



PHOTO: AFP

WE SHOULD GO ROWING! Ecstatic Lazio players celebrate Claudio Lopez's goal against Bologna at Rome's Olympic Stadium on December 22.

Primera Liga Sociedad complete unbeaten year

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Sociedad extended their lead to seven points at the top of the Spanish First Division on Sunday, after Valencia lost 1-0 at home to Deportivo La Coruna, but the Basques had to work hard for their 3-1 victory at Recreativo Huelva.

Recreativo drew first blood when Miguel Angel Espinola and Emilio Viguiera worked together to provide the service for Raul Molina, whose clinical finish from close range earned him his sixth goal of the season.

However, it took Real only two minutes to respond to the bottom club's impertinence, with Nihat Kahveci equalising from Darko Kovacevic's long-range pass.

The Turkish international got his second 11 minutes into the second half after he ran from midfield and then put the ball through the legs of Recreativo goalkeeper Manuel Alumina.

Real had to survive the final 21 minutes with 10 men after Kovacevic got his second yellow card but they added to their advantage two minutes into injury time when Alberto Lorente fired home a cross from Russian midfielder Dimitri Khokhlov.

The San Sebastian side will finish the year with an unbeaten record and have 35 points from their 15 games.

"They made life difficult for us and state of the pitch made playing our type of football very difficult," said Real coach Reynald Denoueix.

TOP SCORERS

Leading scorers in the Spanish league after the weekend's matches:

- 11 - Roy Makaay (Deportivo La Coruna)
9 - Patrick Kluivert (Barcelona), Darko Kovacevic (Real Sociedad)
8 - Nihat Kahveci (Real Sociedad), Walter Pandiani (Real Mallorca), Ismael Urzaiz (Athletic Bilbao)
7 - Julio Alvarez (Rayo Vallecano), Raul Gonzalez (Real Madrid)
6 - John Carew (Valencia), Fernando Torres (Atletico Madrid), Raul Molina (Recreativo Huelva)
5 - Alfonso Perez (Real Betis), Luis Enrique Martinez (Barcelona), Samuel Eto'o (Real Mallorca), Luis Figo (Real Madrid), Javi Guerrero (Racing Santander), Ronaldo (Real Madrid)

"I don't want to use the phrase 'fair' in relation to the outcome of this game but the result is there and nothing can change that," added the Frenchman, recognising that Recreativo played much better than their league position or the result would suggest.

"But I am very happy that we have 35 points and, although I'm already now thinking about the next game against Malaga, my chocolates over Christmas will taste very sweet."

Valencia lost ground on Sociedad but stay in second with 28 points after their defeat by Deportivo.

The only goal of the game fell to

the Spanish First Division's leading scorer Roy Makaay, who took his total to 11 after 21 minutes by leaping on a loose ball and catching Valencia goalkeeper Andres Polap out of position.

The reigning Spanish champions will be regretting their myriad of squandered chances, with John Carew and Pablo Aimar being particularly at fault.

Under-fire coach Louis van Gaal remains at the helm of Barcelona, at least for the moment, after the Catalans' emphatic 4-0 victory at Real Mallorca on Saturday.

Patrick Kluivert scored his second hat-trick of the season as Barca won their first game in six outings, but their hapless hosts were down to nine men after 32 minutes following the dismissals of Alvaro Novo and Samuel Eto'o.

"The result was a surprise for me because this is only the third time in the last ten years that we have won in Mallorca. But they made it easy for us," said van Gaal.

Real Madrid's centenary year ended on a high note when they staged a stunning second half fight back to win 3-2 at Malaga, after being two goals down at half-time.

The European and world champions remain in third with 27 points but have a game in hand over the rest of the championship challengers.

Kiki Musampa and Dely Valdes scored for Malaga before Real woke up after the break and got goals from Zinedine Zidane, Raul Gonzalez and Luis Figo.

Real Betis can thank Assuncao for delivering the winner in their 2-1 win over Osasuna on Sunday.

The Brazilian midfielder found the net with one of his trademark thunderbolt free kicks two minutes into injury time, to end Osasuna's five game unbeaten run.

Betis looked to have the game well under control after Alfonso Perez's early goal, despite the sending off of Brazilian World Cup winner Denilson midway through the second half.

However, the Andalusian side gifted an equaliser to Osasuna six minutes from time when Betis goalie Toni Prats could only parry away an Ivan Rosado shot, who then nipped in to head the Pamplona side briefly back into the game.

Relegation-threatened Espanyol gave former Spanish coach Javier Clemente a winning start to his reign at the club, their third coach of the season.

Savo Milosevic's goal after seven minutes was enough for the Barcelona-based club to grind out a 1-0 victory over Valladolid, who ended the game with just nine men after Alberto Marcos and Juan Manuel Pena were shown red cards.

TOP SIX

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

Table with 6 columns: Team, Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points. Rows include Sociedad, Valencia, Real, Celta, Betis, and Deportivo.

Serie A Milan giants neck to neck

Football

AFP, Milan

League leaders AC Milan held on to top spot in Italy despite being held to a 0-0 draw at home to Brescia on Sunday.

The closest Milan came to breaking the deadlock was when Andrea Pirlo's curling free-kick struck the upright in the first-half.

And Brescia could have come away with a memorable victory had former Italy international Roberto Baggio's close-range right-footer not been blocked by the outstretched leg of Brazilian goalkeeper Dida.

Veteran defender Paolo Maldini slammed the state of the San Siro pitch which prevented Milan from playing their usual slick passing game.

"It's pointless buying players of great quality and asking them to play on a pitch like this," he said. "Everything that we managed to create was lost because of the poor surface."

Brescia coach Carlo Mazzone agreed with the Milan captain.

"It's the worst pitch in Italy," he said. "Milan were forced to hit a lot of high balls rather than play on the ground, and that made it easier for us."

Inter Milan moved up to second, level on points with arch rivals Milan but behind them on goal difference, after securing a hard-fought 2-1 win at Parma.

Luigi Di Biagio gave Inter a half-time lead before Adrian Mutu level-

elled the scores with his seventh goal of the season.

Alvaro Recoba ensured all three points for Hector Cuper's men by converting a penalty 14 minutes from time when Turkey international Emre Belozoglu was brought down by Antonio Benarrivo.

TOP SCORERS

Leading scorers in the Italian football league after the weekend's matches:

- 12 - Christian Vieri (Inter Milan)
10 - Francesco Totti (AS Roma)
9 - Alessandro Del Piero (Juventus), Claudio Lopez (Lazio)
8 - Julio Cruz (Bologna), Filippo Inzaghi (AC Milan), Adriano (Parma), Antonio Di Natale (Empoli)
7 - Adrian Mutu (Parma)
6 - Bernardo Corradi (Lazio), Roberto Baggio (Brescia), Andrea Pirlo (AC Milan)

Lazio blew the chance to take first place after drawing 1-1 at home to Bologna.

Bologna spurned several good opportunities at the Stadio Olimpico before Lazio eventually took the lead in first-half stoppage-time.

Yugoslav midfielder Dejan Stankovic unlocked the visitors' defence with a superbly-timed pass for Claudio Lopez to run onto, and the Argentine marksman coolly stroked the ball past Gianluca Pagliuca for his ninth goal of the season.

But Cristian Zaccardo levelled the scores for Bologna in the 65th minute, cashing in on Guseppe

Favalli's weak clearance.

Bologna held on to steal a point they richly deserved despite the late dismissal of midfielder Carlo Nervo.

Lazio's draw saw them drop a place to third.

Chiervo rose to fourth thanks to a comfortable 2-0 win over bottom club Como.

Headers from Nicola Legrottaglie and Sergio Pellissier secured a valuable win for Luigi Del Neri's men who finished fifth last season in their first season in the top flight.

Reigning champions Juventus bounced back after back-to-back defeats by winning 1-0 at Perugia. Argentine wing-back Mauro Camoranesi scored the winner in stoppage-time, rifling home from 12 yards with a powerful right-foot shot.

Perugia's colourful coach Serse Cosmi had to be restrained after the match when he tried to remonstrate with referee Luca Palanca who he thought was favouring Juventus.

"I have every reason to be disappointed," said an angry Cosmi after the narrow defeat in Umbria.

"At the end of the game I asked the referee to explain himself. 'We leave here with our heads held high, which is more than can be said of some others.'

"I did not see a clever Juventus but only a Perugia team that played better and fairly. 'Camoranesi's goal was their only moment.' In Sunday's other matches Atalanta threw away a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 at home to Empoli, while Reggina came back from being a goal down to beat Piacenza 3-1.

On Saturday Walter Samuel struck a 46th-minute goal to give AS Roma a 1-0 win at Torino, a victory which moved Fabio Capello's team into eighth place in Serie A.

Roma, the 2001 champions, were indebted to goalkeeper Ivan Pelizzoli who saved a Christian Lucarelli penalty in the 10th minute of the match.

In Saturday's other match, a 24th minute goal from Giampiero Pinzi gave Udinese a spirited 1-0 win at Modena and moved Luciano Spalletti's men up to a respectable seventh.

Victory for Udinese was effectively their second triumph in two days.

On Friday the northern club were awarded all three points following the abandonment of Wednesday's fiery clash at bottom club Como.

Udinese were leading the mid-week match 1-0 when play was brought to a halt as Como fans, incensed by several refereeing decisions which went against their team including three penalties awarded to Udinese (two missed, one converted), tried to invade the pitch.

TOP SIX

Standings in the Italian championship after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Table with 6 columns: Team, Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points. Rows include Milan, Inter, Lazio, Chievo, Juventus, and Bologna.

Coaches' Christmas carol!

Football

AFP, Paris

What do you buy the under-pressure football coach who has nothing but problems this Christmas?

Breathing space, that's what. With expectations high and performances poor, the likes of Louis van Gaal and Terry Venables have been under the cosh and nowhere has the festive spirit been more scarce than at the Nou Camp where Barcelona coach Van Gaal has been walking a tightrope.

Come Saturday night, however, a 4-0 win at Real Mallorca had eased the strain and by Sunday, the Dutchman was being told his job was safe. "Van Gaal continues as coach," said Barca vice-president Sixte Cambra. "But we will be looking at things game-to-game - it's very important to keep winning."

Saturday's win moved Barca up from an embarrassing 13th place to a slightly more comfortable 10th and

Van Gaal has been a picture of defiance.

"To resign is not a solution. The most important thing is that there is unity between the players and the coach and I have the impression that they are with me," said Van Gaal.

Barcelona have not finished in the lower half of the Spanish First Division since 1942 and despite their miserable domestic form, they have 10 consecutive victories in the Champions League to equal the record set by Milan in the 1992-93 season.

In England, former Barca coach Terry Venables has been battling similar voices of discontent.

A 3-0 win at Bolton could not have come at a better time for a Leeds team which had been knocked out of the UEFA Cup and were hovering just five places off the foot of the Premiership.

All this from a team who had been Champions League semi-finalists two years ago. "I am disappointed with where we are in the league. I felt that with the players we had I could get the

best out of them and I thought we would be in a much better position," said Venables, a former England national coach.

Sadly for 'El Tel' the knives were being sharpened again on Saturday when a 1-1 draw at home to Southampton sent them back to fifth from bottom, five points off the relegation places.

Liverpool too have been enduring a miserable run. "The goalless draw in Sunday's Merseyside derby with Everton meant they had taken just two points out of 21 - the club's worst league run for 49 years.

However, they are fifth in the Premiership, seven points behind leaders Arsenal.

Coach Gerard Houllier too found himself at the centre of speculation over his job with the rumour mill insisting that the Frenchman was to be dropped on health grounds and replaced by Celtic's Martin O'Neill.

Houllier had life-saving heart surgery last year and has recently had fresh hospital tests. But Liverpool spokesman Ian Cotton said: "Gerard has a contract

until 2005 and we have no reason to believe he won't see that through.

"He's fit and fine and this speculation about Martin O'Neill is absolute rubbish."

Houllier's countryman Luis Fernandez has been cutting a defiant figure despite his Paris Saint Germain side - with Brazilian star Ronaldinho in their ranks - stumbling in the French championship.

"I will fight to the end. I would like to see everyone pulling in the same direction. I have six months to get good results and afterwards we shall see," said Fernandez.

"If I am not able to achieve this, I'll go." As it happened, on the eve of the weekend game with Bordeaux, he was told that his job is safe until the end of the season.

But the match ended 1-1, Ronaldinho missed his second penalty in three games and to make matters worse, PSG's bitter rivals Marseille stood on top of the table, seven points ahead of the capital city side who are marooned in eighth place.

Premiership MU brought down to earth

Football

AFP, London

Dee Garry Filtrcroft's first-half strike gave Blackburn Rovers an unlikely 1-0 victory over Manchester United at Ewood Park on Sunday and so ended the visitors' eight-game winning streak.

Blackburn's win was all the more impressive as new signing, Turkey striker Hakan Sukur, was ruled out Friday with a broken leg and is now set to be sidelined for eight weeks.

The result left United in third place in the English Premiership, four points behind leaders and reigning champions Arsenal, while Blackburn moved up into ninth.

Later Sunday, Liverpool stopped the rot after a run of four straight league defeats with a goalless draw in the Merseyside derby against Everton at Anfield.

The result saw high-flyers Everton move up into fourth position and kept them a place ahead of arch-rivals Liverpool who have now taken just two points from a possible 21 - their worst run in the league for 49 years.

It might have been an even better result for Everton who saw teenage striking sensation Wayne Rooney hit the crossbar in the second half.

United manager Alex Ferguson told Sky Sports after his side's defeat: "We had four or five great chances in the first half but when they didn't go in you feel it's not going to be your day and I felt that."

"We've always had great resilience but today it just wasn't our day." But Ferguson was not too downhearted.

"The important thing about the championship is that you've got to reach New Year in a challenging position and that's why it is important to be in the top three."

Rovers boss Graeme Souness said: "I'm obviously delighted. We worked very hard today. You're never going to get an easy game against United."

"We showed them too much respect to start with and were apprehensive. But we got amongst them in the second half. This is a huge result for us."

And goalscorer Filtrcroft, formerly of Manchester City, added: "It was nice to get one. When I walked into the car park I heard chants of 'City reject' so it was nice to score."

At Anfield, Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier said: "At least we kept a clean sheet," but he admitted his team were still suffering from a "lack of confidence" despite their dramatic midweek 4-3 League Cup win over Aston Villa.

"We've got to keep our heads up. It's the nature of true champions that you have to overcome these situations," added Houllier, who also said Steven Gerrard might be fined for his two-footed challenge on Everton's Gary Naysmith towards the end of the match.

Everton boss David Moyes was happy with a draw. "It was a hard fought point and a good point for us," he said.

Earlier, not even the return of captain Roy Keane, a second-half substitute, in his first match since being ruled out in August with a hip injury, could inspire a United revival.

And nor could England captain David Beckham, who came off the bench in the 71st minute after Ryan Giggs had been marked out of the game by Rovers' Australian defender Lucas Neill.

Ferguson's side dominated the first half but fell behind to a goal five minutes before the break.

Damien Duff's free-kick from the right was headed back across goal by defender Martin Taylor and midfielder Filtrcroft's powerful shot went through the gap between goalkeeper Fabien Barthez and the near post.

It was the first goal United had conceded in over eight hours of football and Ferguson said: "It was a soft goal and all they (Blackburn) needed to do in the second-half was counter-attack."

In the 59th minute Ferguson sent on controversial Republic of Ireland midfielder Keane in place of Uruguay striker Diego Forlan.

But United should have levelled in the 65th minute when striker Ruud van Nistelrooy was played in by England midfielder Paul Scholes.

The Dutch forward was left one-on-one with Blackburn keeper Brad Friedel but, after the American forced him wide, Van Nistelrooy steered his shot wide.

Both Cole and Yorke missed guilt-edged chances to seal the match late on and Blackburn midfielder Tugay went desperately close with a 90th minute free-kick from the edge of the box that whistled past Barthez's post with the France keeper left standing.

At Anfield, Liverpool had the first chance to go ahead when John Arne Riise saw his 25-yard eighth minute volley well saved by Everton keeper Richard Wright.

Everton too had their opportunities, Canada international Thomas Radzinski shooting wide in the 36th minute when unmarked at the back post after good work by David Weir.

Houllier made a double change in the 52nd minute with Salif Diao and Djimi Traore being replaced by Vladimir Smicer and Emile Heskey. Moyes responded three minutes later by taking off Radzinski and replacing him with 17-year-old Rooney.

England forward Heskey was left one-on-one with Wright on the hour mark but a poor first touch let him down.

And Rooney came even closer to scoring in the 74th minute when, after a neat turn on the edge of the box, his shot was deflected onto the crossbar by Stephane Henchoz's block.

TOP SIX

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

Table with 6 columns: Team, Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points. Rows include Arsenal, Chelsea, Man Utd, Everton, Liverpool, and Newcastle.

Matthaeus new Partizan coach

AFP, Belgrade

Former German international Lothar Matthaeus has been named as the new coach of Yugoslavian league leaders Partizan Belgrade, the club announced on its website on Monday.

Matthaeus signed an 18-month deal worth 750,000 euros according to German press reports.

Defending champions Partizan were forced into seeking a replacement when longtime trainer Ljubisa Tumbakovic stepped down on Wednesday claiming he was exhausted.

Matthaeus, who stopped playing in 2001, made 150 appearances for the German national team. He coached Rapid Vienna in Austria in the 2001-02 season.

Scottish Premiership Rangers clear atop

AFP, Glasgow

Rangers moved four points clear at the top of the Scottish Premier League with a 2-1 victory away to Partick Thistle at Firhill on Sunday.

But Alex McLeish's men had to come from 1-0 down, scoring twice inside the final 20 minutes through Michael Mols and Ronald de Boer after Alex Burns had opened the scoring for Partick in the seventh minute.

The match turned after Mols 70th minute equaliser when Partick's Gerry Britton was shown a straight red card after thrusting his arm into Kevin Muscat's face although the Rangers man was not in his field of vision at the time.

Earlier, Partick took the lead thanks to Burns' sixth goal in the last three home games.

Kenny Milne's centre found Burns who beat Stefan Klos in the Rangers' goal with a low shot.

It took Alex McLeish's men over an hour to equalise but they eventually levelled in the 70th minute when, after Peter Lovenkrands' shot had been parried, Mols followed up to score.