

Di Canio can't understand the fuss

LONDON, Dec 18: West Ham's Italian striker Paolo Di Canio says he is surprised by the reaction to his gesture of sportsmanship at Everton on Saturday, when instead of scoring he picked up the ball as opposing keeper Paul Gerrard lay injured outside his area, reports AFP.

The Hammers were drawing 1-1 at Goodison Park as the game entered its final moments when Trevor Sinclair crossed for Di Canio, who had the goal at his mercy.

But seeing Gerrard lying prone the controversial Italian elected to catch the ball and sportingly pointed towards the keeper.

Di Canio, who was banned for 11 games in 1998 for pushing over referee Paul Alcock while playing for Sheffield Wednesday, claims his actions "seemed like the right thing to do".

He said: "Just as I did not expect to be branded a psychopath when I pushed over Paul Alcock, I did not expect the praise I am getting now."

"I saw the goalkeeper doubled over. I saw his knee twisted in the wrong direction. With outfield players it is different, we occasionally have a fall. But I guess he is heavier and got his studs caught in the pitch."

"I could hear him screaming in pain and I understood right away it was serious. That is why I was yelling at Trevor Sinclair to stop so Paul could get some medical attention."

"Would I have scored? You can't say for sure, but without the goalkeeper and a big, wide open goal, I'm sure I'd have had a good chance," Di Canio joked.

Hiddink takes over South Korea

SEOUL, Dec 18: Former Dutch national coach Guus Hiddink on Monday signed a contract to lead South Korea's national soccer team over the next one and a half years in the 2002 World Cup campaign, reports AFP.

The contract with the Korea Football Association (KFA) is effective from January 1, 2001 to June 30, 2002.

"I'm glad and proud to be here," the 54-year-old Dutchman said after signing the contract with KFA General Secretary Cho Chung-Yun.

Hiddink vowed to do his best to make the South Korean team strong, asking for South Korean cooperation with his future work.

"I hope I can contribute my experience to the South Korean national team, but I can't do it alone."

Hiddink will bring in an assistant coach and trainer.

"In the coming weeks or days, I will present the two extra men, who are helping the team," he said. He declined to name them.

Hiddink said he will focus on analysing the South Korean soccer team which remained "physically and mentally strong" but more tactical work needed to be done.

Financial terms of the contract were not disclosed. Local reports said it included a one million dollar signing bonus, on top of a three million dollar salary.

South Korea which will co-host the 2002 World Cup finals with Japan has sought a big name replacement for current coach Huh Jung-Mu.

Hiddink has a formidable record in Europe. He guided PSV Eindhoven to the European Cup in 1988 and Real Madrid to the same title, although the Spanish giants sacked him shortly after.

He had been lined up for a job at Scottish side Celtic after being sacked by Spanish team Real Betis. He has also been charged with Valencia in Spain and Turkey's Fenerbahce.

Monaco tracking Sacchi

MONACO, Dec 18: Struggling French First Division champions Monaco are involved in advanced talks to recruit former AC Milan and Italian national coach Arrigo Sacchi, sources close to the club revealed Sunday, reports AFP.

Monaco's 2-1 home defeat Saturday to Rennes, their ninth in the league, leaves the reigning champions just four points clear of third-bottom Metz in 13th position in the French league.

With the club already out of Europe the pressure is mounting on coach Claude Puel.

And Monaco president Jean-Louis Campora is reported to be already in contact with Sacchi to replace under-fire Puel.

Meanwhile, Monaco defender Martin Djetou has denied reports that he is ready to join Italian outfit Juventus.

But he said that he was nevertheless interested in a move to Italy later this season and had been contacted by Inter Milan and AC Milan.

Serie A

Roma king of Rome



MILAN, Dec 18: A freak own goal by Lazio defender Paolo Negro gave Italian First Division leaders AS Roma a 1-0 victory in the "Roman derby of the Century" against the defending champions, Sunday evening, reports AFP.

The farcical goal, which keeps Roma six points clear of their closest challengers Juventus and Atalanta and guarantees they will lead the top flight into the new year, was a fitting way to settle a disappointing game that failed to live up to the pre-match hype.

The goal came after 69 minutes when Lazio goalkeeper Angelo Peruzzi made a half save from Cristiano Zanetti and Alessandro Nesta tried to put the ball behind for a corner.

But the ball struck Negro and nestled in the back of the net to the delight of the Roma fans, who roared on their team in a match that for the first time in Rome derby history saw the league leaders facing the defending champions.

Lazio coach Sven Goran Eriksson admitted the 10-point gap now separating the Roman rivals was a large one and admitted: "Ten points is a large gap but it is a long Championship so we must wait and see."

His Roma counterpart Fabio Capello was careful to keep his side focused on the forthcoming showdown with Juventus on Friday, avoiding all talk of it being a title decider as some are saying.

Capello said: "There is a long way to go and there are many more games to play - for us and for Juventus."

The game that was supposed to showcase all that is good about Italian football also displayed the ugly side with Lazio's fans, who have acquired a reputation for racism in recent seasons, constantly barracking Roma's coloured players.

The win was good enough for Roma to stay six points clear and now even defeat at the hands of Juventus next Friday would not dislodge them from the top of the league over the festive season.

Juventus had earlier ruthlessly dispatched 10-man Lecce 4-1 to confirm their status as the biggest challengers to Roma.

First-half goals from Filippo Inzaghi and David Trezeguet put the Turin giants on course for victory, with Rodolfo Giorgetti reducing arrears for Lecce after team-mate David Balleri was dismissed.

Second-half goals from substitute Darko Kovacevic and midfielder Gianluca Zambrotta rounded off Juve's scoring to leave Juve coach Carlo Ancelotti confident ahead of next Sunday's clash in Rome.

Ancelotti, who even when Juventus were struggling ear-

lier in the season insisted his side would be challenging for the title until the final day of the season, said: "Now is a very good time for us to start putting together a string of important results and really push our case."

Unfashionable Atalanta also kept pace with the leaders. The Bergamo minnows, level on points with Juventus in second, prevailed thanks to a late strike from Maurizio Ganz, sufficient for a 1-0 win at Bologna.

Verona gave AC Milan an early shock when Emiliano Bonazzoli fired home a rebound for his fifth goal of the season but Milan midfielder Massimo Ambrosini quickly levelled the match after 22 minutes with a header. It finished 1-1 although Verona had Luigi Apolloni dismissed a minute from time.

Milan coach Alberto Zaccaroni thought Bonazzoli had been offside and said: "I was satisfied with the performance - but not the goal - we deserved a



AS Roma superstar Gabriel Batistuta (C) being closely watched by Lazio's Sinisa Mihajlovic (R) and his Yugoslav International teammate Dejan Stankovic during their Serie A clash at Rome on December 17.

Atalanta coach Giovanni Vavassori said: "We were lucky that Bologna did not convert any of their chances in front of goal but we stayed in the match and eventually we won it."

With AC Milan held 1-1 at Verona and Inter Milan escaping with a 0-0 draw at the San Siro against modest Brescia, it is Juventus and more surprisingly Atalanta who are emerging as the biggest threat from the traditional football power base of northern Italy to the leaders.

Inter Milan were lucky to escape a draw with Brescia having a goal disallowed when Dario Hubner was judged to be offside.

Inter coach Marco Tardelli admitted: "We created some chances, they created some chances - a draw was probably a fair result."

better result."

Udinese made a good start to their home match with Fiorentina with Dane Martin Jorgensen giving them an early advantage but Enrico Chiesa equalised.

And the Florence side, rapidly improving under Turkish coach Fatih Terim, secured all three points and a 3-1 win with a second-half own goal by Andrea Sottile and a clincher from Rui Costa.

Parma were shocked 2-0 by visiting Vicenza with two second-half goals from striker Luca Toni, the first coming seconds after the restart after a rush of blood from home goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon.

In Saturday's two matches Napoli thrashed fellow strugglers Reggina 6-2 while 10-man Perugia trounced Bari 4-1.

Lazio fans at it again!

ROME, Dec 18: Fans of Italian champions Lazio once Sunday evening again were involved in a racist controversy before and during the Roman derby match with AS Roma, reports AFP.

Racist slogans on banners and in songs were targeted at Roma's contingent of coloured players regardless of whether they were playing in the match or not, the players concerned being Brazilians Cafu, Assuncao, Aldair, Emerson and Frenchman Jonathan Zebina.

It is only the latest in a series of racist incidents involving Lazio fans and came in spite of the plea of Lazio midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron, an Argentinian, to the supporters to desist from such behaviour.

Cafu was particularly targeted when he went to remove a firecracker thrown onto the pitch by Lazio fans. All the black players were routinely booed.

Lazio, in contrast, have not fielded a black player in their first team for five years since Dutchman Aron Winter was on their books although Ghanaian youth team player Daniel Oka is making good progress and thought to be close to a first-team call-up.

Roma's talismanic Argentinian striker Gabriel Batistuta was also indirectly targeted by a banner. Although the player is white he has been nicknamed the "Lion King" by some because of his long mane of hair.

A banner clearly aimed at Roma's coloured contingent said: "With the Lion King Africa is well represented."

Another clearly xenophobic chant said "Yesterday Neapolitans (people from Naples), today Calabrians (southern Italians) and tomorrow Albanians."

In a separate incident - with no racist link - a fan was taken to hospital with a broken arm after falling into the moat separating the stands from the pitch.

Cragnotti junior says coach will stay

ROME, Dec 18: Lazio director general Massimo Cragnotti Sunday said that the club's Swedish coach Sven Goran Eriksson would see out his contract until 2001, scotching rumours that the Scandinavian would be eased out of the exit door at the Olympic Stadium ahead of schedule, reports AFP.

Cragnotti, son of Lazio president Sergio, maintained the club's line that Eriksson would fulfil his obligations to the Italian champions until July 1 when he will begin a five-year contract in charge of the England national team.

Speaking after the 1-0 defeat by AS Roma in the Rome derby Cragnotti said:

"There is no need to say anything about Eriksson after this defeat - the Swede will stay with us until the end of the 2001 season, we hope together with him we will achieve the results we want."

Eriksson himself rejected the theory that the recent downturn in form of the club was due to his departure next summer.

Eriksson had earlier in the week categorically debunked newspaper reports in England saying that he would step down as Lazio coach if his team lost the derby.

"We are not the same team as we were last year, we are less good," conceded Eriksson. "But I do not think that has anything to do with my decision to become England coach."

"If this were true it would mean that the players are not real professionals," said the Scandinavian, who believes the absence of two key Argentinians is a more likely explanation.

"I believe, however, that Lazio are missing (Claudio) Lopez and (Juan Sebastian) Veron. There is also a little bit of bad luck."

Scottish Premiership Amoruso error costs Rangers

GLASGOW, Dec 18: A dreadful mistake by Rangers defender Lorenzo Amoruso gifted bottom of the table Dundee United an equaliser in this 1-1 Scottish Premier League draw at Tannadice on Sunday, reports AFP.

Dick Advocaat's side were firm favourites to win but this result means they stay third, 12 points behind arch Glasgow rivals and league leaders Celtic.

United remain bottom of the table but can take heart from this hard-working display.

New signing Derek Lilley was the United scorer, cancelling out Claudio Reyna's opener - all Rangers had to show from 14 corners and 45 minutes of first half domination.

Earlier United States star Claudio Reyna smashed Rangers into an 18th-minute lead as they dominated the opening exchanges.

There had been a scare for United in the fifth minute when Ronald de Boer's corner was headed back towards goal by Jamie Buchanan and Alan Combe had to punch away under pressure from Michael Mols.

Rangers forced five corners in a two-minute spell but could make nothing of them.

Barry Ferguson sent de Boer away and Mols threw himself forward to get a header on target but it went straight at Combe.

French First Division

PSG's downswing continues



PARIS, Dec 18: Paris Saint Germain saw their title hopes slip even further away from them Sunday after a 1-1 draw at Bastia, while Nantes drew level at the top with Sedan after a 3-2 success over Toulouse, reports AFP.

Nicolas Anelka hit his seventh goal of the season for PSG after 21 minutes with a shot that took a deflection off a defender.

But PSG failed to make their early superiority tell and they paid for a lack of concentration after the interval when Frederic Nee lobbed in the equaliser on 56 minutes.

Nee's tenth goal of the season moved Bastia into fifth spot, four points off Sedan and Nantes while PSG are stuck in 11th, three points further back.

Sedan had gone top Saturday after a Cedric Monnet penalty seconds before the break saw off struggling Strasbourg 1-0.

Previous leaders Bordeaux were held 2-2 at Lens after throwing away a two-goal lead achieved with goals from Portuguese star Pauleta and Marc Wilmons.

Antoine Sibierski and El

Hadj Djouf scored inside two minutes of a frantic finale after Bordeaux midfielder Sylvain Legwinski had first been dismissed for a second bookable offence.

Nantes nipped in ahead of Bordeaux and level with Sedan on 36 points from 21 games, but like Sedan, they made heavywork of inferior opposition as Toulouse fought hard.

Victor Bonilla fired the visitors ahead and it looked for some time as if his 43rd-minute effort might deny Nantes a ninth straight home success as Christophe Revault, in the Toulouse goal made several fine saves to suggest a shock was on the cards.

Nantes, coached by Raynald Denoueix, needed to win by three goals or more to go top, but that looked well beyond them.

However, they finally levelled three minutes after the restart when a Mathieu Berson freekick found Argentine Nestor Fabbrì, who made no mistake.

Oliver Monterrubio then slid in at the far post to make it 2-1 on the hour as intense Nantes pressure paid off and Romanian striker Viorel Moldovan, fed by Salomon Olenbe, made it 3-1 with his eighth goal of the season after 68 minutes.

Nicolas Dieuze nodded in a late consolation to round off the scoring.

The big losers of the weekend were Marseille, who went down to a Stephane Caizot goal on 37 minutes at Guingamp, who leapt from eighth to fifth, and reigning champions Monaco, beaten 2-1 at home by Rennes.

Wagreau Elot shot Monaco in front on four minutes after a fine pass from fit-again Argentine Marcelo Gallardo and only some fine saves from veteran Bernard Lama in the Rennes goal prevented Monaco moving further ahead.

But in the second half Rennes levelled through an Olivier Echouafni header and Brazilian substitute Serevino Lucas then split the Monaco defence on 84 minutes to find Christophe Le Roux, who fired the winner past Jean-Marie Aubry, preferred to Stephane Porato in the Monaco goal.

Monaco's defeat, their ninth in the league, leaves them just four points clear of third-bottom Metz and it prompted the club to reveal Sunday that they were chasing former AC Milan and Italian national coach Arrigo Sacchi as the moose tightens around the neck of current boss Claude Puel.

Fergie in need of a striker



LONDON, Dec 18: Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson is battling to solve a frontline injury crisis as his team seeks to bounce back from their weekend defeat to Liverpool, reports AFP.

Injuries and suspensions mean Ferguson is down to just one out-and-out striker in the shape of Ole Gunnar Solskjaer for United's next two Premier-ship clashes.

Teddy Sheringham missed Sunday's 1-0 defeat against Liverpool because of a hamstring injury and he is expected to be out for three weeks.

Andy Cole is not due to return from his Achilles operation until the new year, while

Dwight Yorke has two games of his three-match ban remaining.

United clearly missed the trio against Liverpool, and Paul Scholes struggled up front alongside Solskjaer as a makeshift striker.

Ferguson admitted Sheringham, Yorke and Cole are a huge influence for United - but he refused to use that as an excuse for the champions' first home defeat in the Premiership for two years.

"Sheringham got it in training during the week, which is bad timing really, and a hamstring is three weeks," said Ferguson.

"I don't think I've ever had so many strikers out before. It's just one of these things, and that's why you have a pool of players."

"Certainly the presence of Yorke, Cole and Sheringham is massive - and I think their presence can be important in big games."

"We tried to play Scholes in there, but I think Scholes is better coming from behind the game. He sees things in front of him."

"Then we tried Ryan Giggs through, but at the end of the day I don't think it mattered a lot."

"The quality of our passing was disappointing, and it might have been whoever played up front would have had the same problems."

"We needed accuracy of passing to break them down. But let's be honest, it wasn't there - and I can't have any excuses for that."

Bergkamp losing ground



LONDON, Dec 18: Dennis Bergkamp has been warned there is no longer room for both him and Nigerian

striker Kanu in the Arsenal starting line-up, reports AFP.

The Dutchman looks certain to be the man to miss out again in Monday night's north London derby clash with Tottenham at White Hart Lane.

What is more, Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger admits he is tired of the seemingly interminable delay in Bergkamp, 31, signing the new two-year contract which is on offer to him at Highbury even though the player has consistently stated that he wants to stay with the club for the rest of his career.

Wenger started last season with Bergkamp and Kanu as his first-choice front pair but since French star Thierry Henry's conversion from winger to prolific-scoring centre forward, the two former Ajax men have appeared in tandem only rarely.

Wenger admits: "Kanu and Bergkamp together doesn't work. We have tried it but I've come to the conclusion that it is not an ideal pair and now I have the decision to choose between them."

"It is always a difficult decision and lately every time I've chosen one of them the other one has maybe been justified in saying it is not right," the Frenchman told the Press Association Sunday.

"But all I can do now is pick them on current form. At the moment we are trying to play a little bit more of a direct type of game and that is easier with Kanu, who plays higher up the field than Dennis does."

Kanu has scored only three goals all season - but that is still one more than Bergkamp, while two of the Nigerian's strikes have come in the last two matches.

Tottenham fans taunted Bergkamp during an ineffective performance in Arsenal's 2-1 defeat at White Hart Lane last season when he looked a shadow of the player who has regularly been the scourge of Arsenal's old enemies.

He was left out of the return match at Highbury in March when Arsenal reversed the scoring.

But Wenger insists: "He is still an important player for us and it is not as though he has lost a yard of pace or a measure of enthusiasm. In training he still works very hard and his physical condition is unbelievable."

"But I need him to settle his concentration by signing the new contract and I want it done over the Christmas period if not before."

"He has a firm offer from the club for two more years here and he knows how much I want him to stay here. It is his decision now and he has to cope with the fact that he may not play as much as he would like to."

Bergkamp has indicated it is only fine details of agreement between his lawyers and the club which is holding up his contract completion, and says reports linking him with a possible return to his native Holland are way off the mark.

"I'm aware of those stories

but I'm not the one putting them around," he said.

"The club knows that I'm very happy here working with a great coach like Arsene Wenger."

Meanwhile, Arsenal have been handed an extra incentive for victory at White Hart Lane by Manchester United's home defeat against Liverpool, giving Wenger's team the opportunity to cut the gap at the top of the Premiership to just three points.

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Primera Liga Valencia take back top spot

MADRID, Dec 18: Goals in either half from John Carew and Ruben Baraja sent Valencia back to the top of the Spanish league on Sunday following a 2-0 home win over Malaga, reports AFP.

The win allowed Valencia to leapfrog overnight leaders Real Madrid with 31 points from 15 matches to Real's 29 from 14.

Norwegian international striker Carew, signed from Norwegian last summer for a Norwegian record nine million dollars, took a pass from teenage star Vicente Rodriguez to shoot home first time on the volley after 41 minutes.

Baraja then clipped home the second 17 minutes from the end after a quick freekick routine which left the Malaga defence standing and wondering whether they could appeal for offside.

Valencia finished the game with ten men, however, after veteran French defender Jocelyn Anglona was sent off somewhat harshly after clashing with Uruguayan Darío Silva in the 65th minute.

Real, aided by early goals from Fernando Morientes and Luis Figo, won 2-1 Saturday night at Barcelona-based Espanyol, where Figo received carnations and an ovation for having left city rivals Barcelona for Real in the summer for a world record fee of around 56 million dollars.

Reigning champions Deportivo La Coruna lost 3-1 Saturday at Alaves and stand third a point adrift of Real having played a game more.

Deportivo went ahead through Victor, who finished off a fine four-man move, but Alaves roared back and two goals in five minutes - one from the spot - by league top scorer Javi Moreno who put them in the driving seat before Ivan Alonso made it 3-1 near the end.

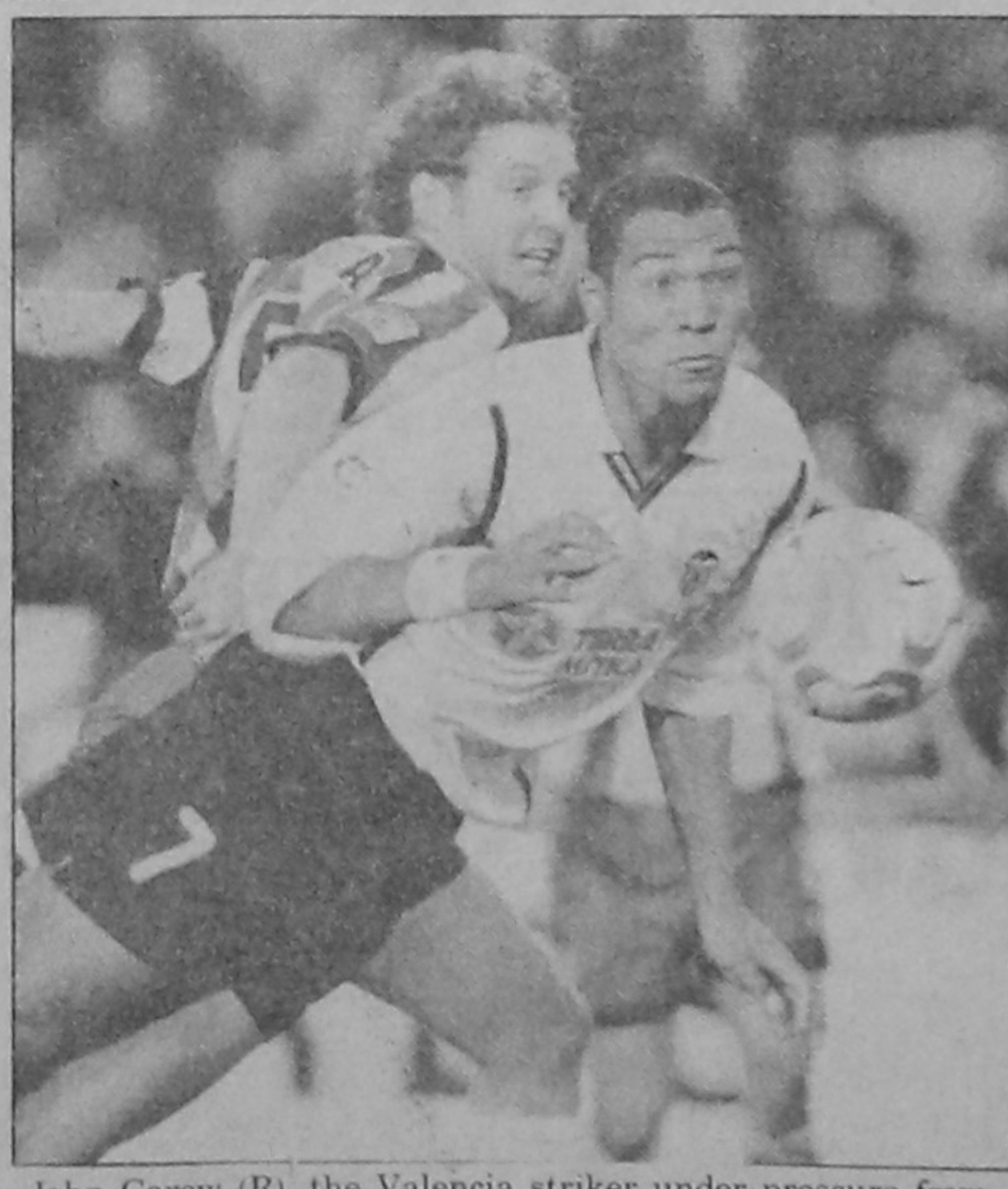
Barcelona, meanwhile, had to make do with a 2-2 draw at Madrid-based Rayo Vallecano after they were denied the win with a Pablo Sanz penalty rescuing their hosts after a foul by Dutchman Frank de Boer, on the Barca scoresheet earlier along with Gerard.

Barca are just sixth with 24 points from 15 games, behind Rayo Vallecano and Alaves on goal difference.



Bayern Munich's inspirational captain Stefan Effenberg (L) initiating a move against Hertha Berlin during their Bundesliga fixture at Berlin on December 17.

- AFP photo



John Carew (R), the Valencia striker under pressure from Malaga's Miguel Angel Roteta during their Primera Liga encounter at Valencia on December 17.

- AFP photo