

**The Age 2007**

**A Galaxy Far, Far Away**

**Beckham's descent from sporting talent to American Idol is a sad one**

*By Neil Humphreys*

ROCKY is adamant. David Beckham will be a knockout in the land of oval footballs. Recently, Sylvester Stallone picked an interminable English Premiership match between Everton and Reading to plug his pugilist from Philadelphia.

Between boxing clichés, Stallone was asked his opinion about Beckham's impending arrival at LA Galaxy, a team which would struggle to turnover the A-League's leading sides. The Italian Stallion was effusive in his praise.

"I am sure in America David Beckham will be received as a superstar," said Stallone. "He has the looks, the whole thing. He'll be welcomed with open arms."

Stallone's soccer expertise derives from his role as goalkeeper Robert Hatch in the lamentable *Escape to Victory*, so you can see the actor is clearly an authority on the subject.

Tom Cruise has been dissecting the merits of playing Major League Soccer with Beckham and last week Disney had him done up like Prince Charming to promote their theme parks.

Without kicking a ball, the former England captain has completed another stunning metamorphosis: Real Madrid's Galactico is no more. Say hello to the new American Idol. Beckham didn't even have to perform a dozen free-kicks for Simon Cowell. But then, he didn't need to. Beckham's brand usurped his right foot years ago.

Stallone, Cruise and Disney: It's Hollywood's A-list, but it's not a sporting list. The absence of respected football commentators is telling. When it comes to Beckham, no one talks football anymore. Largely because there is nothing left to say. It has been reported that Beckham may endure the professional indignity of watching largely unknown kids take his place at Real Madrid.

Sporting director, Predrag Mijatovic suggested the form of Fernando Gago, Gonzalo Higuaín and Miguel Torres will make it tough for the midfielder to enjoy a Spanish swansong.

But there was a glorious time when he was still famous for his ability to whip in crosses more proficiently than anyone else in the world.

When I first interviewed Beckham in 2001, he was still a footballer.

Of course, fame followed his every step, kids from Manchester to Malaysia sported his Mohawk and his occasional forays along the fringes of fashion kept the snappers busy, but the man himself still wanted to play ball.

We met in a Kuala Lumpur hotel, shortly after the Red Devils had collected their seventh Premiership title in nine seasons and were on a blitzkrieg mission to sell as many jerseys as possible in South-east Asia.

Beckham talked football. Passionately. United were desperate to rule Europe again, England were confident of conquering the World Cup at the 2002 tournament and he was proud to captain his country.

He was politeness personified and football was everything. Almost. Near the end, he admitted that he loved the fame, craved it in fact. They both did. The Beckhams enjoyed being in the spotlight and, despite the occasional paparazzi intrusion, were rather eager to maintain the status quo, he said.

Football ruled, but this fame game was clearly more than a bit of a lark. Then he scratched his arm. That arm. The famous arm with the equally famous tattoo sprawled across it. The one that incorrectly spelt out 'Victoria' in Hindi. I had read more about that bloody tattoo than I did any other sporting story that week and told him so.

Beckham laughed. He liked that. But he was still a footballer. In October 2001, he captivated a global audience with a dramatic last-minute equaliser against Greece that could've come from the efficient pen of Shane Warne's scriptwriters.

Beckham was presented with one final free-kick opportunity to salvage a draw in the World Cup qualifier and send England into the 2002 finals. He bent it like, well, himself, and a nation hailed their captain fantastic.

It opened the door for England to reach the World Cup, but it closed the one marked 'Beckham's career'. It was his last great game for his country. Some might say it was his last great game. Period.

Three years later, our paths crossed again in Portugal, but Beckham had clearly dispensed with the services of Warne's scriptwriters and borrowed Freddie Flintoff's. Sitting in the Estádio da Luz, I watched Beckham march towards the penalty spot. It was the Euro 2004 quarter-final between England and Portugal and the teams were about to be separated by penalties.

In the stands, Portugal had home advantage. England had vocal advantage. Both were terrified of Beckham.

The Portuguese had bought into the Beckham brand. They didn't see a fading footballer; they saw an invincible gladiator defeating enemies in Pepsi commercials. They feared the persona, not the player.

So did Alex Ferguson. That's why the astute Manchester United manager shipped his superstar off to Madrid a year earlier. He knew the Beckham brand inside out and he wasn't buying it. Nor were the England fans around me. They had long since stripped away the veneer of celebrity to reveal a footballer struggling to remain afloat in a game where his lack of pace was leaving him dangerously exposed. Beckham dutifully missed.

The last vestiges of a once great footballer were stripped away. When we met again in 2005, the transformation was complete. Beckham was icon first, British ambassador for Any Worthy Cause second and footballer a distant third. He was in Singapore as part of the London 2012 delegation, which was bidding to host the Olympic Games at the 117<sup>th</sup> IOC convention.

Beckham was fighting for the kids of London's East End. He's always doing it for the kids. They're forever being encouraged to jump on board and take a ride to Planet Beckham. It's Beckham's spin on an old Robbie Williams song. But this interview was different. It was all business and, if not quite brusque, the amiable tone of our previous meeting was noticeably absent.

In KL four years earlier, anything went. Now there were ground rules. There were to be no questions on football, especially Real Madrid (after two seasons at the club, Beckham was still trophy-less) and nothing related to personal lives. Four years ago, we talked football. In Singapore, we talked anything but. It's the only interview I've ever conducted with a footballer where his profession was seldom mentioned.

It wasn't that Beckham transcended football; quite the opposite in fact. The game was passing him by. But in Singapore, he clearly acquired a taste for the ambassadorial, figurehead role. It has a certain, elevated status that befits the lofty ambitions of the family brand. Management was never going to be an option (Planet Beckham simply does not orbit Blackburn on a freezing Friday night to watch a young prospect train), nor was dropping down a league.

If only there was a job going where he could still play Beckham The Ambassador, Beckham The Celebrity and Beckham The Supporter Of Any Worthy Cause ... Thank heavens for that Galaxy far, far, away.

Who cares if he is no longer equipped to ply his trade among Europe's elite; this is a Worthy Cause of the highest magnitude. Beckham is leading a crusade to convert the entire North American continent from an oval ball to a round one.

He isn't doing it for the \$250-million, five-year contract. No, he's doing it for the kids again. The guy's becoming football's answer to Ronald McDonald. Focusing on this noble quest will perhaps allay those nagging suspicions that LA Galaxy would struggle against Melbourne Victory.

Beckham has been compared to Pele, Franz Beckenbauer and Bobby Moore, who also headed stateside to kick start the country's last (failed) soccer revolution in the 1970s, but that's a facile comparison.

The 70s trio exhausted their talent at the highest level first, winning major honours for both club and country before accepting a few easy bucks in the North American League. Beckham is only 31, but he has clearly taken fame and fortune over football. That's a shame because he will never squander the first two, but his legacy will only be determined by the latter.

When I first met him in 2001, Beckham was a footballer. By 2005, he was a distracted celebrity. Six months from now, he will be an American sideshow. It's a whole new Galaxy, but his talent deserved a more fitting legacy.