

Banking on Beckham

David Beckham has already left his mark on the game of soccer, but what will his U.S. legacy be?

Well, I was all ready to see it. Billboards in Dallas had advertised it for weeks. Pictures of it were splashed on every news-cast. It had even been the subject of a national TV special. I wondered frankly if I would appreciate it when I saw it.

"It" was the much-ballyhooed coming to America of David Beckham. More specifically, it was to be Beckham's first road game with the LA Galaxy—a SuperLiga match against FC Dallas.

Yet, David Beckham was nowhere to be seen when the Galaxy took the pitch. In fact, when they boarded the plane for their first road trip in the Beckham era of spreading the soccer gospel, he wasn't there. A turned ankle suffered in one of his last matches with Real Madrid prevented him from playing. Even if he weren't playing, it seemed that his purported role as soccer's ambassador to the U.S. would require making the trip with his team instead of hanging back in the Hollywood Hills.

It is perhaps an inevitable result of the risk of promoting one man as the savior of a sport. Just what David Beckham is supposed to "save" American soccer from is unclear. If anything, it is David Beckham who needs to be saved from the numerous local youth soccer players who turned out in Dallas to see the most famous name in contemporary soccer and left without even a glimpse.

The fallout was immediate and instructive. FC Dallas and the Galaxy talked about adding a match somewhere in the schedule so that Beckham's fans in North Texas could see him this year. His next stop in his "Coming to America Tour" was supposed to be Toronto, which he missed as well. Nevertheless, MLS apparently learned its lesson from the disappointment in Dallas and at least had him travel to Toronto. They at least reminded fans of the standard policy for sports events that tickets do not come with any guarantee that a player will play the match.

The experience in Dallas underscored the confusion of what Beckham's

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role really is. If he's supposed to be a pop star and bring attention to soccer by getting on the gossip pages, it doesn't matter if he's injured, but he should still show up and do whatever a celebrity does. If, however, he is to be an athlete and help his team win, then the promotions by MLS, the Galaxy and road opponents should not be so Beckham-centric. To truly succeed, the play on the field, and not just that of Beckham, will have to be the sales pitch to sports fans.

Beckham the celebrity began turning into Beckham the athlete several weeks

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later when he scored off a free kick in the SuperLiga semifinal against DC United and then recorded two assists in the Galaxy's MLS match against the Red Bulls at the Meadowlands. But it is still unclear which role Beckham himself prefers. He will find, though, that Beckham the athlete will be more readily forgiven for an injury, a press conference faux pas, or the antics of a celebrity wife, then will his celebrity alter ego.

And just what is the role of Victoria Beckham—Posh Spice to anyone listening to the radio in the '90s—in all of this? Since coming to America, Becks has been photographed and seen more with his wife than on the pitch with his teammates. At this point she appears destined to become the latest Hollywood female celebrity who sits in a prominent seat at sporting events in Los Angeles but whose own career accomplishments are vague—in other words, the role historically filled by Dyan Cannon. What's worse, is that in her public appearances Victoria Beckham has been more Surly Spice than Posh Spice. Note to Posh: Your husband is making \$50 million a year. Despite a lack of public clamoring for a Spice Girls reunion,

your old group is getting back together. Your friend Scary Spice just mothered a child with Eddie Murphy (who starred in his own version of Coming to America). Life is good. It's okay to smile! Instead, you wear the same expression that I would have if I found out my neighbors were TomKat.

It is certainly possible for MLS to use the visibility of Beckham (and Posh too if she can channel Eva Longoria and at least appear to enjoy it) to showcase its sport, as the match at the Meadowlands demonstrated – though it remains to be seen if the true soccer fan will put up with scores of 5-4 (Red Bulls vs. Galaxy) or 6-5 (Galaxy vs. FC Dallas) any more than true baseball fans would continue

to turn out to see games that ended 30-3 (Rangers vs. Orioles). But one man does not a team, a league or a sport make. If Beckham draws people to the MLS matches, MLS and its clubs need to be prepared to make fans want to come back, or be happy that they came out, even when there is no Beckham.

MLS does have some things going for it, including under-utilized, very modern, fan-friendly new stadiums. Pizza Hut Park in Frisco, Texas, is a magnificent facility. So is Toyota Park in Chicago, and so are others that have been newly built or are in development. They are the type of intimate sports stadiums that the American sports fan hasn't historically experienced.

However, MLS needs to be careful to use Beckham only as a catalyst to encourage people to experience these facilities and the fan experience rather than focusing only on Becks as the greatest show on earth. The true sports fan is a pretty loyal breed; the pop culture celebrity tracker is not. Whether the Beckham experiment works will depend on his ability to capture the attention of the former rather than the latter. ■

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