

PELÉ AT THE NSCAA CONVENTION

The legendary Edson Arantes do Nascimento—“Pelé”—was a featured speaker at the National Soccer Coaches Association of America’s 51st annual convention in Cincinnati on January 15-18.

He appeared Friday afternoon on a panel that discussed “Professional Soccer: 20 Years After Pelé Left His Mark.” On Saturday he returned to explore the topic “Youth Soccer: What Is Best For The Kids?” then later to present checks from convention fundraisers benefiting charities for disadvantaged kids: The Walt Chzowych Memorial Fund, the NSCAA Foundation, the Special Olympics, the Eurosports Passback Program donating uniforms to under-privileged players, the American Athletic Union, Soccer in the Streets and the Sonny Carter Scholarship.

In his appearance Friday, he was greeted by a standing ovation as he entered the Albert B. Sabin Convention Center’s Ballrooms A, B & C—which were packed to capacity—and joined A-League founder Francisco Marcos, and Major League Soccer chief Doug Logan in a discussion moderated by soccer journalist John Polis.

“My dream was to play like my father,” Pelé reminisced, telling how his dad played on a local team in their neighborhood. There, as a little boy, Pelé promised himself, “I’m going to play like my father.”

Play he did, becoming a national hero as well as an international superstar, wowing the world as a 17-year-old phenomenon at the 1958 World Cup, returning again and again in 1962 and 1966 as Brazil rewrote the book on how international soccer is played. He told the NSCAA crowd how he decided to retire in 1970 at age 29. However, “Brazil defeated Mexico”—so, Pelé decided to wait until 1972. But then his home club, Santos, won the Brazilian national championships, and retirement was put off until 1973, then 1974.

As he prepared to hang up his cleats in 1975, incredible financial offers came for him to play professionally in Europe and Mexico. At the same time, he was asked to help boost the fledgling North American Soccer League by joining the New York Cosmos, where he would have a chance to bring big-time soccer to the United States.

“My conscience said I had to come to the U.S. to help,” he told the crowd. “For my soul, I knew it was better to come to America for half the money. It was my chance to give something back to the sport. My second dream became to make soccer big in the United States.”

“He’s the reason a lot of us are here today,” said Logan, who said the MLS learned from NASL that it was a mistake to ignore the American player— something the MLS has avoided by headlining such U.S. National Team members as Alexi Lalas.

The panel then descended into a discussion on player movement restrictions in the USISL, the A-League and MLS. “Who will win the 1998 World Cup?” interrupted a member of the press.

Pelé fielded that question with a bemused smile, responding, “the United States.” That prompted cheers and applause from the packed ballrooms. Pelé smiled and went on to list merits of various contenders: “Brazil has a good chance, an excellent team,” he said, as do Nigeria and Egypt. “France has a good team and will be in the finals. England has improved a lot. Germany is always there. Italy, you must respect. Argentina has a good chance.”

On Saturday, Pelé returned to the packed ballrooms’ podium with Polis, but this time was joined by soccer educator Tom Fleck, author and former Canadian national coach Tony Waiters and the renowned Bobby Howe, coaching director for the U.S. Soccer Federation’s youth division, the USYSA.

Fleck described soccer growth in the U.S. as an “explosion.” Waiters called the MLS and USISL the “greatest thing today” because both give soccer kids role models and heroes. Howe credited the spread of small-sided play for the recent surges in growth.

Waiters agreed—hardly a surprise, as at the convention he pushed repeatedly for youth soccer grams to institute small-sided play all the way up to Under-14. He says Under-10s and Under-12s both need to play small-sided, waiting until age 12 to play full-sided soccer. Pre-adolescents need the additional touches on the ball and a lessening of emphasis on positions, tactics and winning—in favor of developing player technique.

Pelé recounted a 1977 conversation with New York Jets quarterback Joe Namath. “In American football, only the quarterback moves the ball,” Pelé remembered saying, “but in soccer, everybody gets to move the ball.” Soccer is booming in America, he said, because of the enjoyment that kids derive from playing.

“How can we balance the win-win-win mentality versus enjoyment?” asked Polis.

“Winning is part of life,” said Pelé. “Avoid pressuring kids. It is different in Brazil where kids play in the streets and weeds. In the U.S., everything is organized. The kids have shoes and teams and uniforms. In Brazil, kids have more free time to play.” Additionally, Brazilian soccer does not face competition from all the other sports offered to American children—baseball, roller-blading, track, basketball, football, hockey, volleyball— not to mention spelling-bees, music recitals, art and home computers.

On the other hand, Pelé contrasted U.S. youth soccer to Japan where he said kids sometimes get so depressed when they lose that they commit suicide. “Losing is normal,” said Pelé. “We must teach kids how to lose.”

What, asked Polis, causes so many American players to drop out of soccer at ages 12 and 14?

“My idea of coach of the year,” said Fleck, “is the coach who has the most players back the next year—back excited about the game—and not because of his win-lose record.”

“Kids drop out,” said Howe, “because they are not having fun or else they don’t like the coach. We must improve the environment.”

“Coaches need to help give players confidence,” said Pelé. “Too many coaches worldwide kill players’ enthusiasm.”

Waiters. “Delay the importance of winning at the early ages.”

“We must be facilitators so the kids can play,” said Howe. “We must structure their spontaneity”—particularly since American kids are unused to setting up their own sand-lot games, their own pick-up matches and their own small-sided games where whoever shows up plays—without coaches or referees.

“We mustn’t make it too boring,” said Fleck. “It shouldn’t be too complex. Did you hear Pelé say that we must bring out their creativity?”

The discussion turned to the fact that players in Brazil can turn professional at age 14.

“Here in America,” asked Polis, “are we separating the haves and have-nots at age 9 -- too early?”

“Absolutely,” said Fleck. “We tell this 10-year-old she is the greatest thing since sliced bread. We tell three or four other 10-year-olds they aren’t as good.” Fleck also said he opposes the practice of highly skilled kids ‘playing up into higher age divisions.

Pelé said that separating out the “best” for special teams before age 14 is too early. Even in Brazil, the best of the best—the future professionals—don’t start getting culled out until 14-15, he said. In Brazilian society, 15- and 16-year-olds are finished with school and begin to earn a living. He some youth tournaments in Brazil accept teams of “select” 11- and 12- and 13-year-olds. But these aren’t select teams for season-long play or for a traveling season of weekend games, he said.

Waiters worried about what he called a “danger to be labeling players even at 13 and 14.” Most future stars can’t be identified at that age and it’s unhealthy to be telling certain kids they’re “good” to the exclusion of kids who mature later, he said.

“How can we prevent burn-out?” asked a member of the press.

“The best players are well-rounded,” said Fleck. “There’s nothing wrong with letting 9-, 10- and 11-year-olds make additional choices.”

The afternoon session took an awkward break with a near mob seeking autographs from Pelé. Excitedly, some passed to him any available piece of paper, including newspapers, programs and magazines. Repeatedly asked by Polis to clear the stage, most did with only those nearest to Pelé holding their ground until staff from the NSCAA and the Umbro sponsors asked them repeatedly to leave the stage. Then, Fleck, Howe and Waiters left the podium as Pelé and Polis made the presentations of money raised for a variety of programs helping disadvantaged kids.

Did I get an autograph?

It was tempting.

The 56-year-old Pelé reportedly is in the battle of his life, publicly confronting greed, corruption and cronyism threatening the future of Brazilian soccer—at risk to his personal safety. Standing 50 feet away from this living legend, holding a new soccer ball purchased for my 10-year-old, there was a temptation to join the rabble on stage and get that famous signature on my kid’s ball. But I was close enough to see the strain on Pelé’s face, the discomfort as he gamely accommodated the most obnoxious who had rushed the stage despite the requests of those at the microphone.

The majority packing the ballrooms chose to respect this great man.

It was just enough to be in the same room with him.

After all, because of him, “the beautiful game” is exploding in the land we love.

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