Alessandro Costacurta thinks it wasn't Bastoni's fault alone that Italy was out of World Cup qualification

NEW DELHI: Pinpointing the crucial moment when Alessandro Bastoni ended with a red card, after a clumsy challenge on Memic, former AC Milan defender Alessandro Costacurta said going back a few frames, might reveal how the long kick clearance from Gigi Donnarumma and Gianluca Mancini might have equally been responsible for the penalty conceded after Italy led 1-0.



Bastoni, playing out of position, was careless no doubt but Costacurta told Sky Sports, that Mancini ought to have expected the header. "And even on the sending off, the carelessness isn't just Bastoni's. He made a mistake, but Mancini should expect the header and should start earlier, let's not point the finger at Bastoni alone. On Donnarumma's clearance, what was our situation? You have to expect the opponent to get it, and Mancini starts late on Donnarumma's clearance, starts later, and so Bastoni goes in. It's not just Bastoni's fault, who obviously should never come on because it's better to stay with 11 men anyway," he explained.

Costacurta also said the quantity of elite talent in Italy had come down. "Do you know how many Italians, in the top four of the table, played on the last matchday of Serie A?" he told Sky Sports. "If we look at those who are now qualified for the Champions League, namely Inter, Milan, Napoli, and Como, in total they had six Italians on the pitch out of 44: that must mean something... If we then broaden the discussion to the six who are in Europe, we only add seven, and that still becomes too few, because we're talking about 13 out of 66. Presidents and coaches talk about changing things, but either they don't understand, or there's something missing for Italian footballers," he noted.

Costacurta also said Donnarumma hadn't helped things.

"It's clear that we're stronger than Bosnia, but do you think the pressure our players are under is the same as that faced by a Bosnian athlete? No. We, by sporting culture, would either want them all blessed and saintly or we'd leave them tied up in the middle of the street: this mentality doesn't help when you don't have players with a certain ego. I've played with players with monstrous egos, who were scary. When Donnarumma, as captain of Italy, continues to get angry, it's not in the best interests of the national team. There's no point in trying to show off what a great personality he has. Some people waste their nervous energy. The sporting culture in Italy doesn't help young players; it's very difficult for them to get on the pitch and give their best. I also blame the fans for booing them, because the result must be immediate," he said.

There had been debate going into the match if Bastoni, chased by Barcelona, should have been picked. "Those who criticize Gattuso for having him in central defense—he plays on the left for Inter— "They make me laugh. Let's bring back Bonucci or Baresi, who do you put in defense? Bastoni is definitely in that moment, but I think they talked. Bastoni wasn't physically well, but who can play there? Is Gatti better than Bastoni? Finally, is Calafiori better than Bastoni? I don't think so," he said.

Nuwan Thushara files lawsuit against SLC for IPL NOC

NEW DELHI: Sri Lanka fast bowler Nuwan Thushara has filed a lawsuit in the Colombo District Court against Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) after he was denied a no-objection certificate (NOC) to play in the IPL as a result of failing new and stricter fitness tests.

Thushara's legal argument centres around his contract with SLC ending on March 31, 2026 - after which he intended to step away from international cricket - making the enforcement of an NOC for SLC unreasonable and a barrier to his livelihood. While Thushara's argument notes the loss of income from missing the IPL - he's part of the Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) squad - the timing of the legal action has almost certainly ruled him out of the tournament.

The case, in which SLC president Shammi Silva, secretary Bandula Dissanayake, treasurer Sujeewa Godaliyadda and CEO Ashley de Silva have been named defendants, is set to be taken up again on April 9. That date is the earliest the case can be heard as Sri Lanka's courts will be closed over the Easter weekend, and even then it is extremely unlikely that it will be settled in a single hearing. This means Thushara will at the very least miss two more weeks of the IPL, which began on March 28.

ICC regulations stipulate that an NOC from a home board is required to participate in overseas leagues, but they do not mention specific criteria a home board must use to grant or deny it. The ICC leaves the conditions for issuing an NOC to the discretion of the individual boards. This allows boards to follow their own internal policies for granting the NOC; for example, SLC has previously denied NOCs based on players being allowed to participate in two overseas leagues a year.

The question of whether SLC can legally withhold that certificate from a player who is no longer under a central contract is now set to be tested. As per legal documents seen by ESPNcricinfo, SLC had formally informed Thushara that he would not be granted an NOC on March 24. Thushara claims to have requested an NOC multiple times, verbally and in writing on March 15 and 23, before eventually being denied. While SLC is yet to respond to his follow-up on March 28, Thushara claims he was informed unofficially that he would once again be denied the NOC.

SLC's reasoning centres around its new mandatory fitness requirements, which have been spearheaded by the selection committee led by former fast bowler Pramodya Wickramasinghe following Sri Lanka's poor performance in the recent Men's T20 World Cup.

There are five components to the SLC fitness test: a 2 kilometre run, 20 metre sprint, a 5-0-5 agility test, a skinfold test, and a counter movement jump (CMJ). Each of these tests allows for a player to gain a maximum of 29 points total - players need to attain at least 17 points to be considered for selection - with the 2km run and skinfold test holding the most weight.

"If you fair poorly in those two, it will be very hard to pass," a SLC source told ESPNcricinfo. These tests have been a regular part of player training since 2021. However, they were not used as strict selection criteria, rather as a guide, particularly when making calls between two similarly skilled players.

Central to Thushara's argument is that such fitness requirements were not a prerequisite for an NOC in the past, and that his current fitness levels are consistent with what he has maintained over his career, including in 2024 and 2025 when SLC had granted him NOCs.

Thushara's case has similarities to that of South Africa's Tabraiz Shamsi, who took Cricket South Africa (CSA) to the Johannesburg High Court in December 2025. He was not centrally contracted by CSA and had withdrawn from an SA20 league contract. CSA refused to grant him a full-duration NOC to play in the rival International League T20 (ILT20), aiming to protect its own tournament's player pool. Shamsi argued that because he held no active contract with either CSA or the SA20 franchise, the board's withholding of the NOC was an act of "bad faith" to protect its own commercial interests. The South African High Court sided with Shamsi, issuing an interim order forcing CSA to grant the full NOC, setting a major precedent for global player mobility.

The Shamsi ruling proved that when a player is outside a central contract, a board cannot use the ICC's NOC policy purely to protect its commercial interests. Thushara's case takes this a step further, and asks whether a board can legally enforce its internal selection policies on a player who has walked away from the national set-up.

Atletico Madrid, FC Barcelona start 3-games to capture attention in Spain

MADRID: La Liga leader FC Barcelona returns to Atletico Madrid's Metropolitano Stadium on Saturday evening for a match that could prove decisive in this season's title race and begins a run of three games in 11 days between the two sides.

Just four days after Saturday's league game, the two teams will meet again next Wednesday in the first leg of their Champions League quarterfinal, with the return leg at the Metropolitano on April 14.

Barcelona returns to La Liga action with a four-point lead over Real Madrid in the standings, although that could be cut to one point if Real Madrid wins away to struggling Mallorca on Saturday afternoon.

Atletico Madrid and Barcelona have already met three times this season, and the results make it difficult to predict what will happen in the coming days, according to Xinhua.

Barcelona first beat Atletico 3-1 at Camp Nou at the start of December, but Atletico then produced a stunning display to exploit Barcelona's high defensive line in a 4-0 win in the first leg of the Copa del Rey semifinal in February.

Barcelona then dominated a tense second leg and won 3-0 at Camp Nou, although that was not enough to deny Atletico Madrid a place in the Copa del Rey final.

Barcelona suffered a major setback during the international break when Raphinha picked up a hamstring injury that will keep him out for at least a month. His importance was underlined by the fact that he missed Barca's 4-0 defeat at the Metropolitano through injury, but started three weeks later in the 3-0 win.

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick should have right back Jules Kounde and Eric Garcia available, but Alejandro Balde remains a doubt, while striker Robert Lewandowski may need a rest after his efforts with Poland during the international break. Atletico Madrid also has players who made a big effort for their countries, with winger Ademola Lookman, who Barcelona struggled to contain in its last visit to the Metropolitano, playing two full games for Nigeria, while David Hancko did the same for Slovakia.

Others such as Jose Gimenez also played heavy minutes, while the Argentine trio of Julian Alvarez, Nahuel Molina and Nico Gonzalez all clocked up plenty of air miles during the fortnight. Three games between the two teams in such a short span will almost certainly offer fans tactical adjustments, controversy and plenty of tension, and with so much at stake the series promises to be fascinating.

India's S8UL and GodLike Esports selected for 2026 Esports Club Partner program

NEW DELHI: The Esports Foundation (EF) has selected S8UL and GodLike Esports, two of India's leading esports clubs, for its 2026 Club Partner Program. They join 40 global organisations in a $20 million (approx. INR 189 crore) annual initiative aimed at building a sustainable and connected esports ecosystem.

Now in its third year, the program provides participating clubs with up to $1 million (approx. INR 9.4 crore) in funding, along with strategic support and international exposure leading up to the Esports World Cup (EWC) 2026.

S8UL made history last year as the first Indian organisation selected for the program. The four-time Esports Awards winner has since expanded its global presence across competition and content. S8UL competed at EWC 2025 in Apex Legends, Chess, and EA FC.

GodLike Esports now joins S8UL as the second Indian club in the program. Both organisations will roll out initiatives, including content, creator collaborations, fan campaigns, watch parties, and community events to bring Indian fans closer to the EWC.

Since its launch in 2023, the program has invested over $100 million (approx. INR 948 crore) into clubs worldwide, supporting development across competitive operations, marketing, and fan engagement. In 2025 alone, participating clubs delivered more than 330 million campaign views and engaged over 10 million fans through 370 initiatives. More than 130 watch parties were hosted globally, while the Superfan program brought over 2,000 fans to the EWC 2025 arenas in Riyadh.

The selected 2026 clubs reach a combined audience of over 300 million fans across North America, Europe, MENA, China, Korea, Southeast Asia, India, and Latin America. For India, this marks a significant step forward. S8UL's inclusion last year allowed Indian players like Nihal Sarin to compete under their banner in chess. Now with GodLike also on board, Indian esports continues to gain ground on the world stage. The program aims to provide financial stability to professional esports organisations, helping them expand into new titles and grow global fanbases rather than relying solely on prize money.

Bogey free Kochhar in Top 10 at International Series Japan

CHIBA : India's Karandeep Kochhar fought his way into the top ten of the leaderboard courtesy a solid 4-under 67 after the first round at the US$ 2 million International Series Japan. Kochhar lies three shots behind the leader, Korean Hongtaek Kim, who led the way on the opening day after shooting a fine seven-under 64.

Kochhar's start today was as sedate as they come. Teeing off from the 10th, he made nine consecutive pars through his first nine holes - his round coming to life after the turn, with four birdies in the 1st, 4th, 6th and 8th holes.

Meanwhile, Jeev Milkha Singh (T-85) and Gaganjeet Bhullar (T-103) shot rounds of 1-over 72 and 2-over 73 respectively, and have a bit of work to do on Friday.

Korea's Kim leads from compatriot Younghan Song and Thailand's Poom Saksansin, who both recorded 65s here at Caledonian Golf Club, in what is the opening event of the season on The International Series.

The stakes are high with players trying to get points on the board early on The International Series Rankings – which sees the leading players at the end of the season earns place on the LIV Golf League.

Swiatek appoints former coach of Nadal & Raducanu

WARSAW: Wimbledon champion Iga Swiatek will work with Francisco Roig - the former coach of Rafael Nadal and Emma Raducanu - as she looks to turn around her inconsistent form.

Poland's Swiatek has struggled to find her rhythm in 2026, exiting the Australian Open and Indian Wells at the quarter-final stage.

The 24-year-old tends to perform better on clay, having won four of her six Grand Slam titles at the French Open, and has drafted in Roig in preparation for next month's event in Paris, according tov BBC sport.

Swiatek confirmed the partnership on Instagram, writing "welcome to the team, Francisco! Very excited for this new chapter".

Spain's Roig coached Briton Raducanu for five months between 2025 and 2026, but is best known for his 17-year stint with 22-time Grand Slam champion Nadal.

FA Cup quarterfinals on return to international break

LONDON: The Premier League will have to wait to resume after the international break, with the four FA Cup quarterfinals taking center stage in England this weekend.

The timing of the quarterfinals appears unusual, as it means some Premier League sides will not play between March 22 and April 10 or 11, a three-week break just as the season enters its decisive stage.

However, Chelsea coach Liam Rosenior should welcome a return to action as his side faces Port Vale for a place in the semifinals.

Premier League defeats to Newcastle United and Everton, along with an 8-2 Champions League exit to Paris Saint-Germain before the break, have increased the pressure on Rosenior, whose side has not won since a 4-2 victory after extra time against second-division Wrexham in the fifth round, according to BBC sport.

Port Vale visits Stamford Bridge bottom of League One, the third division, and although it produced the shock of the previous round with a 1-0 home win over Sunderland, Chelsea should be expected to win comfortably.

In the current circumstances, however, anything other than a convincing victory would bring further pressure on the coach.

Manchester City at home to Liverpool is the standout tie of the round, with Pep Guardiola's side chasing a cup double after its triumph in the Carabao Cup.

With Manchester City out of Europe and nine points behind Arsenal in the Premier League, Guardiola has every reason to field his strongest side in the FA Cup as he looks to end the season with two trophies.

Liverpool travels to Paris in the Champions League next Wednesday, leaving coach Arne Slot with a dilemma.

Winning the FA Cup would salvage something from a disappointing season, but he will also need his best players fresh to face the European champions.

China's Five-Year Plan details the targets for AI deployment

China has approved its 15th Five-Year Plan [PDF] setting out the country's economic, education, social, and industrial priorities through to 2030. As might be expected, there is a significant number of references to AI, with the technology mentioned in several contexts.

AI is grouped alongside quantum computing, biotechnology, and energy as paths that are to be pursued as part of the country's strategic science policy. The document calls for more work in developing high-performance AI chips and the software to support them in this context. There's also a commitment to academic and industry research on new model architectures and the core algorithms underpinning them.

Development to communications technologies such as satellite systems, 5G+ (sometimes referred to as 5G-A or 5G Advanced) and 6G networks is to support AI workloads as part of a broader push to improve the country's infrastructure for data transmion, general communication and data processing.

In the section of the Five-Year Plan dedicated to digital infrastructure, the use of AI falls into three components: computing power, AI models, and the organisation and dissemination of data across China.

The government calls for national computing hubs described as "intelligent computing clusters", and proposes market mechanisms such as the lease of computeing resources to give access to a large a swathe of the population as possible. There are also to be new ways in which government bodies will procure the computing services they need. The compute hubs the government proposes are also intended to reduce the barriers smaller firms face to access the very latest in technology.



The government wants the theoretical work behind model training and inference to continue as research and in manufacturing, and refers specifically to multi-modal, agent-based, and "embodied" AI. It sees the technology as playing an increasing role in areas of the economy like manufacturing, energy, agriculture, and service industries. It cites industrial design, production processes, general operations, energy system management, and agricultural production as areas where the use of AI should be increased and encouraged. In the service sector, the text calls out the finance, logistics, and software services sectors.

For the general technology-using Chinese consumer, the government wants to see an increase in the number and type of AI-enabled devices, including phones, computers, and robots, and links the use of AI to education, healthcare, care for the elderly care, and social service provision. In these settings, it envisages adaptive learning systems in education, diagnostic support in healthcare, and welfare system management.

At the national and local government levels, the Five-Year Plan wants the digital services provided by all elements of the public sector to increase in scope and ability, based on integrated data systems built around standard models. It calls for the use of AI models in general administration, and the assessment of risk to public safety.

The government is generally quite conservative in its approach to cooperation with other nations, suggesting that it may be possible for the country to participate with outside organisations on international standards around data flows and infrastructure.

The issue of governance and regulation of data forms a relatively substantial part of the discussion in the document, calling for specific leagal and regulatory frameworks for AI, including rules on the registration of new algorithms, security, and overall transparency. It cites common risks to AI use that may affect the economy, including data misuse and deepfakes.

Given the size of the country's population, it's perhaps not surprising that there is little mention of specific steps the country will take to ensure its role in the evolution of AI. Over the course of the next five years, the details are more likely to emerge as events observable by China-watchers.

But as the pages of this site can attest, the country's chosen path for AI rests more on smaller, open, freely-available, efficient models than the approach more common in the West: large, proprietary models controlled by two or three major players based on hardware from mostly one supplier.

Quantum circuits have a hidden weakness and it changes everything

Picture setting up an intricate line of dominoes, where each piece must fall perfectly to trigger the next. The goal is a smooth chain reaction that leads to an impressive final result.

Quantum circuits work in a similar way. They are built from many small steps, known as ("operations"), that act together to process information. When everything functions correctly, these steps combine to produce powerful computational outcomes.

Now imagine that every domino in the chain is slightly unstable. In quantum systems, this instability is called "noise." While small amounts of noise exist in all physical systems, in quantum circuits, it can accumulate over time and create significant disruptions.

This raises an important question. If every step in a quantum circuit is affected by noise, does building longer and more complex circuits still make sense? Quantum circuits are central to technologies such as quantum computers, which are expected to solve problems beyond the reach of today's machines.

A new theoretical study has taken a close look at how noise influences these circuits. The results show that noise places a surprisingly strict limit on how deep a quantum circuit can be, meaning how many steps can be applied in sequence. At the same time, noise makes parts of these circuits easier to simulate using classical computers.

The research was led by Armando Angrisani and Yihui Quek at EPFL, Antonio Anna Mele at the Free University of Berlin, and Daniel Stilck França at the University of Copenhagen. Their findings were published today (April 2) in Nature Physics.

To understand the impact of noise, the researchers examined large groups of quantum circuits built from simple two-qubit operations. They modeled realistic conditions, where each qubit experiences noise after every step, and tracked how the effects of each layer move through the circuit.

Their analysis revealed a striking pattern. In most noisy quantum circuits, only the final steps have a meaningful impact on the outcome. Even if a circuit is designed to be very deep, the influence of earlier steps gradually disappears as noise builds up.

Returning to the domino comparison, it is as if only the last few pieces in the chain actually determine the final result. Earlier pieces still fall, but their contribution fades away. This has practical consequences. When a quantum computer is used to estimate something like the energy or the state of a qubit, the result is largely determined by the final layers of the circuit. Earlier operations effectively "fade from memory" as noise accumulates.

The study also helps explain why noisy quantum circuits can still be adjusted or "trained" for certain tasks. Changing the circuit's settings can influence the outcome, but mainly because the last layers remain effective while earlier ones lose their impact.

As a result, a deep circuit affected by noise behaves much like a shallower one. Adding more layers does not necessarily improve performance, because most of those extra steps no longer contribute in a meaningful way.