

Sacchi's ship rocked again

ROME, Dec 23: European Champions Juventus moved further ahead in the Serie A title race Sunday despite only drawing in struggling Piacenza as nearest rivals Vicenza slumped to a 2-1 defeat at Sampdoria, reports AFP.

Those results left the Zebras six points clear of the pack making up for their midweek Italian Cup exit at the hands of Roy Hodgson's Inter Milan.

But the spotlight again fell on crisis club AC Milan, who slid to their fifth defeat of the campaign in losing 1-0 at the San Siro to recently out of sports Parma.

Croatian striker Mario Stanic hit the only goal on the stroke of half time.

Milan fell a point behind city rivals Inter, who needed a Youri Djorkaeff penalty to prevent tailenders Reggiana notching their first win of the season.

Sunday's defeat for Milan came after Arrigo Sacchi had steered the ship with two wins since replacing Oscar Tabarez as coach earlier in the month.

Parma's win was a relief for new coach Carlo Ancelotti, who reportedly faced the axe after a disastrous first third of the season.

Juventus' lead could have been even bigger with other title chasers slipping up. But after Michele Padovano opened the scoring with a header on 57 minutes at Piacenza having come on for Angelo Di Livio, the sat back and Delle Carri rescued a point five minutes from the end.

Unsung Vicenza, a revelation this season in which they briefly sat atop the Serie A for the first time in their 94-year history, missed their chance to close the gap after being hit by a double blast from Sampdoria's 22-year-old discovery Vincenzo Montella inside the first 25 minutes.

A Marcelo Otero penalty was all the visitors could summon up in reply as they slid to their third defeat of the season. Sampdoria's win took them up to fourth.

Napoli rocketed up to third, level on points with Vicenza as they saw off Lazio 1-0 with an injury time goal from Brazilian Andre Cruz.

Bologna meanwhile dropped a place to fifth after their 0-0 home draw with struggling Perugia.

Barca secure second spot

MADRID, Dec 23: Deportivo la Coruna failed to grab a share of the lead in the Spanish First Division when they were held to a 1-1 draw at Sporting Gijon on Sunday, leaving them two points adrift of Real Madrid, reports AFP.

Brazilian striker "Rivaldo" Vito gave La Coruna a ninth-minute lead, but they were then pegged back by Julio Salinas' 23rd-minute equaliser which forced the visitors to be content with a share of the spoils.

Barcelona leapfrogged the north westerners into second spot with a hard-earned 1-0 win at home to Celta Vigo, defender Miguel Angel Nadel scoring a minute before the break.

But Barcelona's workmanlike performance still fell some way short of satisfying the Catalan club's demanding fans, who have demonstrated their unhappiness with manager Bobby Robson in recent days.

Two weeks ago, Robson's men committed what it Catalonia ranks as the cardinal sin, losing to hated rivals Real and sending the Madrid side four points clear at the top.

Real's draw in Valladolid on Saturday and Barca's win 24 hours later meant that lead was cut to just two points.

A goal by Croatian international Striker Davor Suker put the title favourites ahead but Rafael Alkorta's own goal on the hour secured a point for Valladolid.

UEFA Cup quarterfinalists Tenerife moved up three places to ninth after they thrashed Espanyol 5-1 courtesy of a hat-trick by Felipe Mimbambres and a brace from Chano Cruzado.

Fourth-placed Betis meanwhile took the honours in the Seville derby as they whipped third-bottom Sevilla 3-0 with goals from Alexis, Alfonso and Olias to stay on course for a UEFA Cup berth.

Valencia, currently drifting in midtable, face relegation threatened Hercules Alicante today.

Basten plans to draw the line

ZURICH, Dec 23: Former Ajax and AC Milan striker Van Basten has revealed that he wants to turn his back on the football scene while he considers his future, reports AFP.

Van Basten, 32, a three time European footballer of the year, told this month's edition of FIFA magazine to be published next that "there's the possibility that my life will not be dominated by football any more."

"I've got to get completely away from the football scene to make up my mind what I really want," he explained, saying it was only after three painful years battling his injury "I wanted a normal life again."

He added he was now free of pain and had been able to enjoy a game of beach soccer with friends during the summer.

Van Basten, who attended a recent FIFA taskforce meeting on the future of the game, meanwhile said he believed the red and yellow card system was insufficient to clean up football.

He proposed the introduction of a basketball style system whereby a player would be penalised for each foul and then substituted after five fouls.



Indian left-arm spinner Venkatapathy Raju (not in the picture) is on the verge of getting Eastern Province's Phillip Amm caught behind on the final day of a three-day match at St George's Park in Port Elizabeth, South Africa on Dec 23.

Melbourne Test begins Thursday

Enter Langer, exit Ponting

SYDNEY, Dec 23: Queensland opener Matthew Hayden and Western Australian left-hander Justin Langer were today recalled to the Australian cricket team for the third Test against the West Indies in Melbourne starting Thursday, reports AFP.

Hayden replaces the injured Matthew Elliott for his second Test, while Langer returns after an absence of three years.

Langer, 26, cracked an unbeaten 274 against South Australia in Perth Sunday and has 598 runs this season at an average of 119.60.

He takes over from young Tasmanian Ricky Ponting, who was dropped and will instead play for Australia A against Pakistan in one day match Saturday.

Ponting, 22, and rated a long-term prospect at No. 3, made 88, nine and four in the first two Tests after being promoted up the order.

Veteran all-rounder Steve Waugh has recovered from a groin strain after missing the second Sydney Test and regains his place.

Waugh proved his fitness beyond doubt Sunday with a match saving nine and a half hour 186 not out for New South Wales.

Wales against Queensland. One of the bowlers he faced was young Queensland pacer Michael Kasprovic. Who was wicketless in his first two Tests and has been dropped.

This leaves a batsman the likely 12th man at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Hayden, 25, played his only Test in South Africa in March.

He failed in his only innings against New South Wales at the weekend as did NSW opener Michael Slater who was dropped at the start of the Test series for Elliott.

Elliott made enough, 21, 29 and 78 retired hurt when he slipped with Mark Waugh at mid-pitch in the second innings of the Sydney Test to suffer a bad knee injury.

He had made centuries in the first innings of his last three Shield games.

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Maradona on new mission?

MOSCOW, Dec 23: President of the southern Russian republic of Kalmykia Kirsan Ilyumzhinov has called on Diego Maradona to play for his country's Second Division side Uralan Elista in a multi-million-dollar deal, reports AFP.

Ilyumzhinov, the high-profile Kalmykian President, has invited Maradona to the capital of Elista next March.

Alexei Kucherenko, Ilyumzhinov's personal press officer, said that a preliminary agreement had been signed with Maradona on becoming a player-coach for the team.

"We have a signed contract with Maradona and his manager where we'll pay for all the expenses during his visit, while in return Diego will do promotional appearances in Moscow and Elista," he said.

"Our president wants to give a present to thousands of football fans in Kalmykia, who could witness a great player firsthand."

Local Uralan finished in seventh place in Russia's Second Division last season but the ambitious president wants to see his club among the elite Russian teams in the top flight by next year and has provided Kalmykia's main club with a budget of about five million dollars.

That career had also seen Shilton make a record 125 England appearances with league championship League Cup and two European Cup triumphs in his long career.

Sunday's game was all about celebrating those achievements and that is what Brighton and their shot shy strike force allowed him to do with relative ease.

Shilton, 47-year-old whose first appearance for Leicester against Everton was more than 30 years ago, was presented with copious awards to celebrate his feat of becoming the first player to the one thousand mark.

Remarkably it was a man whom Shilton once signed during his spell as player-manager at Plymouth — home skipper Dominic Naylor — who struck the goals which gave the home side the win.

Shilton had one of the quietest games in his career but he still punched the air in celebration at the final whistle, as the fans gave him a standing ovation, who acknowledged their support on a momentous day.

It was all a long way from Filbert Street and a career that took him from Leicester to Stoke, Nottingham Forest, Southampton Derby, Plymouth and Bolton before joining the Os by way of West Ham.

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Shilton's thousandth tie

LONDON, Dec 23: Peter Shilton celebrated his 1,000th league appearance with a clean sheet and three points on Sunday as Leyton Orient defeated beleaguered Brighton 2-0, reports AFP.

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