

house. A gleaming Skoda Rapid was parked at the gate – a gift from Virat to his mentor.

‘The gift was great but I was floored by the style and the execution. Look at his sentiments. It was this gesture that convinced me of Virat’s humility and respect for seniors. It was not merely because he had gifted me the car. It was because of his emotional touch to the process of reminding me how much he treasured our association, and valued the role of a teacher in his life.’

Virat had played the caring pupil to perfection. Quite the way Nehra had with his coach, Tarak Sinha, gifting him a flat. One fine day, Nehra found Sinha missing from the nets at the Sonnet Club and was told that his coach, residing in a rented house, had been served an eviction notice by the landlord. Disturbed by the development, Nehra, within a week, found a new flat and ensured that his coach never had to face the embarrassment of being asked to shift by some landlord.

Virat had also followed in the footsteps of his role model, Tendulkar. The maestro had taken care of his coach, Ramakant Achrekar, by assiduously looking after his needs. Other than gifting him a car, Tendulkar had always been at his *guru*’s side in times of distress. Virat’s gesture towards his coach comes in the line of that long tradition of respect and love between the *guru* and *shishya*.

Raj Kumar and Virat have cherished their partnership from the time the boy had come to the coach’s academy. ‘I always had to keep an eye on him because he would quietly walk into the seniors’ group and I had to scold him every time he did that. I was worried for Virat since he was not even ten, but the boy had the courage and willpower to compete with players much older than him.’

Virat insisted that he wanted to train with the senior boys. ‘I can do better than them,’ he would tell his coach, which he did. He did not merely stop at improving his batting by scoring runs by the tons. He developed his skills in every aspect of the game. He just wanted to be involved all the time. It was difficult to keep him away from

action. He wanted to bat, bowl, and field in all possible positions. 'I was accused of being partial and promoting Virat, but believe me I only had to sit back and watch his progress and prove many people wrong. He was intent on making his point without causing any unpleasantness. I can vouch for his integrity and the respect he showed to the seniors at the WDCA,' said Raj Kumar.

Raj Kumar vividly remembers the day he saw this chubby lad holding on to the hands of his father. It was the opening day of the registration at the WDCA. He was among the hundreds of youngsters waiting to be admitted. Raj Kumar divided them into two groups – juniors and seniors. Virat was hardly nine and nonchalantly walked towards the group of seniors. 'Hello, hello', Raj Kumar remembers shouting. 'Go there', he guided Virat to the junior group. 'Such was his self-belief that on the first day of the camp he wanted to train with the seniors.'

Raj Kumar discovered quickly that he had exceptional talent in this little champ. One day, Virat walked up to him with a complaint, 'I want to train with the seniors. These junior chaps cannot get me out.' To check whether his anxiety was misplaced, Raj Kumar asked him to pad up for a session with the seniors. 'Believe me,' the coach raved, 'Not even once did he look out of place. He was a picture of confidence and poise among them.'

Virat was adept at accepting challenges. Raj Kumar, in his playing days, was equally competitive, always striving for opportunities to break a partnership, and keen to bowl at batsmen well-set in the game. When Muttiah Muralitharan was in his first season, Raj Kumar, also an off-spinner, was finishing his career with Delhi. The two were yet to meet but Muralitharan would have been delighted to see Raj Kumar bowl the 'doosra' with a flourish. 'My elbow did not exceed the 15-degree bend,' Raj Kumar laughed, as he spoke about his ability to fox the batsmen, referring to the ICC rule on 'doosra'.

Raj Kumar could rotate his wrist, he does it even know, and flummox the batsmen with the one that went the other way. 'I used it sparingly,' he remarked. Raj Kumar, member of the Madan Lal-led Delhi team, which won the Ranji Trophy in March 1989, beating Bengal by an innings and scoring 210 runs at the Ferozeshah Kotla, never missed an opportunity to regale Virat with stories from his playing days. He found his pupil to be an ardent listener, grasping every moment of the engrossing tales that his coach wanted him to absorb.

'There were lessons in those stories. I would tell him about close encounters and tense moments and how we dealt with them. If you see, Virat has this brilliant quality to study the situation and react appropriately. He is adept at reading the opposition and his team's strength and weakness. It is due to his inquisitive nature, as I remember him hammering me with ceaseless questions,' pointed out Raj Kumar.

Virat was born to play cricket. 'And born to lead,' insisted Raj Kumar. From the day he played his first match for the WDCA, Virat appointed himself as the leader. 'He would become captain and call the shots. Even his seniors would marvel at his reading of the game. When the regular bowlers would struggle, he would offer his wickettaking abilities. Virat would announce that he would get the set-batsman out and believe me he would get him out. I can't forget his first day at the WDCA. That throw from the boundary, flat into the wicketkeeper's gloves, had startled us. Such a powerful arm at nine years of age! But here he was demonstrating all-round abilities and showing leadership skills. He was not even fifteen when he showed skills at captaincy,' said Raj Kumar.

Raj Kumar can also never forget the day when his ward was mocked at by the under-15 state selectors. Raj Kumar had played along a couple of them. He was obviously hurt when they dismissed Virat as just another youngster from the stables of Delhi's club cricket. 'Virat was in tears and I really felt for the boy. He had done

everything possible to merit a selection, but Delhi had some very exacting standards and not always cricketing ones,' Raj Kumar lamented.

The crestfallen and exasperated Virat, unable to comprehend the reasons for his exclusion from the state under-15 team, received a warm and encouraging pat from former India captain Bishan Singh Bedi, who happened to be at the Ferozeshah Kotla as coach of the Delhi Ranji Trophy team. It was the first time Raj Kumar had raised his voice at a fellow cricketer and the two state junior selectors responsible for keeping him out were acutely embarrassed when Virat earned selection next year by scoring heavily in the local grade. At one point, Raj Kumar, in a dilemma, had contemplated shifting Virat to another state, but was stopped from making that move by some prudent seniors.

Virat's fervour to make it big did not stop at getting into the state under-15 squad. He now wanted a contract with a bat manufacturer and Raj Kumar had a task at hand. Virat would nag him until one day the coach sent him to BDM, a renowned brand based in Meerut. 'He is too young for a contract. Are you sure he will go the distance?' asked a representative of the company. 'He is a good investment,' Raj Kumar assured the BDM official. 'You sign the boy and I promise you it will be a long and fruitful association,' assured Raj Kumar. 'He stayed with BDM for a while even after playing for India. I am glad he proved my judgment right.'

The biggest challenge for Raj Kumar was to keep Virat calm. He was like a storm looming large on the field and threatening to sweep them all. He was restless even when he excelled because if he got a fifty, Virat would visualise a century as if by right. It was tough to keep Virat glued to his seat. If the opposition got out cheaply, Virat wanted to go in early and finish the game. 'What if I did not get to bat,' was his innocent query to the coach.

Always slotted at No. 4, Virat had this tendency to pad up along with the openers. If he got out, he never took off the pads until the

contest was over. He hated losing his wicket and had to be constantly involved, conveying his message by keeping his pads on. Mistakes were always dealt with a firm hand by Raj Kumar. 'I did not simply stop at scolding him. A few hard slaps have sometimes worked well,' said Raj Kumar, who has been more of a father figure than a coach for Virat.

Raj Kumar has had a huge influence on Virat. The making of Virat was a process that also marked Raj Kumar's evolution as a coach. His rapport with Virat was impeccable. 'I can read his mind. He also knows what goes on in my mind. I have set certain benchmarks for him and he meets them. Sometimes they are about hitting centuries or winning matches. We have worked countless hours on technique and temperament, and he has responded beautifully.'

The flick has always been one of his productive shots. He would nonchalantly pick the line early and meet the ball with the firm face of the bat to hit boundaries at will. However, not always to Raj Kumar's liking. 'I honestly did not like Virat playing the flick. There is always an element of risk when you play across the line. I remember scolding him many times. I wanted him to play the shot to mid-on and not from the middle stump. To his credit he worked hard and came to master the shot.'

Ruushill, his Delhi teammate in under-15 and under-17, averred, 'Virat took pride in his flick shot. He absolutely loves it. I remember an under-19 camp where Raj Kumar Sir was the coach. At the end of a video analysis session, we were asked to fill up a form which included our problem areas and list our favourite shot among other things. Raj Kumar Sir had advocated that we need to play with a straight bat; cover drives and on-drives could wait. Virat put down the flick as his favourite shot and told me to play what I liked best and mention that shot. I also wrote the flick and remember Raj Kumar Sir's smile at the end of it.'

The cover drive, Raj Kumar emphasised, was Virat's strength. He did not develop this shot later in his cricket career, as most critics

erringly observe. Virat had always loved playing the cover drive, Raj Kumar confirmed, 'He loved it to the extent that he also began getting out to cover drive. I advised him to avoid the shot. Then he developed a liking for sixes and began getting out while playing the shot in the air. That was not Virat's game. Once I had to scold him severely. This incident took place when he was playing for India. I warned him not to attempt to hit a six until he had fifty on the board against his name. I did not want him to play the cut and the sweep because I was keen on him playing the ball close to the body. I had never trained him for the cut and the sweep because I wanted to make sure he did not err in playing those shots when he had other strong ones in his arsenal. He improved dramatically and is now well-versed in all the shots in the book. The idea was to improve his shotselection,' Raj Kumar said with pride.

'I am really blessed to have him as my guru. I owe my cricket to him. He has always been there in my tough times. His technical inputs helped me develop as a cricketer. He is an ideal teacher,' Virat was quoted in *The Hindu*. 'It is very important. People don't understand that in the long run, you can't do without a mentor. It doesn't help. I don't talk to many people. It helps to open up because you are under constant pressure, and have to discuss things with someone. I only talk to him. He is the only one I fear. Yes, I do get scolded by him but I like it because it keeps me grounded and focussed. He's the best coach one can ever have.'

Raj Kumar is the only go-to man for Virat when things don't work. 'I keep him grounded by constantly reminding him that he has a long way to go. Breaking records is not the best way to evaluate a batsman. He must be confident, but there is always the danger of over-confidence blocking your objectivity. I look to get the best out of him and we both minutely analyse his failures. Now that he is the captain, I keep telling him not to expect from others what easily comes to him. It is not a feasible method to go about the game. Hence, his thinking and approach to the game is so different from

the rest.' No doubt about that. It is evident that Virat is not cut from the same cloth as his teammates, thanks to the guidance of a thoroughly professional coach like Raj Kumar, who was bestowed with the Dronacharya Award on the heels of his ward winning the 2016 Test series in West Indies.

5



One-Day Debut and Career

The grind of the summer cricket circuit in Delhi introduces a player to the harsh realities of competitive sport. Reputations are made and marred in conditions best described as unfriendly. The local champions wait to maul the established stars and even stalwarts like Kapil Dev, Ashok Malhotra, N.S. Sidhu, Yashpal Sharma and Manoj Prabhakar have experienced it for years. Virat was groomed in such situations and it helped him shape his game. It trained him to fight tooth and nail. Moreover, nothing has been handed over to him on a silver platter.

Virat's success as a junior cricketer preceded his elevation to the national team. It was a star-studded line up with Gambhir, Yuvraj Singh and Dhoni as the guiding force. Virat was diligent in looking to make his place and clearly, it was not going to be easy. The team was an experimental outfit and the national selectors were engaged in an exercise to raise a potent combination for the World Cup three years away. Virat was aiming to become an integral part of that team.

Was he fast-tracked into the national side? There were apprehensions whether or not Virat would do justice to his potential. Questions were raised about him and if he could command a place in the national eleven on the basis of his show in the junior tournaments. He was twenty and, selfadmittedly, ready to launch his

career. The national selectors deserved a pat on the back for keeping their faith in this prodigiously gifted batsman, who knew only one way to play cricket – the aggressive way.

K. Srikanth, the chairman of the national selection committee, must have seen a bit of himself in Virat. Srikanth was adept at wading into the opposition with daring shots – hitting the Pakistan stalwart Imran Khan behind the bowler's head was one unforgettable example – and never compromising on his natural flair. Srikanth was a delight at the crease. So was Virat, who insisted upon batting on his own terms. According to Virat, if the ball had to be hit, it had to be hit. Quite the way Viv Richards and Sehwag played their game, hard and precise.

The National selectors, Srikanth, Yashpal Sharma, Raja Venkat, Surendra Bhave and Narendra Hirwani were unanimous in assessing Virat as a tremendous potential in limited overs cricket. 'He was scoring runs. There were others scoring runs too, but Virat impressed us with his attitude. His body language conveyed his confidence and the zeal to dominate the crease. We had picked Murali Vijay too, but there was no doubt in our mind that Virat was the big one for the future. The way he handled himself on and off the field was exemplary,' said Bhave, with the experience of playing in 97 first-class matches.

The collective view of the selectors was that Virat would take a long time to succeed in Test cricket. 'We had no apprehensions about his abilities. We knew when push came to shove, he would not falter. He had his plans in place and his vision was crafted on the basis of his well-structured game. His temperament was what I marvelled at. Superb,' Bhave raved.

Raja Venkat recalled the Deodhar Trophy held at Baroda (March 2010), which North won under the captaincy of Virat. 'The way he led the team to victory showed that he had the capacity to command respect. The consistency factor was significant in his growth, but I have seen few players with such assurance and self-belief. And look

how his batting has evolved from primarily on-side play to off-side. Of late, you can see him execute the sweep and the square cut profitably. It is this innovation that helped Virat grow.'

Known to grab an offer with both hands, Virat was game to opening the innings in his first ODI at Dambullah on 18 August 2008, two years after his first-class debut. 'I was not surprised by his decision to accept the responsibility because the middle-order was packed,' said Raj Kumar. Virat was not oblivious to the fact that he had to force his way into the team and any batting position was welcome. His stints in Delhi cricket had taught him to be battle-ready and this was the stage for him to show his mettle.

The opener's position was new to Virat. He had never opened the innings in any grade of cricket. And here he was, assuming the responsibility on debut. It was baptism by fire. He saw Gambhir getting cleaned up on the second ball, by the wily left-arm seamer Chaminda Vaas. This cricket was different and he was up against a mean bowler. Virat's contribution was a disappointing score of 12, but not before playing his patent flick off Vaas.

Virat buried the failure of the first match that India eventually lost. He came up with a buoyant 35 in the game at the same venue, two days later. He would remember the match for his maiden encounter with the legendary off-spinner, Muttiah Muralitharan. He faced an over from Murali, got five runs including an edged boundary, and made a few mental notes. He would have to earn his runs at this level. He had begun to enjoy his learning process. Having taken guard at No. 2, Virat took the strike in the next three matches and produced scores of 25, 54 and 31, as India pocketed the series 3-2.

His next ODI was to come a year later at the Premadasa Stadium in Colombo, when India beat Sri Lanka in the final of the Compaq Cup. A place in the team for the ICC Champions Trophy in South Africa meant Virat was on the right track. He was rubbing shoulders with Tendulkar and Dravid, and to this young Delhi cricketer, it was an experience to treasure. A brilliant 79 not out against the West

Indies at Johannesburg fetched Virat his first Man of the Match in the senior league. It was a lowscoring affair against a mediocre attack, but his game stood out in the eyes of the experts. Here was a batsman who promised to serve Indian cricket in the long-run.

There was no fixed batting slot for Virat, since his place depended on the availability of seniors like Tendulkar, Sehwag and Gambhir. It took thirteen visits to the crease for Virat to secure his first ODI century – 107 on a wintry day at the Eden Gardens – against Sri Lanka in 2009. The Man of the Match award eluded him, but Virat was showered with lavish praise from all quarters. Sehwag was leading the side and India had a stiff target to chase – 316 in fifty overs. The mission was accomplished in 48.1 overs with Gambhir finishing the contest with an unbeaten 150. Sehwag gave the credit to his Delhi colleagues, but emphasised, ‘Especially, Kohli has done well. He got fifties in the Champions Trophy and against Sri Lanka in his last game. We all knew he had the talent and it was just a matter of performing at the international level.’

The words worked like magic on Virat’s mind. His cricket progressed at a rapid pace and soon established him as an important part of India’s campaign. He also became part of the team that came to be developed with the 2011 World Cup in mind. ‘This was a crucial phase, even if early, in Virat’s career. He had come to realise his responsibility and his focus was clear. To become a reliable member of the team and create matchwinning situations,’ noted former India Test wicketkeeper Vijay Dahiya.

Four lively centuries had prepared Virat for the biggest stage he was to perform at – the World Cup. India was the co-host with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and the event was termed the best World Cup of all times. The preceding edition (2007), in the West Indies, had left the organisers grieving as India made an early exit. But India was well-prepared this time. It was to be the ultimate tribute from a team to the ultimate cricketer – Tendulkar – who was playing his sixth World Cup.

Virat made a sensational World Cup debut ahead of Raina, with a century against Bangladesh. It was the tournament opener and saw Sehwag in cracking form. His 175 inspired Virat, who came up with an unbeaten hundred as India played around with the host. Sehwag made a mockery of the Bangladesh attack and Virat enjoyed it from a vantage position, as the two contributed 203 runs for the third wicket.

For Sehwag, it was a confirmation of his assessment of Virat. 'Whenever we spoke in the middle, we told each other to not throw our wickets away. I still remember the match against Pakistan in the Champions Trophy (at the Centurion, in 2009), he (Virat) was playing well, but he played a shot straight to long-off. Since then he has scored six hundreds. Sometimes a little nudge is enough for some people. He is a quick learner, and a mature batsman,' Sehwag observed. Virat valued his senior's words and never looked back.

A 59 against West Indies was Virat's next best contribution. India stormed into the final after a hard-fought win against Pakistan, at Mohali, in an expectedly high-profile match that saw the two Prime Ministers – Manmohan Singh and Yousuf Raza Gilani – jointly in attendance at the Punjab Cricket Association Stadium. The mood of the occasion was illustrated in the cordial welcome with which fans from across the border were treated by their Indian counterparts. Virat made just nine as India competently defended a total of 260, built essentially on Tendulkar's chancy 85.

The final at the Wankhede Stadium saw Tendulkar living his dream of winning the World Cup, despite a classic century (103 not out) by Sri Lankan veteran Mahela Jayawardene. Much to the chagrin of the Sri Lankans, two knocks – 97 by Gambhir and an unbeaten 91 by Dhoni – set off celebrations across India. The finish, a six over long-on off Nuwan Kulasekara by Dhoni, was an unforgettable moment for the Indian fans in the stands. Some of them had relished similar emotions as teenagers in 1983, when Kapil

Dev and his 'boys' made history at Lord's by shocking the West Indies.

'All credit goes to Sachin Tendulkar. We played for him. Beating Australia and Pakistan and now this, it's a dream come true,' exclaimed Gambhir. Virat carried around the maestro on his shoulders. 'This goes out to all the people of India. This is my first World Cup; I can't ask for more. Tendulkar has carried the burden of the nation for twenty-one years. It was time we carried him. Chak de India!' said an exuberant Virat as he revered his idol.

Tendulkar expressed his sentiments, 'I couldn't have asked for anything more than this. Winning the World Cup is the proudest moment of my life. Thanks to my teammates. Without them, nothing would have happened. I couldn't control my tears of joy.'

From the end of the 2011 World Cup to the beginning of the next in 2015 in Australia, Virat figured in ninety-six matches. His aggregate of 4,278 runs, with sixteen centuries, came at an average of 55.55. His astonishing range of shots constituted a fierce assault on Pakistan in the 2012 Asia Cup at Mirpur. Centuries by openers Mohammad Hafeez and Nasir Jamshed gave Pakistan the cushion of 330 runs to defend. This was a formidable task by any standard, but India pulled it off with thirteen balls and six wickets to spare. Virat was the difference between the two teams.

This was a game Virat would love to relive over and over again. He joined Tendulkar at the crease, with the innings a mere two balls old, following Gambhir's dismissal to Mohammad Hafeez's off-spin. They were separated at 133 and then Virat dominated the 172-run second wicket stand with Rohit Sharma to snatch the contest from Pakistan, the team reduced to a helpless state. Left-arm Wahab Riaz, who had rattled India in the 2011 World Cup semi-final with a five for 46 strike, was mauled to the tune of 50 runs in four overs. Virat took seven fours off Riaz and left skipper Misbah-ul-Haq with a 'We didn't have any answers' lament. However, there was some

consolation for Pakistan when it went on to claim the Cup with a two-run win over Bangladesh in the final.

Australia became Virat's favourite destination for run-making in all the formats of the game. In the early part of 2015, he trained his guns on his opponents in the World Cup, starting the tournament with a breath-taking century against Pakistan. An overflowing Adelaide Oval was treated to some vintage batting by Virat, packing flamboyance into his innings, the sheer artistry of his performance adding to his popularity among the fans. If there was variable bounce, it was hardly visible when Virat was on strike. His form was the key to India's hopes of retaining the Cup. Virat's response to his innings was in keeping with his form. 'I just look for an opportunity to stand up to their (expectations) because I hate to lose and I play passionately. I like the expectations.'

However, Virat failed to strike the chord that would have pushed India in the desired direction. He failed to get a fifty in the next seven innings of the World Cup and came a cropper in the semi-final against Australia at the Sydney Cricket Ground. Aaron Finch (81) and Steve Smith (105) set the tone for Australia's domination as the home team presented India with an uphill task of 329 to win. Given India's batting strength, a fight ensued. A lot of it depended on a solid start and Virat coming good when it counted the most. Instead, he flopped when he top-edged a bouncer from Mitchell Johnson. Australia strangled India into submission and Dhoni's dreams of retaining the Cup were blown with Virat's cheap dismissal.

Less than a year later, Virat returned to Australia to establish his credentials as the world's premier batsman in fifty-overs cricket with scores of 91, 59, 117, 106 and eight. India lost the five-match series 1-4, but Virat's stupendous feat won him a legion of fans in Australia. No other Indian since Laxman had earned such appreciation in Australia, where the spectators loved a gladiator on the pitch. Virat had ably demonstrated that he was a modern avatar of the ancient Roman warriors.

6



Ready for Tests

In the present times, Test cricket faces an uncertain future. Most administrators have been trying hard to address this issue of dwindling attendance at Test match venues. It has resulted in the loss of revenue and genuine fears of losing young enthusiasts to the T20 brand. India, Australia and England are the teams that are most likely to attract fans when they play at home or away. However, that situation is changing. Nowadays, an Australia-Pakistan Test at Dubai is marked by empty galleries. The situation is the same for an England-West Indies contest at most stadiums. Test cricket is widely considered an avoidable fixture in world cricket. The administrators are aware of the fact, as well as the players.

In these times of rapid fall and rise in terms of a career, when a player of Virat's calibre emerges to entertain audiences, one can hope that Test matches may get a new life. Virat, Joe Root, Steve Smith and Kane Williamson, bring value to Test cricket with their organised batsmanship. They raise one's hope of keeping the interests of the spectators in the longer format of the game. This quartet has served cricket with some outstanding work at the crease, with Virat looking a notch above the rest.

For all his talent and consistency in limited overs cricket, Virat would have nearly missed a season of Test matches had it not been for Yashpal Sharma, who saw a rare spark in the young cricketer's

game. The national selectors met to pick the team for the West Indies tour, even as the country continued to bask in the euphoria of having won the World Cup under Dhoni's leadership. There was talk of Tendulkar calling it a day and the speculation gained prominence when he indicated his unwillingness to tour the West Indies. The master was cherry-picking his assignments now and it set tongues wagging.

The selectors – Srikanth, Yashpal, Raja Venkat, Bhave and Hirwani – had their task cut out. The focus was to give a break to new faces. There was a large pool to pick from, but the selectors were not in a hurry to change the composition of the team for the sake of it. A Test cap had to be earned. The selectors were also keen on sending a message that no player had the freedom to take his place for granted.

Most members selected themselves, but the smooth progress was halted when they came to discuss the name of Virat. As Raja Venkat confessed, he was not sure if Virat would be successful as a Test batsman. 'He was undoubtedly good in the limited overs format. But Tests? I was not sure. I must tell you the one man who was convinced and backed Virat to excel in Tests was Yashpal. He was steadfast in his faith that Virat had it in him to be a very good Test batsman.'

The question confronting the selectors was simple: Was Virat ready to play Test cricket? 'He was,' emphasised Yashpal. 'It was my firm belief that Virat was the best player to have emerged from the stables of junior cricket for a long time. You don't have to look a second time when a talent like Virat is in front of you.' Yashpal ought to have known since he was among those who had marked Sehwag as a special talent at an under-19 camp in Delhi. 'Virus did not need a second look. Neither did Virat,' said Yashpal.

Yashpal was a gritty cricketer. He could bat, bowl, and keep wickets. His policy as a captain, and later as coach, was to refrain from dropping a player without giving him a fair deal. 'I felt this

pressure when I was playing and I did not wish others to suffer from it. The pressure of performance can sometimes shake your confidence. At one stage, some people were against Dhawan too, but I stood by him because like Virat, he too had a tremendous passion to play cricket,' observed Yashpal, a member of the 1983 World Cup-winning Indian squad.

What convinced Yashpal to argue so vehemently in favour of Virat? He was candid, 'I saw that spark early when he came into international cricket. He may not have possessed the technique that made Sunil Gavaskar such a great batsman, but Virat had the same fighting spirit. I had that spirit when I was young. Virat was not so fit during his formative years, but in the three years preceding his Test selection he had improved dramatically in all departments. Similarly, I was not sound in technique, but I would make it up with hard work to learn and improve. I was fearless. Virat was fearless too. His eyes spat fire when he took guard and that convinced me to back him.'

That selection committee meeting was actually the turning point in Virat's career. Yashpal was able to put his message across clearly. 'I told my colleagues that even if Virat were to fail, age was on his side. If he clicked, he would serve the team for no less than ten years. I know he flopped (in the West Indies), but he came back strongly. On his first Test tour to Australia, he had a century against his name. It came a little late, but certainly in time to create a fantastic career,' said Yashpal.

Having come through the grind, Yashpal had realised it was important to support an individual when help was most required. It was true that Virat was competing for a place in the team, but he had the qualities to take the big step into international cricket. Yashpal offered a glimpse into the past when he had cheered up a dejected Dravid. Dravid had been facing a hard time. Runs had deserted him and his previous six visits to the crease had fetched him dismal scores of 11, 11, 0, 3, 3 and 4. 'He was leading the side but looked lost, standing in the slips. I noticed he was alone among the crowd. It

was a different David. I took permission from the team management to speak to him. When I went to see him in the room, he was sitting on the bed with the bat in hand. I asked David how we could help bring back the smile on his face. He laughed aloud. We did not talk cricket, just general discussions. We went to Mohali next. He hit a century (against England in 2008).'

Virat was a fast learner as Yashpal confirmed it. 'He constantly works on his weaknesses.' When he made his debut in the West Indies, it was obvious that he was overwhelmed. The responsibility weighed heavily on him when he faced his first ball in Test cricket at Kingston. The pitch had some cracks and was expected to assist the fast bowlers. The Sabina Park brought back some bitter memories from a 1976 encounter when Clive Lloyd ordered his fast bowlers to fello the Indian batsmen. If they were dismissed in the process, no harm was done. Skipper Bishan Singh Bedi, worried about the safety of his players – Gavaskar would later term it as barbarism in his autobiography *Sunny Days* – decided not to continue the innings since five of the batsmen were absent due to injuries. The innings was termed as completed. This was the lowest point in India-West Indies cricketing relations.

A lot had changed since then, and India was well-equipped in 2011 to face any short-pitched barrage from the West Indies. India, with three debutants – Virat, Abhinav Mukund and Praveen Kumar – was 64 for three when Virat walked out to join David. He calmly defended Bishoo's five deliveries before scoring his first runs in a Test match – a boundary off Fidel Edwards. He was to fall to Edwards in the bowler's next over. It was a forgettable Test debut for Virat because Edwards had him for 15 in the second innings. India won the Test and Virat had plenty for introspection.

Virat was not well prepared for the battle. He failed in his second Test, scoring zero and 27 at Bridgetown, while a decent 30 gave him some relief at Roseau. His place in Tests had not been secured and that was on his mind as he prepared for the series at home against

the same opponent. This was after losing his place in the eleven for the four Tests in England. It was an embarrassing series for India as it lost 0-4 despite the presence of accomplished batsmen like Tendulkar, Laxman, Sehwag, Dravid and Dhoni. The margin of defeats in all matches was staggering – by 196 runs at Lord's, by 319 runs at Trent Bridge, by an innings and 242 runs at Edgbaston, and an innings and 8 runs at Oval. Not since the disgraceful summer of 1974 had India fared so poorly in England. Dravid's outstanding batting was the saving grace as he crafted three centuries, two of them as opener. No other Indian batsman had a hundred against his name.

The transition period for Indian cricket had begun. Although Tendulkar had decided to carry on, the critics began to question his wisdom. He may not have looked a burden on the team, but he was now a mere shadow of his supreme stature as the world's premier batsman. Notably, his next forty visits to the crease in a Test failed to fetch him a hundred. His fans waited for the master to achieve the rare distinction of hundred international centuries, a feat unparalleled by anyone in the game of cricket. At the end of that England tour, Tendulkar was one short of that magical figure, which ultimately came in the Asia Cup match against Bangladesh at Dhaka on 16 March 2012. He was to play one more match – against Pakistan in the same tournament – before ending his one-day career.

All this was happening while Tendulkar's silent admirer, Virat, soaked in every detail of his idol's cricket life. After all, he had toiled hard to be in such a privileged position – sharing the dressing room and living his dream of competing in the big league with the big players. Virat played seventeen Tests with Tendulkar – four overseas, and all of them in Australia. He did not waste any opportunity to learn from the maestro. Tendulkar also took a liking to Virat. Right through his career, Tendulkar encouraged the young guns and he was never short of words in evaluating Virat's ability to dominate.

Tendulkar lavished his praise on Virat when he told a magazine, 'It's a joy to watch Virat bat. His strength is to be able to analyse the situation and adjust his game accordingly. His match awareness is terrific. To be able to have the vision for what the game would look like after four overs or six overs is commendable. He is able to calculate the required run-rate during chases very well. Sometimes his over-aggression might affect him. That is going to happen with aggressive players. That is also his strength. There might be occasions where he will go back to the dressing room and say, "I shouldn't have done it".'

Comparisons with Tendulkar always irked Virat. He responded candidly to set the comparison debate to rest. 'Honestly, I feel embarrassed. It is unfair. Sachin cannot be compared with anyone. Comparisons are not valid from my end. I have looked up to him but I want to be myself while drawing inspiration from him. He is two levels above any player. Sachin was born with talent and I had to work for it. I have been playing well for two years, while he served the nation with grace for twenty-four years. I am inspired by him though I would like to create my own path,' Virat said in an interview to *India Today*.

For all his success in one-dayers, Tendulkar rated Test cricket as the ultimate. He did worry for the future of Test cricket and cautioned the administrators from over-indulgence in the shorter formats of the game. Virat, in contrast, was not unduly concerned about the future of Test cricket. He had worked hard to excel in Tests. He was going to do everything possible to help the longer version of the game retain its appeal.

Virat was with Tendulkar during his agonising moments in the dressing room at the Wankhede Stadium, at the end of his farewell Test against the West Indies. Most eyes at the venue were moist and a teary-eyed Virat walked up to Tendulkar to present him with a thread that he had worn around his wrist. Virat was gifting his idol what he had received from his father as a good luck charm. Virat

touched Tendulkar's feet who in turn hugged him. The mantle was quietly passed on that day, from a master to one in the making.

7



Virat Loves Australia

Ian Chappell is a huge fan of Virat. Who is not? The former Australian skipper, a muchrespected commentator and analyst, finds little flaws in Virat's batting – his authoritative style, positive vibes at the crease, and a wide range of shots appeal to Chappell. He was a torchbearer of attacking batsmanship in his heyday, a compulsive stroke-player who would not accept the bowler's domination. He believed in batting on his terms, which he did of the highest quality.

Modern cricket has seen some entertainers who have set new benchmarks in aggressive batting. Adam Gilchrist and Matthew Hayden advertised this brand the best, slaying the bowlers in Test cricket with the mindset of a one-day contest. Brian Lara brought poetry into motion in the middle with his silken shots that pierced the field, leaving the opponents dazed. Sehwag transformed the face of batting in Tests, not averse to crack the first ball he faced, getting out at 195 attempting to clear the fence and a few months later hitting a six to reach a triple century, the first by an Indian.

Chappell, and most Australians, admired Sehwag's style. At home, they had Ricky Ponting to showcase the Australian way of batting, always on the prowl to attack. Elsewhere, Chris Gayle had a dedicated following with his astonishing sixhitting abilities. He made no distinction between a Test and a T20 encounter. For him, the ball

had to be hit mercilessly and he did it quite often. Dhoni could force the pace of the innings at will and give the match a course that he dictated.

There was some breath-taking entertainment on display when a soft-spoken but determined Laxman walked to the crease and launched a most gracefully distinct genre of batsmanship. He feared no one. The Australians loved it. He played to dominate and the Australians loved him even more for that. Laxman was the darling of Australia on all the four Test tours he made to the sporting nation. He was so popular there that he might have gained an Australian citizenship in a jiffy.

Australia, with its fiercely competitive cricket structure, has always offered the most daunting challenges. 'If you are playing Australia in Australia, you always have to be at your best. There was a time when teams looked forward to do well in the West Indies, but Australia has always proved a hard place to win your cricket battles,' opined Kapil Dev, who took 51 wickets on his three tours to Australia, 25 of them coming on his final visit in 1991-92.

Australia is a benchmark for judging the all-round abilities of a batsman. His preparedness, technique, and temperament, are constantly under scrutiny on the Australian pitches. England offers daunting conditions as well, especially in the first half of the summer when the ball swings and seams prodigiously. However, it is the bounce and pace of Australia that can be unnerving. Dravid, an epitome of correct batsmanship, hit thirty-six centuries in his career and just one in a total of sixteen Tests played in Australia.

Indians have had many memorable performances in Australia. The indomitable Vijay Hazare floored the great Don Bradman with his century in each innings feat (116 and 145) at Adelaide in 1948. He set a high benchmark for others to emulate. Virat had the honour of repeating Hazare's achievement in 2014. It was a pleasant coincidence that Virat shone at the same venue in an epic Test match that highlighted the significance of five-day cricket in modern times.

Gavaskar, on his first tour to Australia in 1977-78, carved out three brilliant centuries – 113 at Brisbane, 127 at Perth, and 118 at Melbourne. He was six years old in international cricket at that time, and had to establish a strong reputation. He had to demonstrate that he was comfortable even in the most hostile conditions. His record of five centuries in eleven matches on Australian soil has been surpassed by Tendulkar's six in twenty Tests, with that classic 241 not out at Sydney as his best. Even Viv Richards' magnificence fetched him no more than four centuries in twenty-two Tests that he played on five tours to Australia.

In terms of appeal and fan-following, Laxman and Virat have been leaders for different reasons. Laxman won their hearts with his flair and the grandeur that marked his shot-making. Virat played the game just the way the Australians did – in the face, with aggression being the striking element of his approach. Their styles may have differed but Laxman and Virat complemented each other well whenever they batted together.

To begin with, the conditions in Australia are diametrically different from the sub-continent. 'In the sub-continent, the pitches are mostly slow and offer low bounce. When I went to Australia in 1999, I was surprised by the pace and the bounce. You can counter the bounce elsewhere, but in Australia it is steep because the ball climbs from the length itself and not always when the bowler bangs the ball in. It can come from the release and the point of hitting the deck. Very challenging,' felt Laxman, who cracked four centuries in Australia.

The culture of entertaining cricket in Australia invites the stroke-makers to play their best game. Initially, Laxman had been shocked by the aggressive yet positive approach of the Australians. 'They follow this style even in their domestic cricket. Playing to win. Nothing defensive.' Just the way Virat loves to play his cricket – aggressive and always looking to win. It changed gradually as the Australians became versatile in their approach, but did not

compromise with their penchant to attack. They would not refrain from setting an attacking field even when the opponents built a partnership.

Virat derived and developed his aggressive instincts from the eight Tests that he played in Australia. The Tests were enough to fuel his ambitions to dominate and convince the young cricketer to spread the message – fight aggression with aggression. He loved it because Australia offers an ideal infrastructure for cricket. Each ground has a distinct character, the spectators are sporting, and they appreciate the game. They also appreciate the opposition even if it ousts the home team, in sharp contrast to the majority of the crowd in India that concentrates on having fun and not so much as understanding the game.

Laxman conceded that the biggest challenge in Australia was judging the length. ‘You have little time to make up your mind to judge the length to play your shot. Or not to play your shot. In India, to “a short of good length ball”, you can either go back or play it on the front foot. In Australia, the decision has to be quick and decisive, to play or leave the ball. Virat learnt his lessons in good time.’

Virat was excellent at judging the new ball. How to play the new ball has been a perennial challenge for the Indian batsmen before and after Gavaskar shouldered the responsibility with his flawless technique. Dropping the ball dead at his feet, with soft hands, against the meanest of short pitch-loving bowlers was a delightful sight for connoisseurs of technique. Gavaskar did it with style. Laxman and Virat followed in his august footsteps.

Virat was able to negotiate the new ball effectively. The prominent seam of the Kookaburra brand gives the bowlers added advantage, but Virat was adept. Moreover, he was fearless. Once the new ball effect is lost, the Australian bowling becomes easy to handle. ‘The first half hour can be very crucial because the ball is hard and judging the pace makes you concentrate all the more. Once you can trust the pace and bounce, you tend to play more shots in Australia

than in the sub-continent. Virat picked his lessons very well,' averred Laxman.

Virat's astonishing composure in the face of the storm that was Australia on the cricket field, left a mark on his teammates. He did get a century at Adelaide on his first tour in 2012, but it was the knock at Perth, seventy-five in the second innings, that confirmed Virat's claims as a proficient batsman in the making. He set the process in motion at Perth, in the company of Laxman. Such an experience was of immense help as he scored runs under tremendous pressure, with the likes of Ajinkya Rahane and Rohit Sharma breathing down his neck.

Laxman analysed the Virat of Perth superbly. 'His calmness in the middle and his concentration were very impressive. He closed out all negative thoughts. In terms of technique, he was ready to meet the Aussies with a positive frame of mind.' Virat waited for the ball to come and that was a welcome change from the earlier dismissals at Melbourne and Sydney, when he had wanted to reach for the ball, playing it away from the body and hitting it hard to overcome his anxiety.

At Perth, recalled Laxman, the focus was timing. 'Virat concentrated on timing the ball. I could see he was enjoying this change of approach a lot. He is a natural player and a great timer of the ball. It was a pleasure watching him grow during the course of that knock.' Laxman and Virat batted together in the first innings to add 68 runs for the fifth wicket, which turned out to be the best for that wicket in the match. In the second innings, Laxman did not score, but Virat's 75 was a defining moment. He was the last man out as Australia completed a whopping innings and a 37 runs victory to sweep the series with a 4-0 margin. All the wins of Australia in that series were overwhelming as India faced unprecedented humiliation, smashed in all departments of the game.

Virat corrected his batting formula at Perth. His shots had the required precision since he was confident of placing them. Laxman

had made the mistake of reaching out for the ball when he first batted in Australia in 1999 and was quick to advise Virat on this aspect. The batsman stood to gain if he used the pace of the ball on Australian pitches. Virat did precisely that at Perth and his subsequent innings two years later. It was to Virat's advantage that he was a natural back foot player. He did play on the front foot, but using the depth of the crease came in handy on the bouncy surfaces. He was able to transfer his body weight profitably and play the back foot punch, cutting and pulling splendidly. These were shots that would have gladdened Chappell.

Virat carried the confidence of Perth to Adelaide and signed off the series with a century that was scripted under incredible pressure. 'He showed tremendous maturity and confidence to shine in conditions that favoured the bowlers,' remembered Laxman. The knocks at Perth and Adelaide confirmed the belief that he belonged to the big league. He had struggled in the West Indies, against the short-pitched deliveries and appeared in a dilemma – to hit or leave. In international cricket, a batsman can chart a fluent course only if he knows how to play the short-pitched ball. To do that he ought to know his off-stump. However, Virat soon sorted out this issue and had an answer ready for the bouncers that came his way. He demonstrated amply that he was evolving and improving. His repertoire of shots had improved exponentially, but it was his mental toughness and application that made a huge impact on his game. He appeared to have mellowed a bit as he ignored the sledging he was subjected to and did not give it back to the opponents. That Virat was not losing his cool was good news for Indian cricket.

The fact that he had excelled in Australia goes to prove that Virat worked on the technical and mental aspects of his batting. Laxman affirmed, 'He understands the essence of batting under pressure. How to read the situation and the pitch; How to counter pressure; How to bat when chasing or to set up a target; I think the best part of Virat's batting is that he knows how to adapt to different conditions.'

He has the best mind-set to tackle adversity at the crease and his technique is suited to battle. He is the smartest cricketer on the planet.'

Virat evolved to the extent that he won the hearts of the Aussies when he returned in 2014. The Australians were clueless as Virat amassed runs at will and in a style that was entertaining and compelling to watch. He was in an imperious form – playing the hook and pull – using his feet to open up the field and exploiting the gaps. He had begun to sweep well and that really made Virat a complete batsman. He was not falling prey to the fourth-fifth stump line and was content to let them go. Almost seventy-five per cent of his runs came on the off-side when the bowlers tried plugging his liking for the on-side. Virat was adding new shots, especially the reverse sweep that he had come to practise a lot in the nets and later in the Indian Premier League. He was able to read the mind of the bowlers and there was just no stopping him.

Scores of 115 and 141 in the opening Test at Adelaide, when he stood in as captain for Dhoni, were followed by 19 and 1 at Brisbane, and 169 and 54 at Melbourne. He celebrated his elevation and confirmation as Test captain with 147 and 46 at Sydney, at the same time when Dhoni decided to quit Test cricket. Virat matched Australia's positive approach by making a daring attempt to scale the target of 349 at Sydney. That India failed and the match ended in a draw reflected the change in attitude. India was not going to play for a draw under a captain who displayed a strong sense of self-reliance.

Laxman had shown the way with his inimitable class and Virat followed him with an improved batting structure. They shared a quality. 'I always looked for boundaries. Virat is also a boundary hitter,' Laxman affirmed. Virat, soft hands and great wrists, has been a powerhouse on Australian pitches. His first thought is always to hit a boundary. If not, convert ones into twos and twos into threes, thanks to his astounding fitness. It is a pity that Laxman and Virat did

not have many opportunities to bat together in Australia. It would have been a symphony for the Aussie ears. They love performers under pressure. Laxman was one. So was Virat.

8



Failure in England

Brash. Arrogant. Undisciplined. An upstart. These were some of the words used to describe Virat. His aggression on the field, looking the opposition in the eye, and his readiness for a confrontation, marked Virat as the man to watch on the field. He worked to gain attention. He enjoyed the scrutiny, right from his formative years in the game that he dearly loved. At no point in his career has Virat shown disrespect to the game or the seniors. However, he is not the one to accept things lying down. 'You give me. I give it back,' is his philosophy, simple and effective.

Tanmay Srivastava, Virat's captain in the India under-19, learned very early that Virat was special. 'We were told that climbing a pole is not that hard as hanging on to it. But Virat climbed and sat on the pole with amazing authority. He bridged the gap between junior and first-class cricket with apparent ease. In junior cricket, you tend to face average bowlers in every team, not in first-class cricket. Virat did not care for reputation. He batted with an aim to make runs and win matches. Failure would make him livid. The greater the pressure, the more he enjoyed. No wonder he matured so quickly to become such a major force in worldcricket.'

Virat has been astonishing in his progress. His hunger for runs is legendary. 'He will accumulate runs even on a pitch full of slush. I have not seen a batsman so hungry for runs,' raved Sehwag, himself

a scourge of the best bowlers the world over. Sehwag batted as if there was no tomorrow. He never made any claims but asserted his supremacy in a compelling style, dismissing good deliveries and never looking weighed down by the occasion. It was this quality that Virat imbibed from watching Sehwag.

Batsmen from the Western part of India are known to abhor gifting their wickets. Gavaskar, Dilip Vengsarkar, Aunshuman Gaekwad, Ashok Mankad, Dilip Sardesai, Sanjay Manjrekar, to name a few, put immense value on their wicket. Give them a chance and rue for the rest of the match. They hated getting out and it was this quality that greats from the North like Bedi, Kapil Dev and Mohinder Amarnath would advocate their juniors to emulate. For Virat, the lessons were learnt simply and effectively. DO NOT THROW YOUR WICKET. It became ingrained in his mind as he climbed the charts of popularity and stature in Indian cricket.

The North has produced some flamboyant cricketers in the last decade or so, with Sehwag being the torchbearer of stroke-filled batsmanship. The likes of Gambhir and Dhawan convinced Virat the way forward was to look to dominate early and plunder for runs. He did not believe in a stuttered start. Initially, he was a slow starter. 'In North, we love hard-hitting batsmen,' averred Kapil. Virat hit the ball really hard. 'I can't remember Virat checking his shot in our junior cricket days,' recalled Srivastava. That Virat loved to build his innings was proof of his ability to absorb fast. He made notes from watching batsmen who believed in grinding the attack, but jumped at the first opportunity to slay the bowlers.

The brazen behaviour on the field was often an act put on by Virat. He, like many of his contemporaries, was convinced that he had to look aggressive in order to pump up himself. It helped but it also came at a cost. A cheap dismissal would set him off on lengthy introspection and analysis. It is a quality that Gavaskar and Tendulkar shared. His desire to innovate, improve and compete sometimes led to haughtiness in him, especially when the best could

not stop him. As noted coach Tarak Sinha observed, 'I have seen him grow steadily. He was one among many in his first few years. And then he became the one to watch out for. I don't remember many youngsters play the ball on the rise as Virat did. You can see he is at such ease when the ball comes on to his bat. The faster it comes, the faster it goes. He has learnt to play the moving ball late. He is not committing to play the ball early anymore and that has happened because he is sure of his footwork and balance. He does not react to the ball and has a big heart. I am reminded of Lamba, who signified the aggression of West Delhi cricketers the best. There are shades of Raman in Virat. He too loves a fight.'

Former Delhi keeper-batsman Devendra Sharma spends his time honing young talent at Delhi's Sonnet Club. He has a keen eye for spotting a good youngster. He was among the few who followed Virat's career since Raj Kumar was also a former Club mate. 'Look at how he has adapted to the challenges of international cricket. He is not a onedimensional player. In fact, he has no favourite stroke and that speaks for his game. He can play all shots.'

For Virat the ball is meant to be dismissed from the square. It was no different for Sehwag nor for Gilchrist, the effervescent Australia strokemaker, capable of finishing a contest on his own. A tremendous hand-eye combination allowed Sehwag the freedom to smash the ball because he could pick it early. Virat too spots the ball early but combines the co-ordination with caution. Sehwag would not mind trying to square-cut the incoming ball, but Virat would wait, constantly analysing the situation even if looking to get on with the job without losing time. No wonder he was always most respectful towards Sehwag, who never craved for attention, but did not miss making his presence felt by making as strong a statement as possible.

Any sportsman is pulled up short by failure. Often, such moments are suffered in solitude because sport can be cruel and demanding. In cricket, batting is described as a one-ball experience. True. You

can lose your wicket to the first ball. 'You live every ball. Why fret over what comes next. You have to play the ball on merit and if you are prepared, nothing can stop you. Good batsmen don't give their wicket easily and not at all when they realise the good form,' observed Sehwag. This has been Virat's philosophy, to live every ball.

Brian Lara was a master at milking good form. He had once said that he made the best of his good form as a cushion for bad times. Gavaskar, Mohinder and Vengsarkar read the game very well and made adjustments in their batting. When Virat encountered poor form on the 2014 England tour, it was a lesson in the disguise of failure. Obviously, he was not reading the ball well and had technical issues. During good times, he could whip the ball from outside off to midwicket, but England presented a challenge. It was a situation that found Virat mentally unprepared. He was perishing to the swing and had no clue where his off-stump lay. This was an excruciating phase because he was keen to perform in England, which offers the bowlers and batsmen a competitive platform to test their skills. Virat had failed and it hurt him immensely.

Elsewhere, his bottom hand had helped Virat garner runs in style. 'His grip is similar to Zaheer Abbas. There is a gap between the hands when he holds the bat, but it is amazing how he plays the same shot in the air with high elevation or along the ground with a last-moment adjustment. Zaheer used to do that and Virat executes it exceptionally. I know he did not make runs in England, but that was an aberration he can easily overcome when he plays there next. Virat is too good a batsman to repeat the mistakes,' said Yashpal.

Virat's body language on that England tour was not convincing. His scores in ten innings read an appalling 1, 8, 25, 0, 39, 28, 0, 7, 6 and 20. He was brought down to earth firmly and his reputation was dented. He had failed where it had really mattered for him to excel. He was greeted by Chris Broad, with a beauty at Trent Bridge, the ball ending in the slips after forcing him to play. The same bowler got

him the second time and trapped him plumb. Virat's first Test appearance in England was hardly worth remembering. Neither was the second nor the subsequent ones.

India won by 95 runs at Lord's after escaping with a draw in the first Test. The team had played to its potential with Vijay, Rahane, Bhuvneshwar and Ishant in tow. The 7 for 74 spell by Ishant, in England's second innings, gave India the match and a 1-0 lead. The team's good times ended with the Lord's triumph, as England swept the next three Tests. Virat was experiencing a torrid phase. James Anderson had snared him in the first innings with a gem that moved late. On his next visit, Virat was flummoxed by Liam Plunkett's first ball when he shouldered arms. Virat was evidently struggling to decide which ball to play and which to leave. His sad story continued at The Rose Bowl, Southampton, where England won by a whopping 266 runs.

The assertiveness in Virat was missing. It was a meek posture that he presented, unsure of his technique, and struggling to cope with the pressure. The comforting thought was that the team backed him. Once again, he was beaten by Anderson's late movement and off-spinner Moeen Ali lured him with his flight. Nothing was working for Virat even though the two innings at The Rose Bowl had fetched him 67 runs. He was not at his best, evidently looking to come out of the worst period of his career. Disaster lay in store at Old Trafford where India lost by an innings and fifty-four runs. Virat fell to Anderson in both the innings, edging to slip on both the occasions. He was just not able to fathom the rapid slump in form. And luck too. The edges were going to hands. India's rout, and Virat's, was completed at The Oval with England winning by an innings and 244 runs.

Next time, it was not Anderson who tormented Virat. Once again, he decided to leave the ball and was caught in front by Chris Jordan. Same story was repeated in the second innings, but this time Virat played the ball, the intended flick-drive ending in slips. The Test-tour

was over for Virat with nothing to show in terms of achievements. The one-day series that followed left him more embarrassed with scores of 0, 40, 1 not out and 13, as India salvaged its reputation with a 3-1 margin after the first ODI at Bristol was abandoned without a ball being bowled due to rain.

‘Anderson was extraordinary in that series and Virat not at his best. We were not worried about his calibre. It was a phase that needed to be forgotten,’ said former national selector Bhave in Virat’s defence. ‘Many batsmen have fared poorly in England after shining in other countries. It took a monumental effort from Dravid (in 2011) to drive home the point that top class technique was the most essential ingredient for success in English conditions. Hard hands can cost you dearly in England and it can happen to anyone. Sehwag though proved hard hands can work in Tests too and you can play your shots right away. Virat was on his first tour to England and all the selectors felt that he needed unstinting support. It prepared him well to tackle failures,’ said Bhave. India had lost all the four Tests in 2011, but Dravid had given an exceptional account of his skills with centuries at Lord’s, Trent Bridge, and The Oval.

When push comes to shove, Virat is always considered the one to execute it best. His temperament was said to be similar to Dravid, who would create a zone for himself, shutting out the negative thoughts and concentrating on the missiles that were hurled at him. Bowlers took pride in taking Dravid’s wicket. Similarly, they now angled for Virat’s scalp, the most treasured batsman to bag. He fought his way to bury the dark experience of England. As Bhave noted, ‘Virat now looks to be on a different plane altogether. He has been in sublime form since that forgettable tour and his consistency has helped Indian cricket grow. I am glad to note that we did not make a mistake by fast-tracking him into Test cricket. He has handled himself excellently.’

Virat matured as a player after that England tour. He was more patient, respectful of the opposition, and learnt to wait for the ball. ‘It

was an important development in his batting. To wait for the ball,' observed Bhave, who has spent many summers in England playing in the minor leagues. The tour to England was a harsh lesson for Virat. He was to learn quickly and firmly establish his place in the team.

9



Excelling in Tests

Good players always claim that Test cricket is the ultimate stage because it is a test of their endurance and temperament. Endurance and temperament are the two essential qualities that a player has to incorporate into his game, along with the skill factor, if the aim is to excel in the five-day format. Each session throws up new challenges and it becomes increasingly stimulating. For batsmen, the joy of excelling in hostile conditions is an experience to be treasured – a century with the ball seaming and darting around in England, or whizzing past one's ears in Australia, enhances the individual's reputation. To stand up to a barrage of short-pitched bowling and counter it with daring is enough to elevate a batsman to the high pedestal of cricketing glory. Great batsmen have always prided themselves on scoring centuries away from home. Virat's maiden hundred, obviously deeply cherished, came in most testing circumstances, at Adelaide, within a year of his debut.

Virat's innings of 116 proved futile because Australia won but he triumphed as he crafted his first Test century. He was over the moon even as Indian cricket lay in shambles. Australia had closed the tournament on a 4-0 standing and the Indians had no place to hide. There was talk of retirement, as is the case when a team fails. In this case, individuals like Tendulkar, Dravid, Laxman, Sehwag, Dhoni and Gambhir had failed to hit a century in the entire series. Virat was the

lone Indian to reach the three-figure mark and that too in the final Test. It was a series no Indian cricket fan would like to remember. Virat was an exception though. The century was a compelling statement of his potential and a confirmation of the fact that he was ready to serve at the highest level.

Double centuries by Ponting and Michael Clarke had already left the Indian bowlers reeling, and then the batsmen led things further down. Virat's century was an act of defiance and a lesson in constructing an innings. It drew admiration from the seniors even as the stand-in captain Sehwag dismissed talk of retirements. He was happy that the talent he had watched from up close in Delhi had arrived on the international stage. His century was a confirmation of his dexterity in making runs. However, what stood out was the dynamism that Virat brought into the Indian camp when he took on the Australians and paid them back in the same coin.

Subjected to constant sledging by the players and taunts from the spectators, Virat decided not to allow the Aussies get their way. 'To give it back verbally and then score a hundred is even better,' he said. 'They sledge when they get frustrated. Obviously it was hot out there. They were constantly sledging so that they could spoil our concentration. They were really having a go at us.' Virat was a run short of his century when he got into a verbal spat with the opposition.

'(Ben) Hilfenhaus said something to me that was quite unnecessary. It was out of the blue. He wasn't even bowling. I had just survived a runout on 99. He said something to me that I can't obviously say at the press conference. I gave it back to him. Ishant and I came together and got stuck into them and they got really pissed off. I usually play my cricket like that and I like to give it back,' said Virat as the world enjoyed a glimpse of his combative attitude.

Virat also spoke about his issues with the spectators. 'In Sydney, they were after me because I hadn't scored any runs, and today they were angry because I got a hundred. It hasn't changed; only the

reason has. It is really, really frustrating at times, they say things which shouldn't be said on a cricket field. If they come here to enjoy a game of cricket, they should do that and not get drunk and abuse cricket players. It's not fair; if the players say anything they're fined and banned,' said Virat, putting the issue of aggression and sledging into a clear perspective.

Virat's first century at home – 103 against New Zealand – was in keeping with his decent form. After an innings win at Hyderabad, where Cheteshwar Pujara hit a century, India came to Bangalore and wrapped up the series with a five-wicket victory. Virat got his second Test century and first Man of the Match honour after Dhoni finished the match with a six. Virat was delighted because he had played a crucial role in guiding the chase with an unbeaten knock of 51. He had stolen the limelight from some of the stalwarts and it augured well for Indian cricket that a young batsman had assumed the responsibility to deliver. 'It was a tricky situation when I went out to bat and MS and I took it ten runs at a time. I needed to be more patient and it worked. There was more turn today, it was a great cricket wicket. I always love this crowd.'

Incidentally, Virat had been confident of India achieving a victory at the end of the third day's play. 'Even earlier on, when people asked which hundred is most special to me, I say the hundred in the Adelaide Test against Australia. I didn't have that feeling ever in my life, before or after—and I felt it again today. When your patience and technique is being tested and you manage to score a hundred, it always pleases a batsman.' He was an important element in the middle order when India scaled the peak of 261 to win.

Within three months of the thumping win against New Zealand, the Indian team faced resistance from England, which had done its homework on competing in the sub-continent. Grass on the pitch at Nagpur had been misconstrued as a surface that had essentially been flat. India played four spinners, but the game ended without a result. For Virat, these are still memories to be cherished. In a match

where a bowler (James Anderson) was declared the Man of the Match, there was praise for Virat. His century stood out in the Indian camp even as Dhoni missed his by a run.

He made a realistic self-assessment following his century. 'I was really eager to do well in this series so I probably got a little too desperate to score runs and that is not good for a batsman. You need to be desperate, you need to be hungry, but you can't get too desperate and start putting pressure on yourself. I am really pleased to have got this hundred,' he had remarked.

He was candid in admitting, 'I was waiting for this one innings. I never doubted myself, never thought about what people were saying. I have always believed in my abilities. You can't keep performing in every series or every match, these ups and downs happen, but you need to stay positive and have the same mindset whether you do well, or you don't do well.'

Virat was the toast of the cricket fans and evoked a sensational comment from Gavaskar. 'Till the fourth day of the Nagpur Test, I would have backed Dhoni. Now that Virat has come up with a hundred under trying circumstances, even curbing his natural game, he discovered a good part about himself. He is ready to take on the mantle of Test cricket (captain). That needs to be looked at in a positive manner by everyone concerned, as that is where the future lies,' Gavaskar said, in his show on NDTV. India lost the series 1-2, but Virat matured as a cricketer.

It did not take long for Virat to carve another notable century against Australia. There was much to celebrate about his feat. His 107 at Chennai was timely because it also contributed towards an Indian win. The fans lapped it up. A Virat century. A Dhoni double hundred. It was a triple bonanza for the Indian fans. Once again, Virat assumed a veteran's role by sharing fruitful partnerships with Tendulkar and Dhoni. The Indian captain set an example by walking in at No. 6 to guide the lower half of the innings. The depth in India's batting complemented Virat's efforts for a winning cause. The fact

that he was beginning to play a fundamental part in the team's rise and ensuring that the team could bank on him, saw Virat emerge a key player in the scheme of things.

The sporting Virat chose to give his views on Dhoni's innings before talking about his own. 'If he bats like that, you don't need to say much. Coming in after Tendulkar's wicket, we needed a big partnership and he strung in one with me. When in form, he can hit the ball a mile and take the game away from the opposition. Very few people in the world can bat like that. It was very special to watch. For someone who bats, keeps, and captains in all the three formats, he's incredibly fit. Hats off to him for that!' Thereafter, he was brief about his own knock. 'A few people watching me felt it was weird that I didn't perform well against England. I took some time off the game and came back fresh. I was hungry for runs before the series and it helped.'

Next up was a decisive moment in Virat's career. He was to face searing pace in South Africa, and he did not disappoint. His 119 at Johannesburg at the end of 2013 packed in a lot of substance. Doubts had been raised in the run up to the match about Virat's ability to stand up to scorching pace. Dale Steyn, Vernon Philander and Morne Morkel came hard at Virat, but he put up a solid front, blunted them in style, and won the Man of the Match award for his excellent batsmanhip. His 96 in the second innings helped India set up a target of 458 runs. South Africa gunned for it, but fell short by eight runs after looking to cruise at one point. The drawn result surprised Virat and he did comment on South Africa giving up the idea of going for the win.

'Absolutely, cricket has won. The way this Test match has been played over the last four days, it was pretty competitive with both teams coming back strongly in one session or the other; it was a fair finish. Everyone was pretty shocked honestly, we didn't think that they would stop going for the score because with eight runs an over and with Philander striking the ball pretty well, and he can bat, we

have seen that in the past, I don't know what happened,' said Virat at the end of the match.

His first visit to New Zealand with the senior team was noteworthy for his century at Wellington. The performance in the series helped Virat claim the ninth spot in ICC rankings, the first time he figured in the top ten of the world. His progress had been remarkably sustained and the century in trying conditions at Basin Reserve helped Virat share the limelight with Brendon McCullum, who slammed 302 in the second innings. McCullum's century did not create the winning stage for his team because Virat stood in the way with a strokeful 105 not out. The positive nature of Virat's knock was the biggest gain for India in a series where he aggregated 214 runs in four innings.

Adelaide again beckoned Virat in 2014, this time to produce his best – a century in each innings. Australia set a furious tempo for this Test when David Warner crafted a 163-ball 145 on the opening day. This was a typical Aussie way of launching a contest, but then Virat, the stand-in captain for an injured Dhoni, was not to be found wanting either. He emulated Hazare who had performed a similar feat at the same venue in 1948. Virat acknowledged the help from Tendulkar for the two outstanding knocks of 115 and 141.

'Speaking to Sachin in Mumbai was helpful as far as the mental aspect of the game was concerned, but coming to terms with myself or being at peace with myself is more of a self-realisation. Here, I wasn't thinking about milestones, only about targets. The only thing I kept telling myself was to believe,' he said. 'Just believe in myself. In every ball that I play. The intent was to get a boundary for every ball. That's how I could keep out the good balls. If I was trying to defend already, I am giving the bowler a chance before I play the ball.'

This was also an innings that saw Virat generously employ the sweep shot. He confessed, 'It is probably the first time in my life I've swept so much. Surprisingly, I haven't practiced it that many times. I've been practicing the lap a lot, but not the flat-batted sweep. But it

surprisingly started coming off, I don't know how. I saw the ball, put my foot down, tried to sweep and it came off. I was feeling good about it. Mentally, I was feeling positive that I can sweep and that's a big thing with me.'

Virat set new records in the process of demonstrating his prowess to the Aussie spectators. His aggregate of 256 runs was the best by a player in his first Test as captain.

A target of 364 raised prospects of an exciting finish on the last day. It was intriguing too because a 'rough' on the pitch meant that the surface was not ideal for batting. However, Virat told the team that they had to play for a win. He said later, 'At no point, did we think about not chasing down the score. We have come here to play positive cricket. No sort of negativity is welcome in this group. That's the kind of belief we have come here with. This has been one of our strongest performances overseas in the past two-three years, and I am really proud of the way in which the boys played in this game. They showed a lot of heart and character.'

Virat's philosophy of cricket came to the fore when he remarked, 'Wins and losses are part of this game. We didn't play for a draw. We played for a win. We lost. No problem. If we had won, the questions would have been different, the answers would have been different. We have to maintain this kind of an approach if we have to win abroad. If we try to play for a draw, the negative approach creeps in. I'm only hurt because we didn't cross the line when it looked pretty bright for us. But that's the way sport goes, that's the way Test cricket goes.'

However, the Test left a bitter taste in the mouth from the war of words between the rival players. Warner, Dhawan and Virat attracted fines for their poor behaviour.

Virat ensured that Australia had taken notice of his growing stature before the year ended, with a well-constructed 169 at the majestic Melbourne Cricket Ground. This was to become Dhoni's farewell Test and the shocking announcement came at the end of the

match. Virat was a regal performer indeed, with support from Rahane, who also cracked a century during their 262-run partnership for the fourth wicket. The Indians had managed to force a draw – a first such result in seventeen years at the MCG. Virat and Rahane justified the faith reposed in them by the think-tank of the team. This pair was considered to be technically and temperamentally adept at handling the pressures of international cricket. The centuries they compiled at the MCG established Virat and Rahane as the pair to depend on in the middle order.

Entrusted with the responsibility of captaincy, Virat stepped into the role in style when India played Australia in the fifth and final Test of the 2014-15 series. Virat's splendid run Down Under culminated in yet another century, his fifth on Australian soil. Australia had posted an imposing 572 and India, riding on Virat's century, responded with 475 on the board. Australia, looking to force a win, presented India with a target of 349 to win. On the victory chase, Virat spoke about the positive approach. 'At a certain stage, I thought we could go after the target. I thought it was worth taking that risk. You can try and see what happens and as the situation developed we pulled off a draw. Sometimes you have to take that risk.'

He had no complaints about his team's approach. 'It is always pleasing to see guys stepping up and going out there and competing in difficult situations in Test cricket. Obviously, the result hasn't gone our way, but we have certainly played the kind of cricket we wanted to. As we gain more composure, and improve in a few areas, you will see us cashing in and actually winning Test matches going to the fifth day.'

India did make a decent attempt, but the game ended in a draw. The match brought down the curtain on an acrimonious series, involving two top teams of contemporary cricket.

The Galle International Stadium offers a serene ambience for cricket, but left-arm spinner Rangana Herath unleashed a storm on the Indian camp, with his flair to take wickets and inflict a defeat. It

was an embarrassment for a batting line-up that had claimed proficiency in its handling of slow bowlers. There was abundant purchase for Herath from the pitch and India encountered humiliation in the first of the three-match series in Sri Lanka.

Dhawan and Virat extended their competition at the nets to the middle and their stroke play matched the splendid atmosphere of the ground. However, it was unfortunate that their batting failed to lift the Indian spirits. Herath spun a deadly web and India succumbed to a 63-run defeat. Herath claimed seven wickets in the second innings, after a hundred each in the first innings by Virat and Dhawan had caused concern to the home team. India wasted a lead of 192 runs to leave Virat a dejected man at the presentation ceremony. 'We should have been smarter with how we should have gone about playing the spinners in the second innings. The need of the hour in the second innings was to take calculated risks when you are chasing a small total in the fourth innings. Our intent was lacking. We let the opposition in. It was a case of us not playing fearless cricket – we were tentative,' Virat emphasised. To end on a happy note, India did go on to win the next two Tests and clinch the series, but Virat ended up with bitter memories of the occasion when his eleventh Test century proved futile.

10



The IPL Journey

The Twenty20 format revitalised cricket at a time when big events were being condensed into small packages. Like long-form news encapsulated into blurbs that pop up on newsfeeds. The emphasis was on instant results. A format that was result-oriented was enthusiastically welcomed by young fans of the game. Twenty20 was conceptualised with the aim to win back the young generation, deemed to be lost to football, basketball and tennis. It brought forth a very different kind of youth who believed the best way to play cricket was to play it differently. They were not averse to putting away the coaching manual because of the demands of Twenty20. If truth be told, it worked.

It was a format that produced a new variety of fans. It also created an eclectic cast of cricketers who were happy to pursue their dreams in the shortest format of the game, even as the purists bemoaned the slow death of five-day cricket. This cricket encouraged the genre of robust hitting. There was little room for the faint-hearted because last-over and last-ball finishes became the norm. There was entertainment galore, even for those who did not understand the nuances of the game. It lured spectators from various backgrounds who were happy to treat Twenty20 as a great entertainment package. Although this was a kind of cricket that left the purists exasperated.

The stadiums were packed at T20 games and deserted at most Test venues. The administrators, however, loved it. The success of T20 filled their coffers and it helped them sustain the longer format. Cricket was at a crossroads. It rained sixes at T20 matches. The audience loved and lapped it up. There was hope. A new set of players had emerged to rewrite the rulebook of cricket. It was no longer necessarily played as desired by the coaches. A fresh manual had emerged with the traditionalists wondering if they had any role left to play in the future of the game.

When the idea of a Twenty20 World Cup was mooted by some of the established Test-playing nations, the resistance came from the Indian Board. Stalwarts like Tendulkar and Dravid opted out of the race and the stage was left wide open to the young and untested. They grabbed the opportunities. Young legs on the field brought young admirers in the galleries. Cricket went through a remarkable transformation. A huge rise in female spectators at cricket venues than ever before set a new trend in India, as Dhoni and his team brought home the inaugural Twenty20 World Cup in 2007 by beating Pakistan in a pulsating final at Johannesburg.

The Twenty20 World Cup galvanised the game in the sub-continent. Private leagues, notably the now-defunct Indian Cricket League (ICL), sprung up to celebrate India's triumph and eventually led to the launch of the Indian Premier League (IPL), a brainwave of Lalit Modi, a businessman with a vision to reinvent cricket as an entertainment package. The IPL was actually an offshoot of the ICL that threatened to challenge the official cricket structure. Fearing a parallel league that could undermine its own efforts at promoting the game, the Indian Board banned the ICL. The IPL turned out to be a more than healthy replacement.

Virat followed the fortunes of the Indian team in T20. He entertained hopes of making a mark in the newest form of the game without losing his focus on playing Test cricket. He did not have to wait long as the IPL arrived a season after India's World Cup

triumph. Cricket would never again be the same after 2008, when the first edition of the IPL signalled a revolution of sorts.

The inaugural IPL was a resounding hit. A full house at the Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bangalore heralded a new era on 18 April 2008 and any doubts over the future of 20-over cricket were laid to rest. It was an astonishing night. McCullum walked out to open the innings for Kolkata Knight Riders with Sourav Ganguly, who took strike. He faced eleven more balls before the stage was taken over by McCullum, who swept the opposition with a stunning charge – 158 not out off 73 balls, with ten fours and thirteen sixes. More sixes than fours signified the nature of the game and the changes that batsmen brought to their style.

The administrators appeared mightily relieved at the heavy turnout of cricket lovers. McCullum's knock went a long way in establishing IPL as a successful event in the annual cricket calendar. What more could the spectators have asked for? There was plenty of action, a result to celebrate, and all of it delivered within three and a half hours, the same time one spent watching a movie at a nearby theatre. It hardly mattered which team won because the cricket world was delighted at the outstanding response from the fans of Bangalore. Among those who watched the McCullum show from close quarters was Virat, making an appearance for Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB). He was to remain loyal to the franchise in the subsequent eight editions.

The IPL, with home and away matches, introduced an element of entertainment to attract spectators to the venue with cheerleading girls and music at the ground enlivening the ambience. The television viewership for the event was heartening too, but the franchises insisted on filling up the stands. The support obviously had to come from the players' fraternity. Good performances on the field were recipes for success and the dazzling start that McCullum gave was what clinched the deal. RCB caved in meekly and Virat managed a poor score of one in his IPL debut, but he gained from

playing in and against some of the greats of the game, like Ponting, Dravid and Jacques Kallis.

The best thing about IPL was the opportunity it provided for the youngsters to share space with some of the luminaries of the game. Virat obviously was keen to make the most of it. Virat's first season in IPL was insignificant. In twelve innings, he accumulated a miserable 165 with the highest score being 38, as RCB managed a mere four victories and suffered ten losses. For a high profile team, it was disappointing, but RCB was still learning its early lessons in T20.

A last-ball finish in the final on 1 June 2008 was a blessing for the organisers and a resounding confirmation of IPL's popularity. Chennai Super Kings (CSK) and Rajasthan Royals (RR) were competing for the inaugural IPL crown and the expectations were high in either camp.

A sea of spectators had descended at the DY Patil Stadium in Mumbai. As they stood in a serpentine queue to gain entry, the ticket-holders were fascinated by the sight of Modi, the IPL Commissioner, arriving in a helicopter a few metres from the stadium. This captivating sight showcased the opulence of the event.

CSK posted a target of 164 and RR made a fervent effort, with the equation coming down to eight runs off the last over to be bowled by L Balaji. For RR, a lot depended on the batting skills of Shane Warne and Sohail Tanvir, one of the eleven Pakistan cricketers to figure in the first edition of IPL. Incidentally, Pakistan players were not picked by any of the franchises in the subsequent editions of the IPL because of the November 2008 militant attack on Mumbai. They were part of the 2010 auction, but not one of them found a place in any team.

For Tanvir, it was a memorable tournament. He had destroyed CSK with a 6-for-14 strike at Jaipur when the teams met for the first time. He hit the winning runs in the final, in the company of Warne, who had played the decisive role as player-cum-mentor. The RR

celebrations drove home the point that there was no clear favourite in this brand of cricket. The underdog stood an even chance and RR proved it on that glorious night at the DY Patil Stadium. The cricket administrators had found a mantra to keep the game alive. As the purist would lament, the devil of T20 was born with the success of IPL-1.

The IPL caravan travelled to South Africa in 2009, when the Union Government conveyed its inability to provide security to the tournament because of the General Elections. The event was a huge success and firmly established the IPL as one of the best sporting leagues in the world. The format of the tournament remained the same and Virat was part of the RCB squad that lost the final to Deccan Chargers, at Johannesburg, by two runs. Anil Kumble was at his best, with a spell of 4-0-16-4, but RCB failed to accomplish the modest target of 144 as veterans Kallis and Dravid let the team down. Once again, Virat could not come to terms with the game and his aggregate of 246 was not in keeping with his form and reputation. There was a half-century to boost his image, but Virat continued to be a disappointment.

For RCB, the title remained elusive and it finished third in 2010, with a win over Deccan Chargers though Virat progressed as a batsman. His aggregate (307) was better than ever. It was also the first time that Kartik Murali, a wily Test left-arm spinner, was bowling to Virat in the powerplay. 'I got him on the third ball,' recalled Kartik. 'He was looking to drive me over midwicket, but holed out to (Angelo) Mathews in the deep,' said Kartik. The bowler had noticed an anxious Virat aiming to charge down the pitch and was quick to counter him with a clever change of pace to fox the batsman.

'There was something about Virat that struck me from the time I saw him first (in 2006). His urgency to improve stood out. It was as if he wanted to improve with every innings that he played. It did not matter if he was figuring in a five-day match or a T20. He was always looking to develop and dominate,' said Kartik.