



# REUTERS

Lazio win first title in 26 years on stunning final day

By Gideon Long

ROME, May 14 (Reuters) - Lazio won the Italian league title for the first time in 26 years on Sunday when Juventus lost 1-0 at Perugia on an astonishing final day of the season.

Lazio beat Reggina 3-0 at the Olympic Stadium in a match delayed first for around 20 minutes by events at Perugia and then by about 10 minutes due to a largely peaceful pitch invasion by around 500 Lazio fans.

But the real drama was at Perugia, where the match was delayed for over an hour at halftime due to a torrential downpour which threatened to force referee Pierluigi Collina to abandon it altogether.

Four minutes after the match did restart, Juve fell behind to a goal from Alessandro Calori, who controlled a poor defence clearance on his chest and fired a right foot volley into the bottom right hand corner of the Juventus net.

Juve then had Gianluca Zambrotta sent off in the 73rd for a foul on Massimiliano Esposito and slumped to only their fifth defeat of the season.

That left Lazio on top of the league on 72 points from Juventus on 71.

Juve had led the championship for the previous 13 weeks and held a nine-point lead just two months ago. No team has ever lost an Italian league title from such a dominant position.

"Congratulations to Lazio," a stunned Juventus honorary chairman Umberto Agnelli said. "The title has gone to a great squad. We'll meet again next year. Thank you Juventus for all you have done."

Lazio's title was their first since 1974 and only the second in their 100-year history. It also made up for last season, when they lost out to AC Milan by a single point on the final day.

Lazio's triumph came against a backdrop of a week of heated argument over refereeing mistakes and alleged biased refereeing which had threatened to permanently sour relations between Juve and Lazio, the only sides in the title race since February.

"In football, as in life, everything is fair," said Lazio's Argentine midfielder Matias Almeyda as he celebrated with team mates in the bowels of the Olympic Stadium.

"In the end, someone has to pay."

Juventus general manager Luciano Moggi, widely seen as the arch villain at Juventus and the target of much Lazio criticism, complained that Sunday's matches had been "conditioned" by the protests and allegations during the week.

"The atmosphere over the past week has been stifling," he said. "But we have to accept it.

"Lazio have always believed in themselves. Congratulations to them and to their president, who has also shown he gets what he wants," Moggi added.

The first twist of what always promised to be an extraordinary afternoon came at Perugia, when heavy rain forced the players to stay in the water-logged changing rooms for over an hour longer than expected during the interval.

In sunny Rome, referee Gennaro Borriello held up the start of Lazio's equally vital match in the hope the rain in Perugia would abate and the two matches could restart at the same time.

But after waiting about 20 minutes, Borriello decided to restart the match.

At that stage Lazio led 2-0 and added a third goal before around 500 fans staged a largely peaceful pitch invasion.

Borriello ordered all the players to return to the changing rooms. Many of them had their shirts and shorts ripped from them by supporters as they tried to leave the pitch.

Order was then restored, the players came out of the tunnel, the match restarted and Lazio completed their 3-0 win.

By the time they finished, Juventus were just starting their second half on a swimming pool of a pitch at Perugia.

The Turin side, seeking their 26th league title, soon fell behind to the delight of thousands of Lazio fans who had stayed behind at the Olympic Stadium to follow events on their radios.

Juve beseiged the Perugia goal for the rest of the half but could not find the single goal which would have left them tied with Lazio on 72 points and prompted a play-off.

When Collina blew the final whistle of the season, it triggered a huge roar of celebration in Rome.

"Maybe our task was made more difficult by everything that happened this week," Juve coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "But we have to live with it."

"When we were nine points clear it was because we deserved to be nine points clear. Today was the day we lost the championship."

In the day's other matches, AC Milan hammered Udinese 4-0 to clinch Italy's third Champions League berth.

Ukraine's Andriy Shevchenko scored his 24th goal of the season and finished his first season in Italy as the leading scorer in Serie A.

Parma thrashed Lecce 4-1 and Inter Milan won 2-0 at Cagliari. Parma and Inter now face a play-off for Italy's fourth Champions League berth.

Fiorentina beat Venezia 2-0 to clinch a place in next year's UEFA Cup. Gabriel Batistuta scored twice and equalled the club's Serie A scoring record in what might be his last match for the Florence side.

