

Fabulous Pele – does he really mean it?

By David A Service

When Pele, known as Pele O Rei (the king) bade an emotional farewell to international football at the Maracana Stadium in Brazil, a crowd of 150,000 chanted “Stay, stay.” For them it was a tragedy that the greatest footballer of his generation would no longer play in his green and yellow national colours.

It had been only two years previous to this, in 1966, that a single kick of the ball from the man known as the “Black Pearl” in the same Maracana Stadium had brought scenes of drama, jubilation and pure showmanship unparalleled in the history of Soccer.

Santos had been awarded a penalty in the 78th minute of a match against Vasco da Gama and Vasco’s keeper was waiting on his line to face it. The ball flashed into the goal, but as soon as the keeper had stopped shaking his head in despair he took off the jersey he had worn underneath his shirt and handed it to the scorer, who pulled it on and did a lap of honour amid frenzied scenes.

The scorer was of course the man who won universal fame and adulation as, simply, “Pele”, and the jersey the keeper had handed him bore the number 1000 on front and back. That penalty kick had brought him his 1000th goal in first-class football.

Only two other players had also reached this figure: Puskas the Hungarian player and Binder from Austria. But Pele had reached his total at an incredible average of 77 goals a year. A few days after the match he was invited to meet the President of Brazil and caused the biggest traffic jam Rio had ever known.

Pele, whose father was a professional footballer until injury cut short his career, joined his local club when he left school at 14 and two years later was signed by Santos. He made the senior side within a year and then forced his way into the national side, leading Brazil’s attack against Argentina in Rio.

In 1958, at 17, he became the youngest player in history to win a World Cup medal, scoring two great goals in the 5-2 Final victory against Sweden in Stockholm.

Pele was acrobat and conjurer combined, with an insatiable appetite for goals. He had incredible close ball control, a bewildering array of body swerves and feints. He dribbled brilliantly, passed with great vision and accuracy and had a fine shot in each foot.

But despite all the adulation and honours, Pele always remained unspoilt and completely approachable. He was retiring yet friendly, sincere and charming. However great the pressures he was always polite and courteous.

And above all he has given hours of Soccer entertainment of a quality which may never be surpassed.