

Lazio bracing to live upto it

ROME, Jan 1: Lazio bid to continue their assault on the top of the table with victory over second-placed Sampdoria as the Italian Serie A returns to action on Sunday, reports Reuters.

Unbeaten in nine league matches, Lazio have been transformed by the arrival of Coast striker Alen Boksic from Olympique Marseille after early-season exits from both the UEFA Cup and their domestic knockout competition.

The Roman club, whose solitary championship title came in 1974, are now joint fifth in the table as the campaign reaches the halfway stage, trailing leaders and champions AC Milan by just three points.

However, a defeat for Sampdoria on Sunday could allow Milan to extend their one-point lead at the top as the champions should win their away match with strugglers Reggiana.

Milan have a game in hand on their closest challengers which they will make up when they play away to relegation-haunted Udinese on January 6.

Lazio's injury-jinxed England midfielder Paul Gascoigne is struggling to be fit to play against compatriot David Platt

after returning from his Christmas break with a mystery groin strain.

The latest injury has raised a few eyebrows at Lazio, club officials wondering how Gascoigne managed to hurt himself during a four-day break in London.

"I felt a twinge when I got out of bed one morning," the Corriere dello Sport daily quoted Gascoigne as saying.

Sampdoria welcome back influential captain Roberto Mancini, who has served a two-match suspension, for what promises to be a thrilling match.

"Lazio have a great forward line but it is us (and Juventus) who have scored most goals," said veteran Sampdoria stopper Pietrov Vierchowod.

"The top six can consider themselves in the running for the title. It's not like in past seasons when one squad 'killed' the championship," said Vierchowod, part of the Sampdoria side which won the league in 1991 before Milan's two straight successes.

"Milan are still strong but without the three Dutchmen (Marco Van Basten, Ruud Gullit and Frank Rijkaard) they're not the same," he added.

Milan are expected to field

controversial Montenegrin playmaker Dejan Savicevic against newly-promoted Reggiana.

The gifted Savicevic, often at odds with coach Fabio Capello over his frequent omissions from the side, netted twice in a charity match against an international all-star side at the San Siro on Wednesday.

Reggiana are still without Portuguese striker Paulo Futre, who tore knee ligaments in his debut for the club last November.

Parma, joint third, with Juventus, aim to forget their pre-Christmas defeat by Napoli when they travel to neighbours Piacenza. The Cup Winners Cup holders will miss defender Antonio Benarrivo and midfielder Massimo Crippa, both suspended.

Roberto Baggio, the newly-crowned European footballer of the year, has a thigh strain but should play for Juventus as the Turin club seek their first away win of the season at the expense of Udinese.

Internazionale level on points with Lazio, are expected to boost their title challenge with a home win over Atlanta, mired in the relegation zone and deprived through injury of French midfielder Franck Sauze.

Time to stop 'talent drain'

LIBREVILLE, Jan 1: The African Football Confederation (CAF) needs to take action against the 'theft' of talented players by the likes of England and France, Gabon's state-run newspaper said on Thursday, reports AFP.

L'union called on the CAF to protest to world football's governing body, FIFA, about what it claimed was "The legalised theft of African talent".

"Because players with recognised talent have been fortunate enough to play for well-endowed clubs, and in countries where a footballer is paid according to his talent, several African footballers have decided not to play for their country of origin.

"By doing so, they can obtain the dual nationality which enables them to play for their host country.

"In England, for example, faced with the undeniable talents of Nigerian John Fashanu, the authorities have pressured him into playing in the colours of the rose."

London-born Fashanu, whose parents are Nigerian, has played twice for England. But because the matches were friendlies, he is still eligible to play for Nigeria and has expressed an interest in appearing for them in the World Cup finals.

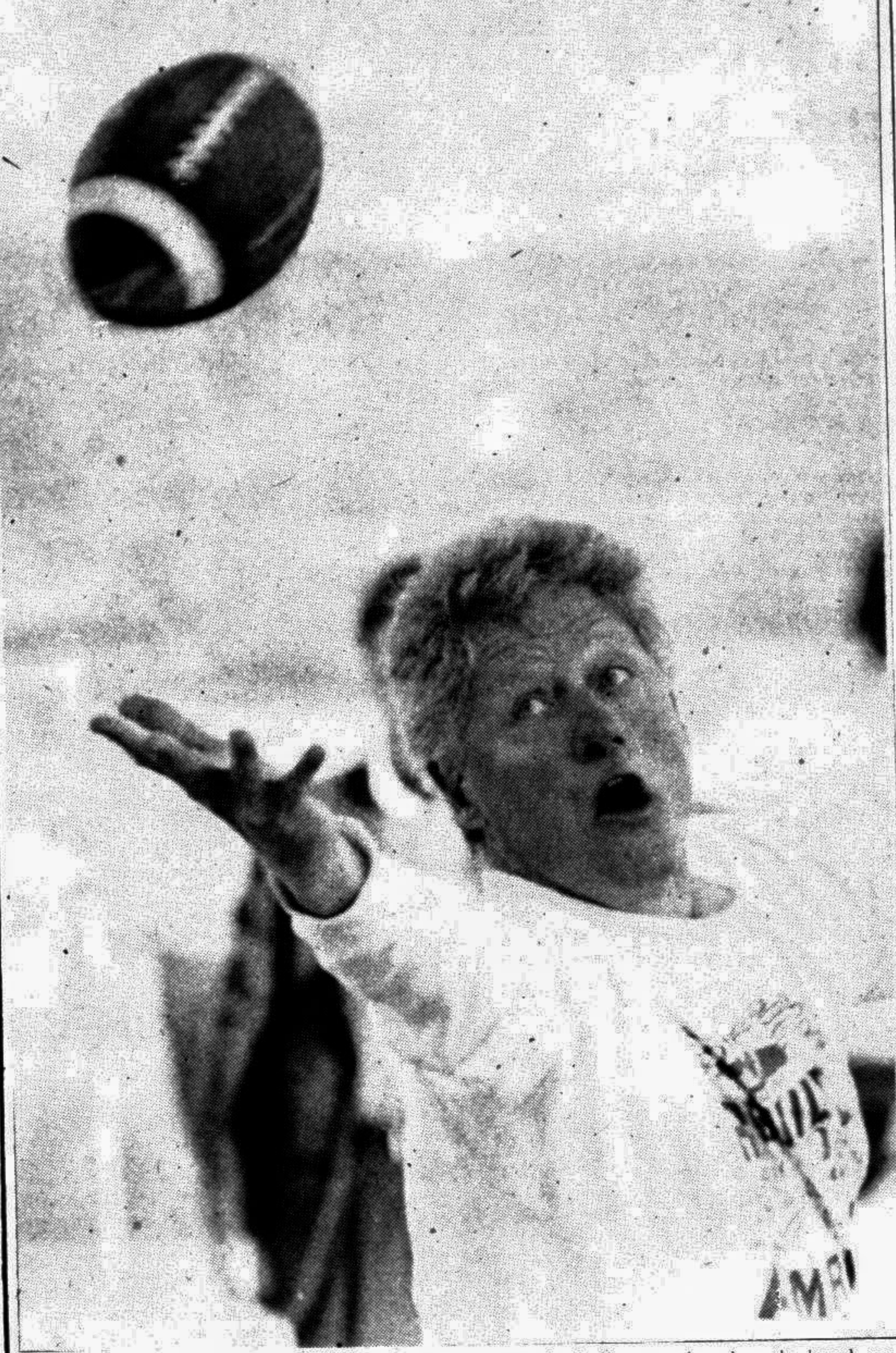
The paper added that "The worst despoilers in Europe are France, because of the number of Africans who have been unavailable for selection by their country of origin because of the French national squad."

The paper singled out three African-born internationals who now play for France — Basile Boli (Ivory Coast), Marcel Desailly (Ghana) and Amara Simba (Senegal).

It also pointed the finger at Belgium, where Nigerian striker Daniel Amokachi has become of the country's most rated players.

"Belgium managed to kidnap the Brazilian Olivera and will soon start on Africa with the performances of Amokachi."

"As the guarantor of the interests of individual African federations, the CAF must lodge a protest with FIFA," the paper said.



US President Bill Clinton reaches for the ball during a football game played on the beach on Dec 31. Clinton is attending a 'Renaissance Weekend' with his family during their vacation in South Carolina. —AFP photo

Silenzi faces a tough task

PARIS, Jan 1: Andrea Silenzi, the top scorer in the Italian league with 11 goals for Torino, faces his toughest challenge yet when his side visit champions AC Milan on Sunday, reports AFP.

In 19 league and European Cup matches this season, Milan's defence has conceded only seven goals while Silenzi has been scoring at a rate of nearly a goal a game.

Torino have a good record against Milan, they were the first side to take a point at the San Siro last season.

And despite being forced to sell Belgian midfielder Enzo Scifo and international goalkeeper Luca Marchegiani to stage-off bankruptcy in the summer, the Turin club are having a good season. They are currently fifth, only three points behind joint leaders Milan, Sampdoria and Parma.

Milan coach Fabio Capello will be looking for a repeat show from Dejan Savicevic to keep their bid for a third straight Italian title on course.

Savicevic, on the point of leaving the club only ten days ago in frustration at his lack of first team opportunities, made all three goals in Milan's 3-0 European Cup win over FC Porto on Wednesday after Capello was ordered to pick him by club owner Silvio Berlusconi.

Parma will be hoping Colombian striker Faustino Asprilla can forget press revelations of an extra-marital affair and re-

cover his scoring touch against AS Roma in the capital.

Asprilla has been off-key recently but he denied it had anything to do with reports of his fling with video movie star Petra Scharbach.

"She's only looking for free publicity at my expense," the Colombian said. "There's nothing in it."

Juventus entertain Napoli in Turin while Inter Milan travel to bottom club Lecce without Dutch international Wim Jonk, who has had a knee operation.

England midfielder Paul Gascoigne hopes to play for Lazio in their game against Atlanta, his first in the Calcio since a goalless draw against Inter Milan in Mid-September.

The latest injury to try

Gascoigne's patience has been to an Achilles tendon, but coach Dino Zoff hopes that he will be fit for Sunday. A decision will probably be made after a practice match on Friday.

In Spain, Barcelona and Deportivo La Coruna should stay at the top as they both have home matches against struggling opposition on Saturday.

Barcelona, likely to be without sweeper Ronald Koeman because of influenza are at home to Logrones while LA Coruna entertain Racing Santander.

Flu has also laid Real Madrid striker Emilio Butragueno low and he is set to miss Sunday's clash with Athletic Bilbao in the Santiago Bernabew.

German league leaders Eintracht Frankfurt's preparation for Saturday's clash with champions Werder Bremen could not have been worse.

Frankfurt have lost their last three matches 3-0 — two of them at home — and are badly missing injured forward Anthony Yeboah, to make matters worse, the Ghanaian's replacement Radmilovic Mihalovic had an ankle operation this week and is out until February.

In France, league leaders Paris St Germain travel to Lille with the firm expectation of returning with two points.

PSG, unbeaten in their last seven away matches, face a side who were walloped 5-0 by Auxerre the previous week and who they have already beaten in Paris earlier in the season.

Milla returns fire

YAOUNDE, Jan 1: Cameroon soccer veteran Roger Milla hit back here on Friday after teammates criticised his second World Cup comeback, reports AFP.

The 41-year-old said: "I proved myself in the World Cup in Italy — if a small group of players have criticised me, what have they achieved?"

"When they hear that I am ready to defend my country's colours, they tremble because they are a bunch of incapables."

"To save Cameroon's honour, we must recall our old players."

Milla was brought back into the Cameroon side for the 1990 World Cup and starred with four goals in five games before Cameroon were knocked out by England in the quarter-finals.

But current international Francois Omam Biyik, who plays in France, has led criticism that he is too old to return for the 1994 United States finals.

Milla, quoted in an interview in sports weekly 'Horizon Sport', added: "The Americans demand my presence in the United States, they at least are grateful to me."

Cameroon are in Group B in the 1994 tournament, with Brazil, Russia and Sweden.

They're stuck with each other

MILWAUKEE, Jan 1: In the 1992 Winter Olympics, American speed skater Bonnie Blair edged Ye Qiuobu of China for the gold in both the 500 and 1,000-meter races, reports AP.

Both skaters now find themselves training at the Pettit National Ice Centre, but if they pass one another on the ice don't expect them to exchange pleasantries.

They don't like each other very much.

Ye, who had knee surgery Aug 4 and isn't sure if she will compete in the 1994 Olympics, is in Milwaukee to train for the World Cup Speed Skating Sprints Jan. 21-22 at the Pettit Centre. Blair will also race then, just a few weeks before the Winter Games.

In an impromptu session Friday with reporters on hand to cover the trials to choose the US Olympic speedskating team, Ye said she is still upset over remarks Blair has made about her 1988 suspension for using steroids.

Ye said a CBS television crew was in China in April to do a story about her and was told then that Blair had said, "I was still with drugs. I was angry a lot at that time. But she never say that to me (in person). After that, I don't like her any more."

Ye was suspended after failing a physical during the 1988 World Sprint Championships, which were also held in Milwaukee. She returned to skate well and in 1992 was narrowly defeated by Blair in the two races.

While Ye was talking in the media room Friday, Blair was outside on the ice skating to two track records in the first two races of the Olympic trials. She broke her own Pettit Centre marks in the 500 and 1,000 meter races with times of 39.92 and 2:06.50.

"I've never been in favour of what she's done," Blair said when asked to respond to Ye's comments. "I don't feel she has to be my friend just because we're in the same sport. When that gun goes off I don't think about anything else (except skating)."

Ye is still trying to recover her strength after surgery on her left knee — she estimates she is at about 80 per cent to 90 per cent — and felt training indoors would benefit her.

Ye said she has not skated very well this year. She said if she is skating poorly and wouldn't have a chance at a medal, she might bypass the Olympics.

"I think I still have a chance," she said, adding a lot depended on how well she does in the January event here.

The Chinese skater told reporters that in 1988 she did not know she was being given illegal drugs and thought her coaches were only feeding her a concoction of flowers and mushrooms — not steroids.

"I don't like to answer any more," she said of the subject, saying she won't submit to any more interviews on the matter. "I don't think people like to recall such bad things."

And although she admits she isn't fond of Blair, she likes US speedskater Dan Jansen, who has failed to win a medal in two Olympics.

"Dan is a really nice boy. I like him because even though he doesn't do so well... he smiles and cheers for others," she said.

Blair said she isn't worried about having Ye around while she trains and said the constant sight of a rival might "make me skate better. If anything, it will be a benefit for me."

Valderrama's second

MONTEVIDEO, Jan 1: Colombia skipper Carlos Valderrama was named South American player of the year for the second consecutive time by the world's journalists here on Friday, reports AFP.

In a poll organised by Uruguayan daily El Pais, the 32-year old playmaker came out in top spot, mainly because of his performances as they qualified for the World Cup. Colombia surprised the footballing world by beating Argentina 5-0 in Buenos Aires.

Valderrama, with 46 votes, beat out Bolivian midfielder Marco Antonio Etcheverry, 30, into second spot. Brazilian full-back Cafu and Colombian striker Freddy Rincon shared third spot on 28.

Colombian Francisco Maturana was named best South American coach, followed by Brazil's Tele Santana, the Sao Paulo coach, and Xavier Azkargorta, who led Bolivia to their first World Cup finals for more than 40 years.

Flugels fired up

TOKYO, Jan 1: Yokohama Flugels fired four goals in seven minutes in extratime today to beat Kashima Antlers 6-2 in Japan's Emperor's Cup soccer final, reports Reuters.

Antlers went into the lead after six minutes when forward Hisashi Kurosaki cracked a close-range shot into the left-hand corner. But Flugels equalised when Brazilian ex-international Edu converted a penalty just before halftime.

Edu put Flugels in front in the 63rd minute with another penalty and they appeared headed for a 2-1 victory until Antlers defender Ryosuke Okuno struck a long-range equaliser with only a minute left.

Seven minutes into extra time, substitute striker Ipppei Watanabe headed Flugels back into the lead to trigger off the goal spree.

Raul Vicente Amarilla, formally on the books of Olympique de Paraguay, netted twice and Yasuharu Sorimachi notched the sixth.

Flugels had never previously won the Emperor's Cup, Japan's main knock-out soccer competition.

Gazza okay

ROME, Jan 1: Playmaker Paul Gascoigne is set to give Lazio a new year boost on Sunday despite injury fears, reports AFP.

Gascoigne, who injured his groin while in England over Christmas, has been given the all clear by coach Dino Zoff for their clash against Sampdoria in Rome's Olympic Stadium.

Zoff, pleased to have "Gazza" back, said: "I have been preoccupied with Gascoigne. It's true. But a player of his class is always useful, even if he is not in the best condition."

Zoff added Gascoigne to his squad as his injury was not as bad as feared. The inclusion of Gascoigne is well timed as Sampdoria are at full strength, having welcomed back striker Roberto Mancini from a two-match suspension.

Martin moves up

LONDON, Jan 1: Australian Rodney Martin moved into second place in the world squash rankings issued on Thursday, the highest position of his career, reports Reuters.

Martin, 28, moved up from third to displace fellow-countryman Chris Dittmar, who has been out of action with a knee injury since August.

Ninety Seven steals the show

HOBART, Jan 1: Ninety Seven, skippered by vacation resort owner Andrew Strachan, surged ahead of the storm-ravaged Sydney to Hobart yacht fleet and won the race Thursday, reports AP.

Hundreds of people lined the docks in Hobart to applaud the victorious Ninety Seven as other moored boats blew their horns to welcome it.

With its blue and white spinnaker aloft, Ninety Seven was first across the line in the Derwent River, taking 4 days, 54 minutes, 11 seconds for the journey.

It was one of the slowest Sydney-Hobarts of the past 20 years, and the 46-foot (13.4-meter) Ninety Seven was the smallest winning yacht since 1954. Storms battered most of the mad-yachts into retirement, including race favorite Brindabella and American entry Cassiopeia.

Micropay Cuckoo's Nest finished second, exactly two hours

behind Ninety Seven, while Wild Thing finished third.

Strachan said suggestions that the race should have been halted because of the conditions were ridiculous.

"Absolute rubbish. We're here to sail and enjoy it and this was part of the challenge," he said. "It really wasn't that hard — we were well prepared."

Strachan put the victory down to sensible sailing and the fierce determination of his crew, which had to change its sleep patterns on Tuesday during the worst of the conditions.

Fatigue forced the 11 crew members to work for two hours and then sleep for four, rather than the usual split of three-three.

"We raced to win," Strachan said. "When the winds came up we slowed down a little, as normal. The boat held together perfectly. It's a beautifully built boat."

The difference was that we tried hard, and worked as a

team, and as a good team. We've got 90-odd Sydney to Hobarts under our belts."

Officials said late Thursday that only 37 of the 105 starters remained in the 630-nautical-mile (1,168-kilometer) race. Two have sunk since the fleet left Sydney Harbour on Sunday to be confronted with mountainous seas.

Race director Greg Halls said the damage bill for repairs and sail replacement among the 68 dropouts had reached an estimated \$12 million.

Ninety Seven, a Sydney-based sloop, arrived far behind the race record held by American Jim Kilroy, who took Kialoa 11 to Hobart in 2 days, 14 hours, 36 minutes in 1975.

Kilroy was helped by trailing winds averaging 20 knots (37 kph).

Ninety Seven's time was the slowest since Apollo's 4 days, 2 hours, 23 minutes, 24 seconds in 1978.

Higuaita acquitted

BOGOTA, Jan 1: Colombian national goalkeeper Rene Higuita was ordered by prosecutors to be released from jail on Thursday because the time limit for pressing charges against him over a kidnapping case had expired, reports Reuters.

Deputy prosecutor-general, Francisco Jose Sintura told local radio that he had ordered the footballer's release from Bogota's Modelo Jail because no formal accusation had been made within the 120-day limit set by a new law.

"The explanation for this decision is not based on Higuita not having committed the crimes but on the fact that the gentleman has the right to be released because 120 days have passed without the merits of this investigation being determined," Sintura said.

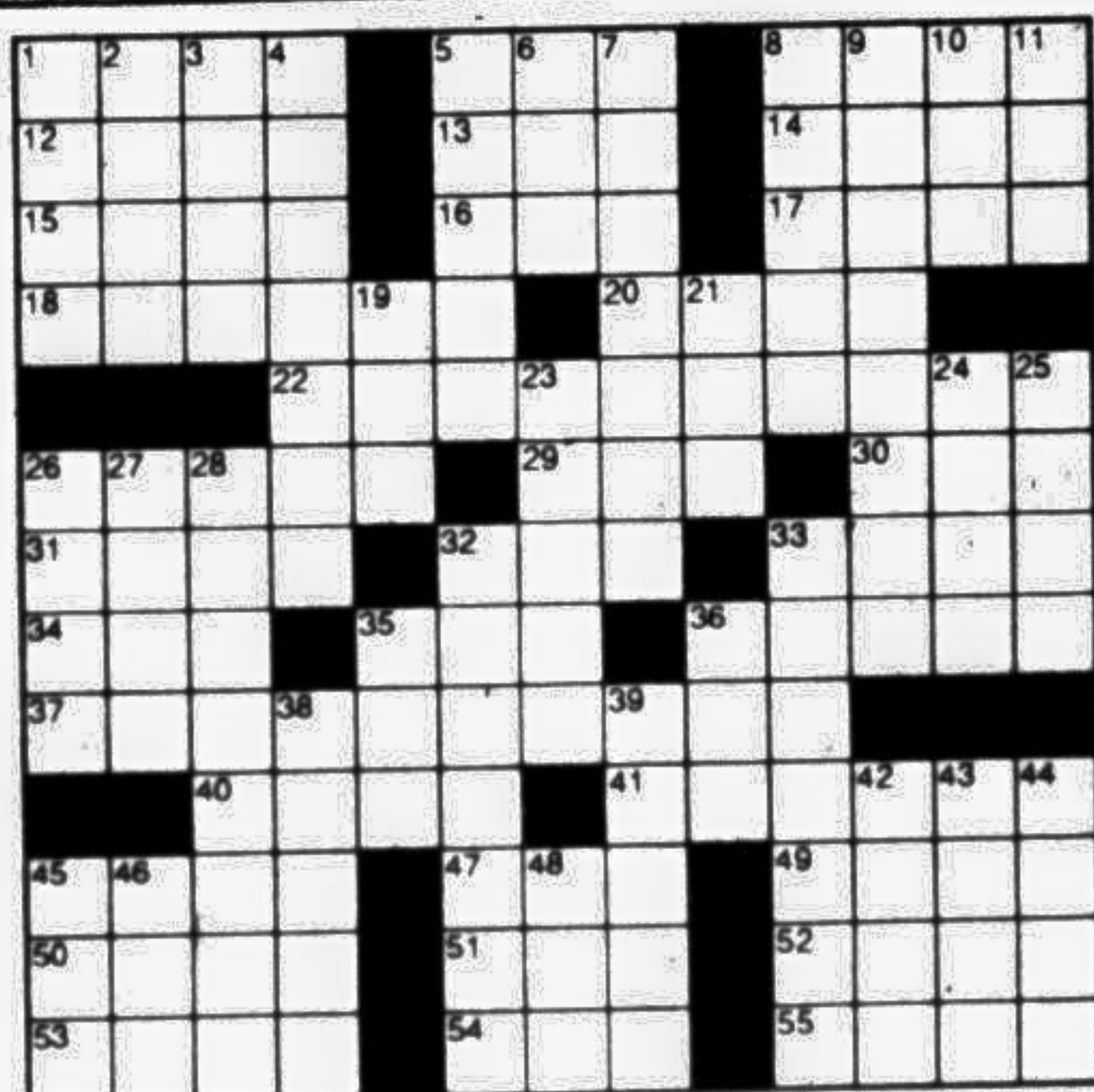
Higuita was detained by police on June 4 and accused of receiving a \$4,000 dollar payoff for helping negotiate the payment of a \$385,000 dollar ransom for a girl in Medellin who was allegedly kidnapped on the orders of Medellin drug cartel boss Pablo Escobar.

Higuita openly admitted to a friendship with Escobar, who was shot dead by police on December 2, but denied any wrongdoing.

The goalkeeper one of Latin America's best-known soccer personalities must pay bail of 100 million salaries (about 10,000 dollars) to secure his release and could still face criminal proceedings.

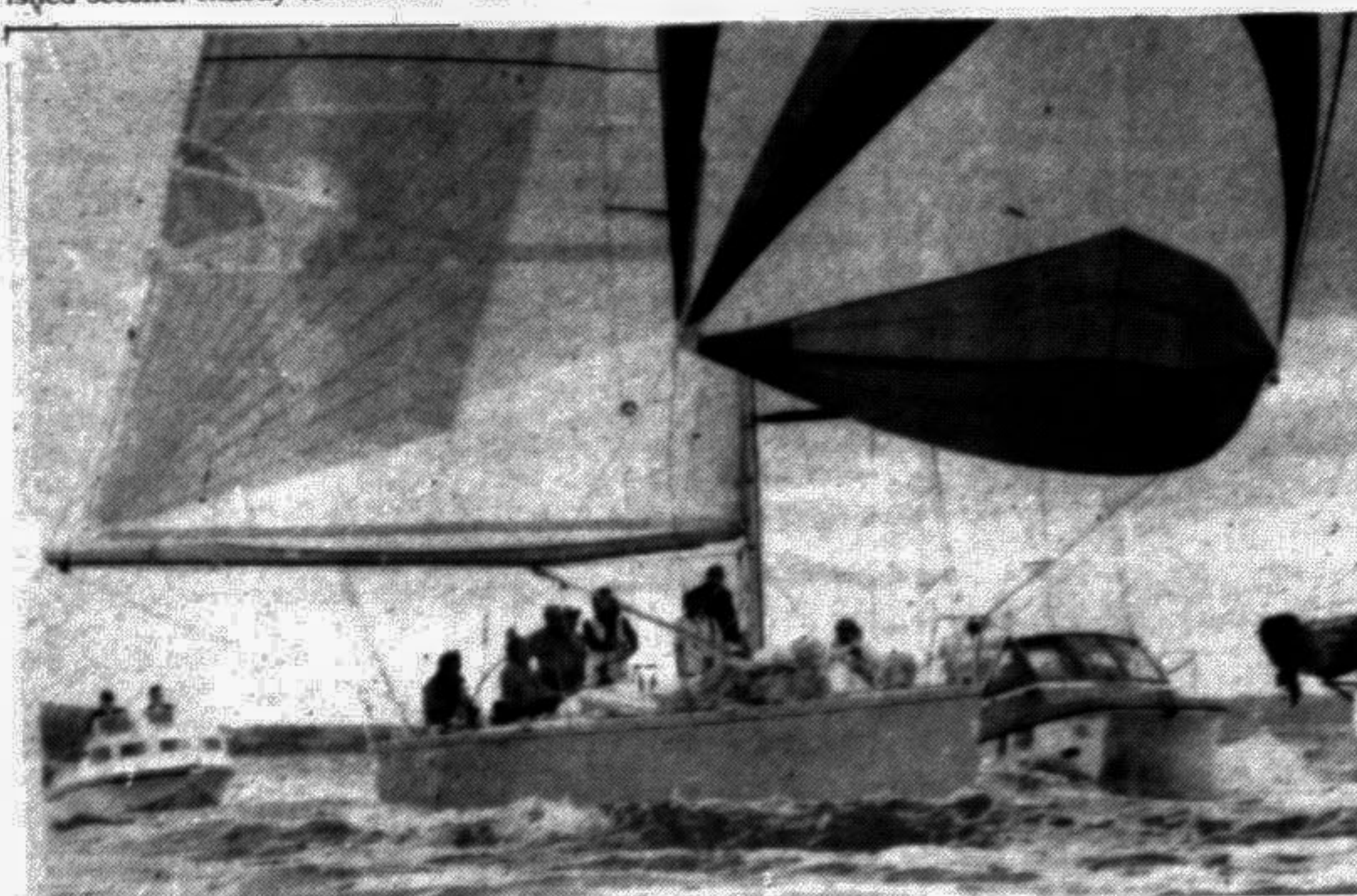
CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	DOWN
1 Large iron hook	1 Chuck
36 Marceau's emulators	21 Had a snack
37 Behavior	22 Frighten
5300, to Caesar	23 Diamond squad
8 Campus area	25 "— bien, merci"
12 Actor Sharif	26 Wilbur's steed
13 Gallery's shout	27 "Unforgettable" singer
14 Wreck	28 Friend
15 Memorandum	32 Spun
16 Call — day	33 Cy Young Award winner
17 Summit	35 Sauté
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26 A real man?	42 Metric measure, for short
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CRYPTOQUIP

KYBQ IYXBT ZFHIPJIBM
KPL PIIOLBZ FT
AMXABMV JFQHOBL
LJPMJBZ KPHHXQH
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: AFTER HIS ASSISTANT
CAME IN LATE AGAIN, HIGH-HANDED
CLOCKMAKER IS TICKED OFF.
Today's Cryptoquip clue: H equals G
The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.



Skipper Andrew Strachan steers his yacht Ninety Seven across the finishing line in the Dirwent River on Thursday to take line honours in the 49th Sydney to Hobart race. —AFP photo