



OF

KING OF FOOTBALL



BY JOANN CHIA

FIFA's Best Soccer Player of the Century Pelé is renowned for his stellar performances and contributions to the game of football. Off the pitch, he puts his fame to good use, advocating for social causes and environmental policies.

I have never watched the legend in action. In fact, when he lifted his first World Cup trophy back in 1957, I wasn't even born yet. It has been 34 years since Pelé retired from international football, yet his allure is still far greater than some of today's most outstanding sportsmen.

Edson Arantes do Nascimento was born into impoverished conditions in Sao Paulo, Brazil. In order to play football, he would stuff a sock with newspaper and hold it together with a string. He received his nickname Pelé during his school days, supposedly derived from a mispronunciation of one of his favourite footballers, Bilé. In Hebrew, Pelé means miracle, and to the Brazilians, Pelé is most certainly a miracle, one who has brought hope and joy to a country stricken by poverty and social issues. So vital is Pelé to Brazil that the local authorities officially declared him a national treasure to prevent wealthy European clubs from buying him out of the country.

When the football superstar made his appearance in Singapore in March as part of the 2011 New York Cosmos Asia Tour, everybody wanted a piece of him. It was to no surprise then, that the Marina Bay Sands convention hall was bustling with dark-suited professionals and American Chamber associates at 8am in the morning, anticipating Pelé's arrival and his thoughts on the future of football in Asia. It was no surprise too, to find the Jalan Besar stadium come alive – jam-packed with eager beavers – just for a glimpse of the football king. Everyone wanted to be in the presence of greatness, and this is a man who has attained the highest accolades by experts, colleagues, and fans as footballer of the century.

Yet despite a trophy-filled cabinet and excessive overflowing laudations, Pelé today is as down-to-earth and bona fide as 15-year-old Edson. Clad in a classic



black suit and trademark short, curly tufts (still jet-black and dense by the way), he tucks away his jet lag with a wide unpretentious smile. He generously shares his appreciative hugs and pecks with his entourage and to overexcited strangers, he offers a reassuring warm handshake. "Do you speak Portuguese?" he asked me heartily, as I settled down next to him with my voice recorder in hand.

Crowning glories

The golden moments of Pelé's careers are numerous. In his illustrious career spanning 37 years, Pelé scored 1,281 goals – with over 90 hat-tricks – in 1,363 games. The attacking midfielder was talent-spotted at the age of 15 and started out at Santos, a professional club in Sao Paulo. A year later, he scored his first goal for Brazil against Argentina, winning the accolade for becoming the youngest player to score in international football.

At the 1958 World Cup, the 17-year-old Pelé added three other records to his name: youngest player of that tournament; youngest player in the World Cup; and youngest player to score a hat-trick in World Cup history.

17 years and four World Cups later, Pelé retired from the Brazilian football scene and set his sights on the Land of Opportunity. He signed on with the New York Cosmos in 1975 and led the club to the North American Soccer League

championship. Way before David Beckham and Thierry Henry had arrived, Pelé was already revolutionising football in North America. He was credited for his significant impact and influence on the sport in the country and now, he is the Honorary President of the New York Cosmos, with hopes of leading the club to Major League Soccer and channelling his love for the game to young people across the US.

"As global ambassador for the game, and as Honorary President of The New York Cosmos, it's a great privilege to be able to give back to the future of the sport that gave so much to me," says Pelé. "The return of The New York Cosmos will inspire footballers in this country [the US], and embrace people around the world who love this beautiful game as much as I do."

Serving the community

He may have shelved his soccer boots a long time ago but the playmaker continues to leave his mark in the international arena. When we started talking about his other love, Pelé's eyes sparkled and he seemed mildly relieved to be answering a question that isn't football-related.

Pelé was appointed a United Nations ambassador for ecology and the environment and the UNICEF goodwill ambassador to help children

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in war-affected countries as well as HIV/AIDS prevention. As a celebrity advocate for UNESCO, he campaigns against adolescent drug use and promotes sports as a means of social expression. The active supporter of social causes dedicated his 1,000th goal to the underprivileged Brazilian children, and the British Empire even made him an honorary Knight Commander in 1997.

“I try to give back to the people because of the love and support everyone has given to me. I am a part of this big global sport and for me, I have doors opened all over the world. I’m one of the few people who can go anywhere, and have a job. So I try, whenever I can, to help the youngsters because God has been too good to me. I try to give back to the people.”

When asked about his hopes for his native country, Pelé’s saddened eyes tell the story of his own difficulties growing up and his empathy for the poor today. “Brazil is a rich country,” he said. “Rich

in minerals and agriculture, but we have a lot of poor people. The administration unfortunately, is not correct, there’s a lot of corruption, but Brazil is a very rich country.”

The Pelé brand

There aren’t many luminaries who are known by just their first name, let alone a nickname. Pelé, as a brand is a successful multi-millionaire dollar business managed by a Brazilian licensing company called Prime Brands.

Since his retirement from football, Pelé has also undertaken several acting roles and commercial ventures, from published autobiographies to documentary films, to even composing musical pieces. In 2006, he signed a major autobiographical book deal and produced a giant-sized limited-edition collectible, the first football “big book” ever sold.

At 70, Pelé is in the pink of health, showing no signs of slowing down

anytime soon. He shares his health secrets: “The most important thing in life is to be healthy. To keep fit, you need to eat well, exercise and be disciplined in having a good sleep. My father used to tell me when I was young, “You’re a good footballer; it is a gift from God, but you need to take care of your body with enough rest and good food.” I don’t drink, I love seafood and vegetable, but I’m careful with my choices.”

For the most part of his life, Pelé has been blessed. Most may remember him for his dribbles, pace and prolific goal scoring abilities, but his gift to society far extends the innate technical skills he possesses. Pelé, or should I say Edson, is a living legend and a miracle for many who have benefitted from his benevolence.

“It’s hard to say which is the biggest miracle in my life but without a doubt, one of the miracles is that I’m able to make so many people happy around the world.” 🙏