

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 Reuter.

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.

Milan are expected to field

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 Antonio Benarrivo and midfielder Massimo Crippa, both suspended.

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.

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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, national all-star side at the San Siro on Wednesday.

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".

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.

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 Oliveria 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.

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 Radmilo Mihailovic had an ankle operation this week and is out until February.

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 Bernabeu.

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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.

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 Schorbach.

"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 Atalanta, his first in the Calcio since a goalless draw against Inter Milan in Mid-September.

The latest injury to try

Because of Blinda

RABAT, Jan 1: Morocco's football coach Abdellah Blinda has brought about the cancellation of the friendly with World Cup opponents Holland, reports AFP.

Morocco were supposed to face Holland on February 16 in Casablanca but on the advice of Blinda, Morocco's Football Federation called it off.

Holland face Morocco in World Cup Group F, and this is the likely reason for the decision. Saudi Arabia and Belgium are also in the group.

Portugal will play Morocco instead, on February 23 in Lisbon.

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 pre-tournament match on Friday.

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