

AMERICAN SOCCER WITH A SINGAPORE FLAVOUR

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WHEN David Beckham arrived in the US last week, he was greeted by a rock soundtrack, shrieks of excitement from hundreds of fans, confetti and all.

His presence should give soccer a much-needed lift in the country, where the sport has long been the poor cousin to baseball, basketball and American football.

Twenty seven years ago, Kalwant Sandhu set foot on the US without the slightest bit of fanfare "Golden Balls" enjoyed.

On a football scholarship by the University of San Francisco - one of the first Singaporeans to earn one, the St Joseph's Institution old boy only had soccer and studies on his mind.

POPULARITY

Even now, he is nowhere near Beckham in the popularity stakes.

But he is, in his own little way, making his contribution to the soccer development in the US for more than two decades.

He started off coaching the club team (women's) at the University of San Francisco in 1982, and soon got the hang of it.

He would later join the coaching staff at San Francisco United Soccer Club (later renamed San Francisco

All-Blacks and San Francisco Bay Seals) in 1991 and for the next eight years, play a part in nurturing some young talents who went on to bigger things.

Sandhu said: "A few of our players went into the professional ranks in the US and Europe.

"Our US-born goalkeeper, Epsen Baardsen, played for Tottenham and Norway.

"Other notables are former US international and Chicago Fire player C J Brown and LA Galaxy goalkeeper Joe Cannon."

These days, you will still find him doing his bit for football at the grassroots level, devoting two to three hours every weekday to coaching kids.

The 50-year-old father of three said: "I like to deal with youth players.

"I enjoy seeing them develop to become good players. It's a great feeling."

Sandhu, who received his US citizenship in 2001, currently resides in a place in Santa Clara County called Mountain View, where he is also vice-chairman of the city's Human Relations Commission.

He now co-runs a soccer academy there called MP Strikers Football Club, catered to young players aged between six and 10.

Beckham stands to collect £128 million from LA Galaxy over five years.

Sandhu is promoting youth soccer purely out of his love for the game, for MP Strikers FC is a non-profit entity.



◆ Left, Kalwant (right) walking out of the players' tunnel during a Football Aid match at Elland Road. Above, Kalwant with some of his young charges at the MP Strikers Football Club academy. Below, some of the boys in action.

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- Kalwant Sandhu

ARE you promoting soccer or other sports in other countries? Or do you know of anyone who does? We would like to hear from you. Please e-mail details to npsports@sph.com.sg

'Beckham's coming is good and bad'

DAVID BECKHAM'S presence in the Major Soccer League can be a double-edged sword.

Kalwant Sandhu is certainly hoping that the positives will far outweigh the negatives.

For sure, he feels that Beckham can give the sport a boost. But he believes that the media have gone overboard with his arrival.

He said: "The TVs are following him everywhere. I hope the club will not be under pressure to rush him back from his injury.

"Of course, I want him to do well in this country. But at the same time, I'm also worried that star players at the end of their careers will come flocking here to look for their final huge pay packet.

"Star players like Pele came to play in the North American Soccer League. But that couldn't stop the League from folding either."

While Sandhu may be in the US, it has not stopped him from following the fortunes of his favourite teams elsewhere in the world. That includes the team closest to his heart: Singapore.

He said: "Youth development is something that Singapore needs to emphasise on.

"I look at teams like Indonesia and Thailand playing in the Asian Cup. Although they qualified as co-hosts, I feel that Singapore should be there as well."

Besides Singapore, Sandhu is also a big fan of Leeds United.

Six years ago, he realised his dream of playing at Elland Road when he signed up for Football Aid, an initiative aimed at raising funds for charity.

Since then, he has been playing at the ground every year.

He said: "I was ecstatic when I first found out that I was going to Elland Road.

"I met players like Rio Ferdinand and Danny Mills, and also spoke to former players such as Peter Lorimer and John McClelland.

"Even Lee Bowyer was really nice!"

- GARY LIM

Just recently, they also engaged Frans Hoek, a renowned coach who has worked with Barcelona, Ajax Amsterdam and the Dutch national football association, to conduct a week-long session at the club.

At the same time, Sandhu also oversees the team at Mountain View High School, where one of his three sons is studying.

And Sandhu, who holds a National Diploma from the National Soccer Coaches of America Association, doesn't just talk the talk.

Back during his younger days, Sandhu was a formidable player.

From 1977 to 1979, he turned out for Tampines Rovers in local top-flight football before he left for his studies.

Among some of the more illustrious names he played with were former internationals Quah Kim Song, R Suriamurthi and Edmund Wee.

Sandhu reckoned he could have donned Singapore's colours, too, if not for his academic pursuit in the US.

He recalled: "I was training under Uncle Choo Seng Quee.

"He told me that I had a chance to play for the national team.

MENTOR

"I still regard him as one of my mentors.

"He might yell at you often, but that's because of his enthusiasm."

Suriamurthi remembers Sandhu.

He said: "He was probably the only Sikh playing football at that level at that time.

"He was a good player. We used to play in the same team."

But the soccer never stopped flowing in his veins even after he left Singapore.

He went on to play for three semi-professional teams in the US - San Francisco Italian

Athletic Club, Mercury and Hellas.

He also did a fine job balancing sports and studies.

He now holds a degree in business, another in economics, and a masters in business administration.

His current job as a vice-president of business development at a mobile solutions company keeps him busy around the clock, since he has to deal with clients from different time zones.

But soccer is never far off his mind.

He firmly believes that the sport has tremendous potential in the US.

He said: "The standard here is actually quite high.

"It's certainly catching up with other parts of the world.

"The talent is there. The infrastructure is there.

"You have to start from the grassroots level and do it little by little.

"But the most important thing is to keep politics out of the way."

