**THE GAME OF ELEVEN**

The day started with the whistle of the train, puffing briskly towards the rain prone woods. The shadow casted by the sky towering trees was enough to cover the entire forest floor with its enchanting fear. In my opinion, it was nearly impossible for anyone to know the presence of any settlements from a distance. The mystical atmosphere was enough to put even a gloomy man to complete enthusiasm in just a sight. The trees for over hundred years had instilled fear among the young. It was in this dense precipitous forest a young vibrant and valor soldier was born.

It was only in one privileged house the radio frequently broke the conversation of the old village woman gathering. Though it was a remote village in the outskirts of the urban settlement, the young privileged lads played the gentlemen’s game of cricket. At the very beginning the people were not completely aware of the game, cricket. They often confused it with crickets’ insect. Since it was a village, the young lads played cricket with their own set of rules and regulations. The boundaries were their main aim, they cared least about the procedure a batsman should follow to achieve the feat. They refused to run between wickets, justifying their lazy action. When a catch is dropped, the fielder was given another chance to take same dropped catch. They had no idea of who is a third umpire. They changed the rules to suit their needs.

*Ravi* was a twelve-year-old young boy who played cricket only in his dreams. Though he had all the capabilities of being a good cricketer he was restricted by his household responsibilities. Despite being poor, he had true faith in God and worked tirelessly to improve the lot of his family. He would walk miles to receive education without overlooking his responsibilities. He would collect dried leaves and twigs and prepare a compost to help his farmer neighbors. *Ravi* had a sister who was just five years; his mother had to wash vessels in the nearby houses to prepare the day’s meal. His good deeds had a positive impact on his village in general and his family in particular. The young village lads refused to provide *Ravi* an opportunity to play cricket in their disorganized team.

*Ravi* had completed his tenth examination. It was the time when a retired cricket coach had come to the village to spend his last years. *Ravi* was the first to visit the coach’s house. *Ravi* wished the coach and conversed with him for hours. The coach on seeing *Ravi’s* interest in cricket wanted to help him. *Ravi* was hesitant to disturb the old aged individual. *Ravi* helped the coach in his household chores and assisted him in his old age aches and pains. The coach to say was a gem of a person, he did not have even a single habit to criticize. He seemed to be a man of bravery and valor, he in his youth had crossed the dense forest, the deep green waters and the breath-taking mountains. He was a man of adventure and conquest.

The coach one day in his leisure hour, called for *Ravi*. *Ravi* being familiar with the call came running to ask what the old man wanted. The coach spoke out his words. He asked *Ravi* if he is interested in playing and learning cricket. *Ravi* without thinking nodded his head in agreement. *Ravi* burst out with tears, he was filled with happiness and joy. The coach had told *Ravi* that he will start his practice session a day after.

The day came, when the coach was to start his training. *Ravi* was at the spot two hours before the stipulated time. The coach arrived; *Ravi* anxiously asked the coach what is the first thing a person must learn to master cricket. The coach told that for any sport including cricket, love and compassion in learning and constant practice will contribute to the success. The coach started with the fielding practice and slowly advanced to batting and bowling. The days passed by and the coach finally concluded with his training.

The coach had a bat which his father had presented him, he also possessed a ball which was signed by little master Sachin himself. *Ravi* grew to become a brave and vibrant young man. He completed his twelfth examination with flying colors in a reputed college in the outskirts of the forest surrounded village.

It was the time when the annual cricket tournament was conducted in the nearby town. The privileged young lads were the first to participate representing their village. Since it was a remote village, the cricket association was formed without any selection. The team mostly included the cream of the society and few upper middle-class youths. The day for the cricket tournament was announced. The village cricket team was practicing with the knowledge that they possessed. They were very anxious since this was their first participation in such a tournament.

The number of villages who were taking part in the tournament were many. The cricket coach wanted *Ravi* to be included in the village team. He did his level best to speak up for *Ravi*, but the rich did not give an opportunity. The coach only managed to get *Ravi* a substitute position. *Ravi* without losing heart, continued to work hard with the hope that he will play cricket one day. The village plains were his play ground. The coach assisted *Ravi* as much as he could. *Ravi* worked from morning till evening, to improve the lot of his family. *Ravi* had blisters on his cotton soft palms. With only two clothes to wear; *Ravi* cherished his childhood only with thought of the gentleman’s game of cricket.

The cricket association announced a handsome reward of Rs.25,000 to the person who emerged as an all-round winner. The winning team would be rewarded with a bicycle and Rs.10,000 for each player excluding the reward of Rs.25,000. *Ravi* was more a practical person, he insisted on trying out and experimenting rather than mere reading. The coach provided *Ravi* with the necessary books he himself had read in his youth, moreover everything cannot be learnt by experience. *Ravi* practiced till the annual cricket tournament, which was not far.

The day finally came with the opening match between village *Samrat* and village *Ashok*. The match initially started well but ended unusually. The *Samrat* team had won the toss and elected to bat first. The team scored a century in just ten overs; the projected score was 210 in 20 overs. The run rate was on the rise and not even a single wicket was lost. The entire cricket ground was vibrant and enthusiastic. The *Ashokan* team lost their hopes; they tried their level best but couldn’t tackle the batting team. The team had nearly ten substitutes, who were seeking for an opportunity. During the vigorous gameplay the mid-on fielder was severely injured. The *Ashokan* team lost their hope completely, the coach called for a substitute who was a young lad of 18. The substitute was given a chance which proved fatal for the opposition. The run rate which was towering as high as 8 runs per over sharply dropped to 4.3. Two wickets were lost for just 15 runs; at the end of 18 overs the *Samrat* team had managed to score only 140 runs with the loss of 7 wickets. The final total was 155 with just 15 runs given in the last 2 overs. The *Ashokan* team easily won the match in just 15 overs; the team had a centurion who scored his century in just 65 balls.

The tournament progressed with the *Ashokan* team winning almost all the matches that they had played. The village of *Theni* was the only village to top the list, as they their strike rate was the most among the teams who participated. The *Ashokan* team reached the finals with golden colors. The little young master was prepared to give his level best in the very much anticipated tournament finals. The old coach supported *Ravi* till the last moment. The final match was to be played between village *Ashok* and *Theni*. *Ravi* was no longer a substitute; he became a permanent member of the *Ashokan* team in which he showcased his ability to play cricket. The old coach instilled *Ravi* with confidence, courage and true batsmanship. Ravi’s Family members were filled with happiness, the coach financially supported them in the absence of *Ravi*. The night before the match Ravi was sleepless, he had confidence but something kept him awake, with the words of the coach still ringing in his hears *Ravi* slowly closed his eyes.

The day began with the sound of the trumpet signifying the beginning of the grand finals. The toss went in favor of the *Ashokan* team, who elected to bowl first. The entire ground was filled spectators from both the villages who were constantly encouraging their team with a vibrant mindset. The pitch was wet and moist; the temperature was nearly 25o Celsius. The ground was lively and energetic. The match started with the boundary; anticipation rose among the spectators. There was utter silence; all eyes were on the bowler who was under pressure. The ground was raining boundaries the run rate was at its peak, almost all the balls easily found their way to the boundary. The bowlers were famished as their spell did not have any effect; the batsman punished the *Ashokan* team. At the end of 10 overs the score was 100 for the loss of only one wicket. *Ravi* was heartbroken; he was initially scared but decided to bowl the next over. The storm never stopped the batsman were on fire, the score was rising rapidly. The 12th over was a golden one, the second wicket was lost which was followed by another. The 14th was a maiden over which was never expected. The team total was moving slowly, the 18th over saw the fall of two more wickets. The team which had started well, ended with an irresponsible innings. The team concluded with 150 runs to defend.

The second inning was completely a contrast to the previous one. The team lost two initial wickets in 5 overs. The team also struggled in their batting line up; the wet pitch provided a tough fight since the spinners had an advantage. The seamers also did their best, but it was the spinners who changed the game. The wicket keeper played his game; his stumping was the best ever. The fielder on their part gave their complete to defend their intermediate total. At the end of 10 overs the score was 60 for the loss of 3 wickets, *Ravi* who was the next batsman was under pressure. He did not know what to do, he suddenly started sweating and his heart began pumping faster, adrenaline was secreted in excess, his tongue was dried and his concentration grew severe. The young lad emerged before the enthusiastic crowd; he was afraid at the anticipating spectators but had the confidence of winning the tournament.

The first ball faced was a dead one, it almost injured his ankle. The over was a poor one with just two runs coming from it. It was the 15th over and the team only had managed to score 90. The projected score was 120. *Ravi* had no hope until the words of the old coach started ringing in his hears. He started his play with a boundary; the spectators were on the edge of their seats. The 16th over was an expensive one, with 25 runs coming from it. The opposition team tried their best but had no result. The first ball of the next over was struck high above the batsman, the mid-on fielder came under it and caught it easily. The entire ground was filled with silence; *Ravi’s* hopes were shattered. The third umpire after examining found that it was a no ball. *Ravi* breathed a breath of relief. It was the last over the *Ashokan* needed only 10 runs to register a victory.

The first ball was a mighty six. The next ball was a disaster, *Ravi*’s companion was clean bowled, though it was not a crucial wicket at this point in the game it put terrible pressure on the batting team. It was the last ball; the ground had lost its usual vigor; the fellow opposition team was anxiously waiting. The birds too seem to anticipate a good result; there was anxiety, pressure and tension all around. The ball was bowled, *Ravi* with a swing of the bat struck the ball which almost landed it on the roof. The coach was filled with tears as he watched the ball sail over the boundary. The chanting of Ravi’s name echoed throughout the ground and the dream that gave him sleepless nights finally came true.