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Ross, Andrew, 1956-

American Quarterly, Volume 59, Number 4, December 2007, pp. 1215-1223 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/aq.2007.0087

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The Ballad of Becks and Posh

Andrew Ross

Che Guevara is said to have declared that Latin America would be free only when it replaced baseball—which the U.S. Marines imported—with soccer. C. L. R. James would have disagreed with the argument, if not the underlying sentiment. Better than anyone, he showed (in Beyond a Boundary) how empowering it could be to indigenize a colonizer’s recreational pastime and make a domestic art of it.1 Ashis Nandy went even further by impishly declaring that cricket is really an Indian game accidentally discovered by the British.

The most recent advocate of Che’s position is, of course, Hugo Chávez, who is using all of his powers (and he has earned many) to convince baseball-crazed Venezuelans that their sporting passions should be redirected toward “the beautiful game.” But the proof of the pudding lies elsewhere, in the United States itself, where the demographic of America’s favorite pastime has shifted, irrevocably, in recent years. Almost a third of the country’s MLB players are now Latino or from Latin America.2 Their covert revolution, in the belly of the beast, suggests that James may have won the debate with Che hands down.

Further support can be gleaned from the career of soccer in the United States, where not a few of today’s children of immigrants will almost certainly be national stars in ten or fifteen years’ time. At least, that is, if the U.S. game follows the tradition by which virtually all of the world’s great soccer players have hailed from hard-knock origins. The prodigious achievements of women’s soccer, firmly rooted in suburbia’s strongholds, are another matter. Not for the first time, the North American development of civil society has surreptitiously illustrated one of Oscar Wilde’s maxims. In this case, it was his quip that soccer was perfectly good for rough girls but hardly the game for delicate boys3 (though, in another context, it might have been his observation that “the trouble with socialism is that it takes up too many evenings”).

Of course, more and more American boys, rough and delicate, play soccer up to the age of about fifteen, at which point the high-pressure competitive ideology of nationally sanctioned sports kicks in. Baseball and American football, after all, were nurtured by domestic elites as an explicit exercise in
exceptionalism. The aim was to forge a muscular national identity through sports that was distinct from Old World templates. The rise of basketball—even though its origins were Canadian—has been accompanied by a similar kind of treatment. Though it is assumed, as a result, that the United States is the world’s only superpower in each of these sports, the performance of American teams, when they deign to participate in international competition, is increasingly rather poor. Even so, it took the coming of the current Bush administration’s unilateralism and preemptive military adventurism to bring out the full irony of designating a domestic match-up as the “World Series.”

Soccer hating, which is ritually fomented by gatekeepers of the four pre-eminent sports (if ice hockey is to be included), is fueled by chauvinism and enforced by vested interests in the vast commercial industries that support them. By that same token, the professional classes in coastal cities have taken up the cause of soccer in recent years as if to prove their cosmopolitanism. Knowledge about the latest doings of Barcelona, Juventus, or, for maximum points, West Ham United, is worn like a badge of liberal honor in wine bars from Tribeca to Silverlake. A convulsive indifference reigns in all the sports bars in between. As a result, the debate about soccer in the United States has all the predictable character of a red state/blue state stand-off. Media attention, typically, has followed the money. The fractions of media capital that depend on global markets are investing heavily in the rest of the world’s favorite pastime, while those whose bread and butter is the national market are fiercely protective of the carefully managed attention spans of their audiences.

The latest attempt to change the national conversation occurred this summer with the noisy arrival, on these shores, of the sightly English phenomenon, David Beckham, and his equally telegenic spouse, Victoria (Posh of Spice Girls fame). In media terms, the event was like that of a closely tracked and long-heralded meteor hurtling to earth. The mundane narrative was that a better-than-average English player, with his peak performances behind him, had been bought by a worse-than-average American team, the L.A. Galaxy, who played in a distinctly unglamorous Los Angeles location (the Home Depot Stadium in Carson City) and were languishing near the bottom of the Western Conference of Major League Soccer (MLS). Indeed, the last image that ecumenical U.S. sports fans would have had of Beckham was of soccer’s blonde prince sobbing in the dugout after he was substituted in England’s doomed 2006 World Cup quarter final tie with Portugal. It would be his last game as the captain of England, and it also looked like the curtains coming down on his career.
But Brand Beckham was much too powerful to be sideswiped by failures on the field, no matter how abject and high profile. It had been built and embellished to extend across all media markets, and unlike Brand Jordan, was fully transcontinental. Courtesy of Posh, it also had the lineaments of pop culture aristocracy. Several years ago, when British tabloid coverage of Becks/Posh reached saturation point (a rare occurrence in that island’s media culture), Victoria made a point of being seen wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with “Bored with the Beckhams.” It was then that we knew that resistance to the Beckhams was futile.

Any indiscretions or shortcomings on his part—and there have been many—could be blamed on her, since her too-crass courtship of fame and publicity had earned her opprobrium far and wide. Though this profile could have been shed on coming stateside, it was magnified by her cringe-worthy exploits on the NBC prime-time special “Victoria Beckham: Coming to America,” a pared-down treatment of a concept originally slated to be a reality TV series. Over time, the public appetite for Posh-hating has allowed Becks to cultivate an odor of saintliness, albeit one that was sprayed on rather than generated by genuinely good deeds. On their own, they would each have been designated as has-beens a long time ago. Together, however, they are indestructible, and never more so, now that they have finally landed in the uplifted bosom of Hollywood. Ten years hence, it is hard to imagine Posh channeling Gloria Swanson: “I am big. It’s reality TV that got small.”

Of course, somewhere beneath the hoopla, Becks had to show he was still capable of performing on a world-class stage. That seemed unlikely after he was dropped first from the English national team and then from his club team, Real Madrid—a vengeful response from the club's directors after he signed for the Galaxy. Soon enough, and amid much public contrition on the part of the respective managers, he was recalled by both teams. By the end of the 2006–07 season, he was being acclaimed for restoring some of England’s pride on the international scene and, much more important, thanked all over Madrid for his role in saving the world’s most storied club from the ignominy of a fourth straight year without topping La Liga, Spain’s premier league. Once again, Becks came up smelling of rosewater, and though he was no longer at the top of his game, the deft power of his golden right foot—the object of an entire library of journalistic odes—had not waned sufficiently for him to be labeled yesterday’s man.

In any event, he was nowhere near to matching the shopworn profile of Pelé—the last world star to be imported to jump-start the U.S. game—who
came out of retirement in 1975 to play for the New York Cosmos. (Even so, it required the diplomatic intervention of soccer fan and secretary of state Henry Kissinger to smooth his transfer from Brazil.) Indeed, all of the marquee names who followed the Brazilian legend into the National American Soccer League (NASL)—Franz Beckenbauer, Giorgio Chinaglia, Carlos Alberto, Johan Cruyff, George Best, Eusebio, Johan Neeskens, Bobby Moore, Rodney Marsh, and Gordon Banks—had finished their European careers at the top rank by the time they signed lucrative American contracts with the likes of the Tampa Bay Rowdies, Boston Minutemen, Fort Lauderdale Strikers, or Washington Diplomats. Beckham, like them, had come for the money and the branding opportunities, but his international career was far from over.

Beckham was coming at a moment when the American sports and vanity media were ready to revisit an old story—will America finally embrace soccer? In many respects, the response was a replay of the perfect media storm created by Pelé’s arrival—his first game for the Cosmos was televised in twenty-two countries and covered by more than 300 journalists from around the world. Beckham’s first Galaxy game, against Chelsea, pretentiously billed as the World Series of Football, attracted equally massive worldwide media coverage. At the height of the Cosmos’ fame, the team was filling the brand-new Giants Stadium with more than 75,000 fans, and home gate figures in the NASL increased exponentially in the years following Pelé’s signing. So, too, Beckham’s arrival saw a prodigious rise in ticket sales at all the MLS franchises where he was scheduled to appear. To soccer’s backers, the prospect of breaching the NFL/MLB/NBA/NHL fortress walls seemed as alive as they were in the heady 1970s.

But much has changed in the game since the heyday of the NASL. At that time, the U.S. national team was a bit of a joke, and the international composition of the league’s teams was a novelty, more likely to be seen as a recipe for lightweight entertainment than a formula for producing top-quality team performance. The Cosmos attracted huge crowds as much for their Studio 54 lifestyle and studied hipness as for their prowess on the field. Today, by contrast, the United States has a highly respected national team, whose international successes rank them in the world’s top twenty (ranked seventeen as of August 2007), and many of its regulars play for top European clubs. So, too, in the course of the intervening decades, the game has gone global, spreading its emotional and economic reach into every corner of the globe. Top clubs all have an international roster of players and look much more like the cosmopolitan NASL sides of the 1970s and early 1980s. Soccer’s fandom
and the physical and social infrastructures that support it have gentrified. What used to be a game followed by working-class punters in flat, cloth caps is now the talk of the town among professionals and moneyed elites. Along the way, we saw the progressive blingification of player’s lifestyles, in response to the personality profiles required by sponsorship deals. When all is said and done, the freewheeling, showbiz culture of the Cosmos’ mercenaries (recruited from sixteen countries)—bankrolled, as they were, by the global-oriented Warner Communications group—was more like a prototype of today’s game than an aberration of the disco-happy Big Apple, as is often claimed.

The rise of Beckham was inseparable from these sea changes in the game’s structure and reach. He has been a full-bore creation of Neoliberal Soccer and living proof that its creative economy could add value to any enterprise that cared to link itself with him, and the game. As for core revenue, there was no denying the figures. After he moved from Manchester United to play in La Liga in 2003, Real Madrid replaced his old team as the world’s richest sports club, largely on the strength of skyrocketing sales of licensed shirts with his name on them. In advance of his first game for the Galaxy, the club had already sold a quarter of a million replica shirts, at $80 a pop. These sales alone were a substantial recoup of the club’s investment or, to be more precise, that of their reclusive owner, Philip Anschutz, the ultra-conservative Christian tycoon whose sprawling corporate empire includes half of the MLS franchises.

Becks had his predecessors in the realm of cross-media superstardom, none more mercurial than George Best, who also excelled for Manchester United, in the late 1960s. The wayward Northern Irishman was dubbed “the fifth Beatle” for his good looks and with-it personality, and his career as a virtuoso on the field and as a playboy after hours qualified him for Beckhamization **avant la lettre**. His 1976 signing with the Los Angeles Aztecs (partly owned by Elton John) came on the heels of Pelé’s arrival, and he also turned out for the Fort Lauderdale Strikers, San Jose Earthquakes, and the Detroit Express. Brilliant on the field and charismatic off it, Best was a devotee of the traditional vices of working-class soccer heroes: drinking, gambling, and womanizing. Each, in turn, but especially the first, proved to be his undoing, slowly but steadily ruining his career. Becks is too much of a neoliberal success story to be hampered by such pitfalls of the old soccer culture. Best’s forgiving fans had a soft spot for his fallibility, but his (OCD-afflicted) successor does not really have fans so much as Beckham watchers, who marvel at his corporate professionalism and the savvy with which he can connect sponsors and investors with the public’s eyeballs and wallets.
The Irishman’s human failings meant that he regularly woke up in bed with the world’s most beautiful women (Miss World 1973 was stripped of her title after an all too-public romp with him), and this was a brash habit that won him near-universal plaudits. By contrast, the media record evinces an intense ambivalence about Victoria Beckham as a stable love object, and not just on account of Beck’s reputation as a dedicated family man. The public’s romance with her husband revolves around a fixation on his beauty as a thing in and for itself, and is thus genuinely iconic. With Best, it was always about what his beauty could procure for him, and us, vicariously. Notably, Becks took the occasion of his first Galaxy press conference to thank various publics for their “love.” “I get that,” he observed, “from the gay community around the world,” and, like a good American politician, he added, “from the black community, and the Jewish community, because I’m half Jewish.” In contrast with these carefully scripted words, the likely lads of an earlier generation (The Beatles, for example, in their cheeky heyday, before the heavy-lidded pretensions of psychedelia kicked in) saw every encounter with the press as a prime opportunity for improvised self-irony. As for Best, he got to coin his own self-mocking epitaph for a career spent in the public eye. “I spent a lot of money on booze, birds, and fast cars. The rest I just squandered.”

Becks’s looks are transfixative, but that does not mean they have no utilitarian value. As a designated poster boy for metrosexuality, he has gratified every sponsor’s campaign to boost the burgeoning market for masculine grooming. The high voice helped, but his willingness to appear in a vacation sarong, submit to the hairstyle of the month, and pout, at short notice, for a thousand photo shoots, went a long way to softening the parameters of masculinity accepted by the average male sports fan. Moreover, the Beckham effect is widely seen as meritocratic at its core; with a little hair gel, body toning, and cuffs worn at all the right lengths, straight men could forgo the Queer Eye to do their self-fashioning thing. Beckham’s “new man” was a passport to a different country, but not a world away from Oscar Wilde’s “delicate boys.”

While all the irony has been stomach-pumped out of Becks, his partner in fashion crime has, at times, excelled in acknowledging where public indulgence meets its parodic limits. This self-knowledge augured well for Victoria Beckham, who arrived in the United States at a time when the public patience for Paris Hilton and other celebutantes was wearing thin. At least the former pop star Posh had done something to earn her fame. She had been a working girl and had acquired international capital as a result of her talents. Her vital contribution to Brand Beckham allowed the couple to feed a public hunger that had been famished by the death of Princess Diana. Those who generously
interpreted their *noblesse oblige* toward the press as a kind of social responsi-

ability were less willing to rationalize Hilton's grabby work ethic. Indeed, the
task of coming up with a crafty apologia for Paris will fall to future American

Even so, no one expects Victoria Beckham to triumph easily in her new

habit. She reigned as catwalk queen of the WAGS (acronym for the high-living

Wives and Girlfriends of England’s players), and as the duchess of Beckingham

Palace (the couple’s bountiful English country house), but she will not stand

out in the neighborhood of world-class shoppers and Botox addicts that she

now calls home. The critical response to her NBC TV special (aired in July)

was devastating. The *New York Post*’s Linda Stasi was especially beside herself:

“It is an orgy of self-indulgence so out of whack with reality that you will sit

there slack-jawed at the gall of these people who think we are that stupid.” The

backfire suggested a new low in celebrity culture, rather than the upgrade that

had been promised. It remains to be seen whether the power couple will allow

themselves (but do they really have a choice?) to submit to the portmanteau

celebrity name (as in Brangelina, Bennifer, and Vaughniston) by which their

best friends in Hollywood, Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes (TomKat), are also

known. Some wits have already proposed Dosh as a suitable moniker.

The ever-lucky Beckham graced his first start for the Galaxy against DC

United with a trademark (free kick) goal and an assist, and suddenly his astro-

nomical salary ($5.5 million annually—plus a gilded share in all merchandise

receipts) looked as if it might have been justified. The Galaxy is only one of

three clubs to take advantage of the MLS’s new designated player rule, which

allows teams to pay high-priced stars over and beyond the league’s salary cap

of $400,000. The acquisition of these big name performers—the Red Bulls

have Juan Pablo Ángel and Claudio Reyna, and Chicago Fire has Cuauhtémoc

Blanco—is seen as crucial to the continued growth of the MLS. Before the

new rule was implemented, the league had seen the likes of Luis Hernández,

Lothar Matthäus, Youri Djorkaeff, and Hristo Stoichkov, but, like their NASL

predecessors, they were all in the twilight of their careers. More *galacticos* are

expected to follow Beckham and Blanco.

Despite that cheerful start, Beckham’s subsequent presence on the field did

not appreciably improved his new team’s league record, and the injuries visited

on his overtaxed, frequently flown body took their toll, absenting him from

regular play. As they neared the end of the season, the Galaxy looked more

and more like occupying the bottom spot. But along the way, a significant

event occurred in the match with the Red Bulls at Giants Stadium, home of

the Cosmos’ greatest triumphs. Beckham was roundly booed by the home
crowd, a 66,237 gate that dwarfed the usual attendance of less than 12,000. The catcalls were hardly unusual at a soccer match, and it certainly was not the first time Becks had heard taunts directed at him. But this was a New York kind of boo—a combustible, chemical reaction to L.A. glitz and hype, conjoined with visceral scorn for the preening and posing of the Beckham road show. Those extra 55,000 spectators had come to ogle at, but also to rain on, the MLS’s all too desperate parade.

While Becks assisted on three of the Galaxy’s goals, the player who prevailed in the Bull’s 5–4 victory was Juan Pablo Ángel, who reinforced his position as the league’s top scorer with another two goals. The result resonated most with the Bulls’ new Colombian fans, whose coethnic loyalty to Ángel has upped the emotional ante (and the gate) at home games since his arrival at the beginning of the 2007 season. This is even more the case with Cuauhtémoc Blanco, whose Mexican following in Chicago is already being seen as core revenue for the Fire. Blanco debuted at about the same time as Beckham, without any of the national hullabaloo, but, of the two players, his arrival may prove more significant in the long run. The lesson is not one that MLS managers can afford to ignore. Indeed, they established a Latino Advisory Board in July to actively court Hispanic fans on behalf of a league these fans have habitually spurned in favor of “home” ties (in Mexico and other leagues south of the border). At least one Mexican entrepreneur, José Vergara, owner of Chivas of Guadalajara, and Deportivo Saprissa of Costa Rica, saw the potential for huge profits. In 2005, he entered a satellite team, Chivas USA, into the MLS. Composed mostly of Latin players, and enjoying a large Latino fan base, the Chivas share the Home Depot Stadium in Carson with none other than the L.A. Galaxy.

The future of men’s soccer in the United States lies less in the chiseled features of Anglo princes like Beckham than in the enduring passions of immigrant communities and the ethnic talent they will generate and support. It is a fair bet to predict that MLS soccer will follow the same path of Latinization as baseball did. If that happens, then we can say with some justification that both Che and C. L. R. were right after all.

Notes


