

THE LATERAL VIEW

Pele and Messi in poetic mesh

IRESH ZAKER

Some hours before Lionel Messi once again rocked Bangladesh and the world on Saturday night, news started trickling in that Edson Arantes do Nascimento, much better known as Pele, had entered palliative care after his body had stopped responding to chemotherapy treatment for cancer.

It is difficult for me to explain the Brazilian legend's impact on me as a fledgling football fan to a generation of aficionados who have had ready access to live football, game footage, and statistical analysis from around the globe. Back when we started watching the game, the only live international football available to us was the World Cup, and Pele had already retired as a Selecao.

Yet through stories told by my forebears, books, rare football television shows and VHS recordings, the legend of Pele was formed in my impressionable mind.

A legend that was cemented by the film "Escape to Victory". When Pele scored with a bicycle kick at the end of the movie, I jumped and screamed as hard as I ever have during a real football match. Pele's remonstrations to Sylvester Stallone's character saying, "If we leave now, we lose more than a game. Please, Hutch!" still ring in my ear, decades after I last watched the film.



Argentina players celebrate after Lionel Messi opened the scoring against Austrlalia in a hard-fought 2-1 win for the Albiceleste in the World Cup Round of 16.



A legend that was enhanced in 1990 when he made a cameo appearance in the charity game held on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday. The stamina was not there but I was nearly brought to tears by his earnest yet gracefulgait.

The numbers and visual confirmation came later. The prodigious games to goals ratio. The wins over expected average statistics. The assists. The abundance of game footage and testimonials on YouTube. They only served to confirm what I had already gleaned from material of almost folklore accuracy. That this was one of the greatest athletes to have ever graced the face of our planet.

Still, no number of facts and figures can encapsulate the sheer joy and love for the game that the two syllables, Pele, generated in my childhood heart. He was my first football superstar, my first icon.

It was heartbreakingly poetic that on the night we learned of Pele's deteriorating condition, we witnessed another legend, in the twilight of his career, dig deep into his reserve of glorious, if slightly fading, skills to push his country forward for one more round.

When it comes to the so-called GOAT (Greatest of All Time) debate, I do not endorse it. I simply do not believe that you can compare players across different eras, regardless of how sophisticated the statistical metrics are employed.

I do believe, however, that there are millions of children around the globe, whose lives have been rendered infinitely more joyful by the legend of Leo. A legend gleaned from the stories of their forebears, and from a magical aura that runs far deeper than the facts and statistics that they will learn much later to justify their devotion to the little master from Rosario.

And that is why I believe that both Messi and Pele stand proudly as equals in the pantheon of the greatest to have ever played the game.

A difficult battle awaits, Messi warns

REUTERS, Al Rayyan

Argentina captain Lionel Messi and coach Lionel Scaloni predicted a tough but beautiful encounter with the Netherlands when the sides meet in Friday's World Cup quarter-final.

Argentina beat Australia 2-1 while the Netherlands defeated the United States 3-1 on Saturday to set up a tantalising clash between two of the great teams of world football who famously met in the 1978 World Cup final which the South Americans won.

"It's going to be a very beautiful game, with two historic teams. Sadly one team has to lose and we hope it's us who go through," Scaloni said in a news conference at 1 a.m. in Qatar after his side's last-16 victory over Australia.

Noting the age gap, Scaloni, 44, said he had since his early playing days been an admirer of Dutch coach Louis van Gaal, 71.

"He was an eminence back then. It's a proud moment to face him. We know how much he has done in football, and how many people have tried to copy him," he said.

"This is one of the pleasures that football gives you, especially as it is happening at a World Cup.

"We face a difficult opponent, like all of them, and we hope to do well. Maybe they are not shining like past Dutch teams, but they are very clear in what they do."

Messi, fresh from scoring and being named man-of-the-match against Australia on his 1,000th career appearance, was similarly clear about the task ahead.

"Now we have a really tough clash with Holland, who play very well," he told reporters.

"They have great players and a great coach, it's going to be hard-fought. It's the quarter-finals of a World Cup and if a World Cup has been tough from the start, it gets even tougher at this stage."

Scaloni said he was delighted with his players, who have won three games in a row at the World Cup in Qatar after their shock opening defeat by Saudi Arabia.

"We are satisfied. Today's match was very difficult. They put a suffocating pressure on us," he said of Australia, though he lamented his team did not extend their 2-0 lead before the Socceroos got an own goal and piled the pressure on for an equaliser.

"We shouldn't have suffered in the final minutes because we had chances to go further ahead," he said.

"But my players were born to play in these sorts of games."

Scaloni kept the injured Angel Di Maria on the bench, but said he hoped he would be fit to face the Dutch.

"Today he wasn't in condition to play. I didn't want to risk it. We hope that over the next few days he can improve and play in the next game," he said.



Shakib's class shines through again

SPORTS REPORTER

It may have been eight months since his last ODI eight, but it seemed to be just another day at the office for Shakib Al Hasan as he picked up his fourth ODI fiver to bundle out India for their second-lowest total of 186 in the first ODI against Bangladesh at the Sher-e-Bangla National stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Interestingly, Shakib's maiden ODI five-wicket haul had also come against India, but this time the champion cricketer hit a few more milestones.

His figures of five for 36 from 10 overs were the best by a left-arm spinner against India and the southpaw became just the second left-arm spinner to scalp five wickets against India after England's Ashley Giles had achieved the feat in 2002.

The 36-year-old also equalled Bangladesh left-arm spinner Abdur Razzak for most five-wicket hauls by a Bangladeshi, tied for second-most. Mustafizur Rahman is at the top with five fivers to his name in the 50-over format.

After skipper Liton Das won the toss and elected to bowl, Shakib picked up wickets in clusters to dismantle a strong Indian batting line-up on a pitch



Bangladesh veteran Shakib Al Hasan used all his wiles in the opening ODI against India, finding ways to use the sluggish surface to his advantage and record a five-wicket haul that set up Bangladesh's successful chase.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

that suited the Tigers' spinners

Liton introduced Shakib inside the first Powerplay and the veteran immediately adapted to the sluggish nature of the Mirpur surface.

He began by removing Indian skipper Rohit Sharma and elite batsman Virat Kohli in the eleventh over of the innings.

The Indian skipper was undone by a Shakib armer as Rohit waited for the ball to turn. But the ball held its line and went through the window between bat and pad before striking timber.

Just one ball later, Shakib removed the dangerous Kohli after he went for an uppish drive. Although the ball

was travelling fast, skipper Liton took a blinder, diving towards his right at cover to send the right-hander walking back to the pavilion in disbelief.

India did manage to recover from the early damage, riding on Shreyas Iyer and KL Rahul for a fifth-wicket stand. But, from the other end, pacer Ebadot Hossain also played his part to help Bangladesh remain on track, bagging four wickets.

Rahul and Washington Sundar kept things going for India, adding sixty for the fifth wicket. But just when the visitors were eyeing a competitive total, Shakib brought Bangladesh back into the game in his second spell.

In the 33rd over of the innings, Shakib removed Sundar after the left-hander handed a simple catch to point while going for a reverse sweep.

In his next over, Shakib bowled Shardul Thakur with an angling delivery that came in to the right-hander. Three balls later, he had trapped Deepak Chahar leg before, completing the five-wicket haul and raising hopes that Bangladesh could clinch a sixth win against India in the fifty-over format, which ultimately materialised courtesy of the brilliant calm shown by Mehedi Hasan Miraz after the exchange.

Pele says he's 'strong, with a lot of hope'

AFP, Sao Paulo

Brazilian football legend Pele said on Saturday that he feels "strong, with a lot of hope" despite medical problems that have kept the 82-year-old sports icon in the hospital with a respiratory infection.

Pele was hospitalized earlier this week amid ongoing colon cancer treatments.

"My friends, I want to keep everyone calm and positive," Pele said in an Instagram post. "I'm strong, with a lot of hope and I follow my treatment as usual."

Pele "has had a good response to care without any worsening in the clinical picture in the last 24 hours," doctors at Sao Paulo's Albert Einstein Hospital said in a statement.

Doctors made no reference to media reports earlier on Saturday that the three-time World Cup winner was receiving end-of-life care.

Pele was admitted to hospital earlier this week for what doctors said was a "re-evaluation" of the chemotherapy he has been undergoing since surgery to remove a colon tumor last September.

At the ongoing World Cup in Qatar, players expressed their support for Pele.

France striker Kylian Mbappe on Saturday tweeted: "Pray for the King."

England captain Harry Kane offered his support for Pele at a press conference ahead of his team's last-16 tie against Senegal.

"We send our best wishes to him and obviously all his family as well," said Kane. "He is an inspiration amongst our game and an incredible footballer and person. We wish him well."

Pele is the only footballer in history to win three World Cups -- 1958, 1962 and 1970 -- and is one of the most successful and popular sports figures of the 20th century.

'It was a pretty tough one to not go in'

AGENCIES, Doha

Australia's teenage sensation Garang Kuol became the youngest player since Brazilian great Pele to feature in the World Cup's knockout stages. And, very nearly, he became the youngest to score since him in 1958.

Qatar was an eye-opening experience the 18-year-old, set to join Premier League side Newcastle United. Sent into battle in the 72nd minute against Lionel Messi and Co, Kuol had only five touches but very nearly had the decisive one, turning and shooting deep in injury time with a shot that forced a terrific save from Emi Martinez.

"It was pretty close. It was a pretty tough one to not go in, and a good save," he said. "I didn't really see much of [it] ... I was turning around and just tried to shoot but on the replay, I could see the keeper rushed out. I think it's just a learning curve."

"I was telling myself that I'd come on and score a goal, and Arnie was telling me to come on and do the same thing. When I wasn't able to score I was very disappointed, but you sort of move on."

Kuol also insisted that Asian teams and those from other continents drastically overestimate the gap between themselves and the top nations.

"People think that [players] in Europe can fly or something. But we're all humans, we're all on two feet. I think the sport in Australia keeps growing, and it keeps producing better and better players as time goes by. In the future, you'll see a team that's at the same level as Argentina and Brazil."