

First win for Maradona's Almagro

BUENOS AIRES, Dec 10: Argentine legend Diego Maradona, who returned to Buenos Aires last month to take up his new post as coach of struggling First Division club Almagro, led his side to their first win of the season here on Friday night, reports AFP.

The team, newly-promoted to the First Division this season, have had a poor run and were winless after 17 matches.

Following Friday's surprise win against sixth-place Velez Sarsfield they are still bottom on 10 points on the penultimate day of the season.

Almagro opened the scoring in the 26th minute through Francisco Maciel, but Velez equalised six minutes later through Eduardo Dominguez and took a 2-1 lead through Jairo Castillo on the stroke of half time.

However two second half goals from Maximiliano Bevacqua (60) and Cristian Aragon (78) sealed victory for Almagro.

Maradona had been undergoing treatment in Cuba for his drug problems before taking up the position on the eve of his 40th birthday.

Sunday is the crucial day in the chase for the Argentine league title between leaders Boca Juniors, who play Chacarita Juniors, and their closest chasers River Plate, who are just two points behind on 36, and play Huracan.

MLS in crisis

MIAMI, Florida, Dec 10: The United States football league MLS is in a deep financial crisis according to a report in the Miami Herald newspaper here on Saturday, reports AFP.

The paper reported the MLS has debts of up to 250 million dollars accrued since the launching of the league in 1995.

Carlos Giron, an MLS director, admitted, according to the Herald, that there was a large debt but emphasized the development plan of the league was in the long term.

The MLS has a large debt but our investors are remaining loyal and are going to endorse us. They support and they trust the development of this competition.

Staelens signs Japanese Div Two Oita

BRUSSELS, Dec 10: Former Belgian international defender Lorenzo Staelens has signed a ten-month contract with Japanese Second Division side Oita, Belgian radio reported Sunday.

The 36-year-old Staelens, captain of Belgian first division champions Anderlecht, said he was interested in finishing off his playing career in Japan.

According to the reports, Staelens, who can leave Anderlecht on a free transfer, will be paid 328,000 dollars on signing the deal, 221,000 dollars for the season and further bonuses for wins.

The former Belgian international, capped 70 times for the national squad, previously played with Belgian sides FC Courtrai and FC Brugge before joining Anderlecht in 1998.

He was awarded the "Golden Boot" award for being the most outstanding player in the Belgian league for 1999.

Feyenoord's Leonardo in false passport probe

THE HAGUE, Dec 10: Dutch investigators are investigating a suspected false Portuguese passport held by Feyenoord's 17-year-old Brazilian winger Leonardo in the latest case of non-European Union players attempting to qualify as EU nationals, reports AFP.

The Dutch ministry believes that the promising player has a false passport and does not possess a work permit.

Prosecutors in Rotterdam have advised the club not to use the player until further notice.

The investigation is the latest twist in an increasing number of cases across Europe of players from outside the European Union attempting to bypass limits on the number of non-EU players allowed in teams.

The most high-profile case involves AC Milan's Brazilian goalkeeper Dida, who is under investigation for using a false Portuguese passport to secure a work permit.

And French club Saint Etienne could face league disciplinary action following doubts of the authenticity of their Brazilian player Alex's Portuguese passport.

SA give disgraced World Cup star another chance

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 10: Brendan Augustine, sent home from the 1998 World Cup in disgrace, has been recalled by South Africa for an African Nations Cup qualifier against Liberia here on December 16, reports AFP.

Augustine and Naughtie Mokocina were kicked out of the national squad by French coach Philippe Troussier after leaving a camp in the French town of Vichy to socialise without permission.

FIFA's awards night gala

War of the greatest



ROME, Dec 10: Argentine football bad-boy Diego Maradona is on the brink of ending a miserable year

which began with a cocaine overdose by being declared FIFA's player of the century, reports AFP.

Maradona - rushed into intensive care after collapsing in January after a drug binge - has emerged as an unlikely favourite ahead of Brazilian legend Pele for the award at a gala FIFA awards night here Monday.

In theory Pele should win hands down.

The 'black pearl' enjoyed far greater success at international level than Maradona, a member of three World Cup winning squads and scorer of more than 1,000 goals in a glittering career that spanned three decades.

Pele is also widely held to have conducted himself flawlessly on and off the pitch, fabled for his sportsmanship and becoming a world ambassador for football in retirement.

Maradona - with only one World Cup victory in 1986 to his name -- is a different proposition altogether.

While his individual footballing genius cannot be questioned, the portly playmaker has frequently found himself in the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

He has earned the dubious distinction of exiting two World Cups in shame. In 1982 he was sent off as Argentina were dumped out by Brazil, and in 1990 he was booted out of the tournament in disgrace after failing a dope test.

Even the highpoint of his career, when he inspired Argentina to World Cup glory at Mexico '86, will be remembered as much for his 'Hand of God' goal against England in the

Premiership

Parlour Gunners' pearl

LONDON, Dec 10: Hat-trick hero Ray Parlour defiantly announced Saturday that Arsenal will never give up the fight for the accolade is threatening to overshadow FIFA's annual guessing game to discover the world player of the

United coach Sir Alex Ferguson paid tribute to Charlton's courageous comeback at The Valley where the title holders held a 3-1 lead with 11 minutes to go before being pegged back by the Premiership newcomers.

"It was a really courageous effort by Charlton," said Ferguson. "They deserved their point because of their courage and they played some nice football at times."

"They are a great lesson about patience and management," Alan Curbishley has not panicked."

Charlton boss Curbishley was delighted with the way his side put the reigning champions under pressure early on.

"For the first 35 minutes, I don't think Manchester United have been tested like that," said Curbishley.

Former England coach Terry Venables, returning to Premiership

King's goal the fastest

LONDON, Dec 10: Tottenham's Ledley King found the net after just 13 seconds at Bradford on Saturday for the quickest English Premiership goal this season, according to the Press Association, reports AFP.

Tottenham have only managed to earn one point in their last eight away matches, meaning King's strike was all the more rewarding for Spurs boss George Graham.

King was given acres of space to drive in a speculative 25-yard shot which spun off the unfortunate Andy O'Brien, leaving goalkeeper Matt Clarke rooted to the spot.

But in an all-action start to the game at Valley Parade, Bradford were back on level terms in the eighth minute as Jamie Lawrence bundled a Dean Windass corner over the line for his first goal of the season.

"We've played Ray mainly on the right side but his timing for late runs seems to be better from the middle. He has great vision there and with his work-rate as well, I've always known he could do that job well."

Newcastle manager Bobby Robson conceded his side were no match for the Gunners.

"After Arsenal's first goal went in it was just a matter of damage limitation."

"We were without at least five top players and I can't criticise my lads too much, but I told them to look at Arsenal and see not only the world-class quality they have but also the

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Sport

Euro clubs' Arkan connection!

THE HAGUE, Dec 10: Three football clubs in France, Belgium and the Netherlands are being investigated for allegedly receiving bribes from murdered Serb warlord Arkan, it was reported here Saturday, reports AFP.

French side Bordeaux, Vitesse Arnhem of the Netherlands and Belgium's FC Brugge are all being probed over transfer dealings totalling millions of dollars, the NRC Handelsblad reported.

The paper said Dutch and French investigators were investigating the transfers of players worth nine million euros (7.9 million dollars) from Arkan's club Obili to the three clubs.

The militia leader and entrepreneur Zeljko Raznatovic - better known as Arkan - was gunned down in the lobby of a Belgrade hotel in January.

Arkan had been indicted by the international war crimes tribunal in The Hague over a series of atrocities his paramilitary unit allegedly carried out during the Bosnian conflict.

NRC Handelsblad said the transfers were handled by Obili's manager Ranko Stojic, a former player for Belgian club Anderlecht, who passed bribes to members of the clubs involved to persuade them to purchase the players.

Bordeaux bought Yvan Vukomanovic from Obili in 1998. The Dutch newspaper said French officials began an investigation last month and believe that the transfer fee, which was not stated, bypassed Obili's bank accounts and went straight into Arkan's pockets.

Vukomanovic has since left the French club.

Vitesse Arnhem are implicated in the transfer of Nenad Grozic, while FC Brugge, one of Belgium's top clubs, bought five players from Obili.

Belgian newspapers on Saturday quoted a director of Brugge, Antoine Vanhove, as saying that two assistant trainers had received "envelopes" from Stojic.

"But they had immediately handed them over to the management of the club and since then they have been stored in the club safe so they could be used as evidence in any investigation," Vanhove told several newspapers.

The Brugge coach at the time of the transfers, Eric Gerets, who is currently coach at Dutch club PSV Eindhoven, has flatly denied accusations from the club that he received bribes.

Leeds, who recorded a famous victory away to Italian champions Lazio in the Champions League on Tuesday night, lost 1-0 at Southampton with in-form striker James Beattie grabbing the only goal two minutes before half-time.

Leeds' King struck after just 10 seconds - the fastest goal ever scored in the Premiership - in Tottenham's 3-3 draw at Bradford.

Strugglers Bradford were 3-1 down but fought back to pick up a precious point thanks to late goals from Dean Windass and mercurial Italian Benito Carbone.

Joe Royle's Manchester City ended a run of six consecutive defeats with an impressive 5-0 win over Everton.

Paulo Wanchope (14), defender Steve Howey (23) and Shaun Goater (42) gave the hosts a 3-0 half-time lead before Paul Dickov and a Gary Naysmith own goal compounded the Merseysiders' misery.

Chelsea's Icelandic forward Eidur Gudjohnsen scored twice in his side's 4-1 win over strugglers Derby at Stamford Bridge.

West Ham and Aston Villa drew 1-1 at Upton Park where Michael Carrick put the hosts in front after 15 minutes only for Lee Hendrie to equalise eight minutes from the end.

Euro flops Rangers host Motherwell on Sunday.

Serie A

Brescia held by Napoli

MILAN, Dec 10: Brescia were held to a 1-1 draw here Saturday by fellow Italian First Division strugglers Napoli, reports AFP.

A draw was probably a fair result in a match where home favourites Brescia bossed the first half while Napoli prospered in the second.

Stefano Diana had given Brescia the lead after 30 minutes only for Fabio Peccia to equalise 13 minutes into the second half for Napoli.

In the earlier match Reggina ended their run of eight consecutive defeats by grabbing a last-gasp equaliser to earn a 1-1 with Verona.

In a match played at Catania, Reggina were denied home advantage because of crowd trouble during their recent 3-0 defeat by Brescia -- Emilio Bonazzoli gave Verona the lead in the opening minute.

Bonazzoli's strike -- his fourth of the season -- looked like giving the points until Lorenzo Stovini equalised in the third minute of injury time for Reggina.

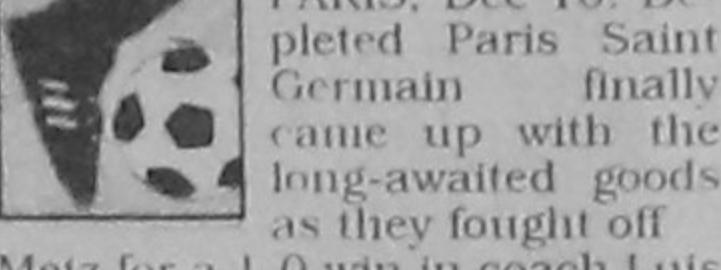


Paris Saint Germain's Aliou Cisse (R) tackling Jonathan Jages of Metz during their French First Division encounter at Paris on December 9.

- AFP photo

French First Division

Anelka lifts PSG spirit



PARIS, Dec 10: Dejected Paris Saint Germain finally came up with the long-awaited goods as they fought off

Metz for a 1-0 win in coach Luis Fernandez' first match in charge at the Parc des Princes, reports AFP.

The capital side, who were reduced to 10 men early in the second half, held on to the slim 1-0 goal lead thanks to international forward Nicolas Anelka, but were lucky to escape with all three points.

The Paris club moved up a couple of places to eighth spot after their win.

Defending French league champions Monaco fought back from two goals down to draw 2-2 at Guingamp.

Gregory Lacombe and Norwegian John Arne Riise both scored in the final quarter-hour after Guingamp's Bruno Rodriguez and Fabrice Fiorese had given Guingamp their impressive first-half lead.

Rodriguez also hit the crossbar from a freekick on 56 minutes and surely a three-goal advantage would have killed off Monaco.

Lyon, who beat Spartak Moscow 3-0 in the Champions

league in midweek, kept up their form to claim a 1-0 victory over Bastia, their first at their Gerland stadium for exactly two months.

Lyon, whose last league win at home was a 3-0 thrashing of Lens on September 9, moved up from ninth spot to seventh.

Sedan missed the chance to go top, losing 2-0 at Lille, and, at the other end of the table, basement club Toulouse had some cheer with a 1-0 win over Lyon.

In other matches, Auxerre drew 2-2 with Troyes, Strasbourg had a 1-1 draw with Rennes.

Meanwhile PSG were shown

that new coach Luis Fernandez' arrival is no instant cure for their league malaise as Metz showed the French international legend they hadn't come just to make up the numbers.

With a change of formation at 3-5-2 that the Parisians seemed hardly able to exploit, Metz proved the more opportune in the first 45 with a number of real chances threatening the goal of Lionel Letizi.

After 11 minutes, wing Gerald Batiste's searching cross from the south west German club had

Andreas Moller cross for victory against basement club VfB Stuttgart, reports AFP.

Borussia Dortmund, twice Bundesliga champions and European Cup winners in the last decade before their form dipped, after coach Ottmar Hitzfeld left for Munich, are in second spot after a 3-0 victory over Unterhaching.

German champions Bayern Munich could only draw 0-0 at Kaiserslautern later on Saturday in another big fixture.

Whoever wins out of Bayern Leverkusen and Hertha Berlin on Sunday will grab top spot.

Schalke have 30 points, Dortmund 29, Leverkusen and Berlin both 28 and Bayern 27.

At Gelsenkirchen, Schalke went ahead through Czech Republic's Radoslav Latal on 21