

Familiar price of success

BY BRIAN HOMEWOOD
in Rio de Janeiro

The Libertadores Cup, South America's top club competition, kicked off Feb. 6 with a match between teams struggling to overcome the loss of their top players.

Peruvian champion Universitario took on former Libertadores Cup champion Velez Sarsfield in Lima in the opening game of the 32-team tournament that extends into the summer.

The game was Universitario's first since striker Eduardo Esidio was sold to Lima rival Alianza in a controversial transfer at the end of last season.

Esidio, a Brazilian who has been allowed to continue his career despite testing positive for HIV two years ago, carried Universitario to the Peruvian title with a record 37 goals in 2000.

Velez Sarsfield, meanwhile, is still coming to terms with the departure of flamboyant goalkeeper Jose Luis Chilavert, who joined French club Racing Strasbourg in November after the best part of a decade with the Buenos Aires-based team.

The fiery Paraguayan, in addition to his normal goalkeeper duties, scored more than 50 goals for Velez, for which he was the regular free-kick and penalty taker. Chilavert, who has subsequently struggled at Strasbourg, was the inspiration when Velez won the Libertadores Cup in 1995.

BOCA LOSES PALERMO. This year's favorites figure to be the Argentine duo of Boca Juniors and River Plate, Brazil's Vasco da Gama and Cruzeiro, and America Cali, Colombia's four-time Libertadores runner-up.

Like Universitario and Velez, several of these teams will have to replace players who brought them titles last year — a familiar price for success in Latin America, where clubs are unable to match the salaries paid by their European counterparts.

Defending champion Boca Juniors has lost striker Martin Palermo to Spain's Villarreal, and River Plate's prodigious



striker Pablo Aimar (to Valencia) and Colombian marksman Juan Pablo Angel (to England's Aston Villa) also have departed.

Cruzeiro coach Luiz Felipe Scolari will be aiming to become the first coach to win the title with three different clubs, having led Brazilian clubs Gremio (1995) and Palmeiras (2000) to the championship.

ROMARIO EYES TITLE. Vasco da Gama's veteran striker Romario, who scored a club-record 67 goals last season, will be wanting to add a new title to his collection of 35.

Olmedo, which last year became the first provincial team to win the Ecuadoran crown in 41 years, and Sao Caetano, a Second Division Rio team that finished second in Brazil's Joao Havelange Cup, will be taking part from the first time.

Several illustrious clubs will be missing, including Chile's Colo Colo, Brazilian clubs Flamengo, Gremio and Corinthians, and Atletico Nacional, the only Colombian club to have won the Cup. Ecuador's Barcelona and Bolivia's Bolivar are other regular participants watching from the sidelines this year.

The teams are divided into eight groups of four in the first round, with the top two in each progressing to the knockout stage.

(Reuters)

For South America's top clubs, the 2001 campaign kicks off with the start of the annual Libertadores Cup. Many are rebuilding after losing star players since the end of the fall season.



Juan Riquelme of Boca Juniors (foreground) is fouled by River Plate's Cristian Ledesma in the 2000 Libertadores Cup quarterfinals. They will play bigger roles this season on their Argentine teams, both hit hard by player losses.

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