

Salas hopes for the best

ROME, Nov 6: Lazio's Chilean striker Marcelo Salas will ask his national team coach Nelson Acosta this week if he can arrive 24 hours later than planned for the World Cup 2002 qualifier with Argentina on November 15, the player said Sunday, reports AFP.

Salas hopes to get Acosta's approval to fly out next Sunday, allowing him to play for the Italian champions in Saturday's titanic battle with Juventus at Turin.

Salas said: "I spoke with the coach Acosta and they want me to go to Chile on the Saturday but I asked him if it was possible to play at Turin and then go the day after."

Salas, who said he would speak to Acosta again this week, is determined not to lose his place in the Lazio team after regaining a starting role because of the injury to Claudio Lopez, the club's Argentinian forward who is facing four months on the sidelines after surgery.

"I want to get a run-out with Juve," said Salas. "For us it is a very important match."

Salas said his return to Lazio action had helped him forget his disappointment at the collapse of a much-touted move to Inter Milan.

"At the end of the day I am happy to stay here," he said. "But now I must start to play regularly. At the end of the day I am happy to stay in the capital but although I am fine we will have to see at the end of the season."

Salas made an impressive first-team return against Bologna, setting up the first goal for Pavel Nedved of the Czech Republic in a 2-0 victory.

Taibi shifts blame

REGGIO CALABRIA, Italy, Nov 6: Reggina goalkeeper Massimo Taibi admitted his blunder allowed Juventus to win Sunday's Serie A match - but promptly blamed the referee for a falling to spot a foul in an incident which turned the match on its head, reports AFP.

Taibi, who acquired a reputation as a serial bungler during his brief stay at Manchester United, was left red-faced a minute before interval when he came baring out of his area to head the ball straight to the feet of David Trezeguet who then found the space to crack the ball home with the goalkeeper stranded.

That put Juventus on the way to a 2-0 victory with Trezeguet scoring both goals. Taibi only accepted part of the blame, insisting referee Domenico Messina should have penalised Alessandro Del Piero for obstructing him.

"I am always ready to assume responsibility for my mistakes," said Taibi. "But the first goal conditioned the entire game."

Taibi added: "Del Piero's foul was blatant. If the television pictures prove me wrong I will make a public apology. My team-mates saw it too: only the referee did not."

The defeat continues a worrying slump for Reggina who beat Inter Milan in their opening Serie A match, a win that heralded the sacking of Inter coach Marcello Lippi - but have now lost their subsequent four matches.

Berger's season over?

LONDON, Nov 6: English Premiership outfit Liverpool may have lost Czech Republic star Patrik Berger for the rest of the season after a recurrence of his knee injury, reports AFP.

The midfielder was carried off in agony during the 4-3 defeat at Leeds on Saturday and will this week fly to America to undergo surgery by top specialist Richard Stedman.

It means 26-year-old Berger is denied the chance to play in his homeland on Thursday with Liverpool in their UEFA Cup second leg against Slovan Liberec.

Berger suffered a knee injury in the first game of the season at home to Bradford.

Now it has flared up again and Liverpool fear that even after surgery in Colorado where Stedman works, it could take Berger until the middle of next year to fully recover.

Stedman has already performed career-saving knee surgery on Liverpool captain Jamie Redknapp this season and the England man is now back in training and hoping for a January comeback.

Referring to Berger's injury after Saturday's defeat, Liverpool boss Gerard Houllier said: "Never mind losing the game at Elland Road: we've lost a good player too."

Bonfrere's recipe for Finidi

LAGOS, Nov 6: Nigerian international Finidi George has to show his worth for new Spanish side Real Mallorca before he can earn a recall to the national team, national coach Jo Bonfrere said here Sunday, reports AFP.

"Finidi has not been playing well for Mallorca. I need to see him playing well and regularly too for his club before I can include him in my plans for both the World Cup and Nations Cup," Bonfrere told a local radio station.

"It's really worrying that our top players like Finidi have been struggling to find their feet at their clubs. This is not good for the national team," he added.

Serie A

Batistuta, Roma on fire



ROME, Nov 6: Udinese stretched their lead at the top of the Italian First Division here Sunday, a 2-0 home victory over Lecce seeing them push a point clear of the chasing pack, reports AFP.

Second-half goals from Argentinian Roberto Sosa and substitute Massimo Margiotta ensured Luigi De Canio's men go clear - before the weekend they led only on goals scored from Atalanta who drew 3-3 in a thriller with AC Milan at the San Siro and are relegated to third.

Up to second are AS Roma whose Argentinian striker Gabriel Batistuta scored a second-half hat-trick to overturn an interval deficit and ensure his side won 4-2 at Brescia.

Another man in form was French striker David Trezeguet, who scored twice as Juventus ended an indifferent run with a well-deserved 2-0 triumph at Reggina.

Inter Milan came back twice to draw 2-2 at 10-man Verona in the Sunday evening match in a game that saw the visitors' striker Christian Vieri return as a second-half substitute after a five-month injury absence.

But Udinese are top although De Canio admitted his team would face a tough task to stay in pole position.

"We are up against some very good teams with the likes of Parma, Juventus and Roma," admitted the Udinese coach. "But we are happy to be occupying that place right now."

On a day of incident-packed games the San Siro clash probably took the honours with AC Milan coming from 3-1 down at the break to snatch a 3-3 draw with Atalanta.

Cristiano Doni - one of three Atalanta players facing match-fixing allegations - gave the unfashionable visitors from Bergamo the lead after 21 minutes.

Three minutes later Brazilian Serginho equalised for the San Siro giants, firing home from a tight angle but in first-half stoppage time Milan were rocked with a combination punch from Atalanta.

First Doni converted a penalty and then Fausto Rossini made it 3-1 with a header in a classic counterattack.

Early in the second half German striker Oliver Bierhoff pulled one back for AC Milan before an Andriy Shevchenko spot kick completed the comeback.

Roma, whose 2-0 defeat by Inter in midweek had toppled them from the summit, took an early lead at Brescia with French defender Vincent Candela on the mark after 13 minutes.

But nine minutes later Pierpaolo Bisoli squared the match for Brescia and in first-half injury time veteran striker Dario Hubner gave the hosts the lead from the penalty spot.

Batistuta equalised in the second period and went on to net again after 78 and 90 minutes.

"We were not at our best in the first period," admitted Batistuta, who now tops the Serie A goalscorer charts with six goals. "We played well but not well enough but we were a different team in the second half."

His coach Fabio Capello said the midweek defeat had not disturbed him, saying: "I had

no worries with the team after the San Siro match - I think this squad of players is capable of great things."

Juventus, meanwhile, deserved their win at Reggio Calabria.

Trezeguet made the breakthrough for the Bianconeri just before the interval to put them in good heart ahead of next week's crunch Champions League match in Athens with Panathinaikos.

Trezeguet struck his first after Reggina goalkeeper Massimo Taibi - a former Manchester United player - had hopelessly committed himself, leaving an unguarded goal.

Trezeguet also bagged the second, heading home Alessandro Del Piero's freekick in the second period.

Just as important for Ju-

ventus coach Marco Tardelli. "But we showed determination and got ourselves back in the game."

Vicenza's Vincenzo Sommese, returning to his native city, gave his side a 2-1 win at bottom side Napoli.

Sommese struck first before Napoli's highly-rated Czech striker Marek Jankulovski restored parity with a brilliant strike.

But Sommese struck his second shortly after the resumption to leave Napoli coach Zdenek Zeman's position looking precarious with one point in five games despite some heavy investment by the newly-promoted club - a board meeting has been convened Monday.

Parma pulled off their second win of the week when in-

form Cameroonian Patrick Mboma struck the only goal



AS Roma's superstar Gabriel Batistuta (L) and Japanese Hidetoshi Nakata in action during their Serie A outing against Brescia on November 5. -AFP photo

ventus will be the fact that their under-fire defence kept a clean sheet.

"We did very well," said a relieved Juventus coach Carlo Ancelotti. "It was exactly the performance we wanted."

Verona took the lead at home to Inter Milan when Emiliano Bonazzoli - their loan signing from Parma - gave them a 16th minute lead but 10 minutes later Francisco Javier Farinos equalised for Inter after being set up by Uruguayan Alvaro Recoba.

Vincenzo Italiano put Verona back in front on the verge of the interval but within a minute the goalscorer was sent off.

In the second half Vieri came on as a substitute for Clarence Seedorf and hit the bar with a header but it was Turk Hakan Sukur who came up with the priceless equaliser after 81 minutes, finishing off a move instigated by Andrea Pirlo.

"We lacked concentration and we were punished for some defensive errors," admitted Inter

three minutes from time at Bari.

Parma coach Alberto Malesani, whose position now seems secure after some early-season mishaps, believed the return from a long-term injury of French midfielder Alain Boghossian has helped give his side a better balance.

Malesani said: "It was a beautiful performance. Boghossian's return has been very important for us."

In Saturday's two matches defending champions Lazio defeated Bologna 2-0 at home with goals from Czech Pavel Nedved and Argentinian Hernan Crespo.

Earlier, Fiorentina had crashed at home 4-3 to Perugia for whom Greek striker Zisis Vryzas scored a hat-trick and Luca Saudati one.

Goals from Angelo di Livio and Brazilian Leandro (two) proved in vain for the Florence outfit whose Turkish coach Fatih Terim is under renewed pressure.

Vieri spots good signs

MILAN, Nov 6: Inter Milan's Italian striker Christian Vieri played his first match under the new regime of coach Marco Tardelli Sunday - and insisted the First Division giants have been transformed for the better since he last donned the blue-and-black striped shirt of the San Siro, reports AFP.

Vieri's half-hour appearance as a substitute in the 2-2 draw at Verona was his first since last May under the regime of Tardelli's predecessor Marcello Lippi.

Vieri was happy to come through unscathed in his first match after his long injury lay-off and told journalists: "This was a good Inter and above all we reacted well."

"I would like to underline a fact that came into my head after the game: last year after we conceded a goal we never managed to equalise. It's good progress but we need to go further."

Vieri entered the fray with Inter 2-1 down and in his first significant contribution he hit the bar with a header - in the end it was his Turkish strike partner Hakan Sukur who came up with an equaliser.

Vieri said: "If the ball had gone under the crossbar instead of against it we would have had more than 20 minutes to try and win the match."

Vieri joined Inter in 1999 after a 49 million dollar switch from Lazio - then a world record fee.

Seedorf abused

VERONA, Italy, Nov 6: Inter Milan's Dutch midfielder Clarence Seedorf was subjected to coordinated racist abuse during an Italian First Division match here Sunday, reports AFP.

Every time Seedorf, who is of Surinamese origin, touched the ball he was whistled and jeered by supporters of home team Verona.

It is the latest in several instances of racist abuse of coloured players by fans in Italian matches this season.

Cameroon coach changed

JOHANNESBURG, Nov 6: Jean-Paul Akono has replaced Frenchman Pierre Lechantre as coach of African champions Cameroon, according to reports from Yaounde, reports AFP.

Akono became a national hero last September when he guided Cameroon to a penalty shoot-out victory over Spain in the Sydney Olympic Games football final.

But the demolition of Lechantre to technical advisor seems a strange reward for a coach who guided the Indomitable Lions to the 2000 African Nations Cup title in Nigeria.

Cameroon also made an impressive start to their 2002 World Cup qualifying campaign under the Frenchman with 3-0 victories away to Libya and at home to Angola.

However, football supporters in the Central Africa country have been slow to embrace Lechantre, attributing the string of successes to playing ability rather than coaching methods.

Akono, a former player and coach with famous Yaounde club Canon, will be assisted by three unnamed local coaches while Lechantre said he did not know what his new role entailed.

"The changes announced by the sports minister caught me by surprise. I have been trying to see him for three weeks without success," Lechantre told reporters in Yaounde.

Akono said he had a huge responsibility and realised the expectations of Cameroon were extremely high given the presence of stars like Rigobert Song, Marc-Vivien Foe and Patrick Mboma in the national team.

"It is critical that all the national coaches work together for the good of Cameroon. Only then can we realise our ultimate goal of becoming the first World Cup winners from Africa," he said.

The appointment of Akono will be welcomed by the seemingly endless supply of talented young Cameroonians as he promoted 16-year-old goalkeeper Idriss Kameni.



Jose Maria Quevedo of Rayo Vallecano gets himself into an acrobatic position during a Primera Liga game against Valladolid at Madrid on November 6. -AFP photo

The moment of truth



PARIS, Nov 6: Top world clubs Barcelona, Manchester United and Juventus have a final chance to earn passage into the European Champions League second phase this week with seven of the 16 places unfilled, reports AFP.

Those giants of European football could surprisingly even finish bottom of their respective groups if fixtures do not go their way though other former champions AC Milan, Bayern Munich and Real Madrid have qualified.

Friday's second phase draw in Geneva could also include the likes of Panathinaikos of Greece, Sturm Graz of Austria or France's Lyon as emerging clubs get to dream of the May 23 final.

A back-door entry to the UEFA Cup for third-placed teams comes as a welcome safety net as last year's runners-up Arsenal would testify.

Only Sporting Lisbon and Heerenveen of Holland have been eliminated from all competitions.

Real Madrid, who travel to Spartak Moscow on Tuesday, timed their qualification from group A to perfection considering their dire domestic form.

A 2-0 home loss to Real Mallorca on Wednesday was followed on Saturday by a 3-1 defeat at the hands of Numancia.

Meanwhile, Spartak beat Rostov 1-0 last Wednesday to clinch their eighth Russian league title in nine years. The match left Spartak with an unbeatable lead from their closest challengers Lokomotiv Moscow with two matches left.

Sporting Lisbon, already eliminated, and Bayer Leverkusen, already qualified for the UEFA Cup, meet in Portugal for their final group A fixture.

Arsenal and Lazio have already qualified from group B though Shakhtar Donetsk of Ukraine and Sparta Prague, their respective hosts on Tuesday, both have three points and a UEFA Cup spot is at stake.

Valencia, who host Holland's Heerenveen in group C, are through but all is to play for between Lyon and Olympiakos at the Gerland stadium.

Lyon, who have injury

doubts over Brazilian central defender Edmilson (knee) and midfielder Vikash Dhorasoo (ankle), need to win by a better score than the 2-1 victory by Olympiakos in Greece on September 20.

Austria's Sturm Graz incredibly lead group D though they lost 5-0 at both Rangers and Monaco, who meet in a winner-takes-all battle at Ibrox.

Rangers' Mickey Mols could be back in the starting line-up after making his third attempt at a comeback from the serious knee injury which has put his career on hold for almost a year.

He played for the first hour of the 7-1 Ibrox thrashing of St Mirren on Saturday and, although he did not score himself, received an ovation from the home fans.

Sturm, initially touted by football experts as one of the worst teams in the competition, need only a draw at Turkish club Galatasaray to go through to the second phase.

FIXTURES

TUESDAY

Group A
Spartak Moscow (Rus) v Real Madrid (Spa)
Sporting Lisbon (Por) v Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)

Group B
Sparta Prague (Cze) v Lazio (Ita)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) v Arsenal (Eng)

Group C
Valencia (Spa) v Heerenveen (Ned)
Lyon (Fra) v Olympiakos (Gre)

Group D
Galatasaray (Tur) v Sturm Graz (Aust)
Glasgow Rangers (Sco) Monaco (Fra)

WEDNESDAY

Group E
Hamburg SV (Ger) v Deportivo La Coruna (Spa)
Panathinaikos (Gre) v Juventus (Ita)

Group F
Rosenborg (Nor) v Bayern Munich (Ger)
Helsingborgs (Swe) v Paris Saint Germain (Fra)

Group G
PSV Eindhoven (Ned) v Anderlecht (Bel)

Manchester United (Eng) v Dynamo Kiev (Ukr)

Group H
Barcelona (Spa) v Besiktas (Tur)
AC Milan (Ita) v Leeds (Eng)

Juventus, the 1996 champions, have been making things tough for themselves since scraping through in a 4-4 draw at Hamburg SV in their first game.

Should the Old Lady of Turin win a Greek club Panathinaikos on Wednesday, they would join Deportivo La Coruna as the qualifiers from group E.

Juventus however are without French playmaker Zinedine Zidane, who begins a five-match suspension for headbutting Hamburg's Jochen Kientz.

Hamburg SV, who beat Juventus in the 1983 final, must win at home to Deportivo and hope Panathinaikos and Juventus draw.

Bayern Munich and Paris Saint Germain both have trips in group F - to Norway's Rosenborg and Helsingborgs of Sweden - yet both clubs have already made the last 16.

A Manchester United win at home to Dynamo Kiev will be enough to see them claim a second phase berth from group G following far from impressive performances so far.

United coach Alex Ferguson is desperate to see his side progress. He said: "There is no denying we've made it difficult for ourselves. But I said 10 points would be enough to qualify, which we'll have if we win on Wednesday."

PSV Eindhoven host Anderlecht meet in the other fixture and a win for either would see them through.

Leeds manager David O'Leary said his patched-up Leeds squad would not be playing for a draw at AC Milan in group H on Wednesday. A point at the San Siro would carry Leeds through to the money-spinning second group stage.

O'Leary said: "I don't think we can go to Milan, sit back and think we need a draw. That could backfire on us. Nobody goes to the San Siro and sits on the edge of the opposition's box expecting to hold out for 90 minutes."

"It's more sensible to say attack is the best form of defence. Digging a trench and hoping to hold out would be asking for trouble."

Barcelona would qualify if a Leeds loss combined with their win at home to Turkish club Besiktas at the Nou Camp stadium.



THE FLYING FOOTBALLERS! Aston Villa and Everton players take to the air during their Premiership encounter at Goodison Park on November 6. -AFP photo

EUROPEAN SOCCER SCENE

Nov 6 (AFP): European football scene after weekend's leagues fixtures:

PRIMERA LIGA

MADRID: Basque outfit Alaves profited from the blunders of Spanish giants Valencia, Deportivo La Coruna and Real Madrid to move into second place in the Spanish First Division table Sunday.

With all three losing their matches Saturday, Alaves benefitted from their 4-0 thrashing of Real Oviedo to move ahead of Spanish champions Deportivo on goal difference.

Both have 17 points, two behind leader's Valencia, who went down 1-0 at Espanyol Saturday. Deportivo lost 3-2 at Villarreal and Real Madrid collapsed 3-1 at Numancia.

Alaves opened their scoring in the 24th minute with a penalty shot by Javi Moreno, top league scorer on seven goals this season, with Jordi Cruyff securing the win with a last minute shot, his first for the club.

Real Mallorca followed their wins over Barcelona and Real Madrid when Miguel Angel Nadal netted the only goal of the match with a last-minute header at Real Sociedad.

Sociedad are now second from the bottom on eight points, two behind Real Zaragoza who climbed out of the relegation zone thanks to a 2-0 win at home to third-bottom Racing Santander.

Rayo Vallecano defeated Valladolid 2-1 to become the top placed Madrid side in the league table in sixth position.

PREMIERSHIP

LONDON: Aston Villa moved up to fifth in the English Premiership Sunday with Paul Merson's brilliant 90th minute strike enough to edge Everton 1-0 at Goodison Park.

With no options available and his path to goal blocked by a posse of Everton defenders, the former England international looked up, saw the keeper off his line, and lobbed Paul Gerrard from 30 metres.

Villa now have 19 points from 11 games, eight adrift of leaders Manchester United, although the Birmingham club do have a game in hand.

Everton remain sixth from bottom with just 12 points out of a possible 36 although recent signing Gary Naysmith was unfortunate not to put Everton in front earlier in the match.

The former Hearts midfielder was first denied by the heroics of Villa keeper David James who pulled off a remarkable one-handed save to stop his goalbound header.

On the hour, Celtic took their deserved lead. Agathe's cross was missed by both Sutton and Henrik Larsson but also Marshall, and Thompson had the simple task of slotting the ball home.

Frenchman Agathe almost doubled Celtic's lead 10 minutes later but the speedy winger fired over the crossbar when well placed to score.

Dundee will host second-placed Hibernian in the Sunday evening match.

And the Scottish international, making his home debut, should have hit the target after excellent work by Kevin Campbell had set him up, but the 21-year-old blazed wide with the goal at his mercy.

Strugglers Derby entertain West Ham in the Monday night match.

SCOTTISH PREMIERSHIP

GLASGOW: Celtic midfielder Alan Thompson restored his club's 13-point lead over Rangers at the top of the Scottish Premier League Sunday with the only goal in a 1-0 win against Kilmarnock at Rugby Park.

The former England Under-21 international prodded home the winner from substitute Didier Agathe's cross on the hour.

But it was unlucky 13 for Kilmarnock, who saw their 12-game unbeaten run ended by the Martin O'Neill's men.

The visitors had the better of the first half with Thompson and Stilian Petrov both forcing saves from Kilmarnock keeper Gordon Marshall while former Chelsea striker Chris Sutton was constantly dangerous from set-pieces with his head.

Celtic goalkeeper Jonathan Gould was finally tested by the hosts with four minutes left of the first half.

The Scotland international was forced to scramble clear Gus MacPherson's cross under intense pressure from Andy McLaren.

On the hour, Celtic took their deserved lead. Agathe's cross was missed by both Sutton and Henrik Larsson but also Marshall, and Thompson had the simple task of slotting the ball home.

Frenchman Agathe almost doubled Celtic's lead 10 minutes later but the speedy winger fired over the crossbar when well placed to score.

Dundee will host second-placed Hibernian in the Sunday evening match.