

The glaring fault in Naim

BISHWAJIT ROY

When the entire batting unit's inept approach against a quality bowling attack on a belter comes under scrutiny, it may not be wise to single out any individual.

Still, the time has come to raise some concerns about Mohammad Naim, since an opener's lingering fragility can jeopardise the entire team.

There is no way to justify crucifying the 24-year-old batter solely for his 20-run innings against Pakistan in Wednesday's Asia Cup Super Four match in Lahore. Instead, the manner in which he keeps throwing his wicket away after showing a glimpse of promise deserves serious consideration ahead of the World Cup.

Naim has only played seven ODIs, which is insufficient to dismiss a batter if the team management sees potential. The left-hander, however, is not a novice to international cricket, having made his debut in a T20I against India in November 2019. Apart from playing for the Bangladesh A squad, he went on to play 35 T20Is and one Test. The number is small, but it is likely enough for one to appreciate the distinction between international and domestic cricket.

Naim, a prolific run-scorer in domestic cricket, has hit 16, 28, and 20 runs in three innings in the ongoing Asia Cup to raise his average to 12.33. Having negotiated the tough initial phase to get a start on all three occasions, unwarranted aggression saw his innings end prematurely.

Former captain and current national selector Habibul Bashar pointed at one of the key reasons behind Naim's failure.

"His [Mohammad Naim] innings was built without singles. We found that the dot ball percentage is very high in Naim's innings. See, he made good starts and looks so good but if I see the matter from a coaching perspective, then I must say he lacks the understanding of how to milk those singles," Bashar told The Daily Star yesterday.



Tigers reach Colombo yesterday to play the remaining Asia Cup Super-4 matches after losing first game against Pakistan in Lahore on Wednesday. PHOTO: BCB

In comparison with his teammates, Naim's T20I performance (35 matches, 815 runs, strike rate 103.42 and average 23.97) may not seem that bad. According to veteran coach Nazmul Abedeen Fahim, the batter enjoyed sporadic successes due to the nature of the format.

"He is not batting with the right frame of mind. I am not sure whether he can understand the idea of calculative risks, otherwise how come he looks aggressive against every delivery. In my opinion, every batter has his own pattern but, so far, I didn't find any pattern in Naim's batting.

"It's not all about the question of form, rather the question of understanding the game. He got little bit of success in T20s because of his aggression but he cannot survive in ODIs and Test if he doesn't understand that every ball is not there to be hit. He has to understand that one need to spend some time in ODIs and Tests to build an innings," observed Fahim.

Fahim also believes the coaching staff should take the responsibility if they believe the batter has the potential to serve the team but lacks knowledge of the fundamentals.

The selectors fought in favour of Najmul Hossain Shanto for long and it paid off. There is nothing wrong with giving a player enough chances if he is picked for the team but the investment must be made in the right place.

"His go-to mindset, which is to punish the ball, works in domestic cricket because of the quality of bowling. He scored big runs in domestic cricket... but you have to rotate the strikes in international cricket if you want to carry your knocks," said Bashar.

It remains to be seen how far a batter can go when he lacks the skills to take singles and rotate strike, something that ideally should be a batter's prerequisite knowledge before entering the national side.



Sheikh Morsalin calmly taps in Bishwanath Ghosh's superbly executed low cross to equalise in the 62nd minute as Bangladesh pulled off a 1-1 draw against superior Afghanistan at the Bashundhara Kings Arena yesterday. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'We were better in terms of chance creation'

SPORTS REPORTER

Having shared the spoils with Afghanistan in the two FIFA-friendly matches, Bangladesh captain Jamal Bhuiyan said that the men in red and green were unlucky to have not notched a win over their superior opponents.

Bangladesh, who played out a goalless draw in the first match, came from behind to hold Afghanistan to a 1-1 draw in the second game at the Bashundhara Kings Arena yesterday. Sheikh Morsalin equalised 10 minutes after Denmark-based forward Jabar Sharza gave Afghanistan a lead with a header in the 52nd minute.

"We were the better side in terms of creating chances in the two matches. Unfortunately, we could not utilise those and we have to learn from these two matches. We have to get better and improve ourselves," said Jamal at the post-match conference, for which the Afghan officials were a no show.

Afghanistan head coach Abdullah Al Mutairi and Bangladesh assistant coach Hasan Al Mamun were sent off during the match following a spat between the two at the touchline.

With the aim to beat Bangladesh at their home ground for the first time, Al Mutairi fielded eight foreign-based players to dominate from the onset. Bangladesh, however, survived the initial pressure and went on to put on a better display than the Afghans in the second half on a rain-soaked ground.

"I think Afghanistan dominated the first 20 minutes of the first half but we controlled the game, especially in the second half. We had good chances from which we were able to take one and made a comeback in the match," Jamal added. "We expected that Afghanistan would press high and dominate us from the first minute but we adapted to it. All the boys adapted well. Besides, the coach brought some changes in the second

half, especially some small tweaks were made and then we were able to dominate them."

Jamal also admitted that the habit of playing on wet outfields had helped his troops yesterday.

Right back Bishwanath Ghosh was the one who set up the goal for Morsalin with a low cross. Morsalin also struck his first international goal against Maldives from a Bishwanath cut-back during the SAFF Championship.

"As we play together in the same club, we know how and where to deliver the ball and who will move where. I have a good understanding and communication with my clubmate Rakib [Hossain], who provided me with the ball and I just pushed it on the path of Morsalin and Jamal. Moraslin was the first to get to it," said Bishwanath, who also said that he would have been happier if Bangladesh came out of the game as winners.

The two friendly matches were basically arranged to prepare Bangladesh for October's World Cup and Asian Cup pre-qualifiers and head coach Javier Cabrera was convinced that they would get past Maldives.

"The target was to prove ourselves that we are ready to beat Maldives and we are absolutely convinced that this team has what it needs to qualify and to play in Australia in November," said the Spanish coach.

The 38-year-old coach, however, did not want to dwell on the mistakes made by his charges in the two games.

"I think we are on the right track again. I don't think we should now try to find what we have done wrong. I think we have had a very good window. We did not only have a very good game today but played well in both matches. We are progressing well and we have to keep doing the same. We will see for sure, there will be things that we can improve, but at this level, we can achieve something important," said Cabrera.

Djokovic, Alcaraz in a different league: Zverev

REUTERS

Carlos Alcaraz has separated himself from the chasing pack and is performing at the same level as 23-times Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic, said Alexander Zverev on Wednesday after his US Open quarter-final defeat to the Spaniard.

Zverev was once viewed as the best bet to break the "Big Three's" stranglehold on men's tennis but the 26-year-old German has failed to kick on and is still seeking a first Grand Slam title.

With Roger Federer in retirement and Rafa Nadal likely to end his career after next season, Alcaraz has joined Djokovic at the top of the men's game, and Zverev is perhaps best placed to pass judgement on the power shift having lost to both recently.

"I played Novak in Cincinnati (last month), I played Carlos here. They're very similar from the level of the game," Zverev told reporters after defending champion Alcaraz outclassed him 6-3 6-2 6-4.

"There are some things Novak does better; there are some things Carlos does better. I think they're at a level of their own at the moment."

At 36, Djokovic is playing some of his best tennis and is chasing a 24th Grand Slam title to match Margaret Court's all-time singles record.

The duo have dominated the tour this season with the Serb winning the Australian and French Opens while Alcaraz, 20, upstaged him at Wimbledon for his second Grand Slam crown.

"The other guys have got to catch up," Zverev said. "It's as simple as that."



Cristiano Ronaldo, who this year marks his 20th anniversary in the national side, will lead Portugal in their top-of-the-table clash in Euro 2024 qualifying Group J when they visit the Tehelne Pole in Bratislava to take on hosts Slovakia tonight. With four wins from four, group leaders Portugal have stayed perfect so far and would want to continue this run against Slovakia and Luxembourg, who they meet three days later. PHOTO: X

Rebuilding Brazil host Bolivia

AGENCIES

Brazil will resume their search for an elusive sixth World Cup title when they host Bolivia in Belem for the opening round of CONMEBOL World Cup qualifiers on Friday night.

The vibe is very different from the start of its past five South American World Cup qualifying campaigns, though, because the Selecao are rebuilding with an interim coach, their star player not based in Europe and promising young players are either struggling for form or injured.

New coach Fernando Diniz, Al-Hilal striker Neymar, and low-scoring Richarlison represent the different faces of Brazil's uncertainty at the beginning of the road leading to the 2026 World Cup. And this time the Selecao will be under more pressure because their archrival, Argentina, are the World Cup champions.

However, the Selecao are still huge favourites in a clash against a side with one of the worst away records in international football, away from the altitude of La Paz.

With Diniz taking charge of Brazil until Carlo Ancelotti's arrival next summer, he will hope to set the Italian up with a good start in qualifying for the 2026 finals. His interim tenure will begin on Friday.

Diniz, a coach without a lot of silverware but with a lot of attacking style, will start his interim tenure Friday.

"Diniz sees football in a different way," striker Rodrigo told journalists upon arrival in Belem in the early hours of Tuesday. "Everyone here is very excited, with a lot of anticipation about this new cycle."

Brazil will be without the injured Vinicius Jr,



and two other players who were also in the latest World Cup. Lucas Paqueta was removed from the squad due to a Premier League investigation that reportedly links him to illegal betting. Antony was dropped on Monday after details of a domestic violence accusation against him emerged this week.

Brazil remain the only nation who has qualified for every World Cup to date, and they will keep that record up if they can continue the home form they showed in reaching Qatar, winning all eight matches on home soil, ignoring the farcical tie against Argentina which was abandoned at 0-0 and never replayed.

Since 2009, Brazil have only dropped two points at home in World Cup qualifying, and they still maintain their astonishing record of having never lost a home qualifier in history.

In contrast, Brazil are matched up with a nation that has forgotten the taste of winning an away qualifier.