

'MOUTH' WALKS THE TALK

Albirex sub scores as vowed to lift hopes for S'pore Cup semis; eyes Lions call-up

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Affectionately known as The Mouth at Albirex Niigata, Singaporean winger Nicky Melvin Singh earned his nickname for being a yapper, who also tends to get caught in unglam photos with his jaws agape while deep in focus.

When they were pegged back to 1-1 by Balestier Khalsa in a Singapore Cup round-robin match on Nov 6, the White Swans bench could have been forgiven for thinking the 23-year-old was "talking cock" again when he told one of his fellow substitutes: "Don't worry, it's okay. Once I come in, I will score."

But, proving that he could walk the talk, the substitute delivered a jaw-dropping 98th-minute winner by heading in Danish Qayyum's cross to make it 3-2.

Their second win in as many Singapore Cup round-robin games put them firmly in contention for one of two semi-final spots against holders Lion City Sailors and BG Tampines Rovers.

As he celebrated with a mala hot pot sipping routine at the request of his good friend George Ng, it is also a reminder of the hot streak that he is in ahead of Albirex's next Singapore Cup game against Tanjong Pagar United at Jurong East Stadium on Nov 23.

He has racked up three league and cup goals in five games across just 177 minutes this season, surpassing his two-goal tally from his previous 43 appearances for the club and mirroring his own return from injury hell.

While playing a friendly for amateur side Singapore Armed Forces Sports Association in 2024, he tore the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in his right knee.

As he was a full-time national serviceman then, he received hospital physiotherapy but not dedicated football rehabilitation, and ultimately took 1½ years to be match-fit.

Nicky told *The Sunday Times*: "Those were dark times. When I got injured, I couldn't walk, I couldn't even shower and I couldn't sleep properly as well because I felt pain all the time."

"I doubted myself and wondered if I should continue to be a professional player because I have heard that players are never the same again after an ACL injury."

"But then, I told myself this is a time for me to reflect and see what I want in life. In the end, I looked at the little details to improve myself."

"The support from my family and friends also helped me stay strong and focused on my road to recovery."



Albirex Niigata forward Nicky Melvin Singh has racked up three league and cup goals in five games since his return from injury hell. ST PHOTO: LUTHER LAU

SINGAPORE CUP

NOV 22
Hougang 3 Geylang 0

NOV 23
Albirex v Tg Pagar
Singtel TV Ch112, StarHub
Ch202 & mewatch SPL Ch01,
Jurong East Stadium, 7.30pm

STANDINGS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
1 Hougang	2	2	0	0	6	2	6
2 Albirex	2	2	0	0	6	2	6
3 Balestier	2	1	0	1	5	3	3
4 Tg Pagar	2	0	0	2	2	6	0
5 Geylang	2	0	0	2	0	6	0

The oldest of two sons and two daughters of a Singaporean-Punjabi father and a Filipina mother, Nicky had grown to love football in a Manchester United-mad family.

When he was still a Tampines Under-21 player in 2021, he showed his willingness to literally go the distance as an 18-year-old when he took up Albirex assistant coach Jaswinder Singh's offer to go to Jurong East for trials, which resulted in a contract offer.

"I knew about their Japanese culture and professionalism, things like getting to training one hour early, but I also wanted to improve as a footballer, so I took up the offer," said Nicky, who admitted to being exhausted by Albirex's intensity earlier on.

After making the 1½-hour journey from his Tampines home for the 9-11am training, he would sleep in the changing room to avoid the long commute for the 5-7pm session. He took Temasek Polytechnic courses online from 5-6pm in his kit before running out to the training pitch as soon as class was over.

But it all paid off as he won the Singapore Premier League with Albirex in 2022 and 2023 and played in the SEA Games in both years before he enlisted.

Proving that one can juggle professional football and studies, Nicky has gone one step further and is in his first semester pursuing a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering at the National University of Singapore.

Jaswinder told ST: "Nicky has gone through a lot, but he is a smart boy. When he was younger, he just wanted to score and assist. Now, he sees the bigger picture of what he needs to do for his teammates while trying to achieve his individual success and get to the national team."

"As he gets older, his understanding of the team play and his functions in the team is more mature. He does not rush into things any more and is increasingly picking the right moments to do the right things."

The bubbly 1.76m attacker hopes that his time is now, that his "chaotic unpredictability" will catch the eye of national selectors

for the 2027 Asian Cup in Saudi Arabia following the Lions' historic qualification.

He said: "Pre-injury, I was more of a fancy dribbler. But now, I feel I'm more effective in the way I dribble, pass and hold the ball and I became stronger while adapting to a new style because it is like a new knee."

"Short-term wise, coming back from injury, I want to contribute more goals and assists from the bench and be a super-sub. And in the longer term, I want to be on that flight to Saudi."

Meanwhile, Hougang United continued their resurgence under Thai coach Pannarai Pansiri as they beat Geylang International 3-0 in the Singapore Cup round-robin stage at Our Tampines Hub on Nov 22.

The Cheetahs provisionally moved level at the top of the table with Albirex after their second straight win, thanks to second-half goals from Nabilai Kibunguchi, Farhan Zulkifli and Chonlawit Kanuengkid.

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