

FROM BECKHAM TO RONALDO – ASSESSING THE NATURE OF FOOTBALL PLAYER BRANDS

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When Manchester United toured South East Asia in the summer of 2007, many of their players were mobbed by local fans eager to see some of the stars of European football. Most notable amongst these was Cristiano Ronaldo, the Portuguese international winger. Such attention marked a major turnaround for Ronaldo, who little more than 12 months earlier had been cast as a pantomime villain following his infamous clash with United team mate Wayne Rooney during a FIFA World Cup quarter-final game in 2006. During the 2006/2007 Premier League season, Ronaldo overcame the taunts and chants of hostile English crowds to pick up a host of national 'best player' awards. Indeed, such has been his recent renaissance that some commentators are now claiming Ronaldo, or 'Brand Ronaldo' as they are calling him, is fast becoming the heir apparent to David Beckham and his global brand.

It is interesting that Ronaldo's emergence as a global football brand has coincided with Beckham's move to Major League Soccer (MLS) in the United States (US). Beckham has been one of the stars of European football over the last decade, despite not being an especially strong football player (in, say, the same way as Ronaldinho, Henry or Zidane). Such has been Beckham's fame, that he has actually become something of a global superstar, with iconic status and a profile that is more 'rock star' than 'East London born footballer'. Much has been written about the factors that led the former Manchester United and Real Madrid star to join an MLS club (LA Galaxy) – a fallout with Real Madrid manager Fabio Capello, pressure to move from his wife Victoria, a friendship with Tom Cruise, and so on. However, there is one indisputable fact: such is the power of Beckham and his brand that the player and his advisors felt the time was right to move to America, the last uncharted football (or should that be soccer?) market in the world. Clearly there are immense opportunities open to Beckham in the world's largest and most strongly established sport market. His contract with LA Galaxy is a lucrative one, his deals with companies such as Adidas will enable him to generate income and create profile across the US, and his soccer camp business is likely to flourish in one of the biggest markets in the world for such services. The question is, if the US market for soccer is so important, why is it that US soccer franchises have thus far only been able to attract players of the calibre of Terry Cooke (ex-Manchester United) and Jaime Moreno (ex-Middlesbrough)?

The answer is that Beckham, and indeed Cristiano Ronaldo, have certain characteristics and embody particular qualities that mark them out as being different to other football players. This has led to them both being referred to as brands, a term that in itself is interesting because it implicitly asserts that the stars of sport are no longer just on-field performers, they are also valuable off-field commercial properties. This is not necessarily a new, nor a surprising, phenomenon: footballers have always been associated with business and commerce (for instance, how many of you remember Kevin Keegan advertising Brut After Shave back in the 1970s?). What is different about more recent developments is that players have become products and brands themselves, not just 'faces and names' with which other products and brands can be associated. This raises some important questions: what is a football player brand? Are football players the same as or different to other brands? Why is it that some players become successful brands but others do not? What factors will players and their commercial advisors consider when undertaking the branding process?

A brand is normally signified by a name (such as Coca Cola), a design (such as an Apple Computer) or a symbol (such as the McDonalds Golden Arches). Some corporations additionally use colours (such as Ikea) as part of their brand, while a number of brands (such as Mercedes-Benz) are currently thought to be working on brand smells. The reason for trying to clearly 'mark' a company and its products is really three-fold: firstly, to make them instantly recognisable to potential and actual consumers such that they become automatic purchase choices; secondly, to persuade and reassure consumers that a particular purchase choice is an appropriate one that will confer certain benefits upon them; and thirdly, to differentiate a company's products from their competitors, and rival product offerings. A brand can be an important part of the tangible product, the functional or psychological part of a product that consumers can see or touch. In the case of, for example, Coca Cola, this is the brown liquid in the red can that people drink to quench their thirst. It can also be that brands are a vital element of the intangible part of a product, in other words the functional or psychological part of the product that it is difficult to specifically identify, see or touch. Again, in the case of Coca Cola, this could be the sense of fashionability one feels when drinking it or the comfort one might derive from being seen to consume a branded product that other people know and like. The consequent effects will be that a particular brand will therefore foster awareness and become instantly recognisable to consumers, create a stimulus, image or expectation in their minds, and help create a sense of trust that helps to facilitate consumers purchase decisions.

So where do football players fit into this? Leaving smell aside (although a range of Beckham or Ronaldo fragrances is certainly part of this), clearly their names are important and will evoke certain images in the minds of consumers. In the case of 'Ronnie' and 'Becks', both are athletic, good-looking, skilful players. It is also no coincidence that both have played for leading teams, the names of which are equally as well known and respected. When each started playing football neither name was known and most if not all people would have had trouble attributing any qualities or characteristics to them. This implies that football itself has played an important role, not only in bringing them to prominence but also in helping establish the features of their brands. As for design, clearly players cannot be artificially designed or created (at least not yet). However, one could argue that their physical features are an aspect of their design, as too one could argue that the clothes they wear and the cars they

drive when they are not playing football are part of the brand's design. As for symbols, the symbol that pop star Prince springs to mind as one way of identifying a player brand (some of you may also recall the recent alphanumeric incarnation of ex-player Paul Gascoigne). To my knowledge, this approach is yet to be employed by a current footballer. More realistically, symbols are more likely to be something like Beckham's famous array of tattoos or Ronaldo's slick hairstyle. Taken together, one can therefore begin to see what a football player brand is comprised of. In Beckham's case, the teams he has played for, the type of football he plays, the way he looks, how he dresses and, let's not forget, who he is married to, have all been important influences on his brand.

Some of what has been described above is clearly a tangible part of the brands in question. Beckham's hairstyles have been groundbreaking and iconic; we know what they look like and many of us will still be able to recall how his hair was cut (remember the 'mohican' at World Cup 2002?). Some amongst us may even have been to a hairdresser to have the same haircut, no matter how wild the style because Beckham gave it credibility and made it socially acceptable for people to have such styles. In turn, this clearly illustrates the more intangible aspects of a football player brand; fashion is a subjective, indeed a cultural, concept, and what each of us may feel about his tattoos is likely to differ greatly across different sections of the globe's population. As for Victoria, his sarong, his houses, his jewellery and his cars, quite what they mean to people is difficult to say and our feelings about them are certainly the more intangible parts of his brand: is he a metrosexual archetype? A role model for 21st Century men? A fashion icon? Whatever his brand represents, it appears to have transcended gender, age, cultural boundaries and geography, to the extent that Beckham is no longer just an English footballer or a European citizen, he has become a global sports brand. Which is why Ronaldo has suddenly become such a hot property: great player, playing for a successful team, known all over the world, good looking.....a sexy guy!

What this discussion therefore calls for is a different interpretation of what a football player brand actually is, as most of the standard textbook definitions of a brand do not really fit what we now know about players that well. Moreover, rather than simply being a name or a symbol, because these brands are human beings, they are rather more multi-faceted and complex than other brands. As such, we might define a football player brand as:

'A unique, distinctive combination of unplanned and planned factors that mark out a player as being different to other players thus enabling the immediate identification of the player and the activities in which they are involved'.

Unlike other products and brands, individual human beings are unique and the distinctiveness that characterises people, such as Beckham and Ronaldo, cannot easily be achieved by others. Each football player brand is therefore a one-off, never to be repeated again. Moreover, unlike other brands, some of which have tremendous longevity, humans age – they get old, footballers in particular having a relatively short 'shelf-life'. The destiny of these young people is therefore foretold and so the life cycle and nature of their brands can be predicted with some degree of ease. What happens with these talented, good looking people in the relatively short commercial lives they have as players has thus far been, in the main, unplanned. When Beckham

made his England debut in 1996, few would have thought that he would become such a global phenomenon. However, when he married former Spice Girl Victoria Adams in 1999, it was rather more certain that he would become a focus for the world's media. In the same year as his marriage, Beckham also won a sporting treble (Premier League, FA Cup and UEFA Champions League), thus cementing his position as a successful, top-level sports star. At this point, the unplanned and planned components of his brand began to interact. Beckham's clothing became more fashionable and daring, his hairstyles became the source of intense media attention, he began signing lucrative endorsement deals with major global corporations, collaborative deals with organisations such as Marks and Spencer were established and he agreed contracts for books about his life. All of these things, unplanned and planned, made Beckham different, something that could not be copied or replicated by anyone else. Although he may not have been the first football player to wear a sarong or to sport a 'mohican' haircut, they became synonymous with him and were an immediate identifier across the world, alongside his tattoos and wife, of the Beckham Brand. Ten years later and people still know him as a celebrity, an icon, a global brand and a valuable commercial property.

The unique, distinctive set of planned and unplanned factors mentioned above would therefore appear to encapsulate a large number of characteristics that can be classified according to the following mnemonic (*TOPSTAR*):

Team – the team(s) that a player plays for or has played for; the associations a player has with a particular team; the profile, reputation and success of the team; the player's role within the team;

Off-field – where the player lives; who the player socialises with and where; who the player is married to or is dating; the type of house the player lives in, the car they drive, the clothes they wear;

Physical characteristics, mentality and values – the facial appearance and physique of the player; other distinguishing features such as hairstyle, tattoos etc.; the way a player thinks and the views they hold;

Success – the player's on-field record; the number of trophies, medals and prizes the player has won; the winning teams and games in which the player has been involved;

Transferability – the extent to which the player appeals to males and females, young and old, followers and non-followers of football; the extent to which the player and their image are culturally and geographically transferable; language(s) spoken;

Age – the stage at which a player is in their career; viewed in product lifecycle terms, this will have an impact on the profile, characteristics and longevity of the brand as well as influencing how the brand is managed;

Reputation - the player's reputation as footballer; style of play; disciplinary record; the player's reputation outside of football; way the player deals with public and media attention.

Using this mnemonic, one can start to see how and why the Beckham brand emerged, but also begin to understand why Cristiano Ronaldo is rapidly becoming a brand in his own right. Moreover, it helps us to explain why Ronaldinho, Shevchenko and Kaka are important football player brands but not as established, acceptable or successful as Beckham. One other issue that needs to be addressed by a player and their advisors is brand positioning. For instance, Beckham is fashionable, stylish, married to a pop star and so on. Compare this with Zinedine Zidane and one sees that

the latter is more cerebral, quieter and less likely to seek the media spotlight. Indeed, although the Zidane brand was not as actively or strategically managed as Beckham's, one can nevertheless see that Zidane is much more likely to have appealed to a different group of consumers than Beckham. With this and the issue of positioning in mind, let us now take a closer look at each element of TOPSTAR in turn to identify some of the decisions that players and their advisors will have to consider in seeking to establish and build a player brand:

Team

In terms of global brand potential, signing for one of the world's leading clubs would appear to be essential. This is one of the reasons Beckham's brand was so successful, especially as he signed for Real Madrid during the 'galactico' era. Cesc Fabregas' playing for Arsenal would seem to mark him out as a potentially strong brand, particularly at this time: a young vibrant player playing for a young vibrant team. The reputation and success of a player's team is actually very important to their brands: globally recognisable, highly appealing - successful player brands need to play for teams that are consistent with a player's positioning and image. Unless positioned as some kind of tough guy or maverick, someone who plays for a team with a poor disciplinary record is unlikely to attain a level of brand success to which they and their advisors might aspire. At the same time, one would expect to see a player being acknowledged as essential to a club, an integral part of a team, rather than a perpetual substitute or squad player, if they are to become a strong brand. In turn, when playing for the team, one would expect to hear the player being referred to as 'a defensive rock', 'a creative genius' or 'a goal machine', for their brands to realise full potential. It is interesting that Beckham, when he first signed for Real Madrid, was somewhat dismissively referred to as 'Forest Gump' due to his endless running. Yet, when he left the club, this is one of the qualities he had become best known for - tireless running and a 'never say die' attitude in his commitment to the team.

Off-field

In different countries, the extent to which the off-field activities of players are scrutinised will vary hugely. The scrutiny is partly based on the role and power of the media in different countries, the rise of celebrity culture and the public's desire to know more about famous people. The reporting of a player's off-field life is therefore becoming just as important a part of their brands as their on-field performances. Where a player lives can be significant - consider Thierry Henry. Unlike many English players who often live in newly constructed houses on exclusive estates, when Henry lived in London he resided in Hampstead (with its mix of Victorian and Georgian villas), a haven for free thinking liberal intellectuals in North London. This minor detail added to many people's perceptions of Henry as a more thoughtful player than most in the Premier League. Beckham meanwhile has just acquired a house in a private gated community in Los Angeles. Beckham, and his wife Victoria, count actors Tom Cruise and Kate Hudson, amongst their good friends. While the friendship between the two couples provides fertile ground for newspaper gossip, the more subtle interpretation of it is that 'Brand Beckham' is truly global, also transcending geography and, indeed, industrial sector. As a counter point to such brands, it is interesting that, when Jurgen Klinsmann played for Tottenham Hotspur, he drove an old Volkswagen Beetle, rather than a Ferrari or a Porsche. Klinsmann has often explained that he did so because of the London traffic. However, what this actually did was to send out some subtle messages about him, his mentality and his values. As

an individual amongst his fast car driving peers, he clearly differentiated his brand from those of other players at the time.

Physical characteristics, mentality and values

At one level, it would be easy to say that a good-looking player is more likely to become a successful brand. To an extent this is true, although in the case of someone like Beckham it is much more besides because he has added to his appearance over time by acquiring new tattoos and hairstyles. For younger players like Cristiano Ronaldo, it is more likely that physical conditioning will play a part in how consumers perceive them. As players get older and their aging physique gradually diminishes their performance, the cerebral side of a player's game and how they think about football will play a much larger part in a player brand. Mentality too therefore is important, with the interplay between physical characteristics and mentality being most aptly demonstrated by Ronaldinho. Seemingly someone who really enjoys playing football, this is apparent in the smile he often displays when taking part in games. In turn, this is an important identified that differentiates him from other players and has led some to suggest that he is currently the most valuable football player brand in the world. One assumes from Ronaldinho's smile that he loves football, believing it is fun and a privilege to play. These values are important, especially when a player brand is involved activities aimed, say, at children. Values can be the way that a player approaches the games in which they are involved, but it is also intended to include their personal values, allied to their views on, say, family, poverty, crime, the environment and so on. Beckham is often referred to as a devoted family man, whilst England goalkeeper David James, is increasingly known for his outspoken views on the future of the planet, something that very clearly differentiates him from most other players in the Premier League.

Success

One of the reasons people consume one branded product instead of another is that it will be thought to deliver superior benefits to them. They can feel confident therefore in purchasing and consuming a product, believing that it is better for them than the alternatives. Amongst other things, people like to bask in reflected glory, meaning they like to be associated with the success of others, hence many people's desire to be associated with players like Beckham et al. A successful player in a successful team would appear to be the optimum state for a successful brand to flourish. Even so, a high scoring striker in a less successful team, for example, will also have brand potential. At game level therefore, individual performances, the number of goals scored and so on will be important. At the level of the club, the number of games won, league position and the number of trophies secured will be important. Otherwise, the achievement of player awards will be an important signal to consumers of the success and quality of a player brand. For instance, it is notable that Cristiano Ronaldo, having progressed from being a 'troublesome foreigner' to winning several annual player awards in England, was immediately being referred to as 'Brand Ronaldo'. If this particular brand is to become a major global one however, such successes will nevertheless have to be forthcoming on an international basis, both for his club and for his country.

Transferability

Some brands perform very well when positioned and targeted at specific groups, but in Beckham's case he was able to transcend gender, age, cultural and geographic

boundaries. As a white, Anglo Saxon, English-speaking male, he has inevitably been popular in markets where consumers display similar characteristics. However, such has been his status that, in places such as China, South Korea and Japan, he has been perceived as an aspirational figure, a fashion icon and a luxury brand. Clearly therefore, his unique combination of features have enabled his brand to be successful in a range of different market places. Being able to speak English is an advantage for any football player, especially given the dominance of world sport by English speaking nations. However, in football, the global profile of Spanish, French, Italian and German teams, allied to the colonial, cultural and political influences of these countries, means that players either from these countries or playing in them are likely to exhibit global brand potential.

Age

When Zinedine Zidane announced his retirement from professional football in 2006, the Zidane player brand effectively ceased to exist. Actually, the Zidane brand became something different – a global campaigner for good causes rather than a footballer. In Beckham's case, rather than re-inventing the brand in a related industrial category, he decided to extend and diversify his brand by moving to the US. In the case of both players, each had to confront the reality that, unlike other brands, the very essence of their brands rapidly begins to deteriorate and that this is entirely predictable and completely unavoidable. As such, player brands have a highly concentrated life cycle, the stages of which will be defined by age, maturity and experience. For someone like Roy Keane, formerly of Manchester United, this saw him make the transition from being a young firebrand to a trusted leader and heartbeat of his team. In cases like this therefore, branding opportunities change, just as they do when a player starts to become rather less attractive, a slower runner or adopts a more reflective approach to the game. Brand managers and advisors should therefore be aware of how such changes effectively impose certain restrictions on player brands. Rather than being market driven, they actually originate internally and cannot be avoided, although they can still be managed. In the case of Pele, the brand lives on, even if the player does not: he is still associated with exciting football, the Brazilian national team and Mexico 1970, but is now perhaps better known by some people for his work with corporations such as Viagra.

Reputation

In most cases, the managers of other product brands will seek to associate with particular player brands because of the positive associations they believe consumers have with certain players. In cases where players behave badly or inappropriately, this will undermine such associations and so brand managers will be less inclined to work with them. For example, McDonalds terminated an agreement with Wayne Rooney because they felt he was an unsuitable role model for young people, largely due to his disciplinary record. Such behaviour clearly diminishes the value of brands, thus placing a strong onus on players to conduct themselves in a particular way, on the field of play and also off it. This is exacerbated by the media scrutiny that players are subject to, even in situations such as press conferences and charitable activities. Allied to this aspect of a player's reputation, the nature and effectiveness of a brand will draw on consumer's associations with the player as, say, a 'hard man', a 'goal poacher' or a 'magnificent leader'. Similarly, the number of fouls committed, bookings received or sending offs may serve to diminish brand strength, although

clearly, in the case of some like Eric Cantona, this actually added to the brand rather than detracting from it.

So, after Beckham and Ronaldo, can you spot the next big brand? Messi, Pato, Nasri, Walcott, Podalski? Or, do others who have already been playing for a while have some, as yet unleashed, potential? Torres? Ribery? Quagliarella? For such players, the appeal of actively seeking to build and promote their brands is clear: it creates opportunities for boosting profile, associating with other brands, transferring to one of the world's leading teams and generating revenue outside one's playing career. But it is worth noting finally that not everyone can be a worldwide global brand. Some brands remain local but nevertheless enjoy a high level of distinctiveness and popularity. Lee Trundle, formerly of Swansea City - an English League One club, is something of a case in point. Despite being almost unknown outside the United Kingdom, he was a local phenomenon and even had his own range of branded clothing. The point is, because of what they do, football players enjoy unique advantages that other brands (and brand managers). We are therefore likely to see the continuation of Beckham-like brands in the future, the key questions being: who will these players be, what will their brands be like, how powerful will their brands be, and where will they be successful?