



Sevilla defender Javi Navarro (2ndR) holds the trophy next to coach Juande Ramos (R) after their triumph in the UEFA Cup final against Espanyol on penalties at Hampden Park in Glasgow on Wednesday.

From Pele to Becks

Football

AP, New York

Pele arrived on American soil in 1975 to give North American soccer life. David Beckham's arrival three decades later is meant to give it a lift.

The Brazilian soccer hero said Wednesday that Beckham's highly anticipated debut later this summer in the Los Angeles Galaxy is not unlike his own.

There's the same fevered excitement, reflected in the number of people inquiring about tickets. Both international icons found their way to cities comfortable in the spotlight. And passionate fans and curious observers alike are eager to see what Beckham will bring to the Galaxy.

And to soccer in America.

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After a brilliant international career, Pele joined the New York Cosmos of the North American Soccer League. His first game was played at Downing Stadium on New York City's Randall's Island, a mud pitch painted green.

Maldini gearing up for grand finale

AFP, Milan

AC Milan captain Paolo Maldini said Wednesday he expected to be fit to face Liverpool in next week's Champions League final in Athens.

The 38-year-old defender, who has struggled all season with a left knee injury, also revealed that he was set to extend his contract beyond this summer and play on for another year.

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AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti said he was confident Maldini would lead out the team in Athens next Wednesday.

"I think he'll make it," Ancelotti said.

"He has done some specific work on his knee and his condition is improving all the time."

With regards to his contract, Maldini said he was close to finalizing a new deal.

"I haven't yet signed a contract, but I have spoken to (AC Milan vice-president) Adriano Galliani and I don't think there will be a problem."

"I think I will need an operation at the end of the season, and after that I should be ready for another season. But that will definitely be my last."

Maldini, who has spent his entire career at Milan, has won seven Italian league titles and four European Cups.

His team was made up of players just out of college. Few had professional experience, much less less with international clubs.

"I remember when we played at San Jose, we lost 2 to 1," Pele recalled. "I said, 'My God, what am I going to do here?'

Pele primed the pump, though, and many European stars soon came to the United States. Germany's Franz Beckenbauer and Brazilian Carlos Alberto turned the Cosmos into the Yankees of professional soccer. The game took off, the Cosmos drawing a sellout crowd of nearly 78,000 to the new Giants Stadium in August 1977.

But the league struggled financially and by 1984 it had folded. It wasn't until the United States reached the World Cup in 1990 -- its first trip in 40 years -- that the sport again attracted a following.

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The 1994 World Cup, played in stadiums across the United States, drew a record 3.6 million spectators, and helped ensure the successful launch of Major League Soccer two years later.

Now the MLS is hoping Beckham will provide another shot of momentum.

"The thing with Beckham, they've got everything set up already," said Pele, who was in New York for a promotional event for GoTV, an English language soccer network in the United States. "The league is OK. The team is established. They have done a lot to get everything down."

Forget the muddy field in the middle of the East River. Beckham signed a five-year deal and will play in the dazzling Home Depot Center, one of many soccer-specific stadiums built for MLS teams in recent years. He will also

be joining a team that won league titles in 2002 and 2005.

"In this moment, the MLS is more prepared than it was then," said Enzo Francescoli, who led the Uruguayan national team in two World Cups and now is chief executive of GoTV.

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