

Just like last season, when it was upset by Valencia in the quarterfinals, Lazio takes an early exit from the Champions League. Nonetheless, there were bright spots for Coach Dino Zoff.



STEFANO RELLANDINI/REUTERS

Zoff looks on bright side

Lazio's Lucas Martin Castroman (No. 35) caused all kinds of problems for Real Madrid defenders Geremi (left) and Roberto Carlos.

BY GIDEON LONG

in Rome

Lazio coach Dino Zoff has several reasons to be cheerful despite his team's premature exit from the Champions League.

The first was Lazio's performance in the 2-2 tie against Real Madrid at the Olympic Stadium.

The Romans, as they did in their 3-2 loss at the Bernabeu Stadium a week earlier, stretched the defending champion all night and created at least as many chances as Real.

Lazio hit the woodwork twice, saw a first-half effort from Marcelo Salas ruled offside, and was unfortunate to concede its first goal just when it appeared to have taken control of the match.

"In our two clashes against the Spaniards, I think we created more than they did," said Zoff, who was without key players Juan Veron and Alessandro Nesta. "We don't feel inferior to them. We worked hard, and we created a lot.

"It would be a mistake to give ourselves a hard



time over our exit from the competition. We have to be realistic. We'd already made life difficult for ourselves in Europe before our defeat in Madrid and our draw here."

The primary reason for Lazio's failure to reach the quarterfinals was not its results against Real, but its 1-0 losses to Anderlecht and Leeds late last year—when Zoff's predecessor, Sven Goran Eriksson, was in charge.

NEW ENERGY. The second reason Zoff has to be cheerful is 20-year-old Argentine Lucas Castroman.

Signed from Velez Sarsfield for \$11.26 million in January, Castroman has brought urgency and energy to the right side of Lazio's midfield.

He was superb in the second Real Madrid match, setting up both Lazio goals with searing runs into the penalty area and almost stealing a late winner with a header that brushed the crossbar.

"He was great," Zoff said. "He gave us so much, and he fought right to the bitter end."

A couple months ago, Lazio was having problems on the right flank and sorely missed Portugal's Sergio Conceicao, who left for Parma in the offseason.

Zoff filled the gap with Castroman, as well as Czech winger Karel Poborsky, who also joined Lazio in January and made an immediate impact in Lazio's league matches.

OLD PROBLEM. Lazio has dug a deep hole in Serie A this season, falling 11 points behind neighbor Roma by early January.

Since Zoff took charge, Lazio has won six games and tied one, but it remains in third place, eight points behind Roma, which is showing no signs of slowing down.

"The championship is the only thing left for us now," Zoff said. "We'll try and be competitive in that" *(Reuters)*