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# Can David Beckham Conquer America?

Let's see. He's the most famous man in the world, loved and adored by all, rich beyond imagination, married to a beautiful pop star, and only 28 years old. What's left? Just one little thing...

**BY JOSH DEAN**

**PHOTOGRAPH BY  
ANDREW MACPHERSON**

DAVID BECKHAM USED TO COME TO AMERICA TO get away from it all. He would put on his oversize tracksuit, lace up his thick-soled sneakers, head out onto Broadway or Sunset Boulevard, and enjoy a few moments of normalcy, of being outdoors and breathing smoggy big-city air without fear of being tackled by a mob of squealing schoolgirls or, worse, a mob of squealing soccer hooligans singing Beckham tribute songs — "That Cockney lad who ain't so bad / I thank you for the Dave" — in any number of gawky foreign accents.

David Beckham, age 28, is huge in Sweden. He's huge in South Africa. He's huge in Australia and New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, and especially England, his home. He is huge, in fact, in nearly every country on earth, except here, where, until his return this June, the only people who ever bothered to say hello were tourists from Europe.

This time, though, something has changed. As David Beckham kicks a ball around with a gaggle of star-struck Los Angeles teenagers, his bodyguard



is getting a little nervous. "Is there another exit out of here?" the beefy, mustachioed man asks a rep from Adidas, which has brought its most important international-marketing commodity to L.A.'s spanking-new soccer facility, the Home Depot Center, in the first place. The bodyguard's nose is twitching; he's spotted uninvited cameramen lurking around the fences. "I'm by myself, and I don't want to tangle with that big guy," he says, referring to a particularly menacing-looking member of the paparazzi. "We got into it the other day." Then, sensing that certain key members of the Beckham posse are nearby and that he is opening the door to questions about his ability to actually guard bodies, he pushes up his aviator sunglasses, squares his meaty jaw, and says, "Not that I can't handle him or anything."

The fact that this bodyguard, or anyone else employed by David Beckham, should have to worry about his safety in America is something entirely novel. But judging by the way Beckham fever has infected the globe, it's hardly surprising. With his 29-year-old wife, Victoria (the former Spice Girl known as Posh), as his queen, David Beckham rules over England with a checkered cowhide scepter. Posh and Becks, as they are known, make news every time they leave the house, and if they are not on the front cover of England's daily tabloids — and "David Beckham Had a New Haircut" will do it," one editor told me — they are surely mentioned inside. (A recent estimate is 18,500 mentions in the past year.) If his team has played the night before, David Beckham is probably also on the back cover. He'll even lead off the evening news.

But England is only the beginning for Beckham. "Without a shadow of a doubt," Mat Snow, editor of British soccer magazine *FourFourTwo*, says, "he is worldwide." Or as London's *Observer* put it, "It's his world, he has it at his feet, and we wait to see which way he will kick our imploded, aerated globe."

When British Petroleum needed a spokesperson for Southeast Asia, its research showed that 80 percent of drivers in Thailand, China, and Vietnam recognized Beckham's face. A chain of beauty salons in Japan, where Beckham mania is particularly insane, bears his name. During last year's World Cup, thousands of men and women flocked to these salons and others to copy his blond faux-hawk. (Popular rumor has it that some women even applied the look to their nether regions.) One Japanese woman, whose exact motives remain unclear, reportedly checked into the hotel where the English team had been staying and, not knowing which room had been his, licked all the toilet seats just to be safe. Another left her husband and took up with another man because, as she told a Japanese weekly, he "resembles Beckham. And he loves it when I call him Beckham during sex."

"Whereas Tiger Woods" — the closest comparison we have in the U.S. — "is respected, Beckham is loved," says Ellis Cashmore, a professor at England's Staffordshire University who has published a book on the iconography of Beckham. "He's adored, and in some parts of the world, he's even worshiped. There's this kind of idolatry about Beckham." Somebody say idolatry? Around the time of the World Cup, Buddhist monks at a temple in Bangkok erected a giant bronze statue in his image.

But the U.S. is Beckham's final frontier. Although he was excised from an episode of *The Simpsons* last year because the producers worried that he wasn't

famous enough, on this trip (according to the aforementioned bodyguard-with-moustache) Beckham and his wife attracted more paparazzi than Nicole Kidman in the days after her breakup with Tom Cruise.

What's caused the winds of anonymity to shift? Maybe the sleeper hit film *Bend It Like Beckham*, which, in a curious bit of luck, thrust his heretofore unfamiliar name into the culture and chummed the waters for his arrival. Or maybe the mini publicity blitz that accompanied his June "vacation" — which seemed bizarrely pointless considering he will not be returning in July with Manchester United. His longtime team sold him to Spain's Real Madrid for \$41 million in a move that should please his primary sponsor, Adidas — Real is an Adidas team; United's sponsor is Nike — but bum out lots of Englishmen, who will have to look forward to his return stints as England's captain.

"It would be pretty amazing to be famous in America for being a soccer player," Beckham says. "That's never really happened before." He ain't kidding. No matter how insanely marketable he may be, Beckham plays soccer, a sport with low scores, frequent ties, and stars who are invariably one-named guys with mullets. On the plus side, soccer is America's fastest-growing participatory sport and is second only to basketball in popularity. "There are 20 million soccer participants in the U.S.," says Simon Atkins, brand-concept manager for Adidas America. "The key is to transform them into spectators and supporters of the game. I think David is a unique person with the ability to do that."

The media, at least, appears to be sold. As soon as the famously inaccessible star was dangled in front of the U.S. press, ESPN, HBO, *Sports Illustrated*, *Vogue*, *W*, and, of course, this magazine lined up to talk to him. "He's arguably the best soccer player in the world. His wife is a pop star. He's gorgeous, and he's what every woman wants: a man who's strong, sexy, successful, in love with his wife, and totally devoted to his family," says Bonnie Fuller, editor of *MJ's* sister magazine *Us Weekly*, and someone who knows what it takes to turn a celebrity into an icon. "Plus, he's enormously rich. What more could you ask for?"

When David Beckham speaks, it is in a quiet voice with the working-class accent of Essex, a gritty suburban enclave on the east side of London often described as the New Jersey of England. He lived there, one of four children of a hairdresser and a gas fitter until, at age 14, he was signed by his favorite team, Manchester United. Two years later, he packed a bag and headed north to train, from that moment on a professional athlete living his dream. (Signing at such a young age is not unusual in the U.K., where teams identify talented players young and then hone their skills on-site in highly organized youth-development programs.) "All I ever wanted to do was play football," Beckham says.

By 20, he was starting for the first team, and by 21 — already renowned for his remarkable ability to curve the ball around defenders on free kicks (hence "bend it like Beckham") — was added to the English national team. But if there was a pivotal moment in David Beckham's life, it came off the field. In 1997, the 22-year-old midfielder was introduced to a skinny brunette with a bob haircut after a game in London. He knew her immediately; she was Posh Spice, at the time a member of one of the most popular singing groups on the planet. Some stories say Posh complimented his ass, others that she merely flirted with the shy lad; either way, the course of Beckham's future was forever altered. Their romance was page-one news, and the glamour couple found themselves thrust



**BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM:** Exhibiting his signature skill — curving the ball up and around the defense into the goal.



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into the tabloid void left by Princess Diana's death. And the more the spotlight shone their way, the more they embraced the part, dressing up in designer clothes and mugging for whichever camera happened upon their path. By the time they were married, the two had fully morphed into royalty, right down to their wedding, at which they sat atop matching thrones.

Of course, there was the inevitable second-act complication. During a game at the 1998 World Cup, Beckham was tackled by an Argentine player late in a tie game. As the referee looked on, Beckham kicked at the Argentine, who collapsed to the ground, writhing in the type of mock pain mastered by soccer players and toddlers. Beckham was ejected, and his team lost in overtime.

England was out of the World Cup, and the next day the nation lashed out. London's *Mirror* newspaper proclaimed "10 Heroic Lions and One Stupid Boy" and the assault was on. Fueled by the tabloids — which printed Beckham cutouts that readers were to set on fire, as well as images of his head meant for dartboards — stuffed Beckhams were hung in effigy outside pubs across England. Beckham himself didn't even bother to come home. He skipped from France to Heathrow, hopped a flight to America, and went into a sort of silent exile that lasted for months, even after his return to England.

"I think that was the hardest thing for me to get through," he says now of a period in which his parents' phone had to be monitored to screen threats. "But in a weird way, I'm glad it happened. It made me a stronger person and a stronger player.

"If you enjoy the highs," he continues, "then you've got to expect a certain amount of criticism. That's part and parcel of being famous."

Sure enough, England forgave. Within a year, Beckham was back in favor (if possible, he was even more popular because of his fall from grace), leading Manchester United to a series of titles and earning one of England's highest honors: national-team captain. Just six weeks prior to leaving for the 2002 World Cup, in Japan, however, Beckham broke a metatarsal bone in his foot, and again, England was devastated, this time at the thought of its team playing without a leader. "The sound of [the bone] snapping reverberated across the planet," English soccer legend Gary Lineker wrote in *The Daily Telegraph*. One of the nation's biggest papers, *The Sun*, ran a photo of Beckham's broken foot with the headline "Beck Us Pray" and — reportedly with the backing of a Catholic archbishop and two Church of England bishops — urged readers to touch the photo while praying simultaneously at



**GOLDEN BOY:** Clockwise from top, with his son Brooklyn; alongside Colin Farrell and his wife, Victoria, at the MTV Movie Awards in June; the famous tabloid cover, asking a nation to pray for his broken foot to heal.



noon on a particular Saturday. Tony Blair, who mentioned the injury during a cabinet meeting, is said to have told Beckham, "Our World Cup hopes rest with you." Even the queen weighed in, suggesting that her granddaughter, a physiotherapist, might be able to help.

"Over the last year, there have been four very major stories that have dominated the British media," says Cashmore, the professor at Staffordshire. "The war in Iraq was obviously one of them, but the other three all involved Beckham. The first was when he hurt his foot. It was like a new discourse in its own right. It was almost like a national emergency."

Beckham healed, England played, and all was well with the world. A group of academics recently nominated him for "most influential man in Britain," saying that "he has helped to create a complex new concept of masculinity." He was the first man ever to appear on the cover of *Marie Claire's* U.K. edition and the first soccer player to appear on the cover of the British gay magazine

## During last year's World Cup, thousands of Japanese men and women copied Beckham's blond faux-hawk hairstyle. Popular rumor has it that some women even applied the look to their nether regions.

*Attitude.* The only reason he's not on every magazine cover every month is that his team of handlers, who in an inverse pyramid seem to point back to Victoria, are ridiculously fickle. Still, says Mat Snow, "he is the most-talked-about personality in England, including the royal family. He is the most-talked-about personality in England since Diana."

"I NEED YOU TO PRAY FOR ME / I need you to care for me / I need you to want me to win / I need to know where I'm heading, 'cause I know where I've been . . ." Rapper 50 Cent thumps from the speakers in an empty weight room under the stands of the Home Depot Center. He is trumpeting his own need for acceptance, but the song provides a perfect soundtrack for this moment,

the one in which the international superstar poses for his first American magazine cover. Of course, you don't have to explain the nuances of 50 Cent lyrics to David Beckham, who, despite his blond hair and pasty face, is so identified with black culture in England that a documentary titled *Black Like Beckham* was made to humorously explore his connection to that world.

The photographer rips a Polaroid from his camera, gives it a shake, and hands it to his subject, the obnoxiously handsome man with chin-length hair pulled into a sort of shogun—via—San Diego ponytail. "So that's the idea," the photographer says. "We're going for cool." [continued on page 95]



"That's how I like it," Beckham responds. As good as he is at playing soccer, David Beckham is even better at being a star. While his four-year-old son, Brooklyn (named for the New York borough in which he was conceived — not information he's likely to appreciate later in life), toddles around, Beckham interacts only with the camera, switching from one of his two perfected photo faces (cool scowl) to the other (cheeky smirk).

It's not until a half hour later, when I am seated across from him in an empty locker room, that he settles back, takes a big bite of chicken finger, and turns it off. Behind the persona of cocky rock star is a quiet, normal husband and father. It is thought that the tight circle of handlers who surround him would prefer that this person say as little as possible. He grants very few interviews, and when one is allowed, it is tightly scripted — in most cases, questions are vetted in advance and the Beckham team reserves the right to approve the final copy. (Neither request was granted in this case.) Cynics will tell you that this is because he is a little dim — Beckham jokes in England are nearly interchangeable with blonde jokes — but that hardly seems fair. Like his relative in royalty, the queen, Beckham has

clearly been taught that less is more; it's harder to criticize a heroic, two-dimensional image.


It's a model he hopes to replicate here.

Beckham admits that he and his wife "like challenges" and consider this a big one. "I would like to be recognized in America because it's such an amazing country. People are so patriotic. You arrive and all you see is stars and stripes. I love that." But, for a man obsessed with fame, the real allure of America is obvious. During a combination vacation — he and Victoria brought along not only their two boys but also his mum and her parents — and publicity tour in June, the Beckhams were feted in New York and Los Angeles, dining with hip-hop mogul Damon Dash, posing together for *Vogue*, and working the room at P. Diddy's MTV Movie Awards after-party, where the likes of Leonardo DiCaprio and Michael Jackson lined up to shake the couple's hands. "Oh, my God," Beckham says, recalling the night in the language of a googly-eyed schoolgirl. "If anyone would have asked me before the other night who we would have liked to have met — it's Michael Jackson. When he had gone, I turned to Victoria and I went, 'God — Michael Jackson!'"

Beckham refers to his wife frequently, so frequently that it's not hard to see why the British media likes to suggest that she wears the pants, that

his sexually ambiguous cover-boy fashion image is her own pet creation. "I think that when you meet the right person, it adds things to your own life," he says, agreeing that the suggestion might be at least a little plausible. But as much as certain journalists like to vilify Posh as a wicked puppeteer toying with the befuddled workingman's footballer, others point out that his devotion to her is fundamental to his popularity.

"It's his loyalty to his family, and his obvious affection for them, that endears him to girls and to the guys as well," says Snow. "People think, 'He's okay. He is kind of one of us' — even though he is extremely rich."

"You know, the statistics say that the number of people staying married has gone up in the last couple of years," Beckham points out. "And people have said that it's because of the way they see me and Victoria with our sons, or always holding hands — things like that." He scratches under his arm cast (which covers a broken wrist) with a plastic knife that, if I'm not mistaken, was a few minutes earlier slicing through chicken fingers, and looks up at a Land Rover representative who's popped in to ask after the Beckhams' complimentary loaner SUV. "Victoria likes the heated seats," Beckham says, grinning. "I'm not so sure. They get very hot. I felt like I peed me pants." 



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