

W H O

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D A V I D

B E C K H A M ?

The England legend talks exclusively to *Sport* about life after football and today's World Cup draw ➔



David Beckham

It's hard to picture David Beckham as a living, breathing man.

It is now a generation and more since a young footballer burst on to the scene at Manchester United, fresh-faced and full of the swagger and desire that would grace the beautiful game for the best part of two decades. Today, we see a grizzled hunk adorning countless television adverts, billboards and magazine covers. The boy became a man, and the man became a brand.

Waiting in a London hotel on a grey Thursday morning, we hear his voice before we finally see him – the moderated east London tone, largely unchanged by moves to Manchester, Spain, America, Italy and France. And then he's through the door, looking model-perfect in a dark T-shirt framed by ink, storied hair swept straight back above a wolfish beard. The room has been set up for TV interviews, so it is illuminated only by a couple of lighting rigs. Combined with Beckham's insouciant style, it all feels a bit unreal,

as if we're conducting the interview inside a fragrance advert.

The 38-year-old has always had to be pretty good at blocking out the glare of the spotlight to concentrate on the task at hand, though. And, as he sits down opposite us with a smile and a handshake, he's polite and focused.

It's all as inevitably effortless as one of his trademark free kicks, but with today's World Cup draw in mind, our first question takes him back to a strike he put everything behind – probably the hardest anyone has ever struck a football. Beckham's penalty against Argentina in the 2002 World Cup group stages was powerful, low and unerring. It closed a painful chapter in his international career that began, as we all know, with a dismissal in the 1998 World Cup second round for a petulant flick out at Diego Simeone. He pauses to collect his thoughts before telling us how he felt when Argentina's ball was pulled out of the pot and placed in England's group.

"As soon as their name came out, I knew it was something I was looking

forward to," he tells us. "I was excited, because I knew that there was a time I could put things right, to an extent."

We suggest England's current crop of players will be anticipating this afternoon's draw with a similar sense of excitement. "It's something that you always watched out for," says Beckham. "It's something I think every Englishman watches out for. Once you reach the World Cup finals, you're always waiting to see who you're going to play in the group stages."

NATIONAL PRIDE

England safely navigated the group stages in four of the five major tournaments at which Beckham played, but greater success sadly eluded him.

"I look back at my career and, if there's one thing I could change, it would be winning something with England," says Beckham, who remains fiercely proud of playing for his country despite the abuse he received from fans after that sending-off in 1998. **✎**

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Previous page image: Doug English/Trunk Archive

David Beckham

"I'm proud of the amount of times I've played for England [115] and I'm proud that I've captained my country. Would I have liked a trophy at the end of it? Yeah. I'd give up a lot to have a trophy for my country."

With redemption on the line and the ball on the penalty spot, the pitch can feel like a very lonely place.

But Beckham was fortunate to be among friends for his showdown with Simeone in Sapporo, Japan.

"I can remember him coming up to me during that match against Argentina," he said. "I turned around and I saw Nicky Butt, Paul Scholes and Gary Neville. I knew I had their support, and you can't replace that."

Beckham is promoting *The Class of '92*, a documentary that brings together the six Manchester United youth team players who developed into treble-winners: Beckham, Scholes, Butt, Ryan Giggs and Gary and Phil Neville. We ask whether the players - Giggs aside - were able to carry the understanding they had at club level with them when they were on England duty.

"I felt that we could," says Beckham. "When we first got into the England team, there were literally more than six United players - there was Andy Cole and a couple of others as well. We were kind of dominating at the time, and the five of us always got on when we were away with England. We always stuck together. People talked about the Manchester United and Liverpool divide, but there was no divide - it was just the fact that we'd sit together at dinner or talk."

"I always look back on my time with those lads as the best time in my career," he continues when we ask whether the fun of playing football evaporated as his career took him away from his friends at Old Trafford. "To have grown up like we did as mates and to have the success we had with club and country - that's any kid's dream. Obviously I moved on to Real Madrid, then to the Galaxy, and played for Milan. I was able to carry that feeling over with me to other clubs, but it was nothing compared to what we had."

MANCHESTER MEMORIES

There's a moment in the film when Giggs laughs as he recalls the nickname he used to have for Beckham when they were apprentices at United: "Alright treacle?" The others chip in: "Flash Cockney" and "Pretty boy" are the suggestions from Gary Neville, one of Beckham's closest friends in football. In *The Class of '92*, the group remembers the attention Beckham paid to having the best car in the group.



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"I think it's because I'm from east London!" he laughs. "That was something I always wanted as a kid: leather seats and nice wheels and a good music system, and that's not changed. Times change - but I still like a nice car."

Beckham has plenty of those now, along with property and business ventures that make him one of the highest-earning athletes in the world - and one of the world's most recognisable faces.

"I never wanted to be a star," he insists, however. "I never wanted to be famous. I just wanted to be a footballer. I wanted to be a professional footballer and I wanted to play for Manchester United and play for England. Obviously, though, I have been very privileged - and I am very proud of everything that has come with that."

In his recent autobiography, Sir Alex Ferguson says of Beckham that he "felt uncomfortable with the celebrity aspect of his life". It has been suggested that this contributed to Beckham's departure from Old Trafford after 12 years, six league titles, two FA Cups and a Champions League trophy. He has admitted to being devastated when he left United; there were private tears when he signed for Real Madrid. But if Beckham could go back, would he trade what he

has now - the money, the fame, the imminent MLS franchise - for a few more years with the number 7 on his back?

"I'd never trade anything that I've done in my career for that," comes the firm reply. "I feel special about Manchester United because they gave me my chance to live my dream with a club I'd supported my whole life and will continue to support. But I'm very proud of my achievements outside of Manchester United. And the fact that I was - which is very difficult, by the way - able to go on from Manchester United and be successful with Real Madrid, PSG, the Galaxy. I'm very proud that I played for some of the other biggest clubs in the world, and I would never change that."

With that, our time is up, and Beckham is whisked away. We're left with a clearer picture of him - and it's a sharper version of the image we already had: the east London boy turned style icon; the sporting diplomat on a par with princes; a business, and a businessman. Six months after his retirement, Beckham is all these things and more. You suspect that's exactly what he wants. ●

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The Class of '92 is available now on DVD (Universal)

LIFE AFTER FOOTBALL

There were tears in Paris as Beckham left the pitch for the final time as a professional in May. A few months on, how is he coping?

How are you adjusting to life without football?

"There were a few weeks where I really missed the game, but I had everything set up. Literally the day after I finished playing at PSG, I was flying across to the US about my MLS franchise. So I kind of jumped into something straight away, which helped me get over the fact that I wasn't playing - and I've been so busy since then I've kind of not had the time to sit down and be sad about the fact that I'm not playing."

How are things progressing with the franchise? Will it be Miami?

"The announcement is not out yet - we haven't announced Miami. We have looked at other places. People are talking about Miami because they've seen me there, and definitely that is an option, but we've not put the announcement out."

Do you think your move to LA Galaxy did help grow the sport?

"If you look at statistics, then yes. I don't like to talk about my impact in America; I think it's down to other people to talk about that, and it's better coming from them because they're not biased. I've seen the impact of the new stadiums that have been built around the country solely for football, I've seen the league and the interest grow, and I'm proud to have been part of that."

What do you miss about playing?

"That regimented schedule of getting up in the morning, training, coming home, seeing the kids. I miss that, I miss training every day, being around the lads. And game days. Nothing can replace that."

What don't you miss?

"Training in the cold most days, apart from when I lived in the US. That's something I don't think anyone enjoys - but if I had the choice, I'd love to do it all again."

Do you have any guilty pleasures now you don't have to train?

"I've been lucky enough that I've always been able to kind of eat what I want over my career and not put on too much weight. I've hardly put on any since I finished playing."