

Sport

Lazio behind Mihajlovic

ROME, Dec 23: Italian champions Lazio said Friday they would take legal action to defend their Yugoslav defender Sinisa Mihajlovic from a reported racist investigation for allegedly racist remarks made to an opponent and also to defend the club's reputation, reports AFP.

Corriere della Sera newspaper had reported Friday that Mihajlovic was being investigated for the much-documented spat with Arsenal's French midfielder Patrick Vieira during the 1-1 Champions League match between the clubs in October.

A Lazio statement said the club would contest what it called "a presumed case by the State Police against the footballer Sinisa Mihajlovic for the ill-judged remarks made by the same player towards the Arsenal player Vieira during the match between Lazio and Arsenal on October 17."

"(It concerns) just one of the verbal disputes that happen on a playing field during sporting encounters characterised by exacerbated antagonism and intense emotional tension and without any real intent."

The club statement reiterated that Lazio supported moves to drive racism out of football, adding: "The prominence given to this modest episode seems to be inserted in a more wide context, incriminating the image of the player and the club."

Lawyers have also been instructed to preserve the image of the club.

On Friday, in response to the newspaper claims, Rome magistrates said the case had not yet been assigned to an individual magistrate.

Mihajlovic admitted insulting Vieira and referring to his colour - Vieira was born in Senegal - but denied racism and subsequently was given a two-game ban by European football governing body UEFA.

Mihajlovic subsequently publicly apologised before the Champions League match with Shakhtar Donetsk of Ukraine and pleaded with the club's supporters to desist from racist chanting.

It is the first time that such an action has been taken in Italian football and it convicted Mihajlovic faces a maximum sentence of three years in jail.

Corriere della Sera said that Italian police were also investigating charges that Mihajlovic had asked some Lazio fans to unfurl a banner at matches in homage to the slain Serbian warlord Arkan.

At an Italian league match on January 30, several days after his assassination, a banner was seen at the Lazio ground which read "In honour of Arkan the Tiger".

At the time of his death Arkan - real name Zeljko Raznatovic - had been indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

Mihajlovic, a Serb, was born in the Croatian town of Vukovar that was the scene of the first atrocities of the modern-phase of the Balkan conflict.

FA to follow French model

LONDON, Dec 23: Plans for a 40 million pound (\$58.8 million dollar) national football centre have been revealed by the English Football Association (FA), reports AFP.

The FA said that the ultra-modern football centre would rival the Clarefontaine base that has been instrumental in providing the platform for world and European champions France's international success.

The site is still under discussion but it will be in the Midlands, and the FA are confident that building work will begin soon with the centre opening within the next two years.

When completed, the FA would have a state-of-the-art base for all of their international teams, from youth to senior level, which will replace facilities at Lillleshall and Bisham Abbey.

The facilities will include accommodation, indoor and outdoor pitches, medical centre and research base. The FA's coaching structure will also be based at the new centre.

FA chief executive Adam Crozier said: "We now have approval to build a national football centre, our version of Clarefontaine."

"We have spent a lot of time speaking to not only France about how Clarefontaine works but a number of big clubs around Europe."

"We have two sites that we're near to completion on and we hope to announce where in January. It will be absolutely state-of-the-art."

Crozier said that such a facility was needed to develop the game in England.

"We need top-class facilities. It's a very important part of the development plans for all the England sides and will probably cost around 30 million to 40 million pounds to build from scratch."

"Part of that will be having the best professionals in every area located there so that all England sides get the best possible help to give us the best possible chance of succeeding."

If you ask the French, they would say it's been a big part of their success, it's where they run everything from. It's the heartbeat of their activities and the clubs also get a great deal of use out of it."



Liverpool super-stars Michael Owen (L) and Emile Heskey swap the high-five after the former had scored against Arsenal in their Premiership encounter at Anfield yesterday. —AFP photo

Premiership

Anfield awes Arsenal

LONDON, Dec 23: Gerard Houllier won the battle of the French managers Saturday as Liverpool handed Arsenal Wenger's Arsenal a pre-Christmas headache with a 4-0 drubbing at Anfield, reports AFP.

Liverpool's convincing win comes a week after their 1-0 win away against Manchester United and suggests that a return to the glory days of the late 1970s and 1980s might not be too far away for the Merseysiders.

Arsenal remained in second place but Liverpool are just two points adrift and a further three back from leaders Manchester United who were due to play third-placed Ipswich later Saturday.

The home side was straight into their stride - although the London club battled back in an increasingly physical contest.

But it was Liverpool who drew first blood after only 10 minutes to give Houllier an inkling of what was to come later.

Emile Heskey forced Silvinho into conceding a throw, which Markus Babbel launched into the box. Heskey nodded the ball back for Steven Gerrard, and the teenager lashed a fierce

drive from the edge of the box past unsighted goalkeeper Alex Manninger.

Then Michael Owen was stopped in full flow by the linesman's flag after a Nick Barmby touch on, and then failed to connect cleanly with Babbel's cross after the German had run onto an astute ball from Danny Murphy down the line.

Arsenal fought to get back into the game and most of their attacking came down the left, apparently targeting Babbel with French striker Thierry Henry and Fredrik Ljungberg particularly prominent.

One dipping Henry drive from just outside the box fizzed over Sander Westerveld's bar before Croatian midfielder Igor Biscan won approval from the Kop for a crunching defensive collision with Vieira which poleaxed the big midfielder.

Vieira's teammate Martin Keown was next to require treatment after he landed awkwardly when he headed out to deprive Heskey.

Janie Carragher was then booked for a foul on Dennis Bergkamp which caused a minor skirmish, with the Arsenal striker appearing to swing his arm in the direction of the Liverpool player.

Babbel was then booked for

a blatant trip on Henry in full flow. The French striker reacted angrily and confronted the Liverpool full-back with a display of histrionics before he was led away.

Arsenal started the second half in aggressive fashion. Westerveld having to be alert to push away a swerving Bergkamp drive.

But Liverpool, having absorbed sustained Arsenal pressure, scored on the counter-attack. Heskey displayed his physical prowess to hold off Keown as he went into the left-hand side of the box.

Manninger could only parry the England striker's shot and Owen was on hand in the 62nd minute for the easy tap-in - his first Premiership goal since September.

Liverpool substitute Vladimir Smicer then played a perfectly weighted through ball to England midfielder Barmby and his precise chip over the advancing Manninger made it 3-0 in the 71st minute.

To cap a perfect day for the Liverpool supporters, Robbie Fowler who has been linked with both Arsenal and Chelsea, rounded the match off with a trademark cool left-foot finish to make it 4-0 in the final minute.

Hoey stirs up trouble

LONDON, Dec 23: British Government sports minister Kate Hoey caused controversy here Friday after she said she might consider the re-introduction of standing areas in Premier League football grounds, reports AFP.

Now relatives of Liverpool supporters who died in the Hillsborough disaster are demanding a meeting with Hoey, the Labour MP for Vauxhall in south London.

The Hillsborough Family Support Group (HFSG) have been outraged by Hoey's admission that she would consider a return to "safely designed standing areas" in Premier League grounds.

Her opinion is in direct opposition to her boss, Culture Secretary Chris Smith, and has caused widespread anger among the families of the 96 fans killed during the 1989 disaster.

The then Conservative Government commissioned a report by senior judge Lord Taylor and he recommended that terracing be abolished and replaced with all-seater stadiums.

Now all English Premiership stadiums are all-seater although some clubs in the lower league have been allowed to retain terracing because of the cost of changing to seats only.

"We challenge Kate Hoey to meet us and look us in the eyes as she attempts to explain why she is fiddling with safety in response to a vociferous minority of fans," said HFSG chairman Trevor Hicks.

"We intend to campaign vigorously to ensure this act of folly does not progress further. 'She may have forgotten the horror of Hillsborough, we have not and cannot.'"

The Premier League have described any return to standing as "inconceivable".

However, Hoey's opinion has been backed by new Wembley chairman Sir Rodney Walker, even though he admitted that standing areas were unlikely to be included in the plans for the stadium, which will be finalised early in the New Year.

"I know that Kate Hoey is a minister who listens to the fans and the fans have never stopped saying they wish there was some standing terracing available for them," the Leicester City chairman told TalkSport Friday.

"I see people who stand up at Leicester in every home game when it gets exciting."

"For the moment I have to work within the laws of the land, and the National Stadium, I suspect, will be an all-seater stadium."

Mario Sconceri, who is set to take over the Cecchi Gori media empire that controls the club, had insisted Wednesday that the Turk would take up an option to extend his contract beyond the season.

That had sparked off a feud within the boardroom at Fiorentina with the club's director general Giancarlo Antognoni and administrative delegate Luciano Luna bitterly criticising Sconceri for what they saw as an incursion on their territory.

Antognoni, a member of Italy's 1982 World Cup winning squad, is still in his job and insists his row with Sconceri - who still officially has no job at Fiorentina - has nothing to do with the future of Terim who he says he values as a coach.

"At present Sconceri is just a newspaper proprietor. If he has said Terim is staying then he has undermined one of the four club directors - and I mean Luciano Luna," railed Antognoni.

Terim, popular with the players and supporters, has had uneasy relations with Fiorentina's president and media mogul Adriano Galliani.

The two refused to speak to each other for a month earlier this season and Cecchi Gori also slapped a media ban on the Turk but the rift was later partially healed when Terim attended a memorial mass for the anniversary of the death of Cecchi Gori's father.

Coventry's Paul Williams (L) and Chris Marsden of Southampton fight for possession during their Premiership clash at Highfield Road on December 22. The game ended 1-1.

—AFP photo

Real ponder Figo, Carlos offer

MADRID, Dec 23: Real Madrid are mulling over a lucrative offer to let Luis Figo and Roberto Carlos play for a World XI side in a friendly next month, reports Reuters.

The European champions have been offered around 1,000 million pesetas (\$55 million dollars) to allow Figo, the European Player of the Year, and Brazilian defender Roberto Carlos to play in the match against a Japan/South Korea Combined XI in Tokyo on January 3.

Real have debts in excess of 250 million dollars and the cash would be welcome but they are wary about the players having an exhausting trip with a league game against Alves coming up on January 7.

"Sporting matters must always come first," Real president Florentino Perez said on Friday. "Our priority is to win the league and the Champions League but if this match is compatible with that then it could be possible."

Perez said a decision would be made on Tuesday.

Politician Bilardo

BUENOS AIRES, Dec 23: World Cup winning Argentine coach Carlos Bilardo announced Friday that he was launching his own political party here in order to contest the 2003 presidential elections, reports AFP.

Bilardo, who led Argentina to the 1986 World Cup title and second place in the event four years later, said that the official launch of his Unity Party (UNO) would take place on January 1, 2001 at 01:00 (04:00 GMT) in order to become the first new political party of the century.

Bilardo, who also holds the post of technical director with top Buenos Aires outfit Boca Juniors, said that it took him 18 months to gather support for the new party.

A qualified doctor, Bilardo added that no sporting personalities were affiliated to the party which would be represented above all by "former university lecturers, judges and doctors."

Bilardo had a fearsome reputation as a player with Argentine first division side Estudiantes de la Plata.

Playing for Estudiantes in the 1968 World Club Championship final against English side Manchester United he was one of the defenders who, by fair means and foul, neutralised United's attacking stars Bobby Charlton and George Best.

He also left a scar on the forehead of United's midfield hardman Nobby Stiles. Estudiantes won the World Championship 2-1 on aggregate.

Bilardo was twice named South American coach of the year in 1986 and 1987 while at the helm of Argentina.

Paraguay to tour China

ASUNCION, Dec 23: The Paraguayan national football team have been invited on a four-match tour of China next year, the Paraguayan Football Association (APF) said Friday, reports AFP.

The dates for the matches will be decided by Paraguay, but they are likely to take place early next year to allow the visiting side prepare for the Copa America, which takes place in Colombia between July 11-29.

Terim's denial

FLORENCE, Italy, Dec 23: Fiorentina's Turkish coach Fatih Terim Friday denied he had signed an extension to his contract with the Italian Serie A side, reports AFP.

"I see nothing - it is one thing in theory another thing in practice," said Terim, who took the reins at the Florence outfit last summer after steering Istanbul club Galatasaray to the UEFA Cup, the first ever trophy at European level for a Turkish club.

Mario Sconceri, who is set to take over the Cecchi Gori media empire that controls the club, had insisted Wednesday that the Turk would take up an option to extend his contract beyond the season.

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Coventry's Paul Williams (L) and Chris Marsden of Southampton fight for possession during their Premiership clash at Highfield Road on December 22. The game ended 1-1.

—AFP photo

Madrid set the standard

PARIS, Dec 23 (AFP): Real Madrid were voted team of the century at FIFA's gala evening on December 11 for yet further confirmation of their mythical status in the world of football.

From Ferenc Puskas and Alfredo Di Stefano nearly half a century ago to Raul and Luis Figo of the current day, 2000 European Cup winners Madrid have been the benchmark for talent, style and winning under pressure.

Eight victories in 11 European Cup finals since the event started in 1956, Madrid's Santiago-Bernabeu Stadium has become for many Spaniards a football shrine.

And that is not overstating the mark.

Spain's obsession with football verges on religious fanaticism and Madrid's European title this year proved the current team can be mentioned in the same breath, but probably not as good as the 1956 to 1960 champions.

Don Santiago Bernabeu, who from 1909 became a player, coach and secretary before taking the club presidency from 1943 to 1976, may no longer be alive but he would surely be proud the team is still at the pinnacle of the sport.

Real Madrid beat Valencia 3-0 at the Stade de France on May 24 in a festival of Spanish football.

Fernando Morientes put Madrid ahead in the 39th minute, before England's Steve McManaman and Morientes' Spanish international strike partner Raul made the game safe in the 67th and 75th minutes.

The win meant Madrid qualified for the Champions League after finishing in a UEFA Cup spot in the Spanish

championship. Madrid, who also won the final in Paris in the first year of the competition way back in 1956, saw their traditional pedigree shine through with underdogs Valencia unable to get a grip on the match.

Veteran defender Manuel Sanchis, who came on as a substitute and was making his 98th European competition appearance, had the honour of lifting the trophy before the team made a lap of honour that lasted an hour of their partying fans.

Madrid's victory provided a major boost to the debt-ridden club - who were at the time about 250 million dollars in the red.

Real, who need financial clout to satisfy demanding supporters with star signings, are expected to earn as much as 30 million dollars from revenue associated with the Champions League this season.

Madrid finished the year 2000 top of the Champions League second phase Group D with victories over Anderlecht and Leeds to prove they are still up to scratch.

Portugal's Luis Figo, signed in the summer for a world record 55 million dollars, has proven a good value for money.

Perhaps the best attacking midfielder in the world, Figo can leave defences red-faced with the delectable flick or subtle body swerve before bearing down on goal.

Real meanwhile failed to reach the final of the inaugural FIFA World Club Championship in January, won by Corinthians.

Corinthians beat fellow Brazilians Vasco da Gama 4-3 on penalties to at the Maracana Stadium.

Vasco skipper Edmundo blazed his side's final penalty wide after his teammate Gilberto and Marcelinho of Corin-

thians had already failed from the spot.

The match itself finished 0-0 after extra-time. It was a hugely disappointing game with little quality football played and no real clear chance created by either side.

Corinthians striker Edilson was voted player of the inaugural FIFA World Club Championship on Saturday - a day after helping them beat Brazilian rivals Vasco da Gama on penalties in the final.

Edilson, who scored two goals in the tournament, received 221 votes from the 1000 journalists covering the event while Vasco's Brazilian international striker Edmundo, who also netted twice including a brilliant individual effort against Manchester United, finished runner-up with 189 votes.

As for United, the then reigning European champions, they were simply unable to prove themselves the best in the world in the steam heat of Brazil, which proved a major factor in their underachievement.

Boca Juniors brought the Intercontinental Cup back to South America for the first time in six years on November 28 after beating Real Madrid 2-1 in a pulsating encounter at the Tokyo National Stadium.

Boca coach Carlos Bianchi was exultant after clinching his second Intercontinental title having guided Velez Sarsfield of Argentina to a 2-0 victory over AC Milan in 1994 for the last South American defeat of Europe.

In June, Boca Juniors beat defending champions Palmeiras of Brazil in the final of the Libertadores Cup, or South American club championship, to qualify for the Tokyo fixture.

played annually against the European Cup champions.



Roma's Uruguayan player Gianni Martinez Guigou (R) tackling Juventus' Dutch international midfielder Edgar Davids during their Serie A fixture at Rome on December 22. —AFP photo

Roma hold Juventus

MILAN, Dec 23: Leaders AS Roma stayed provisionally six points clear at the top of the Italian Serie A on Friday, sharing a 0-0 draw at the Olympic Stadium with their closest challengers Juventus, reports AFP.

Juventus, whose Dutch midfielder Edgar Davids was sent off in injury time, were in charge for most of the match, dominating in terms of possession.

But Roma came close to snatching victory twice in the closing minutes with their Argentine striker Gabriel Batistuta going close and then Francesco Totti being denied by Juve keeper Edwin van der Sar in a one-on-one situation.

Alatania, who host Juventus at Bergamo on Saturday, have a chance to trim Roma's lead to four points before the Italian league is suspended until the new year.

"It was a very tough game," said Roma coach Fabio Capello. "If there was a team that deserved to win it was Roma."

His Juve counterpart Carlo Ancelotti had the opposite view, saying: "Juventus pleased me a lot tonight. It's true we suffered a bit at the end of the second half but if we play like this we can go a long way."

The first real chance of the evening fell to Juventus after six minutes.

Their French playmaker Zinedine Zidane fed Gianluca Pessotto who was overlapping on the left.

Antonio Conte met Pessotto's cross with a firm header but Roma goalkeeper Cristiano Lupatelli made a fine save at the expense of a corner.

Then Filippo Inzaghi went close with a shot from 12 metres out with the home spectators for the first time seeing

their favourites under the cost this season.

It was all Juventus and Pessotto and then David Trezeguet failed to make the most of shooting opportunities with Lupatelli, who has done well since replacing the injured Francesco Antonioli, further enhancing his reputation with another save from Trezeguet.

After 24 minutes Roma produced their first significant attack of the match with Damiano Tommasi playing in Batistuta but the Argentine's shot was blocked by Dutchman van der Sar.

Trezeguet was also presented with the first chance of the second half but again failed

to profit and then Inzaghi too should have done better after a work from Zidane.

It was then when close-range Batistuta forced van der Sar into another fine save with a header from a Calci Trekkie.

But it was Batistuta and then Totti that almost pulled it off for Roma in the last minutes and with Davids dismissed for a second bookable offence it was the Turin side that looked the most relieved to hear the final whistle.

In Friday night's other match at Bari Lazio had some nervy early moments but rallied and defeated their hosts 2-1.

It was the Yugoslav dead-ball specialist Sinisa Mihajlovic who scored direct from a corner with his swerving left-foot delivery deceiving the Bari defence and passing through the legs of Yksel Osmanovskij.

It was a fillip for Mihajlovic who is facing a judicial investigation for the allegedly racist remarks he made to Arsenal's French international midfielder Patrick Vieira during the Champions League match between the teams last October.

In the second half Fabrizio Ravanelli headed a second goal for Lazio in what could be his last game for the defending champions with much speculation that he will move during the mid-season break.

Bari's Swedish captain Daniel Andersson reduced arrears from the penalty spot with seven minutes remaining but Lazio took the points.

The rest of the weekend programme - the last in Italy this year - will be played on Saturday. All the games on Friday and Saturday were to kick off 15 minutes late as players make their protest against the violence to which supporters have subjected some this season.

Far from finished

GLASGOW, Dec 23: Scottish Premiership club Celtic's Danish midfielder Morten Wieghorst has vowed his football career has not been finished by the debilitating brain disease Guillain-Barre Syndrome, reports AFP.

The 29-year-old is out of hospital after 11 weeks fighting the potentially-fatal nerve condition, the Press Association reported Saturday.

The doctors have told me there are no guarantees. They can't say for sure if I am going to be strong enough to play football," said Wieghorst.

They have never seen a professional athlete with this condition but I am determined to achieve my dream. I will give it everything to play football again and I know I will achieve that goal."

The midfielder was an integral part of Celtic's championship-winning side in 1998 and earned a deserved place in Denmark's World Cup squad in the same year.