

International friendly

Argentina blank Mexico

LOS ANGELES, Dec 21: Goals from Santiago Solari and Luciano Galletti lifted Argentina to a 2-0 victory over Mexico here Wednesday in a friendly international football match at Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, reports AFP.

Argentina played a more cohesive, imaginative game from the start, and in the 14th minute they were rewarded with the first goal, a header from Real Madrid's Solari.

Galletti added the second goal in the 82nd, breaking free on the right and beating Mexican keeper Jorge Campos, as Mexico wasted three good opportunities, but for the most part they were too erratic to be effective.

The defeat was the second in Los Angeles for Mexican coach Enrique Meza, whose side was defeated 2-0 by the United States in his first visit to the Coliseum on October 25.

In 28 meetings between the two countries, 14 of them friendlies, Argentina leads the head-to-head record with nine victories, 13 draws and six defeats.

On a chilly night in front of a crowd of 55,000, a young group of Argentine players showed up a Mexican team packed with veterans.

Solari's goal -- a crisp header of a ball sent in by Lucas Castroman -- was his first in just his second appearance for Argentina.

Galletti, another of the youngsters called up by Argentine coach Marcelo Bielsa, notched his first international goal.

For Mexico, the defeat was an unwelcome setback as they look toward a February 28 clash with the United States in Columbus, Ohio, in a 2002 World Cup qualifier.

Transfer discussions shelved

BRUSSELS, Dec 21: Further discussions on reworking the European transfer system have been shelved till January 12 following a meeting here on Wednesday between the European Commission (EC) and various football bodies, reports AFP.

A two-and-a-half hour meeting between officials from the EC, world football's governing body FIFA, its European counterpart UEFA, Europe's national leagues and international players' union FIFPro ended fruitless.

In a statement, the EC said the meeting was "constructive" but added further discussions were necessary to find the best solution for the sport.

FIFA secretary general Michel Zen-Ruffinen said there were problems which meant further talks were needed on January 12.

Philippe Plat, vice-president of FIFPro, said there was complete disagreement on the question of annulling current contracts.

Over the past two years and following player protests, the EC has been trying to square the circle and make the transfer system conform to the principles of competition and the free movement of labour as enshrined in EU labour laws.

The EC is looking in essence to uphold three principles -- the free movement of players, ensure that clubs which bring through youngsters receive a fee if the player then leaves and also guarantee that contracts are respected.

But the EC admits that the free movement of players "cannot be applied to the letter" as sport has certain specific features.

To begin with, the EU wants FIFA to set down a basic framework in which to operate in future, to which it can then propose amendments where appropriate.

Probe panel wants Bonfrere sacked

LAGOS, Dec 21: A panel set up to probe Nigeria's poor soccer performance at the Sydney Olympics has recommended the dismissal of Dutch coach Jo Bonfrere, reports AFP.

Panel chairman Chive Kaave told reporters Thursday that all is not well with the Nigerian coaching crew.

"The relationship between Bonfrere and his assistants, Shaibu Amodu and Stephen Keshi, is less than cordial. Bonfrere accused them of disloyalty and sabotage while he was with the Olympic team in Sydney," he said.

He said the Dutch coach should be sacked to give way for the assistant coaches to ensure Nigeria's qualification for the 2002 World Cup.

"There is deep-seated mistrust between the three coaches and if this is not checked, it could distract them from the task of qualifying the country for the next World Cup," he warned.

"We have advised that where the coaches cannot work together, Bonfrere be relieved of his job and the Super Eagles be handed to Amodu and Keshi or in the alternative Bonfrere be allowed to choose his own assistants," Kaave added.

Bonfrere recently accused the Nigerian footballing body NFA of delaying payment of his salaries, a charge the FA denied.



Luis Enrique (L) of Barcelona and Alaves' Martin Astudillo locked in a tussle during their Primera Liga outing at Barcelona on December 20. - AFP photo

Primera Liga

Carew keeps Valencia ahead



MADRID, Dec 21: Norwegian striker John Carew scored a late equalizer for Valencia in a 1-1 draw at Athletic Bilbao on Wednesday to earn top spot and then got sent off for his goal celebrations, reports AFP.

Crew's 84th minute strike cancelled out the 13th minute opener by Bilbao's Josu Urrutia meaning Valencia took over first place from Real Madrid in the Spanish football championship.

Valencia needed just one point from the match and nearly didn't make it before Carew's goal and celebrations which included an aggressive gesture with a finger.

The return of Brazilian stars was a plus for both Deportivo La Coruna and Barcelona, who were third and fourth in the table after Wednesday's games.

The 1999 FIFA world player of the year Rivaldo scored twice and Patrick Kluivert hit the other as they led 3-0 against Alaves. But Alaves hit back through a penalty by the league top scorer Javi Moreno, who now has 13 goals, and another strike by Brazilian Magno for a 3-2 final result.

The club from Vitoria even saw the goal which would have

earned them a point disallowed.

Deportivo La Coruna's Brazilian Djalminha scored two wonderful goals and Dutchman Roy Makaay earned the other in their 3-0 victory over Real Oviedo.

Real Mallorca continued their good form with a 3-2 win over Espanyol which left them in fifth spot. Mallorca equalized twice before Olympic champion Samuel Eto'o of Cameroon

earned the winning goal with eight minutes to go.

Real Sociedad however continued their dire form and a 3-0 defeat in Malaga kept them rooted to the foot of the table.

On Tuesday, Real Madrid celebrated Luis Figo's European footballer of the year award with a 3-1 victory over Rayo Vallecano to leave them second on goal difference but with a game in hand, against Real Zaragoza on January 24.

STANDINGS

MADRID, Dec 21: Spanish football league table after Wednesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Valencia	16	9	5	2	28	10	32
Real Madrid	15	10	2	3	34	18	32
Deportivo La Coruna	16	9	4	3	28	14	31
Barcelona	16	8	3	5	32	24	27
Real Mallorca	16	7	5	4	21	19	26
Rayo Vallecano	16	6	6	4	33	25	24
Alaves	16	7	3	6	25	18	24
Villarreal	16	6	5	5	20	18	23
Real Oviedo	16	7	2	7	20	25	23
Malaga	16	6	3	7	26	25	21
Las Palmas	16	6	3	7	20	34	21
Athletic Bilbao	16	5	5	6	21	22	20
Real Zaragoza	15	4	7	4	18	16	19
Celta Vigo	16	3	9	4	16	19	18
Espanyol	16	5	3	8	17	21	18
Numancia	16	4	4	8	18	26	16
Racing Santander	16	3	5	8	19	28	14
Osasuna	16	2	7	7	16	24	13
Real Sociedad	16	3	3	10	15	35	12

Serie A preview

Roma eyeing merry Xmas



Friday night in a pre-Christmas showdown that could go a long way to deciding the title, reports AFP.

The stakes are high. Victory would see the hosts put a nine-point gap between themselves and the chasing pack although Atalanta would have the opportunity to trim that lead back to six when they entertain out-of-sorts Inter Milan the day after.

Defeat would see Juve close the gap to three and give Roma plenty of food for thought as they put their feet up during the two-week Christmas break.

But - barring a 2-0 defeat at the San Siro to Inter and a 0-0 draw with a defensive-minded Perugia - Fabio Capello's side has risen to every challenge in their 11 First Division matches so far and last week's 1-0 victory over defending champions Lazio in the Roman derby has only improved morale further.

Juventus are also in fine fettle and have produced some brilliant football in recent weeks since their brief panic attack after being eliminated from the Champions League.

But the visitors from Turin will field a depleted defence against Roma with Uruguayan Paolo Montero and Croatian Igor Tudor both suspended and full-back Alessandro Birindelli and another central defender Ciro Ferrara doubtful through injury.

That will only encourage Roma's Argentinian striker Gabriel Batistuta, known as Bati-gol during his nine-year reign at Fiorentina but called the Lion King at Roma, and the King of the Serie A beasts will hope to feast on the depleted Zebras.

Francesco Totti is expected to play despite a minor injury but Capello might play Japanese playmaker Hidetoshi Nakata in place of Marco Delvecchio.

Atalanta hope to continue their unlikely challenge for the Scudetto when they host ailing Inter Milan at Bergamo.

Inter president Massimo Moratti has found out the hard way that money is not everything with five-years of splashing the cash - including the world record fees on Ronaldo and then Christian Vieri - landing a solitary UEFA Cup and with the San Siro side lan-

guishing in mid-table. He has dispensed with eight coaches in that time and there

Napoli going Loco!

NAPLES, Italy, Dec 21: Italian First Division side Napoli are winning the race with English Premiership side West Ham United for the signature of Boca Juniors striker Martin Palermo, Corriere dello Sport reported Thursday, reports AFP.

The key player in the potential deal that could lure the Argentinian international to the southern Italian club is Argentina's greatest ever footballer Diego Maradona, who led Napoli to two Serie A titles during his illustrious spell at the club having previously starred with Boca.

Maradona, who was in Italy 10 days ago to be crowned alongside Pele as FIFA's World Player of the Century, met Napoli chief executive Corrado Ferlaino at the gala night in Rome and told him Palermo was the player that Napoli needed.

Palermo has already been the subject of one bid from West Ham but the paper reports that the striker would prefer a move to Italy, quoting him as saying: "Italy is the ideal place for any Argentinian footballer to play."

The forward also said Napoli would be the ideal club - presumably because the club has had a strong following in Argentina because of the link with Maradona.

Ironically his current club is considered the Italian club of Argentina as it was founded by Italian immigrants - Boca are nicknamed the "Xeneze" (Genovese).

The Boca forward is something of a maverick character, earning the nickname "El Loco" (the crazy one) because of his idiosyncratic behaviour.

In the 1999 Copa America he missed three penalties for Argentina in a group match with Colombia - an unprecedented feat in international football.

But he is Argentina's most prolific striker and last month his two early goals put Boca en route to a 2-1 victory over Spain's Real Madrid in the Intercontinental Cup Final, the match which until FIFA launched their new World Club Championship in January used to determine the title of club World Champions.

is renewed speculation that the ninth Marco Tardelli - who only took the job in October - is on borrowed time.

Moratti, who Wednesday offloaded Irish striker Robbie Keane to Leeds United, was at one time intent on persuading the 1982 World Cup winning midfielder to buy Brazilian striker Romario from Rio de Janeiro outfit Vasco da Gama.

On Wednesday however Moratti made it clear they were not in the chase for Romario.

There has also been talk of managerial change at Fiorentina with coach Faeth Terim stalling on signing a contract but on Wednesday the club insisted the Turk would stay at the club.

Unlike Inter the Florence club, who host Verona on Saturday, are showing genuine promise after suffering the trauma of losing Battistuta and Terim is widely admired by both his players and the supporters although his relationship with club president Vittorio Cecchi Gori has not been an easy one.

Lazio coach Sven Goran Eriksson is in the opposite situation with club president Sergio Cragnotti - the tomato since baron - behind the Swede but the fans apparently keen for the Scandinavian to depart now rather in July when he becomes the new coach to the England national team.

Cragnotti will find it difficult to digest his Turkey on Christmas day should the champions lose at Bari on Friday night, however.

Udinese are in the middle of a slump too after topping the table earlier in the season and will hope to put that right at home to Bologna.

Brescia host Lecce while AC Milan face a tough San Siro clash against improving Perugia. Bottom-of-the-table Reggina host Vicenza while Napoli will hope to consolidate their better recent form at home to Parma.

FIXTURES

Friday: Bari v Lazio, AS Roma v Juventus (both 19:45 GMT)

Saturday: Atalanta v Inter Milan, Brescia v Lecce, Fiorentina v Verona, AC Milan v Perugia, Napoli v Parma, Reggina v Vicenza, Udinese v Bologna (all 14:15 GMT)

*Note: all fixtures have had their kick-offs put back 15 minutes as a protest against violence in football.

Real welcome back 'The Vulture'

MADRID, Dec 21: European champions Real Madrid said Wednesday their former striker Emilio Butragueno would return to the club next month as assistant to general sporting director Jorge Valdano, reports AFP.

The 37-year-old Butragueno, nicknamed 'The Vulture', will take up the post on January 15 after leaving his current job as an aide to Spanish Secretary of State for Sport Juan Antonio Gomez Angulo.

His arrival is part of a shake up of administrative posts at the club under new president Florentino Perez, who brought in Valdano and who has also named former star Alfredo Di Stefano as honorary president. Butragueno spent 12 seasons with Real, winning six league titles. He then played three seasons for Atletico Colaya of Mexico before hanging up his boots in April 1998.

Romario on fire

Vasco win Mercosur Cup

SAO PAULO, Dec 21: Veteran striker Romario scored a hat-trick, including two penalties, as Vasco da Gama came from three goals behind to beat Palmeiras 4-3 away in an astonishing Copa Mercosur final on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

Romario completed Vasco's amazing second half recovery when he tapped in a rebound at the far post in the third minute of injury time for the winner. Palmeiras players collapsed on the field in disbelief and the crowd of 20,000 fell eerily silent.

Palmeiras had led 3-0 at halftime in the all-Brazilian final after Francisco Arce, Magrao and Tuta scored in the last 10 minutes of the first half.

Former Atletico Madrid and Middlesbrough player Juninho Paulista was involved in all four goals as Vasco hit back after the break.

Juninho won the penalties from which Romario scored Vasco's first two goals. He scored the third himself and then produced the shot which led to Romario's final goal.

Romario, still one of the world's top players at the age of 34, took his personal tally in all competitions this year to a club record 64.

Several Vasco players dedicated the triumph to former coach Oswaldo Oliveira, who had been bizarrely sacked after a game on Saturday for hugging rival coach Luiz Felipe Scolari. Scolari is a bitter personal enemy of Vasco director Eurico Miranda.

The only disappointment for Vasco was the performance of central defender Junior Baiano. The former Brazil international needlessly gave away the penalty from which Palmeiras scored their first goal and was sent off for the third time this year in the second half.

The match was the third of the final after Vasco won the first game and Palmeiras the second. It was a rare high point in the three-year history of the Mercosur, a made-for-television event in which most games are played in empty stadia and in which many teams choose to field reserve sides.

The competition features 20 of South America's biggest clubs, who are handpicked by the South American Football Confederation (CSF). Almost exactly the same teams take part every year.

Palmeiras have been in all three Mercosur finals. They beat Cruzeiro in 1998 and lost to Flamengo last year.



ROMARIO RULES: Vasco da Gama's ace veteran Romario holds aloft the Copa Mercosur trophy after their win in the final against Palmeiras at Sao Paulo on December 20. Ramario scored a hat-trick. - AFP photo

Ronaldo trains with a ball



RIO DE JANEIRO, Dec 21: Injury-stricken Ronaldo kicked a football in public for the first time in eight months on Wednesday and said he was confident of returning to his very best, reports Reuters.

The Brazilian went through an hour of light exercises, working with a ball in training for the first time since he tore a

tendon in his right knee while playing for Inter Milan in April. Activity involved mainly dribbling a ball through cones, with a couple of tentative shots and some ball juggling.

To return to the pitch and train with a ball is a big excitement but I'm not getting carried away, he said.

I'm working to be like I was before, if not then all this sacrifice will not have been worth



Superstar Ronaldo goes through the rings on December 20 at Rio de Janeiro during his first training session following his knee injury on April 13, 1999. - AFP photo

Keane goes to Leeds



MILAN, Dec 21: Inter Milan striker Robbie Keane has joined English Premiership side Leeds United, the Italian First Division club announced Wednesday, reports AFP.

The Irish international has moved initially on loan for a season but it is expected to become permanent with the English side paying Inter the same fee that the San Siro giants forked out to Coventry City for the services of the 20-year-old in July.

With Christian Vieri back to fitness, Uruguayan forward Alvaro Recoba poised to sign a new deal at Inter and Turkish international Hakan Sukur and Chilean Ivan Zamorano also available to coach Marco Tardelli there was little opportunity for Keane to break into the forward line even though the Italian 1982 World Cup winner has occasionally fielded a three-man starting line-up.

Brazilian striker Ronaldo is also recovering from long-term injury problems and there is renewed press speculation in Italy linking Inter to another Brazilian forward Romario, whose contract with Rio de Janeiro outfit Vasco da Gama expires in January although Tardelli is thought not to be as keen as chairman Massimo Moratti in pursuing that deal.

But it was clear that Keane



ROBBIE KEANE

had little option to move if he wanted first-team football although another English Premiership side Chelsea had also been reported to be in the race.

Keane initially impressed observers at the San Siro and scored goals against Polish outfit Ruch Chorzow, Lecce (in the Italian Cup) and Lazio (in the Italian Super Cup).

Tardelli picked Keane as a starter in his first games after succeeding Marcello Lippi in October but the return from long-term injury problems of Vieri saw him lose his place.

He failed to break his duck in Serie A when he did get a chance, usually as a substitute, and in the end lasted less than five months into a five-year contract.

Leeds chairman Peter Ridsdale was keen to conclude

Inter chairman downplays it

MILAN, Dec 21: Inter Milan chairman Massimo Moratti said Wednesday that the Italian First Division club was not in the chase for Brazilian striker Romario, reports AFP.

Romario's contract with Rio de Janeiro club Vasco da Gama expires in January and Moratti had been reported to have rekindled his interest in Brazil's 1994 World Cup winning talisman even though Inter coach Marco Tardelli had made it clear he was opposed to the switch.

Moratti had tried to buy the Brazilian two months ago when Tardelli had just taken the reins at the San Siro club but the new coach made it very clear that he was not keen on buying a player whose talent is undisputed but is also renowned for being a difficult player to handle.

But speaking Wednesday evening, Moratti denied he had renewed his interest in the Latin American, saying: "The negotiations with Romario were not renewed - they did exist a couple of months ago."

Moratti did, however, hint he was not in agreement with Tardelli when he added: "I thought someone who knows how to score goals might be useful."

anything. He said he was purred on by the memory of a goal he scored in a Spanish championship match for Barcelona against Compostela, the one he considers the best of his career.

That goal is the biggest demonstration of the strength I had and this is why I want to recover, he said.

I never thought about giving up football. I love playing football, it's what I know how to do and I would never think about stopping.

But he did not want to predict when he would be able to play competitively again. The most important thing is to be 100 per cent, he said.

Ronaldo tore a tendon in his right knee after playing for only six minutes of an Italian Cup final first leg against Lazio.

That was his first game since he partially tore the tendon in an Italian league match the previous November. The second injury was far more serious and led the football world to wonder whether he would ever be the same player - or even play - again.

Since then, Ronaldo has been working desperately to recover the form which led him to be acclaimed the best in the world.

He spent November in the French coastal town of Capbreton, close to the Spanish border, which hosts an exclusive sports clinic and training centre.

Under the eye of a team of physiotherapists and specialist training and medical staff, Ronaldo carried out eight hours of work, six days a week.

Ronaldo's physiotherapist Nilton Petroni said the player was now doing three hours work a day in a gymnasium every morning, following by outdoor training with a ball in the afternoon. He is still allowed to jump or train in the rain.

Petroni also refused to predict a comeback date and said his recuperation was being planned in one-month stages.

But Ronaldo's spokesman Rodrigo Paiva said: Since the surgery, the doctor has been saying it will be in the first half of next year.

Terim staying

FLORENCE, Italy, Dec 21: Fiorentina's Turkish coach Fatih Terim will stay at the club despite remarks made by Terim himself who said he would consider his position over the mid-season break, the Italian First Division side's director Mario Sconceri said Wednesday, reports AFP.

Sconceri, who is due to become head of the Cecchi Gori Group that runs the club, was speaking after the coach was reported in the Italian media as saying he would decide during the Christmas break whether to take up his option for next season.

Sconceri told journalists: "Terim is staying in Florence. At the moment no club has confirmed who their coach will be next season."

Terim took the job at Fiorentina after guiding Istanbul-outfit Galatasaray to the UEFA Cup last May, the first ever victory for a Turkish club at continental level.

He was assumed to have taken on a very difficult task in replacing Giovanni Trapattoni as the Florence side had just lost their talismanic Argentinian striker Gabriel Batistuta to AS Roma.

But the Turk has proved very popular with the fans and players and is widely seen as having exceeded expectations so far.

Earlier this season Terim and club president Vittorio Cecchi Gori were refusing to talk with the latter also imposing a media ban on the former.

But after Terim attended a memorial mass for Cecchi Gori's father the two were reconciled although the Turk's remarks earlier this week had refueled speculation that a parting of the ways was imminent.

German Cup

Amateurs stun Bochum

BERLIN, Dec 21: Amateurs Union Berlin beat Bundesliga side VfL Bochum 1-0 in the shock result of Wednesday's German Cup quarter-finals, reports AFP.

In previous rounds, Union have beaten three Second Division sides including Ulm in the last sixteen.

FC Magdeburg, who beat Bayern Munich in the previous round, were not able to continue their giant-killing run, losing 1-0 to First Division leaders Schalke 04.

In other matches, VfB Stuttgart beat SC Freiburg 2-1 after extra time and Borussia Munchengladbach beat their Second Division rivals MSV Duisburg 1-0.