

# Long Live the King

Pele's presence looms large at FIFA Qatar 2022, even though he is in a hospital back home

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**H**e had stopped playing for Brazil, was in his forties and was well past his prime. He was playing for a club, New York Cosmos, in the United States in a bid to promote football there. But when he arrived in Calcutta to play an exhibition match against Mohun Bagan, football historian late Novy Kapadia recorded, "lakhs of people" gathered outside the airport to catch a glimpse of the legend.

The year was 1977 and 80,000 spectators turned up at the iconic Eden Garden to watch him play. Overnight rain had made the ground soggy and conditions were not quite ideal for good football. The 'King' played only for 30 minutes, failed to score a goal, hit the post once but exhibited enough of his magic to send the crowd into raptures. Overawed Mohun Bagan players jostled to have a word with him to learn footballing tricks. The legend was generous in his praise of the Indian footballers, especially Mohammed Habib. But before the football crazy city could have enough of Pele, it was time for him to leave.

For a generation which has not seen him play, he may be a footnote in football history. But the adulation for the King remains unadulterated. Not just Brazil but the entire football world prayed for his health this month when it was reported that Pele, now 82 years of age, was battling cancer and was in the hospital. At Doha, stadiums and buildings were lit up with prayers for the King and the Brazilian team went round the stadium with a banner wishing him a speedy recovery.

A google search on Pele, or 'The King' as

Brazilian playwright and football fanatic Nelson Rodrigues famously called him when he was in his teens, showed up the icon's health bulletins over the past couple of years. Even the God of football is merely a mortal. But the magic he wove was real and grainy Black and White TV footage showing him dribbling past rivals or scoring goals are still

mandatory viewing for aspiring footballers. His legacy—'Jogo Bonito', Portuguese for 'The Beautiful Game'—which made Brazil the eternal favourites for the FIFA World Cup, continues to inspire the national team, if not others. Every four years, there are several favourites to win the World Cup and then there is Brazil—which puts enormous pressure on post-

Pele players but the likes of Zico, Romario, Ronaldo or Neymar have revelled in it. In 2022 World Cup, Brazil is now playing to break the jinx that has prevented the Cup from travelling back to Brazil since 2002. If they manage to lift it one more time, it will be a fitting tribute to the 'King'.

**W**ay back in 1977 when Pele named his autobiography, *My Life and the Beautiful Game*, the dedication read: 'I dedicate this book to all the people who have made this great game the Beautiful Game.' As years went by, Brazilians have however opted to infuse a certain degree of caution at the cost of flair and their trademark flamboyance honed by beach football. This has a lot to do with most Brazilian players increasingly playing for clubs in Europe. However, by a combination of dazzling individual skills, immaculate passes and a capacity to quickly build a maze of one-tuos and off-the-ball movements, Brazilian players have made the game their own. If a proof was needed, it was in evidence when they beat a hapless South Korea by four goals to one in Qatar.

As many as five World Cups had already been played before Pele took the bow as a 18-year-old in the 1958 edition of the tournament in Sweden. When he left competitive football two decades later, after completing an ambassadorial role for New York Cosmos in the North American League, he was the most influential footballer of the 20th century, the only footballer to have been a member of the World Cup-winning national team thrice, and having played in four World Cups. He was a prolific scorer with 1,279 goals—including a record 77

goals for Brazil (from 92 games)—a landmark which Neymar is in hot pursuit of in Qatar.

Football historians continue to wonder if Alfred de Stefano, the Argentine icon who represented Spain, Argentina and Colombia but could never play in a World Cup due to the World Wars, could have equalled the feat.

**I**t was after Pele finally signed off in 1978 that Diego Maradona emerged to achieve a similar iconic status and forced fans and football writers alike to draw parallels. Opinion was divided on who of the two was indeed the greatest footballer of the century. It was a public debate which embittered the relationship of the two greats for considerable time. They made their peace though and Pele even appeared on Maradona's TV show and played the guitar!

When Maradona passed away in November 2020, Pele wrote on Twitter: 'I lost a great friend and the world lost a legend...one day, I hope we can play ball together in the sky.'

But at the turn of the century in 2000 when FIFA's 'Player of the Century' award was declared, the simmering rivalry between the two reached a flashpoint. FIFA had conducted an online poll—one of the first of its kind—and Maradona won it by a handsome margin. The Argentine did enjoy an unfair advantage because most of the football fanatics in 2000 had never seen Pele play. Maradona's exploits in the 1986 World Cup were, however, still vivid in memory. Pele, who was then the sports minister of Brazil, it was reported, was not amused.

FIFA then conducted a second poll, more as a damage control exercise, in which a committee composed of journalists, officials and coaches voted and Pele was the overwhelming winner this time. The Footballer of the Century award was eventually shared between Pele and Maradona and this time,

the temperamental Argentine was not too happy about it. He picked up his award, dedicated it to his wife and Cuban leader Fidel Castro and stormed off the stage, leaving Pele and others flummoxed.

Pele questioned the Argentine's 'greatness' on footballing grounds. As late as in 2017, the King was quoted by *goal.com* as saying, "Now, we can't say that Maradona was a great header. He didn't score goals with headers...And we cannot say Maradona shot very well with both feet, because he didn't shoot with his right, only mainly with his left... So, from time to time, when people make comparisons, I make jokes about that. For me he was a great player, just that you can't compare Maradona with Pele."

Call it the super ego of champions, but it was obvious that the 'Black Pearl' (another of Pele's nicknames) was not comfortable with frequent comparisons with El Diego. The two greats, however, became good friends and would banter. "I always joke and say to him, 'Maradona, you can be level with Pele when you have scored more than 1,000 goals', and he says, 'I can't now, but it doesn't matter'."

Both Pele and Maradona have a Calcutta connection. After 1977, Pele returned to the city in 2015 on a ceremonial visit. The city's football fanatics, equally divided in their loyalty between Brazil and Argentina, had been happy enough when Maradona visited the Salt Lake Stadium in the city in 2008.

Pele's presence in the 2014 World Cup, held in his home country, did little to inspire the national team. But eight years later in Qatar 2022, the King's presence—though he is in a hospital back home—looms large. Neymar's men walked in after a win in a round-of-16 match with a giant banner with the legend's photo—sending their prayers to the ultimate architect of *Jogo Bonito*. ■

Photos: Getty Images



Recovery wishes for Pele from the Brazilian squad after their match with South Korea at Stadium 974 in Qatar, 6 Dec 2022

