

IT'LL TAKE WAY MORE THAN BECKHAM

By **WILLIAM C. KASHATUS**

IF MAJOR League Soccer is counting on English superstar David Beckham to be the savior of American soccer, the sport is in for a rude awakening.

The former captain of the English national team and a veteran of three World Cups, Beckham, at 32, is an exceptional though injury-plagued midfielder with remarkable passing ability and an unparalleled talent to score on free kicks, a quality that inspired the title of a recent movie, "Bend It Like Beckham."

While the English phenom will undoubtedly increase the worldwide attention to U.S. soccer, he is no Pele, the mythic hero who came to the United States more than 30 years ago to promote the sport.

Edson Arantes do Nascimento, better known as Pele, was an inside forward for the Brazilian national team. He possessed a natural athleticism that allowed him to escape defenders with ease, an exceptional heading ability and a powerful shot that made him a prolific scorer. From 1956 to 1974, Pele scored 1,220 goals, making him the all-time scorer in Brazil's history. He is also the only player to be a part of three

World Cup-winning teams.

Despite offers from Europe, Pele stayed with Santos, the club he started with at 15, remaining with them for two decades until he came to the U.S. in 1975.

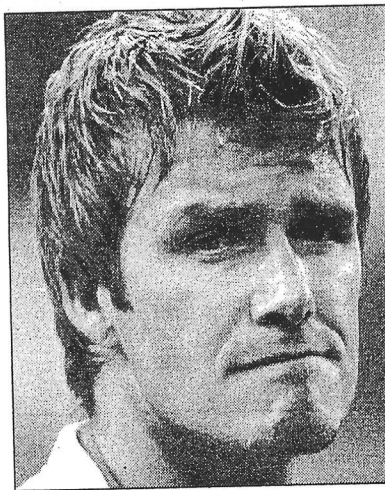
"I'm not a player like Pele," Beckham admitted in a recent interview. "He could run past five defenders and score five goals. My qualities are the assists and working hard and the free kicks."

But there's another major difference between the two stars: Pele promoted the game. Beckham is promoting himself.

When Pele arrived, soccer in this country was dying a slow and largely unnoticed death. The North American Soccer League had been established five years earlier, but few Americans attended the games. Nobody cared.

Even in New York, the most ethnically diverse city, there was little interest in the hometown Cosmos, a ragtag team of students, foreigners and part-timers who played on high school fields to rows of empty seats.

Tickets had to be given away with fast-food vouchers. Junior reporters were assigned to the games, often as punishment. But when Pele signed with the Cosmos, more than 300 sportswrit-



ers covered his every move. Fans flocked to the games.

Pele not only brought instant credibility to the standard of play in the United States, but he reversed the fortunes of the Cosmos and made the NASL a viable alternative to baseball, basketball and football, at least briefly.

Pele was bankrolled by charismatic Warner's chairman Steve Ross, who guaranteed he would earn more in his three years in New York than he had in his entire career with Santos. But the missionary aspect of Pele's commitment to U.S. soccer was every bit as important for the man

hailed worldwide as "the ambassador" of soccer.

Beckham came to promote his own future in Tinseltown. That's why the aging superstar signed with the Los Angeles Galaxy, which has a Hollywood following, why he and his wife, Victoria (Posh Spice) schmooze with Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes, and why he basks in the attention of the paparazzi. The only question: When will an acting career beckon Beckham?

But even if the Galaxy's newest addition was more committed to promoting American soccer, it's doubtful U.S. soccer would benefit. While the sport continues to be extremely popular among youngsters, it doesn't hold much entertainment value for Americans.

Here's why:

- It's fun to play, but it's boring, and confusing, for spectators.
- Americans like high-scoring contests and disdain ties. A good soccer game is 1-0 or 1-1.
- Soccer hasn't been able to penetrate our pop culture because of its European origins and its emphasis on team success above individual achievement.
- Soccer's popularity among im-

migrants has created a niche market that doesn't appeal to the American working class and their disdain for things foreign.

► Americans simply don't have the talent to play soccer at the highest levels because it's a "foreign-oriented" sport, not a "hand-oriented" one like football, basketball, baseball or hockey.

► Soccer is a game of improvisation that doesn't lend itself to being broken down into a series of plays that, as in football or basketball, can be practiced.

Unfortunately, Beckham's arrival has spurred more of the same old tired talk that my generation has heard since the early 1970s, when the "key to success" was cultivating interest in the sport among American youngsters by developing their talents.

Since then U.S. soccer officials have established an Olympic development program with an eye on the 2010 World Cup when Team USA is supposed to compete in the final round.

And our national team embarrasses itself every four years.

William C. Kashatus, a former goalkeeper who has played and coached soccer at the school and Division III levels. He can be contacted at will@historylive.com.