

Ref under dog attack

TEHRAN, Dec 17: A football match in the central Iranian city of Isfahan had to be abandoned just six minutes from time after a stray dog attacked one of the referees, press reports said Saturday, reports AFP.

The match between Kar-o-Techin and Iran-Sport was in the 84th minute when a stray wandered onto the pitch and sent players and refs running "for their lives," the Doran-E Emrouz paper said.

The hound attacked one of the referees, who defended himself with his flag and finally fought it off after a tense 20-minute standoff with the help of fans, it said. But the match had to be called off.

Shevchenko's humane gesture

MILAN, Italy, Dec 17: AC Milan's Ukrainian striker Andriy Shevchenko dedicated his sporting success to the child victims of Chernobyl on Friday, when the world's most infamous nuclear power plant was finally shut down, reports AFP.

"I play football for my supporters and for those who love me, but if it helps the world never to forget I dedicate my victories to the children of Chernobyl," said the centre forward.

An estimated 15,000 to 30,000 people have died as a result of the 1986 explosion that contaminated three quarters of Europe, spewing radiation into the atmosphere equivalent to 500 times that of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima 41 years earlier.

Scottish Premiership

Larsson rules for Celtic

GLASGOW, Dec 17: Henrik Larsson scored a hat-trick and new arrival Ramon Vega got two as Celtic thrashed Aberdeen 6-1 in the Scottish Premiership on Saturday, reports Reuters.

Swiss international defender Vega, who joined on Friday from Tottenham Hotspur, struck with two headers at Parkhead as Celtic stayed seven points ahead of Hibernian, who won 2-0 at home to St Johnstone.

Celtic have 54 points from 21 games. Champions Rangers, in third with 41 points from 19 matches, travel to bottom side Dundee United today.

Larsson, Celtic's regular marksman, began the rout after just five minutes with the first of his three goals which took his total to 26 for the season.

Vega began the move and Larsson side-footed a low cross from winger Bobby Petta past goalkeeper Ryan Esson from six metres.

Vega made it 2-0 after 20 minutes when he steered in a left-foot shot from Alan Thompson's free-kick but it was not until the final 14 minutes that Celtic began their deluge.

Larsson collected his second by beating the offside trap in 76 minutes and then struck a spectacular volley from Thompson's cross after 78 minutes to make it 4-0.

Vega then headed in a Thompson corner with nine minutes left and teenage substitute Jamie Smith curled in a 16-metre shot in the last minute to the delight of the 60,000 crowd.

Vega said: "I only met the players on Friday night and hardly knew them but they made me feel welcome and that settled me."

"I have never scored two goals in a game before but the reception from the fans was passionate and I wanted to give them something back."

Aberdeen remain in tenth with 17 points. Manager Ebbe Skovdahl said: "I will not criticise my players in public, it's my job to do that in private."

Hibernian were never in trouble against St Johnstone once Stuart Lovell gave them a 39th-minute lead at Easter Road.

The Australian international made a great burst into the box and curled a left-foot shot past goalkeeper Alan Main. Mixu Paatelainen then sealed the points in the 73rd minute when he glauced in a dipping free kick by Franck Sauze for his 10th goal for the Edinburgh club this season.

Kilmarnock slumped to their fourth successive defeat at home when they squandered a two-goal advantage against Dundee at Rugby Park to lose 3-2.

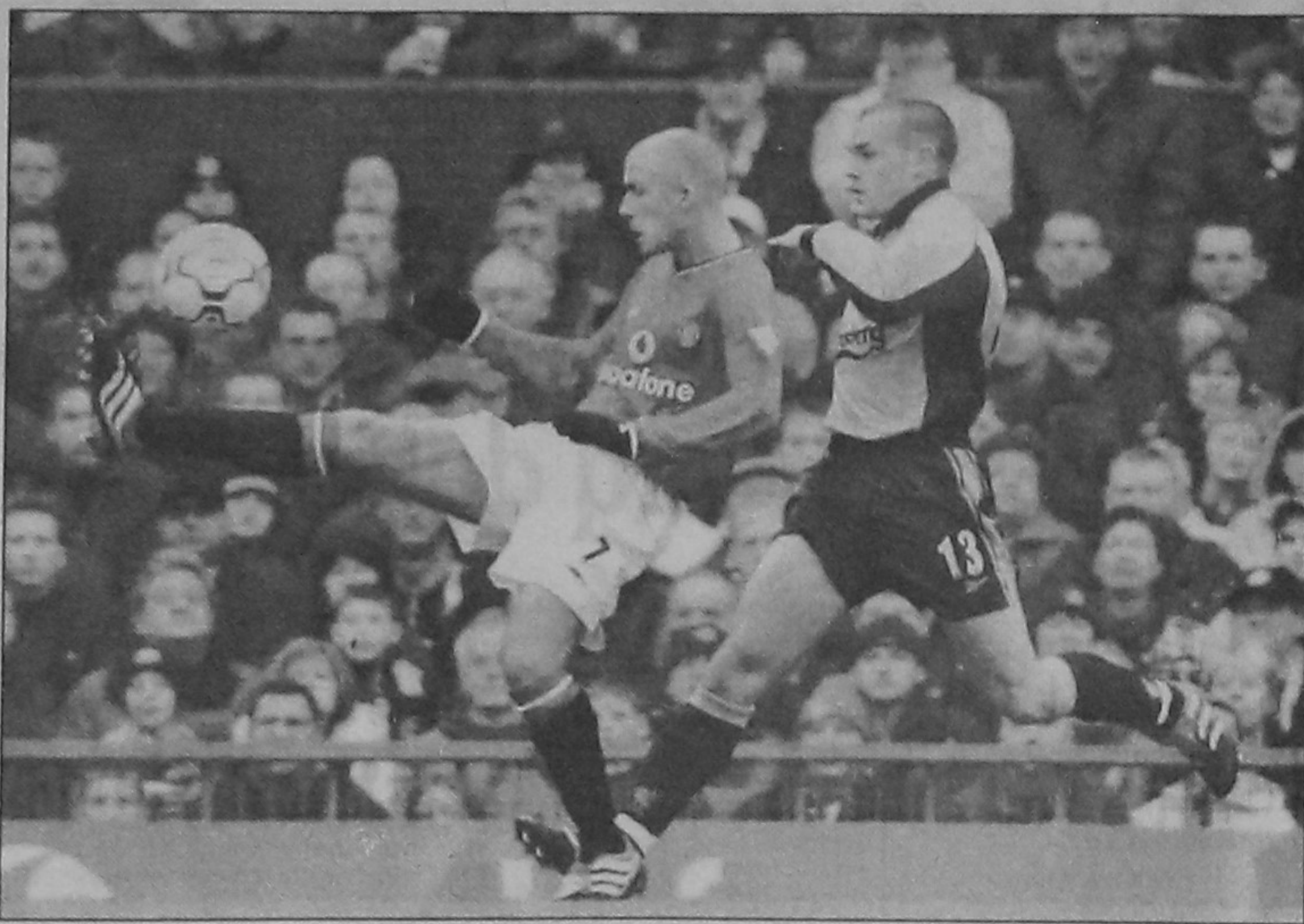
Christophe Cocard had given Kilmarnock a fourth-minute lead with a low shot and Martin Bakers header made it 2-0 after 48 minutes from Cocard's cross.

But Dundee player-manager Ivano Bonetti sparked the fightback with a 55th-minute shot that slipped under goalkeeper Gordon Marshall, before Steven Milne finished off crosses by Javier Artero after 77 and 79 minutes.

Kilmarnock are in fourth with 36 points from 21 games while Dundee are in seventh.

Fifth-placed Hearts lost 2-0 away to Motherwell, for whom Derek Townsley made the breakthrough with a 57th-minute header and then Derek Adams struck in an 88th-minute breakaway.

Dumfries defeated St Mirren 2-0 at home with goals from Scott Thomson and Chris McGroarty with an 18-metre shot.



Liverpool's hero Danny Murphy (R) putting pressure on Manchester United's David Beckham during their premiership clash at Old Trafford yesterday. — AFP photo

Premiership

Old Trafford has fallen



MANCHESTER, Dec 17: Liverpool ended Manchester United's two-year unbeaten streak at Old Trafford with a hard-fought 1-0 victory Sunday, breathing fresh life into the English Premiership title race, reports AFP.

Reigning champions United had not been beaten at home in the league for nearly two years since losing 3-2 to Middlesbrough on December 19, 1998.

Since then United had gone 36 matches unbeaten at their Manchester fortress and were one game away from equalling the club record set between April 1996 and March 1998 before a goal from Liverpool's Danny Murphy ultimately ended the streak.

It was more than five years since Liverpool had last won a match against their successors as England's leading team, a 2-0 Premiership victory at Anfield in March 1995.

Murphy stunned the home crowd when he fired Liverpool ahead just before half-time.

Gary Neville needlessly handled the ball just outside the area and the Liverpool midfielder sent the ball around the

United wall and into the net, with France international goalkeeper Fabien Barthez stranded.

Up until then United had enjoyed the majority of the possession, but Liverpool's packed and determined defence would not let them do much with it.

Michael Owen fouled England team-mate Neville in prime David Beckham territory just over 35 yards out only on this occasion the England star's trusty right boot let him down and he bent the free-kick wide.

The scrappy nature of the match will not have bothered Liverpool's French manager Gerard Houllier one bit and he would have been delighted with how well his side held the champions.

After stifling United, Liverpool pushed forward in the dying minutes of the first half.

First Murphy fired in a shot which was pushed away by Barthez for a corner.

Then Murphy swung in the corner towards striker Emile Heskey and he connected with the header which midfielder Paul Scholes cleared off the line.

United failed to heed that

warning and in the 43rd minute they paid the price.

Neville controlled a long ball with his arm on the edge of the 'D' and this time Murphy made no mistake as he curled a free-kick around the side of the United wall and into the net.

England striker Owen might have had a second in first half stoppage time, but he overran the ball.

He came closer at the start of the second half when his edge of the box shot clipped the top of Barthez's crossbar.

In the final minute of normal time United had defender Luke Chadwick sent off after he had pulled back Vladimir Smicer on the edge of the box with Barthez the only other United man between the Liverpool man and the home goal.

Substitute Gary McAllister blasted the resultant free-kick wide and Liverpool then survived four minutes of time added on before the final whistle.

Defeat means second-placed Arsenal can cut United's lead at the top to just three points with victory in the north London derby against Tottenham on Monday.

Gregory's advice for Ginola

LONDON, Dec 17: Aston Villa's French winger David Ginola has been ordered to lose weight or risk losing his team place by the English Premiership team boss John Gregory, reports AFP.

The 33-year-old Ginola has been piling on the weight since his three-million-pound (£4.5-million-dollar) summer move from Tottenham, the Sun newspaper reported.

Gregory is reported to have lost patience with Ginola, who completed his first full game of the season against West Ham last week.

Gregory said: "He's looking overweight. It's all that time off he's had and because he's 33."

"We can tell how much body fat a player is carrying and he's carrying a bit of timber. It's up to him. You know what I'm like. If he's not doing it, it's a case of 'off you go and we'll get somebody else in'."

And Gregory added: "We've seen little glimpses of what he can do but everyone knows you have to be fit to exercise your skills. The fitter you are, the easier it is."

Inter fans come to their senses

MILAN, Dec 17: Inter Milan's team arrived safely at the San Siro here Sunday for their Italian First Division match with Brescia just three days after the team bus was targeted by angry supporters as they arrived for the Italian Cup match with Parma, reports AFP.

Fans applauded and showed no sign of dissent when the bus, escorted by a sizeable contingent of police vehicles, approached the underground tunnel that leads to the changing room area at the famous Milan venue.

Two minutes later the Brescia team bus also arrived safely.

A Molotov cocktail was hurled at the Inter bus on Thursday before the Cup quarter-final second leg match with Parma that finished 0-0 - Parma had won the first leg 6-1.

Despite heavy investment - including two world record transfer fees in the past three years - Inter chairman Massimo Moratti has failed to turn around the struggling team in his five-year term as president.

The match with struggling Brescia is being billed as a must-win game for the San Siro side.

Serie A

Napoli rout Reggina

ROME, Dec 17: Napoli thrashed bottom club Reggina 6-2 on Saturday to move out of the relegation zone in the Italian First Division for the first time this year, reports Reuters.

The former champions, back in the top flight after two years in Serie B, scored through six different players to almost double their goal-tally for the season.

They were 3-0 up at half-time and easily weathered two late strikes from Reggina, who have taken just one point from their last 30.

Napoli move up to 14th with 10 points from 11 matches while Reggina stay stuck on the bottom with four points.

In the day's other match Perugia beat struggling Bari 4-1 despite having top scorer Marco Materazzi sent off after just half an hour for a second bookable offence.

Midfielder Giovanni Tedesco scored twice for Perugia, who are unbeaten in their last three matches and move up to 10th.

Threats to Lizarazu Kaiser can't believe it

MUNICH, Germany, Dec 17: Bayern Munich president Franz Beckenbauer has echoed the concern of coach Ottmar Hitzfeld over troubled French defender Bixente Lizarazu, who is the target of an extortion demand from Basque separatist group ETA.

The French international, whose mother received the letter on Tuesday demanding that her son pay a "revolutionary tax" because he played for France, is having to train with security guards nearby.

"It's a sorry episode, but there are too many crazy people in the world," said Beckenbauer, who added that he had no way of finding a solution to Lizarazu's problem.

"What can we do?" said the "Kaiser". "We can't protect him. It's a matter for the police."

Following training on Thursday, Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said: "I feel deeply concerned about this."

Hitzfeld's anxiety could stem from the fact that Lizarazu was accompanied by four bodyguards, with the World and European champion speeding off in a black BMW that came out to the field to pick him up.

On Wednesday, following Bayern's 2-1 win over Hamburg, Hitzfeld said that he was "deeply annoyed".

"I'm deeply annoyed. It's a situation that I don't think anyone has experience of around here, least of all me."

"It concerns all of us and it's extremely difficult for the player. I hope Bixente will come out of this unscathed," added Hitzfeld.

Primera Liga

Real move to the top



MADRID, Dec 17: Real Madrid went top of the Spanish First Division for the first time in two months after goals from Fernando Morientes and Luis Figo gave them a hard-fought 2-1 victory away to Espanyol on Saturday, reports Reuters.

Deportivo Coruna failed to take advantage of their chance to take the top slot as they slumped to a 3-1 defeat at Alaves while Rayo Vallecano and Barcelona could not be separated as they drew 2-2 in a frantic encounter at the Teresa Rivero stadium.

Real Madrid lead the table with 29 points and a game in hand, one point ahead of Valencia who can return to the top if they beat Malaga in their

match today. Deportivo are in third spot level on points with Valencia, but with a four points cushion over Rayo Vallecano.

Alaves jumped to fifth position and Barcelona slipped a place to sixth, but both teams have the same number of points as Rayo.

Real Madrid sealed their victory in an eight minute spell in the first half of their match against Espanyol.

On five minutes a neat angled pass from Steve McNamara found Fernando Morientes on the edge of the area. He checked past one defender and then fired home under keeper Juan Luis Mora.

Luis Figo extended the lead with a perfect curling free kick that left the despairing Mora with little chance.

Espanyol pulled one back on

22 minutes after Mauricio Pochettino took advantage of poor communication between keeper Iker Casillas and the Real defence to send a looping header into the empty goal.

Real, perhaps still smarting from their humiliating midweek exit from Spain's King's Cup at the hands of Third Division Toledo, fought hard to hold on to their lead against a willing Espanyol side.

Deportivo have never won a First Division match at Alaves's Mendizorrosa stadium and continued their poor run despite taking the lead. A superb series of passes following a Mauro Silva free kick split the Alaves defence and allowed midfielder Victor to slot home comfortably on 17 minutes.

But two goals in four minutes from first division top scorer Javi Moreno turned the match in Alaves's favour. An unstoppable header on 22 minutes and fiercely struck penalty took his total to 12 and gave his team the lead.

Ivan Alonso wrapped up with a header on 72 minutes as keeper Jacques Bengoa was stranded off his line.

Rayo took the lead after just five minutes in their breathless encounter against Barcelona. Elvir Bolic headed home after a perfect lofted cross from midfielder Michel.

But it took Barcelona only four minutes to get back on level terms. Spanish international Gerard Pique unleashed a sharp angled drive that spun into the corner out of reach of keeper Julien Lopetegui.

The second half began like the first with both sides creating chances with ease. Lopetegui and his Barcelona counterpart 18-year-old Jose Manuel Reina produced some fine saves to frustrate their opponents.

But Lopetegui was unable to stop Barcelona edging in front on 66 minutes as Frank de Boer headed in powerfully from a curling Guardiola free kick.

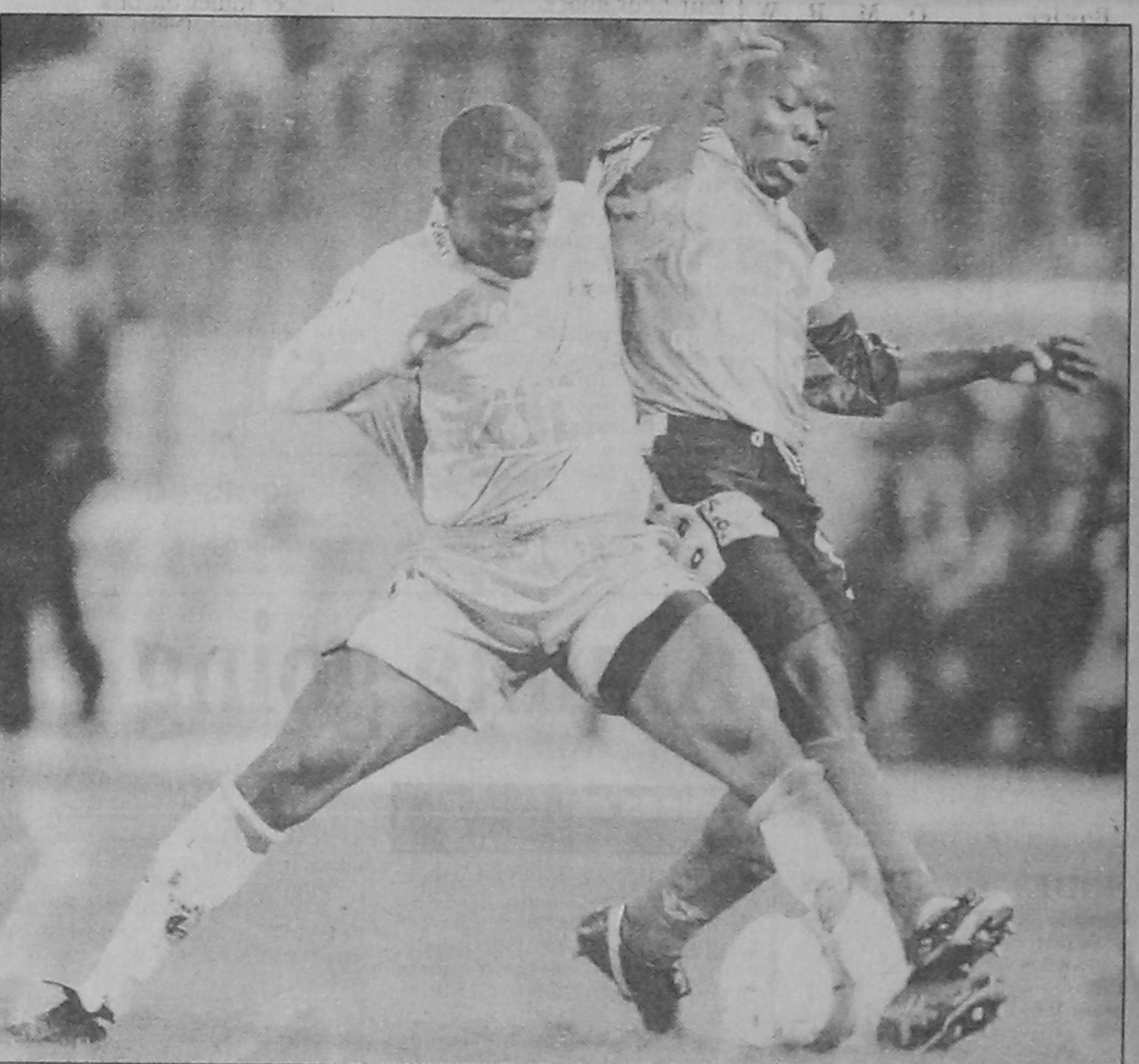
De Boer turned villain seven minutes later as he gave away a penalty after handling in the area and Pablo Sanz converted coolly from the spot to bring Rayo back on level terms.



Frank de Boer (R), Barcelona's Dutch international locked in a tussle with Bolic of Rayo Vallecano during their Primera Liga fixture at Madrid on December 16. — AFP photo

French First Division

Sedan's squeaky win



Pierre Njanka (L) of Sedan battles for possession with Strasbourg's Puis N'Dieff during their French First Division clash at Sedan on December 16. — AFP photo

PARIS, Dec 17: Sedan needed a controversial penalty to beat gassy bottom-placed Strasbourg 1-0 on Saturday.

but the narrow win was enough to lift them back to the top of the French First Division, reports Reuters.

Girondins Bordeaux, the previous leaders, squandered a two-goal lead and had to settle for a 2-2 draw away to RC Lens, who maintained their unbeaten home record.

Cedric Mionnet scored for Sedan from the spot in the 40th minute after defender Gharib Amine was alleged to have fouled Olivier Quini in the area. It was his eighth goal of the season.

The decision was hotly disputed by the Strasbourg players, who dominated the game but were thwarted by a combination of poor finishing and fine goalkeeping from Nicolas Sachy.

"If we don't score we are not going to win matches," said disappointed Strasbourg striker Peggy Luyindula.

Sedan have now won eight and drawn three of their 11 home games this season.

"Strasbourg made it hard for us," said Sedan defender Luis Satorra. "We didn't get a lot of space and we didn't show what we are capable of."

Portuguese striker Pedro Paqueta with his 11th goal of the season, and Belgian Marc Wilmots, with a header, gave Bordeaux a comfortable lead in front of a sellout crowd at Lens.

but the visitors then had Sylvain Leguvisier sent off for a second yellow card after 75 minutes.

Lens roared back with strikes from Antoine Sibierski and El Hadji Diouf in the last 10 minutes.

"Anything can happen in this league," shrugged Bordeaux coach Elie Baup.

Sedan now have 36 points with Bordeaux second on 35. Lille are third on 34 after grabbing a 1-1 at Metz thanks to an 88th minute strike from Christophe Landrin. Nantes have 33 with a game in hand.

En Avant Guingamp reignited their surprise title challenge with a 1-0 win at home to Olympique Marseille that lifted them to fifth.

Midfielder Stephane Carnot scored the only goal after 37 minutes as the club from the Brittany town of just 8,000 people moved to within four points of Sedan.

Cannot latch on to a long cross from Yannick Baret, controlled the ball on his chest and lashed it past goalkeeper Stephane Trevisan.

Guingamp ended a run of

three league matches without a win to stay involved in the closely-contested title race.

Marseille were weakened by injuries and international call-ups and squandered several scoring chances.

In other matches, Troyes surprised Olympique Lyon 1-0. Stade Reims rallied for a 2-1 win away to champions Monaco after trailing at halftime and St Etienne downed Auxerre 2-0.

Two games will be played today with fourth-placed Nantes at home to Toulouse and Bastia facing Paris St Germain.

Yugoslavia to take part in India tourney

BELGRADE, Dec 17: Yugoslav national team will take part in the Millennium Super Soccer Cup tournament in India in January, Belgrade daily Vecernje Novosti reported Saturday, reports AFP.

The decision was made after "number of calls from India, insisting on our presence," the daily quoted Branko Bulatovic, the Yugoslav Football Association chairman, as saying.

Sixteen national teams will take part in the tournament, including Columbia, Iceland, Bosnia, Cameroon and Chile.

Bosman ruling

EC to ring in changes



LONDON, Dec 17: The European Commission (EC) have agreed to reverse the Bosman Ruling for all players up to the age of 23 as part of a series of wide-ranging proposals, according to English newspaper Sunday Business, reports AFP.

The EC and world football's governing body FIFA have reached agreement over three

Lizarazu files official complaint

PARIS, Dec 17: French international defender Bixente Lizarazu filed an official complaint on Friday over an extortion attempt from Basque separatist group ETA, an official close to the investigation said, reports AFP.

The footballer, born in the French Basque country, made the complaint after meeting anti-terrorist officers investigating the case, the official said.

However, no meeting is planned between Lizarazu and French Interior Minister Daniel Vaillant, the ministry said.

The captain of Lizarazu's club side, Bayern Munich, Stefan Effenberg, had indicated Friday that the player was due to meet Vaillant.

Lizarazu, a member of France's World Cup and European championship-winning team, will not play in Sunday's game at Hertha Berlin because of a calf injury but will leave Munich on Friday and will meet with the French minister in charge of security on an unspecified day, Effenberg said.

"He worries a lot about his family, but unfortunately we can't help him," said Effenberg.

Lizarazu, 31, was flanked by two bodyguards in the stands of the Olympic Stadium for Bayern's 2-1 victory over SV Hamburg on Wednesday.

In the hand-written letter, Lizarazu was ordered to pay the "revolutionary tax" in compensation for playing for the French national side, which was described as "an enemy state."

It is the first time that ETA, which normally targets wealthy business leaders or companies in the Basque country, had turned its attention to a French national living abroad.

ETA is accused of killing some 800 people since it began waging its violent campaign for an independent Basque homeland straddling France and Spain in 1969.

significant issues; an alteration of the Bosman Ruling, a percentage of transfer fees to be passed on to clubs who develop players up to that age and the introduction of a strict transfer window.

The alteration of the Bosman Ruling is the biggest move by the EC. The case in December 1995 revolutionised football, with players being able to switch clubs for free once their contracts had expired.

However from next season, it will no longer apply to any player up to the age of 23, with clubs being able to demand compensation for the cost of the players' training.

The EC Commissioner for Competition, Mario Monti, agreed the deal with representatives from FIFA, UEFA and the international professional footballers' association, FIFPro, last Wednesday.

It is a major turnaround for the EC authorities who have argued for the past six years that the free movement of labour within Europe is the very basis of the European Union itself.

But it is understood the declaration by 15 heads of government in the aftermath of the Nice summit led to the EC immediately agreeing to two of the FIFA proposals.

The declaration stated that sport - and particularly football - had special social implications and that any decision on its future had to take this into account.

"We have compromised with FIFA on their proposal for players up to the age of 23," said competition commissioner spokesman Amelia Torres.

"We agree that clubs should have some kind of compensation for their efforts in training the players at an initial stage."

"It protects clubs who have a tradition of training players. They are the future of the game. So we want to protect that."

Ronaldo can kick ball in January

PARIS, Dec 17: Brazil and Inter Milan forward Ronaldo will be able to start training with a ball as early as January following recent physiotherapy at French clinic, reports AFP.

Ronaldo, who underwent a second knee operation to repair a ruptured tendon on April 13, was given the all-clear on Friday by professor Gerard Sailant at the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital in Paris where he was initially treated.

The two other agreements are equally significant. From next season international transfers will be limited to two-month period from the end of May to the beginning of August.

The move is aimed at preventing big clubs from buying in star players from around the world during a campaign.

The other area of general agreement was to ensure that clubs, who both discovered and trained players up to the age of 23, should benefit from moves throughout the player's career.

The clubs a player has played at before that age would divide five percent of transfer fees after the age of 23 in an effort to ensure that they can benefit from all the work done in the initial years.

Gentleman Di Canio

MILAN, Dec 17: The Italian press proudly hailed Paolo Di Canio Sunday for his act of sportsmanship in the 1-1 draw between his English Premiership club side West Ham United and Everton on Saturday, reports AFP.

The controversial Di Canio, once a pariah in English football after an incident where he pushed a referee to the ground, won acclaim from everyone with the exception of his West Ham boss Harry Redknapp when he refused to score what would have been a winning goal to allow Everton goalkeeper Paul Gerrard to receive treatment for an injury.

Gazzetto dello Sport led the chorus of praise, saying: "Great Di Canio - he gives up a goal to help an opponent."

The Gazette London correspondent Giancarlo Galavotti pointed out that everyone, including 30,000 Everton fans - applauded Di Canio although in a clear reference to Redknapp the paper said: "Well, almost everyone."

The paper also highlighted the reaction in Britain notably that of BBC reporter Stuart Hall, fondly remembered in Europe for his laughing antics alongside Eddie Waring in the gone-but-not-forgotten 'Jeux Sans Frontieres' ("It's a Knockout") programme.

Hall, famed for his catchphrase 'Luxembourg are playing their joker', waxed typically lyrical, saying: "Fantastic, wonderful."

Corriere dello Sport said: "A gentleman's gesture from the former Lazio player. The stadium rises to applaud."