

Ghanaian great

Abedi Pelé doesn't hesitate to pick himself alongside Diego Maradona in the midfield of his dream XI: "I'm the same as Maradona. We're sturdy-legged. With the ball at our feet we're very strong technically. We can carry a team to win matches and titles." Oddly, there's no spot in the XI for Pelé mark I. Too obvious perhaps.

The boy born Abedi Ayew dribbled rings around his street-football opponents. By the age of eight he'd picked up a nickname that suited so well it ended up on his passport. Ghana were known then as the 'Brazil of Africa' after winning the Africa Cup of Nations in the 1960s playing a sinuous samba style. Brazil had unveiled Pelé at the 1958 World Cup aged 17; their African cousins ushered 17-year-old Abedi into his first Africa Cup of Nations in 1982.

His impact wasn't quite so earth-shaking, or so it seemed. But Ghana won the tournament, and the teenager with the box of tricks and a magical left foot was noticed abroad; a quantum leap for African football. "It was my generation who showed the world there was talent in Africa,"

says Pelé. "I'm talking about Rabah Madjer, Roger Milla, George Weah. Thanks to us, people came to Africa looking for something new."

Pioneers never have it easy. At Qatar's Al-Sadd, Pelé ruptured his cruciate ligaments. Then the league banned foreigners. Pelé bounced back to Ghana then on to France, hauling himself up via Niort, Mulhouse and Lille to Marseille. At last he struck gold winning African Footballer of the Year in 1991, '92 and '93. Marseille lost the European Cup Final in 1991 but Pelé was man of the match as they returned to win the Champions League in 1993. He is one of only two Ghanaians to win the tournament, beside former Bayern Munich stalwart Sammy Kuffour.

Pelé should have won the 1992 Africa Cup of Nations for Ghana. A backheader from the edge of the area against Nigeria and a Maradona-esque slalom were the choice efforts from his golden boot-winning collection of goals. But a yellow card saw him suspended from the Final of a tournament he had illuminated. Ghana lost 11-10 on penalties to the Ivory Coast after a goalless draw.

For all Pelé's record nine appearances in the ACN, his only winners' medal is from his teenage debut. He appears in every list of best players never to appear in a World Cup Finals too; the Black Stars made their first appearance seven years after his retirement.

But the 2010 World Cup had his fingerprints all over it. Pelé, a FIFA committee member, was asked by South Africa to join its campaign. Feeling "rather small" alongside Nobel Prize winners Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and F. W. de Klerk, he "trembled so much I could hardly hold the papers my speech was written on".

He says: "Africa is now feared and respected at international level, but it needs to go further. It was necessary to show that Africa can compete with Europe and America, not just on the field but in terms of organisation."

Pelé also provided three members of the Ghanaian squad: his sons Dédé and Rahim Ayew, as well as Lee Addy, all came through the ranks at Pelé's Ghanaian club-cum-academy FC Nania. Dédé plays for Marseille along with Pelé's other son Jordan.

Ghanaians in English football

Since the formation of the Premier League in 1992, a total of 13 Ghanaian players have graced England's top division.

Tony Yeboah is fondly remembered for his goalscoring exploits at Leeds United. He became the first Ghanaian import into the League in 1995, scoring 12 goals in 18 games on loan from Eintracht Frankfurt and then doubling his tally after moving to the Yorkshire club permanently.

Junior Agogo, who was born in Accra but educated in London, signed for Sheffield Wednesday in 1995 and made his debut two years later. He played for eight other English clubs including QPR and Nottingham Forest and is still going strong with his current club, Danish side Odense BK.

Of the other Ghana players to move to these shores, Michael Essien (below) is the most well known and has made over 130 appearances for Chelsea to date. Kevin Prince-Boateng was a popular character at Tottenham Hotspur and Portsmouth, as was Elvis Hammond at Fulham.

Currently, Asamoah Gyan, with ten goals this season, John Mensah, Sulley Muntari, all plying their trade at Sunderland, John Pantsil at Fulham and Richard Kingson at Blackpool are flying the flag for Ghana in the Premier League.

Abedi Pelé won African Footballer of the Year three times



Ghanaian football history is littered with talents, but Abedi Pelé paved the way...



THE PIONEER