

Leaving a great Lazio

Football

REUTERS, Rome

Outgoing Lazio President Sergio Cragnotti is confident he is bequeathing a mighty soccer force, despite the financial troubles his successor may also inherit.

The Italian tycoon, who held the Serie A trophy aloft two years ago, finally threw in the towel late on Monday, saying he would resign once new board members were elected.

"Life is made up of cycles and this cycle is ending. Although this Christmas will be different from the others, I have a tranquil soul because I've done a lot for this club," the 62-year-old told daily La Gazzetta dello Sport on Tuesday.

"I'm happy to be leaving behind a great Lazio."

The Rome-based club are unbeaten in 14 league games since an opening day defeat to Chievo and are in third place, just one point behind AC Milan and Inter.

But off the pitch, life is more problematic. Cragnotti put the club up for sale last month, after his food company Cirio, which holds a 51 percent stake, defaulted on more than one billion euros of bonds.

A study by financial newspaper Il Sole 24 Ore showed Lazio finished last season with 487.4 million euros (\$500.1 million) of debt, up 46 percent from the previous season.

Turnover dropped 12 percent and losses soared 57 percent to 139.8 million euros.



SERGIO CRAGNOTTI

wanted four months of unpaid wages -- about 720,000 euros -- by January 7 or he would be free to leave.

Coach Roberto Mancini had warm words on Tuesday for both Cragnotti and the footballers' patience.

"The players' behaviour has been magnificent given this particularly difficult moment," he told Gazzetta dello Sport.

"And when the president actually leaves, it will obviously be extremely

painful. We all owe him a lot. And I think he made his decision for the good of the club," Mancini said.

Cragnotti's resignation is widely expected to be formalised at a Lazio board meeting on January 3.

After taking over in 1992, Cragnotti built Lazio up from a frustratingly under-achieving club into a major force in the European game and he was the first Italian soccer president to float a club on the stock exchange.

Lazio moved up the ranks of the Italian elite -- fifth in 1993, fourth in 1994, second in 1995, third in 1996, fourth in 1997, seventh in 1998 and second by just a single point in 1999.

Cragnotti invested heavily to create a title-winning side for his Swedish coach Sven Goran Eriksson clinching the championship on the final day of the 1999-2000 season -- Lazio's first scudetto in 26 years.

"Two magic moments in my life -- winning the scudetto and our victory over Manchester United," Cragnotti reminisced to the Italian media. Lazio scored a 1-0 win over the English giants in the European Super Cup in 1999.

But Cragnotti's relationship with Lazio was also fraught at times. He boycotted games at the Olympic Stadium and threatened to quit on several occasions after the club had been fined for racist chants and banners inside the stadium.

Bets are now on who will take over the Lazio reins.

"I hope whoever my successors are, they will have the same good fortune that we had this year," Cragnotti said.



STELLA HUGHES

The luckiest lady!

Football

INTERNET, Barcelona

Barcelona FC - the legendary Catalan club - has signed up a 64-year-old ex-dinner lady from Greater Manchester.

Stella Hughes became a lifetime member of the Catalan giants after unwittingly becoming the 10 millionth visitor to the club's Nou Camp stadium.

She had bought a ticket to the ground during a day trip to the city with her husband.

She can now attend Barcelona games anywhere in the world as a guest of the club - despite admitting to disliking the beautiful game.

Since her stroke of luck, Stella has become a national figure in Spain, appearing in national newspapers and on television.

She was presented with a signed shirt and given a VIP guide of the ground.

And her name has now been added to the club's pantheon of big stars, such as Rivaldo and Kluivert.

She said: "I treated me like royalty and said you're a member of this football team for life."

"And I thought, 'Why me?' - it didn't really sink in."

Her husband Neville - a Manchester United fan - admits to mixed feelings.

He said: "I'm gutted - I'm the football fan and the Red and she gets the ticket. It's terrible."

But Stella has now started swooning up on Spanish football and Barca's deadly rivals Real Madrid in particular.

She added: "I've got a message for Ronaldo (Real's new signing) - 'Watch out, because Stella's about!'"

Year of racism

Football

INTERNET

Sadly, Emile Heskey is no stranger to racist chants.

And sadly, if we cast a quick glance over the latest spate of investigations carried out by Uefa into racial abuse, Eastern European club sides feature with alarming frequency.

Indeed, they feature too frequently for "coincidence" theories to be bandied about.

Heskey was again subjected to mindless racial abuse, this time from Slovakia fans, who saw their team defeated 2-1 by England.

It is testament to the bustling striker's strength of character that he did not let the monkey noises directed at him detract from his performance for his country.

But it can't be easy for the Liverpool forward to always display such sang-froid.

In March 2000, Heskey suffered a verbal and physical battering during an England Under-21s victory over Yugoslavia in Barcelona.

On that occasion, the striker also claimed he was spat at.

The football anti-racist group, Kick It Out, immediately called for any Yugoslav player who spat at Heskey to be banned from European games by Uefa and the Yugoslav football authorities to punish any fans guilty of racial abuse.

At the time, the Kick It Out spokesman Piara Powar noted: "Some of the most recent cases of racial abuse have happened in the context of European club football."

"Lucas Radebe, of Leeds United, suffered when they played Slavia Prague, while Andy Cole and Dwight Yorke were targeted when Manchester United faced Fiorentina.

"However, we are concerned that historically Uefa has not taken any action. There has been a wall of silence."

That wall of silence has since

been dismantled brick by brick as Uefa has had to address the increase in racism in football across Europe. (Incidentally, Italian fans turned on Heskey in November of the same year.)

One of the most high-profile cases which brought matters to a head involved Sinisa Mihajlovic of Yugoslavia and then Lazio and Arsenal midfielder Patrick Vieira.

Mihajlovic was handed a two-match ban by Uefa after admitting to insulting Vieira in reference to his colour, but he denied the remarks were meant to be racist.

A hollow public apology also followed.

The Mihajlovic incident came just weeks after Leicester City's black players were on the receiving end of constant abuse from Red Star Belgrade fans during a Uefa Cup tie.

Fast-forward two years and FK Sarid, of Yugoslavia, were fined £10,799 for the racist behaviour of their spectators towards Ipswich players.

CSKA Sofia may still be punished following the evidence of racial abuse during their game with Blackburn Rovers.

And while Hajduk Split were cleared of any charges, Fulham felt compelled to make an official complaint after their recent Uefa Cup tie with the Croatian side.

While it would be foolish to suggest that racism in football is the exclusive preserve of Eastern Europe - it quite obviously is not following recent events in Holland, Italy, England, Spain, Germany - it is without question an issue which must be confronted.

The extreme right-wing element, which is often behind racist chants at football matches in Italy and Holland, cannot be attributed as the cause in the Eastern Europe, where many countries are experiencing Western-style democracy for the first time.

So it is more a sociological and cultural issue. The simple fact is that there are few black people, let alone black footballers, in those countries under the spotlight.

And given that countries like Yugoslavia and Croatia have other major issues to deal with - improving the lot of their citizens politically and economically for a start - means a drive for greater racial tolerance is unlikely to be high on the agenda.

This does not make the racist chants excusable, and for some it is unlikely to make the matter any more understandable.

But unless there is a massive change in the demographics of Eastern Europe or a multi-million pound Uefa initiative to re-educate football fans in the offending countries, the problem will remain.

Cisse going to MU?

INTERNET

Auxerre striker Djibril Cisse has fuelled speculation he is set for a move to Old Trafford by reportedly watching Manchester United's defeat to Blackburn.

The Daily Express newspaper claimed the highly-rated 21-year-old striker was invited to the game by compatriot Laurent Blanc.

The veteran French defender is believed to be using his influence to try to smooth the way for a deal with former club Auxerre and United.

Sir Alex Ferguson has been linked with Cisse in the past and the Old Trafford club are said to be monitoring him and team-mate Philippe Mexes.

Auxerre boss Guy Roux accepts Cisse will eventually move on, but any deal is unlikely to go through until the summer with the French team still in the Uefa Cup.

Ferguson is keen to strengthen his striking options when the transfer window reopens next week and is aware of Arsenal's and Liverpool's interest in Cisse.

Brazil star Ronaldinho, who is available at cash-strapped Paris St Germain and Sunderland youngster David Bellion are also possible targets.

Players back Van Gaal

Football

REUTERS, Barcelona

Barcelona defender Carles Puyol says that his team mates are fully behind the club's decision to retain Louis van Gaal as coach.

"It was the right decision," Puyol told Barcelona-based sports daily Mundo Deportivo on Tuesday. "All the players support the boss and I believe it is the best way forward for the club."

Before last weekend's league match against Real Mallorca Van Gaal had again under intense pressure following a dismal run of domestic results.

The Catalan press had speculated that the Dutchman would be fired unless the team won the match in Mallorca and would almost certainly be replaced by Argentine coach Carlos Bianchi, who they said was waiting in the wings.

But a comfortable 4-0 win over the islanders, who played with nine

men for the last hour of the game after to two first-half sendings off, eased the pressure on Van Gaal and persuaded the club to confirm him in his post.

Bianchi has since decided to return to Boca Juniors, although he accepted the offer only after Barcelona reaffirmed their faith in Van Gaal.



LOUIS VAN GAAL

Barcelona have announced that they are looking into the possibility of strengthening their squad with new signings when the transfer window opens on January 1.

Van Gaal could be in the hunt for a striker to partner Patrick Kluivert up front and a left back to bolster an injury-plagued defence.

The Catalan press have speculated that Chelsea's Dutch centre-forward Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink is top of the club's target list.

Puyol, however, said he believed the club already had the players to resolve the crisis.

"If the coach asks for some new players and the directors agree then they will be welcome, but I believe in the squad we have and think we can turn things round ourselves."

Following Saturday's win in Mallorca, Barcelona moved up to 10th place in the Spanish First Division, but they are still 16 points behind leaders Real Sociedad.

Their next game is at home to bottom club Recreativo Huelva on the weekend of January 4-5.

Rooney makes 'em happy

Football

INTERNET

Wayne Rooney has delighted Everton's fans by at last finalising his new contract.

The 17-year-old forward has been caught in the centre of a wrangle between his former agent and new representatives, and delayed signing a professional deal.

He has already missed out on more than £60,000 in wages as he is still on his £90-a-week YTS money rather than the £6,000 a week Everton will initially pay him.

But, more importantly, it also meant that Rooney could be poached by other clubs. Now, though, a deal has been agreed and drawn up, and he will sign as soon as there is a gap in the Christmas programme.

A spokesman for the club insisted yesterday: "It is all now agreed and sorted out. The lad is trying to play fair by the people around him, but we anticipate that he could sign the contract early in the New Year."

Goodison manager David Moyes was in the transfer market this week, signing former Spurs keeper Espen Baardsen on a short-term contract.

Baardsen will sign for a month after being released by Watford, but is hoping he can earn a longer deal.



WAYNE ROONEY

Moyes is negotiating to sign Egyptian international Ibrahim Said, but said yesterday he has yet to tie up the deal.

Everton will also offer Joseph Yobo a new contract to keep him away from a transfer-window raid by Newcastle. The Nigerian's wages could be pushed up to £28,000 a week.

Meanwhile, French World Cup winner Christophe Dugarry is set to sign for Birmingham in a deal worth around £4million if he keeps them in the Premiership.

Dugarry has discussed a free-transfer switch from Bordeaux and is close to sealing the move, which will be for six months with a two-year contract should City stay up.

Hitzfeld's great escape!

Football

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich's victory over Bundesliga champions Borussia Dortmund last month may well have saved Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld his job, Bayern's commercial manager Uli Hoeness said on Tuesday.

"If we had lost, it must have been possible to have had a talk with him, asking how do we continue?" Hoeness said in an interview with Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper.

Hitzfeld, who steered Bayern to their fourth European Cup success in 2001, has had a difficult past 12

months. Bayern ended last season with no trophy for the first time since 1985. This season, the club was knocked out of the Champions League in the first group stage, finishing bottom of their group with just two points from their six games.

Hitzfeld, who has had four seasons in charge of Bayern, was under mounting pressure. However, Bayern defeated their rivals 2-1 and now stand six points clear of Dortmund and Werder Bremen at the winter break. Some commentators are even saying the title chase has become boring.

Hoeness said Bayern could rescue their season by extending their Bundesliga title-winning record to 18 and by reaching the final of the German Cup. Bayern

are through to the quarter-finals. "That could make something respectable out of the season," Hoeness said.

Hoeness also reconfirmed Bayern's interest in German striker Miroslav Klose, whom Kaiserslautern appear likely to sell to avoid financial collapse. Bayern, Dortmund, Hertha Berlin and several top European clubs have also expressed interest.

However, Hoeness said Bayern would not be prepared to enter a prolonged bidding war for the 24-year-old who helped Germany reach this year's World Cup final with five goals in the tournament.

"If the amount is well above 5 million euros (\$5.13 million) then Bayern will walk away from the business," Hoeness said.

Del Bosque's money on old horses

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Vicente del Bosque is banking on the older players in his squad to help the European champions maintain the success they have enjoyed in recent years.

"The players that are around 30 years old are possibly more useful than the youngsters," Del Bosque told Spanish news agency Europa Press.

"The fact that they are close to the end of their careers makes them more demanding of themselves. (Luis Figo, Roberto Carlos, Zizou (Zinedine Zidane) will all want to finish their sporting careers on a high."

Zidane and Figo both turned 30 this year, Brazilian defender Roberto Carlos celebrates his 30th birthday next April, while centre-back Fernando Hierro is 34.

The Real coach admitted that despite the strength of his squad, which also includes younger players of the calibre of Ronaldo and Raul, the club faces a tough task in reproducing the success of recent seasons.

"The fact that Real have won the European Cup for three out of the last five seasons is extraordinary," he said. "It would be difficult enough for any club to repeat the feat, let alone us."

But Del Bosque said that despite his side's poor start to the second



ROBERTO CARLOS

phase of this season's Champions League they were still well placed to win a trophy this term.

"The two games against Borussia (Dortmund) will decide the qualification the Champions League, while in the Spanish league we aren't badly placed."

"We are at roughly the same sort of level as other teams that are playing in the Champions League and better placed than say Barcelona."

Del Bosque's side have taken just one point from their first two second phase games and lie bottom of group C which is headed by AC Milan. They play second-placed Borussia in back-to-back games when the competition resumes in mid-February.

Real are in third spot in the Spanish First Division, eight points behind unbeaten leaders Real Sociedad, but with a game in hand.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	39 Comedian	3 Show-room	25 Emanation
1 Hula	39 Taylor sample	26 Grand scale	
4 Parisian, e.g.	40 Deltail, lor short	4 Auslere	27 Prima donna
8 Fence upright	41 Vintage calculator?	5 Doggle	28 Particular
12 "Hooray, Jose!"	45 React in horror	6 Brian of rock	29 Juice
13 Stage statuary	48 Half-slip's other half?	7 Bitterly distrustful	32 Sondeheim creation
14 Footproof	50 Shattered	8 Sacred recitation	33 Hall a 1960s
15 Its capital is Yaounde	51 Help hoods	9 "— Gang"	35 Dronet
17 Saharan	52 Guys	10 Lanka lead-in	36 Offer unwanted
18 O. Henry-esque	53 Fibber	11 Bill's co-adventurer	38 First anniversary gift
19 Poorly	54 Actress Kay	16 Play charades	39 Oriental noodles
21 Essen expletive	55 Foundation	20 Do brick-work	42 Barber-shop prop
22 Fun's prop	23 Observant one	23 Observant one	43 Peter Fonda role
26 Pronouncement	24 Peregrinate	24 Peregrinate	44 E-mail
29 Festive	2 Winglike	25 Solution time: 25 mins.	45 "Sleepy Time —"
30 Anybody		THIS PISA GIO	46 Will Smith biopic
31 Actor Brad		AONE EDEN RAP	47 Vast expanse
32 — de mer		CROSI TOWN GRE	49 Honest politician
33 Bartlett or Bosc		KARATE EBSEN	
34 "— had it!"		MW TEXAS	
35 Embrace		MAGE HAY ABLE	
36 Vibe, good or bad		GRB ERE ATIL	
37 Collegian's territory		PEON ADS BRIM	
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CRYPTOQUIP

K G D Z S F S Z N Q A X S A Q D G Z
 G O O W Q Y W Q Q R Q
 I A S Y Q R R K Z N X G Y O S A H
 K O ' R R K D I F H O S S N A G O K Z N
 Yesterday's Cryptoquip: DOCTORS WHO STUDY ELEPHANT SKIN PROBLEMS OUGHT TO BE KNOWN AS PACHYDERMATOLOGISTS.
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: Z equals N
 The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.