sorry to see a lively character like him look so sad. I did not know how to react and took the best route – bat with him as if nothing had happened.’

A partnership developed. Outside the field, Chauhan simply marvelled at Virat. ‘I knew he was immensely gifted and progressing well from the junior ranks, but this side of his personality made me admire him even more. He showed tremendous grit coming to Kotla hours after losing his father. I offered him the option to return home, but he was adamant. I realised that day that this love for the game was going to take him far.’

Tears welled up in Virat's eyes as he went about his job of demolishing the opposition. Bisht was in superb touch at the other end and the runs came fluently. There were admirers of Virat's discipline in the Karnataka camp as well. For coach Venkatesh Prasad, this was exemplary dedication. 'I can only bless him,' he said and put his hand on the young fellow's head. The Karnataka players visited the Delhi dressing room at tea break and offered their condolences. They had never known a player overcoming such monumental grief at home, in order to bring joy to his teammates on the cricket field.

Reflecting on that day, Prasad could not stop talking about what he had discovered at the Kotla. 'I saw a gem of a sportsman. I had been informed at the ground about his father's demise and felt for Virat. But I was shocked when I saw him padded up and ready to bat. I couldn't believe my eyes. His approach was fantastic. It was incredible for a young man, who had just lost his father, to come and take charge. The way he applied himself to the job was outstanding,' recalled Prasad.

For the former India seamer, it was the second time he was watching a teammate return to the cricket field from his father's funeral. In 1999, a certain Sachin Tendulkar had shown similar commitment at the World Cup in England. 'It was a very emotional moment. We were not even aware that Sachin had flown back home for the funeral. The team as a whole was shattered. Our warm-up before the Zimbabwe match was lifeless,' said Prasad. India's performance against Zimbabwe was lifeless too, as it suffered a loss that shocked its fans. Tendulkar joined the team for the next match against Kenya and came up with a century in Bristol, as a fitting tribute to his late father.

At the Kotla, Virat radiated such confidence at the crease that Bisht was inspired to give his best. 'We did not speak much. In fact, he was lost, and I felt very sad for him. I remember after he played a shot, and I walked up to check if he was doing okay. I mumbled

something and just admired him from my end, watching him grow as a cricketer. I had heard a lot about him and was now seeing him up close. His eagerness to make runs was evident from his big scores in junior cricket and here he was demonstrating his art. He was quiet for most of the innings, sticking to normal cricket. There was not one moment when he was hustled into playing a ball,' said Bisht, who made 156, but failed to clinch the first-innings lead for Delhi.

The century was waiting to happen for Virat when he was adjudged caught behind, off B. Akhil, ten runs short of the target. He stood at the crease for a moment, and then began his long walk to the pavilion. He was hurt. Karnataka players should have called him back for he had not touched the ball. Virat had been crestfallen due to the two incidents that had caused him such grief – his father's death and a poor decision. He had already wept at home and now he broke down in the dressing room.

He left the Kotla for the crematorium, even as his team battled Karnataka. For Bisht, it was a day of mixed feelings due to the joy of his maiden century, and the pain of Virat's personal loss. In the evening, as he reflected on the day, his phone rang. 'Congrats for the century,' said the voice on the other end. Bisht was overwhelmed. It was Virat. He had not forgotten to keep track of the match even in his hour of grief. Three days later, Virat travelled with the team to Rajkot to play Saurashtra. He made four and 35 in Delhi's innings defeat. The Ranji Trophy season was over for Virat and Delhi, but he had taken firm steps towards an eventful journey. The boy had grown into a man on that fateful day at the Kotla.

4



The Teachers' Day Gift

September 5 is celebrated as Teachers' Day in India to mark the birthday of Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, former President of India, and a renowned philosopher and statesman. The *gurushishya* (master-pupil) tradition is an ancient one in India and still practised in some corners of the country. For Raj Kumar, his understanding of the importance of Teachers' Day had always come from his son Aviral and daughter Suhani narrating their experiences from the events at school. Until one morning in 2014, the Teachers' Day became unforgettable for Raj Kumar, thanks to someone very dear to him.

'I answered the bell and found Vikas (Kohli) at the door,' said Raj Kumar. Raj Kumar knew that Virat was away in the United States for a photo shoot with a sponsor. Hence, his brother's arrival at his house so early in the day was cause for concern. Vikas too had nurtured cricketing dreams, but could not proceed beyond club cricket. 'I made no distinction between the brothers but Virat was miles ahead,' said Raj Kumar.

Vikas stepped into the house, dialled a number and handed his cell phone to Raj Kumar. 'Happy Teachers' Day Sir,' said Virat, even as Vikas thrust something into Raj Kumar's palm – a bunch of keys. Raj Kumar stood perplexed as Vikas requested him to step out of the