

Angel for Villa

BUENOS AIRES, Dec 24: English Premiership side Aston Villa have signed Colombian international forward Juan Pablo Angel of River Plate on a 12.4 million dollar contract, the Argentine side announced Friday.

The 25-year-old centre-forward will arrive in Birmingham at the start of January to determine the terms of his contract.

Angel, who came to River Plate in 1998 from Colombian side Atletico Nacional, scored 13 goals to finish the top scorer in the recently-decided opening phase of the Argentine league, and was the league's top scorer in 2000 with 22 goals.

Now, he says, he is relishing the challenge of the English Premiership.

"I've watched English football a lot on television," Angel said.

To leave here and go and play in the Premiership is a challenge for me, but it's the right time in my career to try my luck abroad.

The length of the contract was not revealed.

Sociedad fire coach

SAN SEBASTIAN, Spain, Dec 24: Spanish First Division bottom club Real Sociedad have sacked their coach Periko Alonso only two months after he took on the job, club sources said Friday, reports AFP.

The 47-year-old, who was part of Spain's 1982 World Cup squad, took over as coach on October 24 from former national manager Javier Clemente, who had resigned the previous day.

But results have not improved and the club are currently bottom of the league with just 12 points from 16 games.

He is the fifth Spanish First Division manager to lose his job this season.

Al-Jaber loaned to Al-Ain

RIYADH, Dec 24: Saudi international striker Sami Al-Jaber has been loaned temporarily by English First Division side Wolverhampton to Emiratis outfit Al-Ain it was confirmed here Sunday, reports AFP.

The 28-year-old Al-Jaber will help the side during the Gulf Cup football tournament from January 3-14.

Six teams are taking part in the competition - Al-Ain, Al-Ittihad (Saudi Arabia), Al-Salmiya (Kuwait), Al-Ittihad (Qatar), Est-Rifa'a (Bahrain) and Dhotari (Oman).

An Al-Ain official told AFP that "agreement" had been reached with both Wolverhampton and the player's original club Saudi side Al-Hilal.

Al-Jaber was the first Saudi player to sign for an English club and was an integral part of the Saudi national side during two World Cup campaigns.

Schalke ready to extend Sand contract

GELESENKIRCHEN, Germany, Dec 24: German Bundesliga leader's Schalke 04 are negotiating to extend the contract of Danish international striker Ebbe Sand in a bid to prevent him being snapped up by rivals.

The German media reported Sunday that the 28-year-old Sand is being targeted by unnamed top English sides who have offered up to 18.5 million dollars to lure him to the Premiership.

But Schalke insist that they are not ready to part with their star player who joined them last May from Danish side Brondby and has 13 goals have helped them climb to the top of the German league.

The club have a one-point lead in the Bundesliga over defending champions Bayern Munich going into the autumn break.

"When you have such a good player people are always speculating about transfers. We're negotiating with him at the moment and want to prolong his contract until 2003," Schalke spokesman Gerd Voss said.

"We had our eye on Sand for two years. Now we have got him," said Schalke manager Rudi Assauer, insisting that they were not ready to part with the player in the near future.

Fergie confident of keeping stars

LONDON, Dec 24: Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson is confident that the Premiership champions can keep all their big stars at Old Trafford, reports AFP.

Andy Cole is poised to sign a new long-term contract early in the New Year and Ferguson expects the likes of David Beckham, Ryan Giggs and Jaap Stam to follow suit.

Ferguson told the News of the World Sunday: "I would put my life on them staying - as long as we look after them."

Nothing is certain in life but I don't think they want to leave Manchester United.

"I think we have the financial clout to keep our best players. We will look after them."

"We have a great set-up. There's a good structure at this club and we don't want to break it. It's all about continuity."



Vladimir Jugovic (L), Inter Milan's Yugoslav international, locked in a tussle with Atalanta's Massimo Donati during their Serie A match on December 23. - AFP photo

Serie A

Roma's joy on Atalanta slip

MILAN, Dec 24: AS Roma take a six-point Italian First Division lead into the New Year after alling aristocrats Inter Milan defeated high-flying Atalanta 1-0 at Bergamo on Saturday, reports AFP.

Inter's long-awaited first away win of the season, courtesy of a goal from Dutch substitute Clarence Seedorf, ensured Roma's 0-0 draw on Friday at home to Juventus preserves their six-point margin over the Turin giants.

Seedorf's goal came after he pounced at close range as Christian Vieri's shot was deflected into his path.

Inter coach Marco Tardelli said: "The thing that pleased me was how sensibly the players reacted when we went 1-0 ahead. Now we can go forward - our policy is to progress by taking little steps at a time."

Atalanta coach Giovanni Vavassori said: "Just as it was wrong to get overexcited when we were doing well it would be wrong to give ourselves a hard time over this result. Atalanta played well."

A rare day of joy for Inter was made even sweeter when arch-rivals AC Milan went down to a shock 2-1 defeat to unheralded Perugia at the San Siro.

Milan went behind after 21 minutes when a mistake by Genaro Gattuso allowed striker Luca Saudati to head the visitors although it only took the hosts four minutes to reply.

Massimo Ambrosini fed the overlapping Paolo Maldini who crossed for Ukrainian Andriy Shevchenko to head in his 11th goal of the season, taking him ahead of Roma's Gabriel Batistuta as the league's top-scorer.

But in the second half Perugia caught Alberto Zaccheroni's side cold with Saudati's cross finding Greek forward Zisis

Vryzas, who made no mistake. "Certainly Milan did not play well," admitted "Zac". "We did not put into practice what we have been working on but you have to give credit to Perugia."

His Perugia counterpart Serse Cosmi gushed: "This was a historic success for Perugia. We dedicate it to the president (Luciano Gaucci) and also the supporters."

Florentina continued their fine run under Turkish coach Fatih Terim with a 2-0 triumph at home to Verona.

It was a personal triumph for striker Enrico Chiesa who scored twice, first with a penalty and then from close range.

Terim, who is stalling on signing a contract for next season with the club he joined from Galatasaray in the summer, was cagey about his future.

"I don't want to talk about that now," said the Turk. "Especially as I am not going home at Christmas. I will stay in Florence and therefore I have all the time I need to speak with the president."

Lecce took an 18th-minute lead in a stormy clash at Brescia through Cristiano Lucarelli but then both sides were reduced to 10 men with Brescia's Antonio Filippini and Lecce's Luigi Piangerelli dismissed.

Lucarelli bagged his second five minutes into the second period but two goals including a penalty from Dario Hubner earned Brescia a 2-2 draw and a point after they had been reduced to nine men by Filippo Galli's dismissal.

Parma again disappointed, having to settle for a 2-2 draw at struggling Napoli.

French midfielder Johan Micoud headed them in front four minutes before the interval but Fabio Pecchia squared the match.

Yugoslav striker Savo Milosevic headed Parma 2-1 ahead but Nicola Anoruso equalised again for Napoli.

Napoli coach Emiliano Mondonico said: "If we want to stay in Serie A we are on the right path. Today everybody gave their all."

Udinese rekindled their impressive early season form after a recent slump with a 3-1 defeat of Bologna, two goals from Dane Martin Jorgensen giving them a 2-0 interval lead.

Giuseppe Signori pulled one back for Bologna just seconds after having a penalty saved by Luigi Turci but Stefano Fiore calmed home nerves with another spot kick, ensuring Udinese prevailed.

"I am very pleased," said their coach Luigi De Canio. "Today we saw the real Udinese again - it makes up for the last few weeks."

Bottom side Reggina secured only their second win of the season with an Ezio Brevi goal sufficient to eclipse Vicenza 1-0.

But Roma remain in control of the division after their draw at the Olympic Stadium with Juventus on Friday.

Juventus, whose Dutch midfielder Edgar Davids was sent off in injury time, dominated in terms of possession.

But Roma came close to snatching victory twice in the closing minutes with Batistuta having a goal disallowed and then Francesco Totti denied by Juve keeper Edwin van der Sar.

In Friday's other match at Bari defending champions Lazio defeated their hosts 2-1.

Yugoslav Sinisa Mihajlovic scored direct from a corner and then Fabrizio Ravanelli headed a second goal off the underside of the crossbar.

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

STANDINGS

ROME, Dec 23: Italian league table after matches played Saturday (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points).							
AS Roma	12	9	2	1	23	8	29
Juventus	12	6	5	1	19	10	23
Atalanta	12	6	4	2	16	9	22
Lazio	12	6	3	3	19	12	21
Florentina	12	5	5	2	22	16	20
Udinese	12	6	1	5	21	15	19
AC Milan	12	5	4	3	20	15	19
Parma	12	5	3	4	15	12	18
Bologna	12	5	2	5	17	16	17
Perugia	12	4	4	4	17	17	16
Inter	12	4	4	4	13	14	16
Lecce	12	3	4	5	11	20	13
Verona	12	2	6	4	14	20	12
Vicenza	12	3	3	6	13	19	12
Napoli	12	2	5	5	16	20	11
Brescia	12	1	6	5	13	18	9
Bari	12	2	2	8	10	21	8
Reggina	12	2	1	9	8	25	7



Perugia's Greek international Zisis Vryzas (C) is exultant after scoring against AC Milan during their Serie A game at Milan on December 23. - AFP photo

Zamorano leaves Inter

MILAN, Dec 24: Inter Milan's Chilean international striker Ivan Zamorano has quit the Italian Serie A side and returned home to South America, the club confirmed Sunday, reports AFP.

The 33-year-old, who joined Inter from Spanish giants Real Madrid in 1996 and whose contract was due to expire next month, asked team bosses to be released early because of his lack of play.

"I'm leaving I've stayed too long without playing. I thank all those who have had confidence in me and president Moratti (Massimo)," said Zamorano, who found that he could not compete against the likes of Italian Christian Vieri, Turkey's Hakan Sukur and Uruguay's Alvaro Recoba for a first team place.

Inter sporting director Gabriele Oriani added: "We'll be in the market from January after the break for another striker."

Zamorano previously played for Chilean side Cobresal, Swiss outfit St. Gallen and Spanish club Sevilla.

Winner of the Spanish Primera Liga title in 1995 with Real Madrid, Zamorano also won the 1993 Spanish Cup title with Real Madrid and the 1998 UEFA Cup with Inter.

There were reports earlier in the week that the Chilean was ready to sign a two-year deal worth three million dollars with Mexican outfit America.

Sir Alex totally behind the new man

LONDON, Dec 24: Alex Ferguson has pledged his total support to his successor as Manchester United manager.

Ferguson will remain at Old Trafford in some capacity when he retires at the end of next season, prompting fears that he may overshadow the new man.

However Ferguson intends to keep well away from the running of the team and will give his full backing to his successor.

"The important thing is there's a great structure at the club and the club I'm sure will pick the right man and he will get my 100 percent support because I'm a United man," he said.

Whoever follows Ferguson will have an onerous task and Ferguson claims dealing with the media is extremely demanding and time consuming.

He dreads Fridays and conducting interviews is one part of the job he will not miss.

He added, though, that United were not anti-media and did what was required of them.

"That's the one part I will not miss I can assure you, the media attention of the club," he told the BBC.

"A lot of people criticise us for not being media friendly, which for my mind is a load of nonsense."

"We give as much as we need to give and that's all you have to do."

"If I were to do all the interviews and the players had to give all their interviews that they had to do then we would not win a game, there's no question about that."

"It's insatiable the interest in this place. You have to be tough. You have to say we're not doing this or we're not doing that and we're not doing the next thing and get on with the job of preparing to play important games."

"I include myself and sometimes a Friday is agony. You've got them all - radio, TV, Sundays, dailies and evenings and it's very, very difficult."

Strasbourg cry foul

STRASBOURG, France, Dec 24: Strasbourg have cried foul and accused referees of being sexist as they bid to be awarded all three points from their abandoned match against Metz on Thursday night, the club announced here Sunday, reports AFP.

Strasbourg, who sit bottom of the French league, were leading Metz 1-0 when a female referee's assistant was stunned by a flare which landed nearby in the 68th minute of play.

The match was subsequently abandoned, however Strasbourg feel that they have been hard done by because a female assistant proved "vulnerable" to the rigours of the match.

"We now have proof that this incident was not intentional, contrary to the flares (which had been thrown by Metz supporters)," a Strasbourg official told AFP.

Strasbourg point to the fact that the projectile thrown only measured 5 centimetres long, and was therefore "almost impossible" to detect by stadium entrance security.

But they also questioned whether the match would have been abandoned if a male referee's assistant had been the victim.

"The image of a woman on the ground was obviously emotionally stirring for the referees' officials... but would the same penalty apply if the body on the ground was one which looked less vulnerable," the club said on its website.

Referee's assistant Nelly Vincent suffered damage to her eardrum. A 21-year-old Strasbourg supporter has been charged with throwing the rocket.

Strasbourg face having to replay the match on a date to be decided in January.



RIGHT HERE! David Ginola (L), Aston Villa's French star, points to the spot where he claims he was kicked during the Premiership clash against Leeds United at Elland Road on December 23. - AFP photo

Premiership

MU comfortably atop

LONDON, Dec 24: Manchester United regained control of the English Premiership with a 2-0 home win against Ipswich Saturday as second-placed Arsenal crashed 4-0 to resurgent Liverpool at Anfield, reports AFP.

Norwegian international Ole Gunnar Solskjaer was the man draped in red handing out the presents, his first-half double permitting some half-time festive cheer ahead of a scoreless second half.

The result puts United back in pole position with an eight-point lead over closest rivals Arsenal - and left manager Sir Alex Ferguson beaming following the disappointment of last week's home defeat to Liverpool.

Ferguson praised the two-goal contribution of baby-face assassin Solskjaer, who eased United's striking woes with two clinical finishes.

"Nine time out of 10 you can bet your life on him scoring," Ferguson enthused after the victory.

"The first half was a superb performance and that's what we expect from the players. It was good to see after last week," he added, referring to the 1-0 home loss against Liverpool.

While Ferguson's team handed him the perfect Christmas present, Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger was left pondering another heavy jolt to his team's title chances after the thrashing at Anfield.

Wenger said Gerard Houllier's side were now as good as a bet as his own team for a crack at the title, even though Liverpool are 10 points behind United.

Houllier played down his team's chances however and said United's anticipated 10-point hold on the league would be hard to dislodge even with 19 games to go.

Houllier was nevertheless delighted with his team's showing.

"Not many teams beat Arsenal like that and I think the team will get stronger and stronger as the league goes on but to my mind we are short of five points," Houllier said.

Houllier was also happy with a second successive clean sheet and paid tribute to his defence.

"The back four were tremendous, just as they were at Old Trafford. I thought they were absolutely superb and also, when we had the ball we made better use of it this time."

"After the second goal there was a lot of confidence and I could feel the team was getting stronger and stronger."

Liverpool got the show on the road with a stunning volley from Steven Gerrard. Further goals from Michael Owen, Nicky Barnby and Robbie Fowler sealed the rout.

Tottenham, who held Arsenal to a 1-1 draw on Monday, could only watch in despair as second-from-bottom Middlesbrough walked out of White Hart Lane with a valuable point.

STANDINGS

LONDON, Dec 23: English Premiership table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points).							
Manchester United	19	13	4	2	46	14	43
Arsenal	19	10	5	4	30	18	35
Leicester	19	10	5	4	22	15	35
Liverpool	19	10	3	6	37	24	33
Ipswich	19	10	3	6	27	20	33
Aston Villa	19	8	8	3	25	18	32
Stunderland	19	9	5	5	19	18	32
Newcastle	19	7	8	7	35	25	26
Chelsea	19	7	8	7	25	21	26
West Ham	19	6	8	5	26	27	26
Tottenham	19	7	5	7	25	27	26
Leeds	19	7	4	8	26	30	25
Charlton	19	7	4	8	26	30	25
Everton	19	6	4	9	20	30	22
Southampton	19	5	6	8	24	32	21
Derby	19	4	7	8	23	35	19
Manchester City	19	5	3	11	25	33	18
Coventry	19	4	4	11	17	34	16
Middlesbrough	19	3	6	10	20	28	15
Bradford	19	2	6	11	13	33	12



Gianfranco Zola (R), the Chelsea wizard, takes to the air while executing a flick, during the Premiership fixture against Bradford City at Stamford Bridge on December 23. - AFP photo