

Copa Mercosur

Flamengo's

SAO PAULO, Dec 21: Flamengo won the Copa Mercosur on Monday, drawing 3-3 away to Palmeiras in a thrilling finale to South America's youngest cup competition, reports Reuters.

Substitute Le scored the title winning goal in the 84th minute, less than ten minutes after coming on in the second leg of the all-Brazilian final.

Flamengo's 4-3 first leg victory meant Palmeiras needed to win to take the tie, decided on results rather than goal aggregate, to a third match.

Palmeiras seemed to be comfortably on their way when a penalty by Francisco Arce gave them a halftime lead which reflected their first-half dominance.

But the visitors stunned the home crowd after the break, turning the game around with goals by Caio and Rodrigo Mendes in a ten-minute spell.

Palmeiras hit back immediately. Within a minute of Mendes' goal, Arce scored again, this time from a free kick, and Paulo Nunes then headed Palmeiras into a 3-2 lead.

Palmeiras coach Luis Felipe Scolari was about to replace striker Faustino Asprilla with a defensive midfielder when Le's goal shattered his plans six minutes from the end.

Le, a 20-year-old who has been given only a few first team outings since turning professional last year, wept after scoring his goal.

Flamengo won the title, their first in an international competition since 1981, despite selling top striker Romario to rivals Vasco da Gama last month. Romario finished as the Mercosur's top scorer with eight goals.

Palmeiras, who won the inaugural Copa Mercosur last year, were lucky to finish the first half with eleven men.

Referee Luciano Almeida and his assistants all missed an incident in which Colombian maverick Asprilla clearly elbowed an opponent in the face.

Former Brazil defender Júnior Balano escaped with a yellow card for a hideous challenge on an opponent, which clearly merited a sending-off.

Palmeiras coach Scolari had berated his players after the first leg for not committing enough fouls.

The Mercosur is a made-for-television event featuring 20 of South America's biggest clubs, who take part by invitation.

Despite the dramatic 13-goal final, much of the tournament was a disappointment with many teams giving it low priority and fielding reserve line-ups.

Karpin Russia's player of the year

MOSCOW, Dec 21: Russian international, midfielder Valery Karpin, who plays for leading Spanish side Celta Vigo, was on Monday named Russia's player-of-the-year, reports AFP.

Karpin was selected following a survey conducted by the oldest Russian sports daily, Sovetskij Sport, of more than 200 of the country's top football specialists and players.

Moscow Lokomotiv's midfielder Alexei Smertin took second spot, while Karpin's Celta teammate, midfielder Alexander Mostovoi, was third.

Lebouef regrets

LONDON, Dec 21: Frank Lebouef issued an apology to his teammates Monday for his moment of madness that looks to have put paid to Chelsea's English Premiership hopes, reports AFP.

But his apology may cut little ice with manager Gianluca Vialli as he contemplates a Christmas central defensive crisis that threatens even his now limited league ambitions.

And it certainly will not influence the FA when they receive referee Jeff Winter's match report on Lebouef's second half dismissal in his team's 2-0 defeat against Leeds at Stamford Bridge Sunday.

The Frenchman was dismissed for a second bookable offence on Harry Kewell in the space of seven minutes before stamping on the Australian and arguing his case with Leeds players and officials on the bench before belatedly accepting his deserved punishment.

"Frank knows he should not have done that and he has apologised to everyone," Chelsea full back Jon Harley said.

Already facing a two-match ban for his second red card of the season - he will miss the FA Cup 4th round and Premiership visit to Coventry - Lebouef can now expect further punishment after Winter confirmed he had noticed the stamp on Kewell although Lebouef was dismissed purely for the second yellow card.

It was the last thing Vialli needed to see having already lost his two other main central defenders to injury during the 2-0 defeat that left the Blues 17 points behind leaders Leeds in the league.

Marcel Desailly was unable to reappear for the second half after suffering a dislocated shoulder that could keep the former AC Milan star out for several weeks.



Carlos Gonzalez (L) of America de Cali and Atletico Nacional's Freddy Grisales fight for possession during their Colombian League match in Medellin on December 19. Naciona — AFP photo

Latin soccer scene

RIO DE JANEIRO, Dec 21: River Plate won the Argentine championship on Sunday in one of five title races to be decided in Latin America at the weekend and the only one to be settled on a conventional league basis, reports Reuters.

Atletico, playing at home in Medellin, won the shootout 4-2 after being held to a goalless draw in Sunday's second leg. The first leg in Cali had ended 1-1.

The match, played in front of a 48,000 crowd, was a dour defensive affair with neither team prepared to take risks.

BRAZIL

Corinthians beat Atletico Mineiro 2-0 in the second leg of the final to send the tie to a third and final match.

Striker Luizao scored both goals in a cynical, dirty match but was set off in the last minute for kicking an opponent in the knee.

PERU

Underdogs Pachuca, who began the season with the aim of avoiding relegation, won their first title with a dramatic golden goal win over Cruz Azul.

Argentine Alejandro Gilaria scored in the second minute of extra time after a goalless 90 minutes in Sunday's second leg. The first match was a 2-2 draw with Gilaria scoring both of his team's goals.

Pachuca had never reached the knockout stages since the current format was introduced in 1970 and this time made the last eight. They then eliminated defending champions Toluca and Atlas, who had finished 12 points ahead of them in the championship's first stage.

Pachuca, from the town of the same name, are the oldest first division club, having been founded by a group of British miners.

As with River Plate in Argentina, Pachuca claimed the first title — the Invierno (Winter) — of the season which features two championships.

COLOMBIA

Atletico Nacional won the Colombian championship on Sunday, beating America on

halftime lead.

The Strongest, coached by former Argentine international Mario Kempes, fought back in the second half with goals by Ronald Arana and Sandro Coelho.

ECUADOR

Liga de Quito won the title for the second year running, beating army club El Nacional 3-1 in the second leg of the final as a 4-1 aggregate win.

International Eduardo Hurtado, who played this year in Major League Soccer in the United States, scored twice with Argentine Ezequiel Maggioli claiming the third goal. Hurtado also scored the first leg.

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The game's low point was a hideous tackle by Corinthians defender Joao Carlos on Atletico's Robert in the 15th minute. Joao Carlos flew feet first into Robert's leg from behind, committing an obvious red card offence, but was not even cautioned by referee Marico Resende de Freitas.

The official let numerous other tackles, dives and handballs also go unpunished.

Atletico had won the first leg 3-2. The tie is decided on points rather than goal aggregate.

BOLIVIA

Blooming won the title for the second year running as they overcame The Strongest in the final.

Blooming, from the eastern city of Santa Cruz, won the second leg at home 3-2, the same score by which they had won the first leg in La Paz on Wednesday.

Victor Hugo Antelo, who holds the record for the most goals scored in Bolivian soccer history, shot Blooming in front with a 15th-minute penalty before Limberg Gutierrez and Martin Maracho gave them a 3-2

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