

Lessons from an Enduring Icon

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While most ageing icons eventually fade from view, Pelé remains at the centre of it all: an influential, universally recognised and respected personality around the world. How has this enduring legend thrived in today's "I want it now" culture, and what can marketers learn from him?

The closing ceremony of the London Olympic Games featured an unmistakably Brazilian twist. To mark the symbolic passing of the Games from London 2012 to Rio 2016, the stage was suddenly awash with vibrant colour, spectacular dancers and pounding samba drums.

And while that was enough to get the sell-out crowd whooping with excitement, it was the

emergence of a certain 71-year-old man that truly sent the 80,000 in the stands into a frenzy. That's because the 71-year-old in question was Edson Arantes do Nascimento, better known as Pelé, Brazil's favourite son and the "King of Soccer".

Even the least ardent football fan can understand the scale of Pelé's accomplishments: the youngest-ever winner of a World Cup, the only player to win the trophy three times and the only footballer to score more than 1,200 professional goals. FIFA has named him Footballer of the Century, and he is the International Olympic Committee's Athlete of the Century.

Pelé is a rare breed: one of the world's last living icons whose timeless story still inspires people across the globe. Fifty-four years after helping Brazil win the World Cup, he's still able to draw crowds of screaming fans and pick up honorary degrees from universities he's never attended: mostly for what he's doing today, not his past achievements.

Not bad for a commercial superstar whose family was so poor that – as a child – he had to play football with a ball of bundled socks and string. When the BLINK team met Pelé at the Hotel Unique in São Paulo, it became clear that passion is the key to his enduring appeal. We asked him to share his advice on staying relevant at a time when attention is short-lived and fads are abundant.

Lesson #1: Be kind and respect everyone

When you meet him in person, the one thing that stands out about Pelé is his star power. But despite being a sporting legend for more than half a century, the man is also remarkably humble, emanating an easy-going charm and openness that puts everyone around him at ease.

Indeed, before we start our interview, Pelé is more than happy to chat with our crew about the teams they support and ask for their thoughts on the latest developments in international football. He is also keen to be part of the group. Upon seeing the huge throne that we had prepared, he quietly asks: "Do you have a smaller chair? Because this one is too big..."

Pelé knows how far a throne is from his impoverished beginnings in the district of Três

Corações, Brazil. As a child, Pelé found joy and escape in football and became dedicated to the game. As he grew older, he was the one who practiced while others went to the beach.

“Since I was young, I knew that I needed to stay in good shape to be a good player,” he says. Pelé credits his father as being a big influence on his approach to the game, making sure the young player combined his competitiveness and excellence with compassion. “I used to play football with the kids on the street, and my father used to watch. Once, I played some tricks on some kids, and my father told me, ‘Listen, this is not good. The gift you have to play football is a gift from God. Don’t tease the kids. You must teach and help them. You won’t become anything if you are not a nice person’”.

Lesson #2: Don’t think you’re the best

Pelé’s attitude toward his gift, his teammates and even members of competing teams quickly won him lifetime fans around the world. Football, he argues, is a global game because it can be played by anyone. “What makes football so special”? he asks. “It is a pastime for everyone. It doesn’t matter if you are small, strong, fat – everyone can play football. You have the pros, but it’s a game everyone can play.”

Pelé was intensely aware of this, and worked on his fitness when many others thought he would ride on his glory. “That’s another lesson that I learned from my father. God gave me the gift to play good football, but if I’m not in good shape, I will fail,” he says. Pelé continues to apply this philosophy in his business dealings today. “You can use this for sport or for business; I think it’s the same. First of all, respect people. Secondly, don’t think you are the best, because if you do, then you start to lose. This is the same for any condition, any profession,” he says.

Lesson #3: Keep a clear eye

on what you really care about By the 1970s, Pelé was officially retired and thought he’d stay that way. Then he got an offer he couldn’t refuse: come back to help get football noticed in the U.S. To Pelé, this wasn’t about playing again – it was about his tremendous desire to bring more young people to football. Having never played football outside Brazil in

his entire life, Pelé signed with the New York Cosmos in 1975 and helped raise the game's profile in a country where it had previously been all but ignored.

Fundamentally, the secret of Pelé's long success on and off the pitch has been to make choices based on what he believes is truly important. Indeed, conscious of his position as a role model, Pelé looks for commercial opportunities that allow him to engage younger generations."I always think that if I stay as an example to young people, that will be good. A lot of players think only about how they can make money right now. I think that this is my example, to encourage the next generation."

Lesson #4: Remember where you came from

Even while playing professionally, Pelé used his celebrity to draw attention to global issues, keeping his focus on those efforts that could affect real change. As an active player for Brazil's professional team, Santos Futebol Club, his star appeal was so powerful that it triggered a two-day truce in Nigeria's civil war. Fighters on both sides agreed that there was nothing more important than watching Pelé play in Lagos.

Today, Pelé tirelessly directs his passion to charity work, inspiring others by demonstrating the power of individual potential and displaying an infectious optimism. Pelé was appointed as UN ambassador for ecology and the environment in 1992 and has worked as a UNICEF Goodwill ambassador since 1995.

He also helped pass legislation in Brazil, intended to reduce corruption in Brazilian football. The law became known as "Pelé Law". Earlier this year, British Prime Minister David Cameron asked him to help promote the international campaign, Race Against Hunger.

Pelé is equally passionate about promoting his home country at a time when it will soon host the biggest sporting events on earth: the Confederations Cup in 2013, the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics in 2016."I worked for the World Cup Committee in 1994, 2002 and 2010 in other countries. Now, it is time to do something for my country – I have to do something! These events are very important for the country. The next four years will be important in changing people's perception of Brazil."

Pelé's work will focus on promoting what Brazil, the world's sixth largest economy, can

achieve. “Brazil was always the best on the field, but now we must show that we are also the best off the field,” he says.

Lesson #5: Do good now. Don't be satisfied with past achievements

Certainly the next few years will create a vibrant legacy for Brazil, but – for Pelé – the future is about what he can do now. He explains clearly that he would prefer to be remembered for his role in changing lives, not just for his sporting achievements.

“The future is now. What you do now for the future is the best thing,” he says. “Remember me not as a great player but as a human being and for what I have tried to do for future generations.”

After our interview, Pelé thanked everyone for their time, making a point of shaking hands with everyone in the room. It's only a small gesture, but one that sums up the man perfectly. For all the cups and medals he has won on the football pitch, Pelé is still the kid who grew up in Três Corações, playing with a ball made of bundled socks tied with string.

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