

Lazio flying high

REUTERS, Rome



Lazio moved joint-top of Serie A with a 3-1 home win over Inter Milan on Friday which plunged the champions and coach Rafael Benitez into a fresh crisis after the worst of their problems seemed to have passed.

Giuseppe Biava bundled the ball home midway through the first half and Argentine forward Mauro Zarate struck with a lob early in the second period to show that the early season form of last term's relegation candidates was no false dawn.

The visitors pulled a goal back through ex-Lazio forward Goran Pandev after a couple of rebounds but in-form Brazilian Hernanes sealed victory in style with a minute remaining.

"It was the best Lazio of the season," playmaker Hernanes, who joined the club before the start of the campaign from Sao Paulo, told reporters.

"I've been trying for a bit to have a game like this with a goal and an assist. We're on the right path and won't give up," added Hernanes who played the ball through for Zarate's goal.

A recent wobble by Lazio had pundits suggesting their resurgence was over but a confident performance against the treble winners will have tongues wagging again about whether Edy Reja's Rome-based side can last the pace in the title battle.

The match was Inter's last in Serie A this year ahead of their participation in the Club World Cup and the pressure is back on Benitez after wins against Twente Enschede and Parma had seemed to secured his position after a shaky spell.

Injury-hit Inter, who saw Dejan Stankovic limp off in the first half and were also without suspended top scorer Samuel Eto'o, played youth team defender Felice Natalino at right back while midfielder Sulley Muntari returned from a layoff.

They again lacked fluency and the only bright spot was the previously struggling Pandev breaking his season's duck as the boos rang out around the half-full Stadio Olimpico.

Inter's dearth of attacking options without Eto'o and with Diego Milito only just back in training after injury means a move in the January transfer market for a striker is paramount.



PHOTO: AFP

Lazio midfielder Anderson Hernanes is ecstatic after scoring the third goal against Inter Milan during their Serie A encounter in Rome's Olympic Stadium on Friday.

MU match called off

AFP, London

Manchester United's bid to maintain their position on the top of the Premier League with victory at Blackpool on Saturday has been scuppered by the freezing temperatures in England.

United are two points clear of second placed Chelsea but they may lose first place after their game was postponed as a result of the snow that has ravaged most of the country.

Blackpool chiefs confirmed that the match would become the first top-flight fixture to be postponed this weekend due to a frozen pitch at Bloomfield Road despite the club's use of protective covers and hot-air blowers.

Temperatures had dipped below minus eight in Blackpool and the match was officially called off after referee Peter Walton carried out an inspection on Friday.

A statement on the club's website read: "Mr Walton expressed concern that the severely affected areas of the playing surface would not thaw sufficiently for the game to be completed."

New deals for L'pool kids

AFP, London

Liverpool youngsters Daniel Pacheco and Martin Kelly were given new long-term contracts with the Premier League club on Friday.

Spanish forward Pacheco, 19, signed a two-year contract extension which keeps him at Anfield until June 2014, while England Under-21 defender Kelly, 20, agreed a three-year extension which will also see him remain on Merseyside until 2014.

Pacheco has featured just once as a substitute for Roy Hodgson's team so far this season, but Kelly has been more heavily involved, starting two league games and eight Europa League ties.

Robbie exit on the cards

AFP, London

Tottenham boss Harry Redknapp will allow Republic of Ireland captain Robbie Keane to leave White Hart Lane in the January transfer window.

The 30-year-old, who was loaned out to Celtic for the second half of last season, has started just two games this campaign with Peter Crouch, Roman Pavlyuchenko and Jermain Defoe all first choices.

"I think he'd like to move - he wants to play," said Redknapp.

"He's not used to not playing. All his career, he's played and been a big player and he wants to play. He could sit here and take his wages, but that's not him."

"He wants to play football. He trains hard, works hard every day, he's shown a great attitude."

"And probably the hardest decision I had to make was last week: I couldn't get him on the bench."

Snub shocks US media

Football

AFP, New York

American media reacted Friday with shock to FIFA's decision to snub a US bid for the 2022 World Cup in favor of Qatar, some dubbing the move a "money grab" from a nation rich in oil and natural gas.

"Qatar? Really? Has the FIFA cartel seriously lost all of its soul? Is it only about the dirty oil money? Does it really care about growing the game? Or lining its pockets?" asked Seattle Times columnist Steve Kelley.

"This decision is strictly a money grab. All this announcement does is fuel the already-existing suspicions of collusion that have haunted the entire bid process."

Comments about Qatar's extreme heat and lowly football status, 113th in the FIFA rankings, were common.

"It's not like Qatar has been growing a domestic league the way the United States has," Kelley said. "There's not going to be a headline: 'Messi Leaves Barca for Doha Oil Kings.'"

"Want to know what 50 degrees Celsius feels like? Turn your oven to bake and stick your head in it for about 10 seconds. Don't worry. It's a dry heat."

"Besides, FIFA has been assured that all of the stadiums in Qatar will be air-conditioned. Air-conditioned? Those stadiums better be refrigerated. They better have the AC cranked to the

Frozen Tundra setting."

The New York Times summed up Qatar with the headline "It's Small, It's Hot and It Has a Lot of Money."

"This is definitely shocking and in many ways unfortunate," said Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter, whose city was with Seattle and the New York area among 18 finalists for 12 match sites had the US bid won.

"You can't help but feel it was all about money," American defender Danny Califf of the MLS Philadelphia Union told the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Grahame Jones of the Los Angeles Times wondered about how Qatar, where alcohol sales are banned in all but certain hotels, will handle the issue with an event featuring beer sponsors.

"How will Qatar react to the thirsty fans seeking an alcoholic drink or to scantily clad fans seeking to sunbathe, where tournament-time temperatures will soar well above 100 degrees?" Jones wrote.

New York Times columnist George Vecsey prodded Americans to move past the hard feelings of defeat and continue to support football.

"What the United States needs to do right now, rather than sulk and mutter about being cheated, is continue developing soccer the way it has in the last generation," he wrote.

"Holding the World Cup is not a birthright, not a prize for having a lot of hotels near a lot of stadiums. It's a big world out there."

"Oligarchs and sheikhs instead of American hedge-fund operators and rogue bankers. Take your pick."

UEFA ban a medal

REUTERS, Madrid



CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho called a two-match UEFA ban for improper conduct a medal and not a punishment on Friday and said he had been singled out for special treatment by the European governing body.

UEFA banned the Portuguese on Tuesday after allegations that he had engineered deliberate red cards for two of his players in a Champions League match.

Xabi Alonso and Sergio Ramos picked up yellow cards for time-wasting which resulted in them being sent off at the end of their 4-0 win away to Ajax last month.

"I see this punishment as a medal," Mourinho told a news conference.

"I'm not going to change. My grandmother died a long time ago but I remember what she told me as a child. 'If they are envious of you, you should be happy,' and this has happened to me."

"I'm pleased there is one rule for Jose Mourinho and one for the other coaches. It's a historic punishment for me. Following the line of my old grandmother, it's a medal not a pun-

ishment.

"I can't leave the technical area, others can. I can't pick up a ball an adversary wants, others can. I can't speak with the fourth official, others can. They are medals so, no worries."

After the Ajax game, Spanish media reported the Real players had acted on instructions from Mourinho. They said the message was passed from Mourinho to reserve goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek and on to first-choice keeper Iker Casillas.

Spanish television showed Dudek talking to Casillas with hands covering their mouths and then Casillas was shown doing the same with Ramos.

The sendings-off mean Alonso and Ramos will serve automatic one-match suspensions in the final group game against Auxerre, which is a dead match for Real as they are assured of first place in Group G and qualification for the last 16.

Both players had accumulated two yellow cards in the group stage before they were sent off and a further yellow card in a subsequent game would have meant a one-match suspension during the knockout rounds.

UEFA fined the club, Mourinho and the four players involved. The second match of Mourinho's European ban has been deferred for a probationary period of three years.



PHOTO: STAR

A model dons the Shezan Lincoln designed jersey for the Bangladesh cricket team that won the Grameenphone Jersey Utsab at a local hotel yesterday. He also received Tk 3 lakh after votes via SMS and the decision of the judges went in his favour.

Kaiser wants 2022 WC in January

Football

AFP, Berlin

German football legend Franz Beckenbauer has suggested that the 2022 World Cup in Qatar be held in January to avoid the searing summer heat in the Gulf country.

A member of the FIFA executive committee that stunned the world on Thursday by announcing the 2022 tournament to the tiny emirate, Beckenbauer said that it would be wrong to stage the event in the traditional close-season period of June/July.

"We need to consider this solution of January and February when in Qatar the temperatures are around a pleasant 25 degrees," he told Bild newspaper.

"Why would that not be acceptable? The schedules for the big European leagues are due to be changed in 2012 and that would mean the impact would be less."

"Also it would be a viable alternative to the huge expenses involved in setting up air-conditioning for the stadiums and the fan zones."

Beckenbauer, a World Cup winner both as a player and a manager, refused to say who he had voted for in Zurich when the World Cup hosts for 2018 and 2022 were designated.

But he did admit to being left lost for words by Qatar getting the nod for 2022 ahead of the United States, Australia, Japan and South Korea.

"What astonishes me is that Australia was eliminated in the first round of voting, just like England (for 2018), but I am sure Russia will be an excellent host in 2018."

FA can't trust FIFA

Football

AFP, London

The acting chairman of the English Football Association has said he will not take the job on a permanent basis in the wake of England's 2018 World Cup defeat because he "cannot trust" FIFA.

Roger Burden became the latest English football figure to lambaste the sport's global governing body after it picked Russia to host the 2018 tournament and England received just two votes out of 22.

In a letter to FA board members, Burden said: "I had applied for the position of chairman. I recognise that an important part of the role is liaison with FIFA, our global governing body."

"I am not prepared to deal with people whom I cannot trust and I have withdrawn my candidacy."

The FA's unhappiness at the 2018 decision

is also expected to lead to moves to scrap plans for a friendly international against Thailand in June, a match originally planned in a bid to gain support for England's bid.

Burden said that while he had "no issue" with Russia's winning bid, he could not understand how England fared so badly in the voting process in Zurich on Thursday, being eliminated in the first round.

"We were equal top of FIFA's own technical assessment of the four bids. We were top of an independent assessment of the best commercial bids and our presentation on Thursday was widely acclaimed as the best of the 2018 and 2022 bids," he said.

"Against this background, I am struggling to understand how we only achieved two votes. It is difficult to believe that the voting was an objective process."

"On top of that, Prince William, the Prime Minister and other members of our delegation were promised votes that did not materialise."

Canales out for a month

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid will be without Sergio Canales for three to four weeks after the Spanish midfielder sprained his ankle during training, the club said Friday.

"An MRI performed on Sergio Canales ... on Friday revealed a Grade II external lateral ligament sprain of the left ankle," the club said in a statement.

"The player is expected to miss three to four weeks depending on his progress."

Canales, considered the revelation of the Spanish league last season, was out of action for almost three weeks earlier this season after an ankle injury in September.

Strike affects La Liga

AFP, Madrid



LFP

A wildcat strike by air traffic controllers which has produced Spain's first state of alert since the return to democracy on the 1975 death of Franco has affected the country's football fixtures with leaders Barcelona having their match postponed to Sunday.

With almost all airports affected by the controllers' walkout there were fears that several matches would not go ahead and with Barca still stuck on the east coast but due to face Osasuna across towards the northwest on Saturday evening league authorities decided to postpone the match.

Media indicated the Spanish League (RFEF) had decided the game would be rescheduled for 1600 GMT Sunday although there was no immediate confirmation from the organisation.

club was "waiting on new information."

Barcelona added that "the 19 players and the technical staff are still in the dressing rooms at the Nou Camp waiting for news of the situation at El Prat airport," from where they were due to fly out for the game.

Media reports indicated that the Catalan club would make the 480km trip by train later Saturday and then transfer to a bus.

Valencia were meanwhile due to face Real Madrid in the capital Saturday evening but they too faced being held up and so travelled late Friday by bus.

Real's city rivals Atletico Madrid had been due to make essentially the same journey in reverse, going out to face Levante, but they likewise elected to head over by bus on Friday and avoid the fate of thousands of people forced to sleep in airport lounges.

The strike has caused chaos with thousands of flights cancelled at a time when many Spaniards are looking to take a mini-winter break as Monday and Wednesday are public holidays. Many also take Tuesday off and take five days.