



Ranji Trophy: Palghar Express gathers steam

Five years ago, **Shardul Thakur**'s still nascent cricket career was in limbo. He had been dropped from the Mumbai U-19 squad. He was overweight, his bowling was wayward, and an ultimate meeting with one of his idols hadn't quite gone to plan.

Now, you don't need to be a cricketer in India to speak about an encounter with Sachin Tendulkar as a life-changing moment. But if you do happen to be a cricketer, that too one from Mumbai, then the meeting ends up gaining even more heft. Strangely though, Thakur's strongest memories of standing shoulder to shoulder with Tendulkar are that of him listening cluelessly to the cricket great delivering an impromptu crash-course on the variety of deliveries that a fast bowler should possess.

So rather than try to inculcate the inimitable advice that had come his way — mainly because he couldn't fathom it — Thakur decided to focus on the simpler aspects in his quest for redemption, starting with a steadfast decision to shed the excess kilos. Everything else fell into place from that point on. Even his erratic bowling.

Five years on, the 23-year-old is Mumbai's go-to man. He's lean, he's fit and he's got his bowling in control. As Mumbai take on mighty Karnataka, Thakur will once again be the talisman of a young team as it looks to outlast the in-form defending champions in their backyard. He also has 40 wickets in his kitty and is presently second in the Ranji Trophy wicket-taker's list. And, as he insists with a smile, he has finally put the Tendulkar doctrine into practice with great success.

"This season I'm trying things which Sachin sir had told me. I've been bowling cross-seam, worked on my wrist position. But my key still remains being steady, patient and not let anything deter me from hitting my spots, just like he had said," Thakur adds.

Patience, though, is not an alien concept for Thakur, even if cross-seam might have sounded like one back in his U-19 days. A resident of Palghar, the fast bowler used to spend seven hours in a train travelling back and forth while his cricket career was still in its infancy. While the rest of his locality friends were fast asleep, Thakur's journey would begin at 3.30 am so that he could make the 'mail' train at 4am and reach Churchgate by around 7.30. With kit bag in tow, Thakur would make the journey to Mumbai often standing beside the train toilets, bearing the stench and jostling for space. Today, Thakur, who has five five-wicket hauls this season, is called the Palghar Express.

Travel solution

As he would make his way back, Thakur would look enviously at his teammates as they planned evening get-togethers and made dinner plans. He of course had a three-and-a-half-hour train-ride ahead of him. Then one day, Dinesh Lad — former coach of Rohit Sharma and father of Siddhesh Lad, who is also part of the Mumbai squad — came up with a rather enticing offer to ease his travel worries.

Lad wanted his young ward, who by then had already earned renown for having struck six-sixes in an over at school level and had an eye-catching out-swing, to get transferred to a school in Borivali and shift base to his home. But the youngster, though tempted, wasn't too comfortable accepting it. Thakur, after all, didn't want to inconvenience his coach, and was keen on still making the lengthy travel. But then he relented.

"Lad sir already had one cricketer accommodated at his place and he had his son Siddhesh and daughter at home too. It was a big obligation, and I didn't want their family to be disturbed. I had an uncle in Vile Parle. So whenever there were day games, I used to spend one day at Lad sir's place and the other two days at my uncle's house," he recalls.

In the school nets, he would bowl to the likes of Rohit Sharma, who had already represented India A by then and was already making waves in Mumbai cricket. Thakur remembers the buzz around the future India star back then, especially when the India opener would return from a tour.

"Those moments inspired all of us. We wanted to be where Rohit had reached. If someone from our school could do it, then why not us," he says.

These days, Thakur counts Rohit as a teammate, even if he might presently be away in Australia for the World Cup. And he's aware that both his idols, Rohit and Tendulkar, will be checking on his and the team's progress hoping that the young pacer can inspire Mumbai to yet another Ranji final.