

# Primera Liga Kovacevic kicks Barca

Football

AFP, Madrid

Two goals from Yugoslavia's Darko Kovacevic earned Real Sociedad a 2-1 home win over giants Barcelona to consolidate their lead in the Spanish league on Sunday.

With Real Madrid, who did not play this weekend, down in seventh spot and Barcelona in 10th, it has been a bleak end to the year for the country's two biggest clubs.

Ten-man Real Mallorca forced a 2-2 draw at Deportivo La Coruna in Sunday's late game to claim second spot, three points behind Real Sociedad, with Valencia, who drew 0-0 at Basque club Alaves, in third place four points behind the leaders.

Barcelona coach Louis van Gaal surprisingly fielded an attacking side at Sociedad but this did not stop the Catalan club being dominated throughout the match.

Dutch striker Patrick Kluyvert opened the scoring however though he had a slice of luck. His first shot hit the post and then rebounded off the back of Sociedad's Dutch keeper Sander Westerveld into the net in the 33rd minute.

To the credit of Raynald Denoueix's Basque side, Real continually fought for the equalizer and were rewarded five minutes before the half-time break from the

head of Kovacevic.

Kovacevic scored what proved to be the winner in the 53rd minute. Profiting from an error by Barcelona defender Fernando Navarro, Kovacevic beat Argentinian keeper Roberto Bonano a second time for his ninth goal of the season.

Barcelona finished the match with nine men however when Brazilian midfielder Thiago Motta and Dutch winger Marc Overmars were sent off in the 77th and 90th minutes.

Real Mallorca's determination paid off when, down to 10 men after just 20 minutes following the sending off of Argentinian Ariel Ibagaza for dissent, they held their nerve to hold out for the 2-2 draw.

Roy Makaay scored twice for Deportivo to keep him top of the league goalscoring list with 10 goals after Kovacevic had overtaken his tally earlier in the day.

Uruguay's Walter Pandiani and fellow striker Samuel Eto'o of Cameroon, from a penalty, were on target for the visiting island side.

Alaves thanked their French keeper Richard Dutruel for a superb performance in denying Valencia victory in their 0-0 draw.

Celta Vigo also did well to bounce back from UEFA Cup defeat to Celtic to win 2-0 at Valladolid, leaving them in fourth spot five points behind Sociedad, thanks to goals from Brazilians Catanha and

Edu.

Fifth-placed Real Betis, who looked tired following their 1-0 UEFA Cup victory over French club Auxerre, beat Athletic Bilbao also by 1-0 thanks to a superb freekick from Brazilian Marcos Assuncao, although Bilbao missed a penalty.

European Champions League reigning champions Real Madrid meet Libertadores Cup winners, or South American champions, Olimpia Asuncion of Paraguay in Japan on Tuesday in the annual Intercontinental Cup and their match against Sevilla was therefore postponed till January 2.

At the other end of the table, Espanyol beat Rayo Vallecano 3-1 in a relegation battle. Vallecano, at second from bottom a place below Espanyol, have only earned one point in their last six matches, leaving coach Fernando Vazquez in danger of the sack.

### TOP SIX

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

Sociedad	12	7	5	0	23	14	26
Mallorca	12	7	2	3	19	15	23
Valencia	12	6	4	2	20	7	22
Celta	12	6	3	3	15	8	21
Betis	12	5	2	2	10	12	20
Deportivo	12	5	4	3	17	16	19



AIR KOVACEVIC! Real Sociedad striker Darko Kovacevic (L) takes to the air while teammate Nihat Kahveci follows after Kovacevic had scored against Barcelona at San Sebastian on December 1.

# Serie A Lazio defy odds

Football

AFP, Rome

Cash-strapped Lazio rose to the top of the Italian football league on Sunday after coming back from two goals down to win 3-2 at Piacenza.

Lazio have 27 points from 12 matches, one more than AC Milan who held on to second place ahead of arch-rivals Inter on goal difference.

Inter thrashed Brescia 4-0 with Christian Vieri scoring all four goals while AC Milan were held to a 1-1 draw at Empoli.

Reigning champions Juventus dropped to fourth although they came back from two goals down to earn a 2-2 draw at AS Roma.

A pulsating match was marred by three late dismissals with Roma's Francesco Totti and Vincent Candela seeing red, and Juventus defender Alessandro Birindelli also taking an early bath.

Crippled by massive debts and put up for sale by their major shareholder, Lazio can do little wrong on the pitch, stretching their unbeaten league run to 11 matches with their dramatic away victory.

Fabrizio Miccoli and Massimo Caccia gave Piacenza a 2-0 lead before Argentine duo Diego Simeone and Claudio Lopez restored parity before half-time.

Bernardo Corradi struck from close range to steal the points for Lazio in the final minute.

Lazio coach Roberto Mancini paid tribute to his players for hauling themselves back into the match.

"Piacenza made it really tough for us but all credit to the team for coming back so strongly," said the former Lazio star. "For the first 20 minutes we fell asleep and then my players were truly extraordinary."

Piacenza captain Eusebio Di Francesco was impressed with the way Lazio never let their heads drop after a poor start.

"Lazio are a very different team from the one they had last year," said Di Francesco. "On the pitch they were very committed and seemed to have a great team spirit."

Vieri ended his goal drought in spectacular style at the San Siro.

The Italy international, who had not scored for 447 minutes prior to the match, found the net in the third, 13th, 57th and 84th minutes to condemn Brescia to their seventh defeat of the campaign.

Inter coach Hector Cuper paid a massive compliment to Vieri whose four goals makes him the country's leading goalscorer with 12 goals.

"He's one of the strongest players I've ever worked with as a coach," said the Argentinian. "Lots of other players score goals but he always plays for the team."

AC Milan were left counting the cost of missed chances after a disappointing draw at Empoli.

Tommaso Rocchi put the finishing touch to Vincenzo Grella's superb pass to give the hosts a deserved lead before Ukrainian striker Andriy Shevchenko levelled the scores.

At the Stadio Olimpico Roma took the lead in the 12th minute thanks to their captain Totti.

Francisco Lima crossed from the left wing for Totti who controlled the ball with his chest before brushing aside the challenge of Juventus hardman Paolo Montero.

Totti then nodded the ball and drilled a low left-foot shot beyond Gianluigi Buffon.

Roma doubled their lead a minute from the interval when Totti unlocked the Juve defence with a superb backheel that allowed Antonio Cassano to spring the offside trap.

The former Bari striker sprinted

towards goal and drew Buffon out of his goal rounding the Juve goalkeeper and sliding the ball into an unguarded net.

But Juventus hit back in first-half stoppage-time when Italy international Alessandro Del Piero met Mauro Camoranesi's corner with a firm header which nestled in the top corner.

And the visitors stole a point when Pavel Nedved rifled home Gianluca Zambrotta's left-wing cut-back.

Torino remain in the relegation zone after going down to a heavy 4-0 defeat at home to Parma.

Rising star Matteo Brihi gave the visitors a 15th-minute lead before Adrian Mutu's brilliant freekick doubled Parma's advantage.

Brazilian Adriano struck twice in the second half to pile the pressure on Torino coach Renzo Ulivieri.

Elsewhere Bologna crushed local rivals Modena 3-0 at the Renato Dall'Ara stadium and Perugia won 2-0 at struggling Atalanta.

On Saturday Chievo drew 1-1 at lowly southern club Reggina.

Nicola Lagrottaglie levelled for Chievo just after break to cancel out Japanese midfielder Shunsuke Nakamura's first-half penalty.

Saturday's other match between Como and Udinese was postponed due to torrential rain in the north of Italy.

### TOP SIX

Italian league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Lazio	12	8	3	1	25	10	27
Milan	12	8	2	2	27	9	26
Inter	12	8	2	2	25	12	26
Juventus	12	7	5	0	21	8	26
Chievo	12	7	1	4	21	13	22
Bologna	12	6	4	2	16	9	22

# Cragnotti eases nerves

AFP, Rome

Lazio director Massimo Cragnotti has moved quickly to reassure supporters that they will not be selling players when the transfer window reopens in January to ease their financial problems.

Crippled by massive debts and put up for sale by their major shareholder, Lazio can do little wrong on the pitch, rising to the top of Serie A on Sunday after a dramatic 3-2 win at Piacenza.

The Rome club's money worries have led to numerous media reports that Dutch defender Jaap Stam and former Italy international Stefano Fiore could be sold, but Cragnotti has dismissed talk of a winter clear-out.

"We will not be selling anyone in



MASSIMO CRAGNOTTI

January," he said after watching Lazio fight back from being 2-0 down to earn a memorable victory this weekend.

"We will keep this squad until the end of the season. These boys can bring the club success.

"A lot of things have been said about the club that are not true. We are not close to bankruptcy, we are a healthy outfit."

Cragnotti also dismissed reports that Lazio were behind in making payments to Manchester United for Stam and to Valencia for Gaizka Mendieta, who has since been farmed out to Barcelona on loan.

"We have numerous creditors and we have respected the payments to other clubs such as Manchester United and Valencia regarding transfer fees."

# Bundesliga Bremen fly with Ailton

Football

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen's Brazilian striker Ailton was in top form in his side's 3-1 victory at home to VfB Stuttgart on Sunday who regained second spot in the German league for the northern port club.

Ailton found the net in the first half and after a penalty in the closing stages with a Maden Krstajic goal in between for Thomas Schaaf's men. Ailton now tops the league goalscoring list with 12 goals.

Stuttgart striker Kevin Kuranyi equalized but the south western side were unable to prevent the match falling away from them when

a win would have earned them second spot behind leaders Bayern Munich.

Bayern may be out of the Champions League but they top their domestic league table, six points ahead of Bremen, following their 2-0 home win over Hertha Berlin on Saturday thanks to goals from Michael Ballack.

Borussia Dortmund are in third spot, eight points behind Munich, following their 2-1 comeback win at Nuremberg.

In the other Sunday game, Schalke 04 won 2-0 at Hannover 96, leaving the Ruhr club in fourth place, nine points behind the leaders.

# Scottish Premiership Celtic, Rangers sail

AFP, Glasgow

Celtic showed signs of a European hangover but three second-half goals were the perfect remedy as they overcame Motherwell 3-1 to stay a point clear of Rangers at the top of the Scottish Premier League on Sunday.

Henrik Larsson, an own goal from Scott Leitch and a Joos Valgaeren strike gave Celtic their win over bottom-placed Well.

Rangers kept up the chase and warmed up for next weekend's Old Firm showdown with a 4-0 thrashing of Hearts that ended in controversy over experienced referee Hugh Dallas's sending off of Hearts' Irish defender Alan Maybury.

### TOP SIX

German football league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Bayern	15	11	2	2	33	14	35
Bremen	15	9	2	4	31	26	29
Dortmund	15	7	6	2	21	12	27
Schalke	15	7	5	3	20	13	26
Stuttgart	15	6	6	3	25	18	24
Munich	15	7	3	5	24	20	24

# Dudek sees doom

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool boss Gerard Houllier admitted Jerzy Dudek could be axed from his first team after the Polish goalkeeper's extraordinary blunder gifted Manchester United their opening goal in Sunday's Anfield showdown.

Liverpool were left four points adrift of Arsenal at the top of the table after a 2-1 defeat.

Houllier had already been under intense pressure to drop Dudek after a string of errors in recent weeks but he has resisted calls to give England under-21 international Chris Kirkland an extended run in the first team.

Houllier's rationale had been that dropping Dudek would destroy his confidence.

But it became agonisingly clear that the Pole's confidence had

# Premiership Magpies back flying

Football

AFP, Newcastle

Alan Shearer and Craig Bellamy put their Champions League misery behind them by grabbing a goal each in the last five minutes as Newcastle denied Everton the chance to go second in the Premiership on Sunday.

Forced to play for over an hour with ten men after defender Joseph Yobo was ordered off, Everton looked set to hang on for their sixth successive 1-0 victory after Kevin Campbell's 17th-minute strike had put them ahead.

In another match of the day, Leeds United snuck further following a heartbreaking 1-2 loss to Charlton Athletic.

The defeat left Leeds in 16th place in the league and just three points away from the relegation zone, their worst position in nine years.

When Andy O'Brien headed inches wide in the 80th minute, it looked like being another frustrating day for the Magpies.

But Shearer and Bellamy, both banned in Europe as a result of their misdemeanours during the 4-1 thrashing by Inter Milan on Wednesday, had other ideas.

First Shearer latched on to Shola Ameobi's header to send a stunning 25-yard volley beyond the helpless Richard Wright for what he rated as one of the top three goals of his career.

Three minutes later, Bellamy wriggled along the byline on the left of the Everton goal and poked in a shot-cum-cross that took a cruel deflection off Chinese midfielder Li Tie to squeeze between Wright's flailing hand and the near post.

"I didn't think it was going to come," Shearer admitted afterwards.

"Everton were very tough and resolute and it is always very difficult playing ten men who have something to hang on to.

"It's different to when you are chasing the game the way we were against Inter on Wednesday."

Until O'Brien's header, Newcastle had never really looked like scoring and Shearer revealed that had influenced his decision to go for the spectacular finish.

"Dare I say it, it was going to take something special to break the deadlock, so I just decided to take pot luck. If you don't buy the ticket you're not going to win."

Bellamy, who was fined by manager Bobby Robson after being sent off for a silly piece of retaliation against Inter, succeeded in putting his miserable European experience behind him.

"I've been fined and I took a lot of stick this week," he said. "All I could do was get out there and try not to let

it bother me.

"I've got great teammates who have helped me along and its credit to them."

Robson added: "We deserved to win but they made it extremely difficult for us.

"If we had Everton's defence I think we would win the league."

While Newcastle's strike force again demonstrated their class, the frailty of their central defence had been exposed by Campbell's 17-minute opener.

Latching on to David Unsworth's hopeful punt out of defence, the former Arsenal man was able to find his way through two Newcastle defenders before squeezing a shot through the legs of Shay Given.

Yobo was given his marching orders in the 21st minute when he pulled down Bellamy from behind with the Welsh striker clean through on goal.

Everton boss David Moyes felt the referee had been harsh on Yobo for what he saw as a clumsy rather than a malicious tackle.

But he paid tribute to the quality of Shearer's strike, the first goal Everton had conceded in more than ten hours of football.

"After the sending off it was a case of hanging on in there and we did that," he said.

"It was always going to take something special to get them back into it and let's be fair, it was a wonderful goal."

Leeds boss Terry Venables refused to answer questions about his future at the club after Scott Parker's last-minute winner for Charlton plunged his side deeper into crisis.

Leeds had seemed well set for a precious three points after Harry Kewell fired them ahead with a stunning strike three minutes before the break.

But Kevin Lisbie grabbed an equaliser ten minutes from the end with a half-volleyed shot, setting up Parker to clinch the three points with a mazy run and toe-poked shot.

"Defensively we went to sleep at the end and we were punished," said a visibly strained Venables.

"We have played a lot of good football. (Michael) Bridges hit the inside of the post and that could have made it 2-1 for us. Instead it ends up 2-1 against us. We were mugged and it is a very disappointing result."

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"I've been fined and I took a lot of stick this week," he said. "All I could do was get out there and try not to let

self and for the team. But I'm pleased with the response of the rest of the lads, there was no finger-pointing and complaining. And don't forget that he has won plenty of games for us.

"We missed our chances too, nobody moans at strikers for that, but when a goalkeeper makes a mistake it seems to be different."

Liverpool have now taken just one point out of a possible 12 in their last four games, but Houllier voiced confidence his side could bounce back.

The Frenchman said: "I suppose we gave them too much respect, and that was maybe because we are going through a difficult period. We lacked fluency and should have been more audacious.

"But don't forget that Arsenal have had a bad run too. It's our turn now. That is what makes the blunder so disappointing. We felt after winning in Europe this week that we were on the way up again."



LYON ON FIRE! Lyon's Brazilian striker Sonny Anderson acknowledges his fans at the end of the match against Strasbourg at Gerland stadium in Lyon on December 1.

# League One Lyon regain top spot

Football

AFP, Paris

Defending champions Lyon went to the top of the French first division on Sunday when they battled back from a goal down to defeat Strasbourg 2-1.

Although Lyon dominated large parts of the first half, they found it hard to break down a well-organised Strasbourg defence and fell behind in the 23rd minute when Ulrich Le Pen scored his second goal of the season after good work by Yves Deroff and Pierre Njanka.

Lyon looked as if they would be punished for their cautious line-up which saw Peguy Luyindula playing as a lone striker but it was the attacker who brought his team level in the 34th minute.

Midfield ace Juninho was having more and more influence on the game, and it was his cross from a free-kick which set up the winner for Mahamadou Diarra four minutes after the break.

Lyon now have 31 points, one ahead of Nice who lost 3-0 to Sedan on Saturday while Guingamp moved into third spot on Sunday with a 3-1 win at Lens.

Guingamp also had to come from a goal down to clinch the three points.

Antoine Sibierski gave the home side after 21 minutes before Hakim Saci grabbed the equaliser six

minutes from the interval.

Florent Malouda, on 55 minutes, and a last minute penalty from Christophe Le Roux ensured the three points.

On Saturday, Ben Saada was the architect of Bastia's 2-0 victory at home to Marseille with two late goals, while Nice's 3-0 reverse at Sedan was down to two goals from Henri Camara of Senegal and a late strike by Alain Liri.

Meanwhile Monaco's Shabani Nonda inspired a 3-1 victory over Paris Saint Germain to put his team into sixth spot.

Monaco coach Didier Deschamps said afterwards: "I hope now this can be used as a springboard to a better period for us. We have to be ambitious even if this league is very close. What we need now is more consistency."

Luis Fernandez' PSG side registered their third consecutive defeat and are marooned in mid-table, seven points behind the leaders.

Things looked promising for the visitors when Ronaldinho put PSG ahead in the 25th minute. Andre Luiz fed the talented Brazilian and he got the better of Monaco defender Rafael Marquez before firing past keeper Flavio Roma.

Monaco however were looking lively in the search for an equalizer with Souleymane Camara, Nonda and Marquez all having chances though PSG keeper Lionel Letizi was up to the task.

Monaco were finally level five minutes before the break. Andreas

Zikos got the ball on the edge of the area and an accurate pass, between defenders Talal Elkarkour and Frederic Dehu, found Nonda who chipped the ball into the net.

Nonda hit Monaco's second goal of the night and his 10th of the season in the 70th minute. Jerome Rothen fed Camara, whose cross from the left to the near post found Nonda who made no mistake with a header.

Monaco's third came from quick reactions by Marquez, who, seeing the ball come back off the post following a Zikos header, reacted the quickest to score with 10 minutes left.

PSG's Francis Llacer was sent off for a dangerous challenge in the third minute of injury time in yet another setback for the well-beaten Parisians.

### TOP SIX

French football league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Lyon	17	9	4	4	34	21	31
Nice	17	8	6	3	21	10	30
Guingamp	17	4	5	26	19	28	28
Marseille	17	8	4	5	17	17	28