



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# The unattainable fame of Pelé - what is the handicap of today's football stars?



Some current or future football players will surpass the records that Pelé set more than half a century ago, but none of them will surpass the global fame of the Brazilian player who died on December 29 at the age of 82. "He was the most famous human figure in the world": this is an accurate description of the scale of Pelé's global fame, which Euclides de Freitas Couto, a specialist in the links between football and politics, provided to Le Monde.

In his time, Pelé was not only the world's most famous football player, but also the most famous human being. In 21 years of playing football, from 1956 to 1977, he was more famous than John F Kennedy, Che Guevara, Yuri Gagarin, Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and John Wayne.

Current football stars, and their successors, cannot even dream about achieving similar global fame and influence to Pelé's, despite being much faster, stronger, more skilled and incomparably richer than the recently deceased Brazilian. What is stopping them?

**Instead of 15 minutes of fame, Pele will have 15 centuries (Andy Warhol)**

In the late days of his career, while playing for the New York Cosmos, Pelé once had a night out in Studio 54, accompanied by Mick Jagger, Rod Stewart and Andy Warhol. Warhol was impressed by his charisma and because of him, he somewhat modified his famous theory that everyone would have their 15 minutes of fame. "Pelé was one of the few who contradicted my theory: Instead of 15 minutes of fame, he will have 15 centuries".

Pelé became an icon of football and global culture in the analogue age. In fact, his fame rested on the myth that spread first through radio and the press, later through television, but those were slow and production-poor. During most of his career, Pelé was a mythical hero who destroyed opponents and flooded their goalkeepers with shots that were impossible to stop.

Everyone wanted to see this football prodigy from Brazil, and that's why Pelé's Santos toured the world for years, playing exhibition games with local clubs, in front of hundreds of thousands of fans. They came to the stadiums to see just one player, and later told their children and friends about it, enjoying the micro-glory that a live encounter with the greatest in the world brought them.

Pelé's successors are almost intimate with their fans. It is a kind of professional obligation. They feature on Instagram and Twitter, where just about anyone can tell them they have played poorly and are not worth half the money their favourite club paid for them, because they feel they have the right to tell them so.

**Pelé was unmatched famous because he placed his football art into social, and even political engagement**

Messi, Ronaldo, Neymar and Harry Kane have exposed their private lives to global attention, and everything about them is familiar, but that is why there are limits to their global fame. They can never become invisible and untouchable, as Pelé was. Their performance in each match is measured and published through detailed statistics as soon as the match is over. They cannot create magic like Pelé could. In Pelé's time there were no electronics to measure how many kilometres he ran and how many passes he had. Only his elegance, speed and football wit were remembered.

Pelé was also unmatched famous because he placed his football art into social, and according to some, even political engagement. He was doing something that is unimaginable, even forbidden, to today's stars, because it could affect their professional contracts, which are as large as medium-sized industries.

At a time when social movements for equality, human rights and economic balance were flourishing, which coincided with the peak of Pelé's career, the Brazilian knew that his social

background, and his race, could help promote those movements and their values. Like all his teammates, with whom he won the World Cup three times (for which he still holds the record), Pelé came from a poverty-stricken background.

Admittedly, he is no different from today's football stars, especially those from Latin America. But no one like Pelé managed to promote his rise on the social ladder so convincingly and globally, motivating millions of underprivileged children to follow the path of sports and hard work, rather than crime.

Pelé also had the "impertinence" to manipulate his racial origin in a positive way, breaking the then still strong racial prejudices with his dominance in a predominantly Caucasian sport.

In his biography *Pelé: His Life and Times*, he described his first visit to Africa as an uplifting experience. 'Everywhere I went I was looked upon and treated a God, almost certainly because I represented to the blacks in those countries what a black man could accomplish in a country where there was little racial prejudice, as well as providing physical evidence that a black man could become rich, even in a white man's country'.

**Today's football stars, fortunately, do not have to fight racism with personal courage**

By marrying a Caucasian woman, Rosemary dos Reis Cholbi, in 1966, Pelé delivered a supreme blow to widespread racial prejudices. It was the crown of their love, but even more so it was a message that the world must overcome racial divisions, of which Pelé himself was a victim in his youth.

Today's football stars, fortunately, do not have to fight racism with personal courage. This has long been the task of everyone who has anything to do with football, from fans to clubs and television. But they too would have had to follow that difficult path, if Pelé had not been brave enough and aware of his global influence

in his time.

Today, football stars have no right to social activism. That right has been bought from them with astronomical contracts. Or it is simulated by their participation in controlled socially responsible campaigns, again with the approval of the clubs they signed a contract with. The fact that they are depoliticised and excluded from the channels of social influence certainly raises the sporting parameters of both them and their clubs, but limits their social charisma, far below that of Pelé.

Although according to football standards, they are equal or even better than the late Brazilian, they will never become stars like Pelé was, nor will they reach his status of "the most famous human figure in the world".