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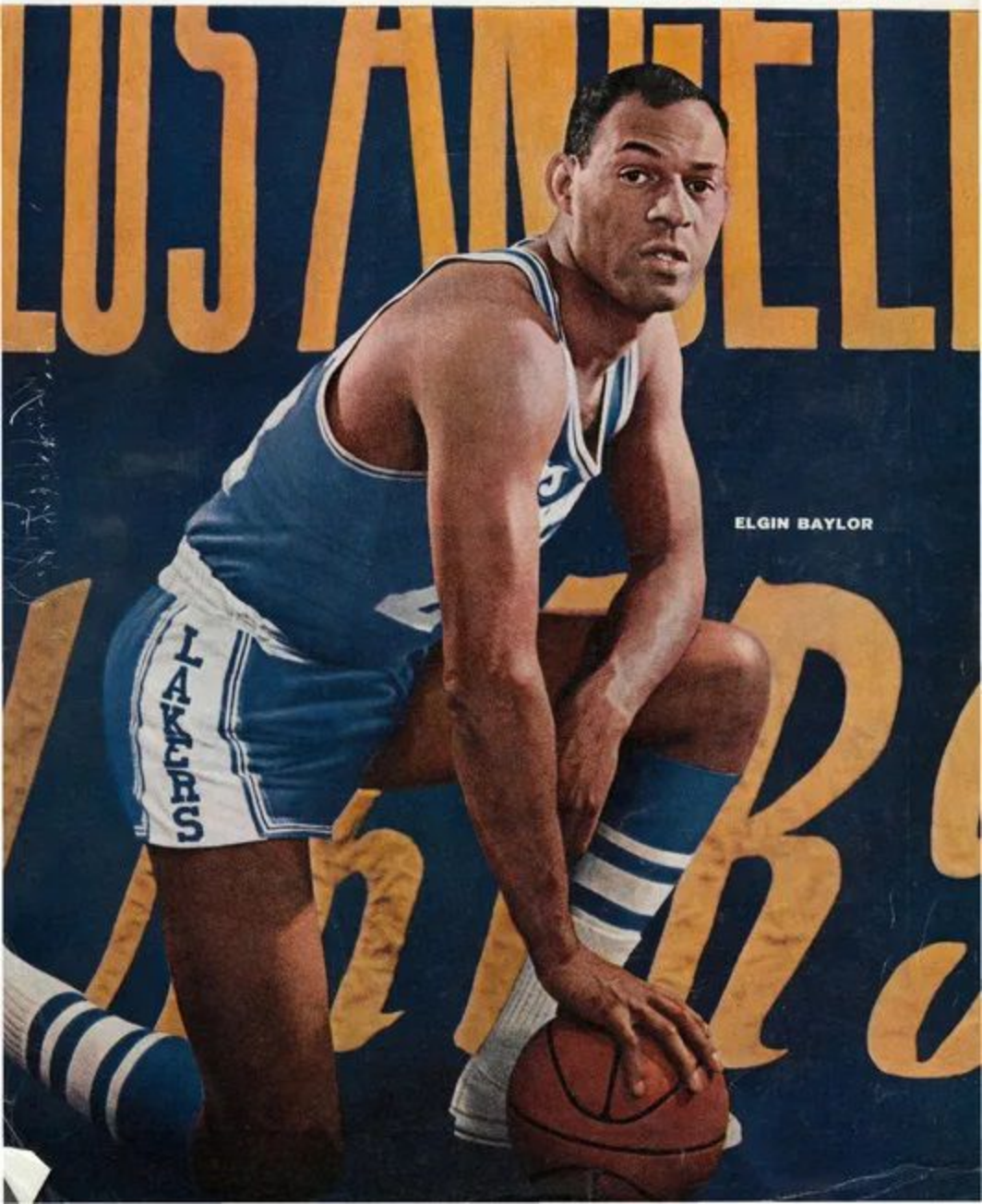


Almost unknown in the U.S., Edson Arantes do Nascimento—nicknamed Pelé—is the idol of soccer-playing nations and a demigod in Brazil where he earns half a million dollars a year

THE MOST FAMOUS ATHLETE IN THE WORLD

BY PETE AXTHELM

Two members of the Santos, Brazil soccer team passed the ball forward along the sideline, then shot it toward the small man called Pelé, who was waiting in front of the goal. Pelé lifted his right leg in a short, quick motion and looped the ball over one defender's head. He dodged past that man and lifted the ball again as two more defenders approached. The ball seemed to hang in midflight as Pelé feinted to his left; then he ducked his shoulders and lunged between his opponents. Before a shocked goaltender could react, Pelé drove the shot into the net with his head.

It was very close to the perfect way to execute a scoring play in Pelé's chosen game—the game that is called soccer in the U.S. and football everywhere else, and is also the most popular sport on earth. The goal was scored in a one-sided game between Santos and Juventus in the São Paulo state league, back in 1959. But Brazilians, who are sophisticated as well as passionate about their soccer, remember its brilliance as if it had won the most recent World Cup for them. About 60,000 people saw it; about one million will claim to have seen it if you ask them now. "It was," a Santos sportscaster says confidently, "the greatest goal Pelé ever scored." In Brazil—and almost everyplace else where soccer is played—that is equivalent to saying it was the greatest goal anyone ever scored.

"I guess it was my best goal, from a technical standpoint," says Pelé, whose real name is Edson Arantes do Nascimento and whose undisputed title is king of international football. "I can't say it was my biggest thrill, because it wasn't important enough. We were ahead 4-0 at the time and we didn't need a goal that much. But I must admit it was something special."

Coming from Pelé, who makes a diligent effort to be the most modest of idols, this is a strong statement. Coming from anyone else, from anyone who has watched this man play during the last eight years, it would be an understatement, for almost every move Pelé has ever made on a soccer field has been something very special. Pelé, 25 years old, is 5 feet 8 inches tall and weighs 163 pounds, most of it apparently concentrated in the awesome muscles of his powerful, slightly bowed legs. On every play he seems to be two steps ahead of the players around him. He dribbles the ball as if it were attached to his feet by sensitive strings; he shoots harder and more accurately than anyone else in the game. When he rushes through the offensive zone toward a goal, Pelé captures the imagination in a way that only the most dramatic of athletes can.

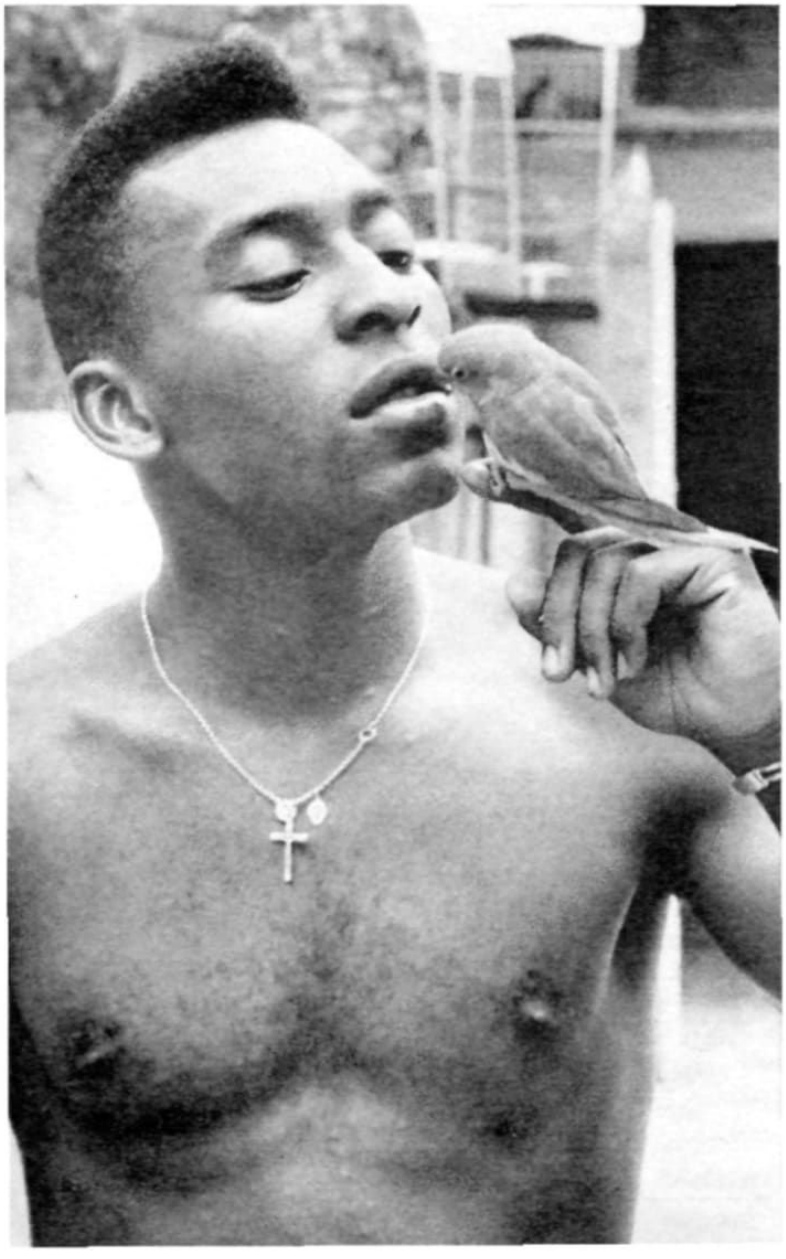
Pelé is one of those rare performers who can, for a moment, make all the patterns and tactics of a complex game seem unimportant. He prides himself on being a team player ("He sets the example for all the other players," says the

continued

Santos coach, Lula), but relating a brilliant Pelé goal to a team pass pattern is like crediting an 80-yard pass reception by Olympic Sprinter Bob Hayes to the Dallas Cowboys' multiple offense. Like Hayes or Gale Sayers in American football or Bobby Hull in ice hockey, Pelé can turn a team game into a memorable individual show. Suddenly he is alone, surrounded by opponents. He draws them out of position, rushes around or between two of them, gets knocked down or shoved aside and then, somehow, comes up with the big shot. The huge crowd cheers; some delirious fans try to scale the high barbed-wire fences that separate Brazilian soccer fields from the grandstands. Pelé walks back to his position, smiling—he seems to smile after every play, even unsuccessful ones—having once more shown why he is the highest-salaried and most idolized athlete in the world.

He was smiling in the same way last month on the Santos practice field, but around him things were different. The gates in the fences were open, and only about 20 kids had wandered into the stadium to watch an early-morning workout. Now there would be no individual show. Pelé was one of 10 men jogging around the field; then he was one of half a dozen doing special leg-strengthening calisthenics. Just another member of a very good, well-run organization.

Extremely fond of dogs and birds, Pelé plays with one of the pets he keeps at his parents' house in Santos.



Well, not quite. Santos Football Club, the beneficiary of his talents, won two major state league titles in the 20 years before Pelé came into his own in 1958. Since then the team has won seven out of nine. These days Santos always plays to packed houses and commands huge fees for exhibition games and tours. (As if to prove that this prosperity was not a coincidence, attendance dropped by 50% in 1962 when Pelé was benched for a long period because of injuries.)

After practice Pelé sat in front of his wooden locker and stripped off his gray sweat shirt. Others in the crowded room laughed and yelled back and forth. Pelé spoke quietly, absently fingering the gold crucifix he wears on his neck as he chose his words. "Luck. You need a lot of luck to have a long and successful career. There is so much chance of injury, or of something suddenly going wrong. But so far I've been as lucky as anyone. I'm very fortunate."

His good fortune is legendary among soccer followers. The son of a bush-league player who earned $4.50 a game, Pelé now makes more than $200,000 a year in salary and bonuses. A fourth-grade dropout, he is the owner of several lucrative businesses and the subject of two books and a movie. His total income is about half a million dollars. A Negro, he lives happily in one of the few places in the world where color has no effect on a man's life. And after 10 years of playing soccer for a living, he still likes what he is doing. "I enjoyed it when I was just a kid in the streets," he said, "and I enjoyed it when I started playing in Santos for $75 a month. Now that I'm married, naturally I'd prefer to travel less. But that doesn't mean I'm unhappy. Just because I'm on top, I'm not going to start complaining."

This is the Pelé style. He could complain and people would listen. He could demand changes in his rigorous schedule and he would get them. He could write his own ticket for his salary. But he figures that a man who gets paid to play a game should be happy, so Pelé acts happy, satisfied, grateful. He is modest—almost, but not quite, to the point where it would sound phony. He is courteous even to the most unruly of his fans, and smiles bravely as shrieking girls with long fingernails try to claw souvenir pieces of jersey off his back. He has been honored by kings, statesmen and religious leaders all over the world. Yet he is cautious and soft-spoken, less concerned with his records than with showing you what a nice guy a superstar can be.

That isn't always easy. The king of soccer is now surrounded by a self-appointed palace guard, a troupe of officials and hangers-on that acts as a sort of reverse public-relations service. Members of the group keep strangers and well-wishers and other mere mortals at arm's length, except at the soccer stadiums, protecting Pelé by means that

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often are devious and rude. They have nearly succeeded in presenting a distorted image of Pelé to the world. In his home city of Santos he is universally liked and admired; almost everywhere else he is suspected of being a brooding, temperamental man who wishes only to be left alone. At the recent World Cup matches in England, for example, Pelé weathered some very rough play and two injuries with commendable calm. Still, he was portrayed by *The Sunday Times* of London as "the sad millionaire . . . an introverted, remote figure imprisoned in the shell that protects him from the crushing weight of his fame."

Actually, Pelé claims, he has rarely been sad, is not a millionaire and will never be crushed or imprisoned by a game he loves or the people who love him. "I appreciate the crowds around me," he said. "Especially the kids. I know that when I was growing up football was one of the few things I could enjoy. Seeing a top player was always a big thrill. Now I get a thrill myself by having the kids around me. Of course, sometimes the people can get too enthusiastic."

Soccer fans almost always get overenthusiastic. One morning at Caracas airport Pelé and his teammates had to wait four hours inside their plane before the field was sufficiently cleared for them to disembark. In Dakar, Senegal a group showed up at 4 in the morning to mob the bus that took him from his plane to the airport waiting room. In Milan a crowd milled around for hours while Pelé hid behind a large pillar, waiting for a chance to dash to a car. In the Ivory Coast 15,000 Africans lined the road from the airport to the town of Abidjan, cheering wildly as their hero rode past in an open car, holding his hands over his head in triumph. "It was like a parade," marveled Julio Mazzei, the Santos team trainer, "for a president."

The adoring mobs, whatever inconvenience they cause, are the mark of Pelé's supremacy. Every poll taken since 1958 has declared him the world's premier soccer player, yet in the passionate atmosphere of the sport a few thousand screaming fans can be more reassuring than any poll. "Yes, I would like more privacy, a chance to move around and go places without causing a disturbance," he says. Then he pauses, looking a little annoyed at this breach of the Pelé style, and becomes grateful once again: "But the attention is a compliment. When the crowds stop coming, then it will be time to worry."

At the moment Pelé is far more worried about things that are happening on the playing fields, things he darkly terms "the consequences of my fame." His glory and fortune and bright future can become meaningless when two burly defenders converge on him with the intent to commit mayhem. In the recent World Cup matches the Bulgarian team worked him over brutally, finally crippling him and costing the Brazilians whatever chance they had to win their third straight cup. In a recent New York exhibition game against Milan International he was shadowed by one Gianfanco Bedin, who was clearly assigned to employ any means at his disposal, legal or illegal, to keep Pelé out of scoring range. And even in Brazil, where affection for the game's beauty is supposed to preclude such get-the-star tactics, Pelé finds himself besieged more and more often. "There's always somebody gunning for me," he said. "I know that the players are ordered to do it, and I don't hold it against them so much. They have to do their jobs. But the referees aren't doing theirs. I've been pushed, tripped, kicked—every foul there is. If I tried the same things against someone else, I'd be thrown out of the game. But other players get away with it against me. What makes me most angry is that the public pays to see me play good football, and then the other teams won't let me."

This is the only subject that seems to upset Pelé. The smile was gone as he talked about it, and his frown showed both frustration and a certain amount of understandable fear. He had missed some World Cup games, he had just missed a league game that Santos lost to Campinas and now he was a doubtful starter in other games because of a shoulder injury administered by Milan's Bedin in New York. "Of course, you can get hurt just dribbling around by yourself," he said. "But when everyone is out to stop you, and the referees let them, you have a lot more chance of being injured."

It is not a pleasant thought, this possibility that the most brilliant and lucrative career in the history of soccer might

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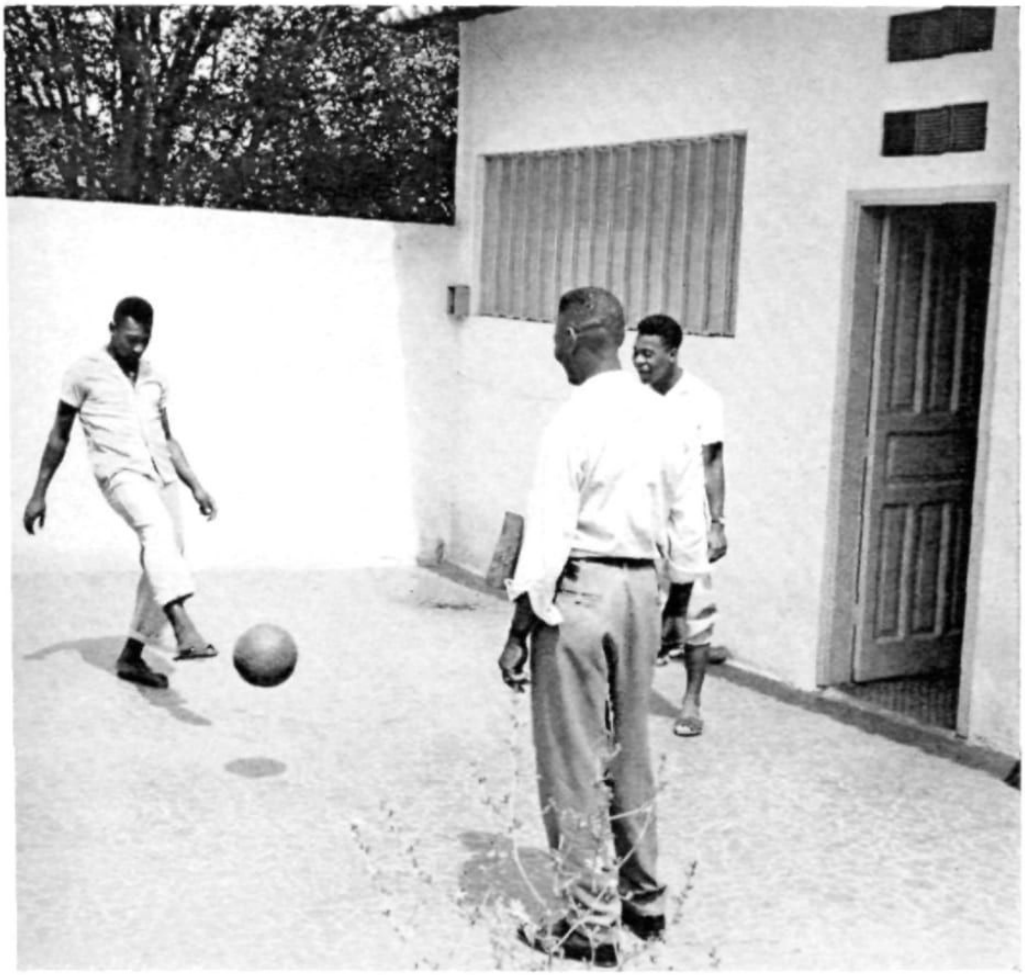
Outside their Santos apartment, Pelé strolls with his wife Rosemarie, to whom he was secretly engaged for six years.



In the courtyard of his parents' home, Pelé has a busman's holiday with his father, a former minor league soccer player nicknamed Dondinho, and brother Zoca.

be cut short; it is a thought that has produced a budding persecution complex in Pelé. But, having spoken of it, he stopped, pondered for a moment, then smiled again and changed the subject to another favorite theme.

"You know, when they do things like that to me, it can help the team. I can draw the defense out and pass to other men. When two or three are hanging on me, that leaves two other Santos players open, and they are not fools." He went on about his team and its achievements, which include at least one victory in every state, national and world championship. He looked happily around the room—at Gilmar, the colorful goalie who has joined Pelé on almost every all-star team; at Carlos Alberto, the fiery halfback; at Pepe, the aging star who has been Pelé's closest friend in Santos; and at Edu, the 17-year-old hailed as Pelé's eventual successor. Now he was relaxed again, no longer thinking of his own travails as Pelé the king; it was much easier to be Pelé the team player.

Sometimes the two roles conflict. When Queen Elizabeth invited him to a special audience during the World Cup competition, Pelé the star was flattered. But the Brazilian national team was in "concentration," the monastic ritual that precedes every game. Coach Vicente Feola decided that he could not let one player leave while the others stayed, so Pelé the team player turned down the Queen. The incident was widely interpreted as a snub, enhancing Pelé's reputation as a moody individualist. "That's not true at all," he said. "I was doing what the team wanted. I would never do something like that out of temperament. On the contrary, I feel that, in my position, I have a special responsibility not to be temperamental."

Responsibility is another Pelé theme. Responsibility to his teammates, to the people who pay him, to his trusting fans. Responsibility to the thousands of kids who read Pelé magazines, eat Pelé candy bars, and *do not* smoke Pelé cigarettes. Pelé does not drink nor smoke, although training rules do not prohibit either habit, and he refuses to endorse any alcohol or tobacco products. On a recent Mexican tour he turned down a $10,000 offer for one beer ad. "It costs to give up such things," he said, "but it's one thing I can do to help the kids live good lives."

The good life of Edson Arantes do Nascimento began inauspiciously enough, in a small backwoods town called Tres Coracões. Pelé's father, João Ramos do Nascimento, was an undistinguished soccer player with the nickname Dondinho. (All Brazilian players are known exclusively by nicknames, some meaningful and others obscure; Pelé himself does not remember how he got his or what it means.) When Pelé was 5, Dondinho was promoted to a slightly higher-class team in Bauru and moved there with his wife Celeste and their three children.

Pelé soon established himself as a standout in neighborhood soccer games, and something less in the neighborhood school. He made bad grades, got into a series of disputes and left in fourth grade by mutual agreement with a truant officer whose grim visage he still remembers vividly. His mind free of scholastic details, he devoted all his energies to playing games. "Football was the only career I ever thought of," he said. "I became a cobbler's apprentice, but I never really thought I'd stick to it. I wanted to follow my father's path. I was convinced he was the best player who ever lived but that he never got a chance to prove it."

Pelé got his own chance from a friend of his father, former São Paulo Player Waldemar de Brito. De Brito was tall and lean, with a deep, commanding voice that scared Pelé a little and drove the boy to work hard at his training. De Brito found his protégé when Pelé was only 11 and helped him become a top Bauru player by the time he was 14. The following year, with no more worlds to conquer in the hinterlands, De Brito

took Pelé to São Paulo to take a shot at the major leagues.

The São Paulo teams were not exactly waiting with open arms. Reputations made in Bauru are scorned in the richer and prouder cities near the Brazilian coast. "I was very naive," said Pelé, "but I really thought I could make some team." Many of the teams he visited were less naive but were less impressed with his ability. They were also, as they have since found out over and over, very wrong. They rejected Pelé, and De Brito turned to the team in the seacoast city of Santos. Luiz Alonso Perez, the coach, who is called Lula, agreed to look at Pelé. After one practice session and an argument with reluctant club officials, Lula hired him on a trial basis.

Pelé's self-confidence, badly shaken in São Paulo, was slow to return to him in Santos. "I felt as if I was lost," he said. "I was only 15 and suddenly I had to live with strange people in a strange place. I was scared of failing, but even more I was scared of the dark." After two months he was still a little scared of the dark dormitory where the team lived and of the city that seemed so large and impersonal to him. But it was becoming increasingly clear that he was not going to fail on the field. He graduated from the junior team to the reserves of the Santos first team, with a salary hike from $75 to about $600 a month. Club officials lost their skepticism and began to lavish praise on him; they voluntarily paid a $1,000 bonus to De Brito, who went home to Bauru with his judgment rewarded and his place secure in the legends that were about to spring up around Pelé.

"My first real chance," recalled Pelé, "came when four of us were loaned by Santos to the Vasco da Gama team in Rio, when they were shorthanded for a tournament. We won and I scored some goals. When I got back to Santos everyone was saying I was great, and I was put on our first team. But I still wasn't sure I had made it. I was only 16 and I needed my coach to keep teaching me and giving me confidence."

Lula, the coach, is a large, phlegmatic man with a sleepy, everything's-under-control smile that he maintains through

continued

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all but the most frenzied moments of a game. He has coached Santos for 15 years, an unheard-of tenure in a precarious business. He produced winning teams before Pelé arrived and will probably produce them after Pelé is gone. However, Lula will always be known primarily as the man who coached Pelé. He accepts this fact—and his handsome salary—and cheerfully submits to the routine questions that have sustained Brazilian fan magazines for eight years: What was Pelé's greatest moment? "The 1962 game against Benfica in Lisbon, when we won our first World Cup for Clubs [as distinguished from the quadrennial World Cup for all-star teams from each country]. Pelé led us to our best game ever."

What was Pelé like at first? "Just an errand boy for the older players. He would buy soda for them, things like that. Then, before they knew it, they were looking up to him."

And, the unnecessary question at the end of each interview: Is Pelé the greatest player you've ever coached? Lula smiles, pauses for dramatic effect and says crisply, "Pelé is the greatest player anyone has ever coached."

Pelé began to show this to the world

After Brazil's 1958 World Cup victory Pelé is greeted by Sweden's King Gustaf VI.

when he was 17, by leading Brazil to victory in the 1958 World Cup matches in Stockholm. He was praised in every soccer-playing nation, toasted in champagne by Brazilian President Juscelino Kubitschek and pronounced, for the first time, the king of soccer in Brazil. "I still think that World Cup was my biggest thrill," he said, "because I was so young. I wasn't prepared for it psychologically."

In the eight years of uninterrupted success that have followed, Pelé has never really prepared himself for anything. He greets each new triumph with wide, appreciative eyes and the happy naiveté that is a mark of the Pelé style. He holds every scoring record in Brazil and has averaged almost a goal a game during his career. He has helped win nearly every title his team has sought, and Santos has refused multimillion-dollar offers for him. He lives in what he considers the best of all possible worlds and, when he thinks of the future at all, he registers only one concern. "I have always believed," he said, "that no matter how much fame a man has, he should live a simple life."

This is Pelé's most cherished ideal: the simple life—life in a fairly modest apartment that is no better and no worse than the 35 other units in a pastel blue building one block from the beach at Santos; a life of fishing and hunting in the backwoods, away from the crowds, or listening to records at home; a life of cautious investing, of moderate spending and quiet dignity; a life, in short, that should be almost impossible for the most famous athlete in the world.

But Pelé has made it possible When he started earning big money he sent his entire salary home to his parents and lived on only a portion of his bonuses. He shared a rooming house with five other players and drove a Volkswagen sedan. Lately he has made a few concessions to his position. He bought a house for his parents in a fashionable section of Santos. He began investing money in businesses under the direction of his personal manager, José Gonzalez Ozores, who is known as Pepe Gordo. He even agreed, reluctantly, to drive a blue Mercedes that was given to him by an ardent supporter of the Santos team.

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PELÉ *continued*

The simple life survived these minor adjustments, and last February it also survived the most important adjustment Pelé has made. He got married—in the simplest way that an idol of millions could ever hope to do it. In fact, both the courtship and the wedding are excellent examples of the Pelé style. Pelé and Rosemarie Cholby were secretly engaged for almost six years. He never took her out in public, and she never ventured into a stadium to see him play. According to Pelé, this was to keep the girl safe from hordes of fans and jealous girls. According to a few of Pelé's friends, it was also designed to reassure Pelé himself; he has always feared that girl friends might use him to seek publicity. Six years of secrecy made it pretty clear that Rosemarie wasn't looking for headlines, and last fall the couple dared to appear in public and announce wedding plans.

The reaction was swift and predictable. There was nationwide gnashing of teeth among Brazilian maidens, and widespread analysis of Pelé's love life in the fan magazines. Society experts wondered about the protocol involved in this momentous wedding. One helpful Santos citizen suggested that the ceremony be held in the town's 35,000-seat stadium. Pelé, of course, had his own ideas. There was a simple ceremony, in his parents' house, followed by an intimate reception, to which only one team member—his best friend Pepe—was invited. Somehow the press managed to give it the coverage it seemed to warrant —"the couple looked at each other and smiled six times"—but it still could be considered as dignified an event as Pelé could have hoped for. The happy couple had a good head start toward the simple life.

The honeymoon, a tour of Europe, proceeded just as smoothly. Friends of Santos and of Pelé seemed to appear everywhere, helping the couple avoid crowds while enjoying each country's hospitality. Since Rosemarie is white, the newlyweds might have encountered some discrimination in a less-perfect world than Pelé's; but they had no such problems, and Pelé still finds it hard to believe that the problems really exist

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"Don't you think a Negro with a white wife might have had some trouble in parts of Europe if the Negro's name wasn't Pelé?" he was asked. "I don't know," he said, a little puzzled. "I never even thought about it. I've never been faced with any kind of race trouble. Here in Brazil we hardly think about race. I know that Cassius Clay [who, incidentally, probably ranks second to Pelé among the world's best-known athletes] is always talking about fighting for his race. I wouldn't criticize him, because I don't know the situation where he comes from. But in Brazil no one thinks that way. I could fight for my country or my friends, but not for one color."

Race and politics and world problems have no place in the simple life. Pelé donates to many charities and tries to give as much attention as he can to children, but he leaves the policy decisions and sociological theories to others. His main personal worry now is how much time he can spend with his wife, since his schedule keeps him traveling for about four months each year. And his closest approaches to policymaking come in his conferences with Pepe Gordo, in the small, plywood-paneled office at the back of the plumbing-supply store that is Pelé's largest business venture.

Pepe Gordo was sitting at the desk when visitors arrived recently at the office. Pelé stood at his right side, talking into one of three telephones. There were pictures of Pelé on each wall, books about Pelé on the top shelf of a large, standing bookcase. Pelé finished one conversation and picked up another phone, looking slightly impatient. He had been home only three days after a month-long tour to New York and Mexico City; that night at 10, he would have to enter the team dormitory for "concentration" leading up to an important league game. He spoke into the phones that Pepe Gordo handed to him, and signed the papers Pepe Gordo pushed in front of him. He approached such duties with none of the enthusiasm he shows on the playing field. It is clear that he is not about to rival Arnold Palmer as an athlete-mogul. Typically, he does not even use his name in the title of his business.

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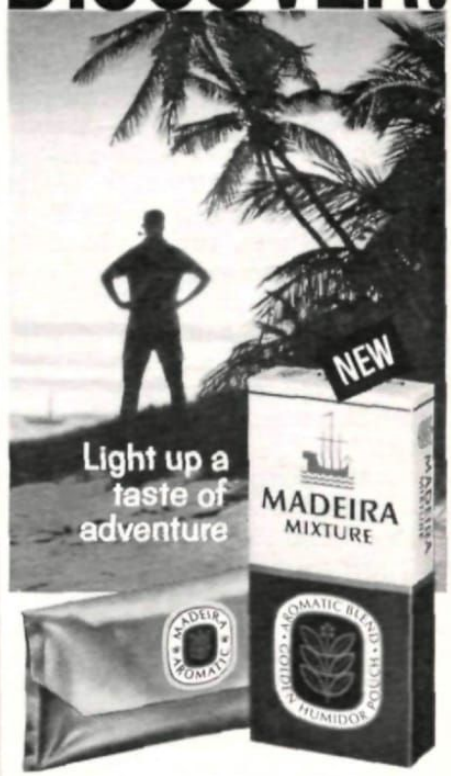

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Anyway, it isn't the money that hurts, it's the humanity. How would *you* like to have 60,588 people mad at you?

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PELÉ *continued*

The subject of his income was raised. Pepe Gordo looked up from the desk and grimaced. "We have something in our country," he said solemnly, "known as taxes. They are just as high as those in the U.S. And because of them, we don't disclose exact figures." What Pelé and his manager do disclose, reluctantly, is that Pelé makes more money from endorsements than he does as a soccer player. They also reveal that he works under a two-year contract with ample fringe benefits and bonus clauses.

Pelé plans to continue playing for about five more years, unless he is crippled before that time by enemy action. When he does leave soccer he will have few worries, but Pelé does not really seem to be looking forward to that day. When he mentioned quitting he leaned forward on a red leather chair in his office and stopped smiling, and for the first time it became apparent that Pelé's head lies just a little uneasy beneath the crown.

"I know all this has to end sometime," he said quietly. "I won't always have all this fame. But when I'm through as a player, I'll still be a man. I know I'll be well set in business and material things, and I hope I'll still have all these friends around me. But, of course, you can't tell. I guess that is when I'll separate my real friends from my fans."

He smiled at his own phrasemaking, but he did not seem to be eager to start the separating. His supremacy has recently been challenged by Portugal's Eusébio, hero of the World Cup, and it will undoubtedly be challenged by others soon. Pelé knows that someday, perhaps while he is injured, one of the challenges will be successful and soccer will be dominated by someone else. And, despite his occasional remarks about "consequences" and annoyances, Pelé likes it at the top and wants to stay there. "Ever since I first started playing," he said, "I always saw the shadow of somebody behind me, trying to beat me out of my position. Even when they started saying I was the king, I didn't feel completely secure. I still see that shadow behind me now. I know it's there, and I know, at all times, that I can never afford to let up." **END**

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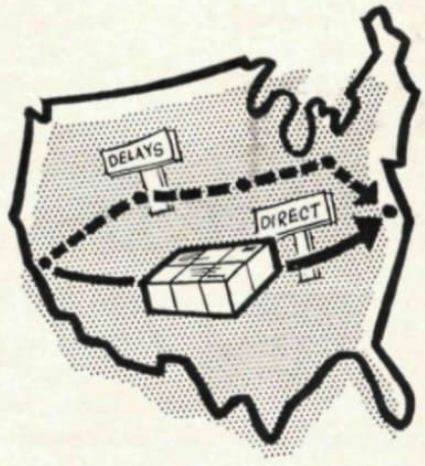

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