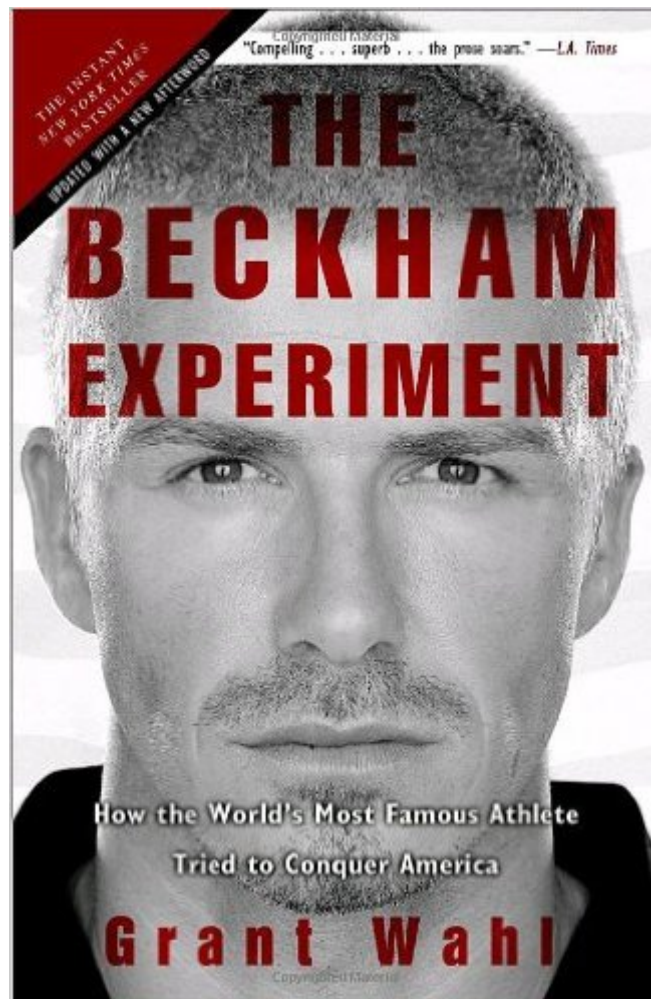


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The Beckham Experiment: How The World's Most Famous Athlete Tried To Conquer America



Synopsis

In 2007, David Beckham, the golden boy of soccer, shocked the international sports world when he signed a five-year contract with an American team, the Los Angeles Galaxy. Under the direction of his manager, Simon Fuller, the mastermind behind American Idol and the Spice Girls, Beckham was ready for a monumental challenge and a risky adventure—ready, as Fuller put it, to earn his stripes Stateside. Could he pull off what no player had ever accomplished (including Pelé in the 1970s) and transform soccer into one of the most popular spectator sports in America? It was a bold experiment: failure meant a team, a league, a sport, and Beckham himself might miss their chance to hit primetime in the U.S. With unprecedented access to the Galaxy and one-on-one interviews with Beckham, veteran Sports Illustrated writer Grant Wahl focuses on the inner circle of the experiment: Beckham, Galaxy leading scorer Landon Donovan, Simon Fuller, controversial former coach Ruud Gullit, outspoken former Galaxy president Alexi Lalas, and Mrs. Victoria—“Posh Spice”—Beckham. Wahl takes readers behind the scenes, on the road with the team and inside the locker room, to reveal just what happened on and off the field when the most renowned player in the world left the glamour of European soccer to play in a country that has yet to fully embrace the sport. We find out what his teammates really think of their superstar captain, who was calling the shots behind the scenes, how Beckham’s management conducted a shadow takeover of the Galaxy organization, and if the team plans to embrace him—or not—when he returns from AC Milan for the 2009 season. The Beckham Experiment is a no-holds-barred account of ego clashes and epic winless streaks, rivalries and resentments, big gambles and great expectations, cultural and class collisions, and ultimately the volatile mix of celebrity and professional sports. As Beckham embarks on his third season with the Galaxy, the question remains: even for a player the caliber of David Beckham, are some goals out of reach? From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

"Three seasons into Beckham's American adventure, the same question remained: Would it ever be about the soccer?" That was the last sentence of the book, and it easily could have been the first. Amidst great hopes and unrealistic expectations ("Beckham will have a greater impact on soccer in America than any athlete has ever had on a sport globally." Tim Leiweke, CEO of AEG), the experiment has been a commercial success, and raised the profile of MLS. But as Sir Alex Ferguson, the legendary manager of Manchester United, said, "You can't escape the field." It was a theme that the author stressed with regularity, and one that apparently escaped American soccer promoters during their formulation of this grand experiment. Grant Wahl, in a very detailed, entertaining, and enlightening book, provides the reader with answers why the experiment has not achieved all of its objectives. The portrait was an extremely balanced analysis that was not dumbed down to sell more books for a non-soccer audience. Mr. Wahl writes about the sport of soccer without derision and/or frequent comparisons to its more accepted mainstream counterparts. He understands international soccer (he has covered 5 World Cups) along with the unique way the game is organized professionally in North America. Like a scientist, the author presented the equation, gathered the evidence from many sources, structured an interesting story, and ultimately demonstrated why the experiment did not work yet where it was needed the most: On the field of play. Although Beckham did not provide exclusive interviews for the book, he is quoted frequently from previous discussions with the author.

Let me state upfront that, having grown up in Europe, I was (and still am) a huge soccer fan. So when the announcement came in 2007 that David Beckham would be joining the LA Galaxy, I was mightily surprised--and intrigued. In "The Beckham Experiment: How the World's Most Famous Athlete Tried to Conquer America" (302 pages), author Grant Wahl (from Sports Illustrated) brings us the juicy background details of the transfer that brought Beckham from Real Madrid to the Galaxy, and how the grand experiment evolved from there. I will admit that I don't follow the MLS that closely, and so for me a lot of new details emerged in this book that I was unaware of. The book really shines in the second half, when we get insight on how the 2008 season unfolds, with a promising start for the Galaxy, followed by a 15 game (that's half the regular season) downward

spiral in which it can manage only 1 win. The author is not kind in his assessment of Beckham, in particular his lack of leadership which comes back time and again, moreover because Beckham was made team captain before he even played a single minute. "The questions about Beckham's lack of leadership didn't come just from Donovan, but from other players who liked Beckham personally and shared dinners with him on road trips." At one point in the season both the coach (Ruud Gullit) and the GM (Alexi Lalas) are fired, and the author makes an assessment of each of the main parties. He comments dryly on Lalas: "In the end, it came down to this: Lalas had a three year contract, and in those three years never once made the playoffs". Beckham clearly became disinterested in the Galaxy as the losing streak mounted. His trip to the closing ceremonies of the Beijing Olympic Games were totally unnecessary (and that's just one example).

I really enjoy Grant Wahl's articles in Sports Illustrated. Each one is a must-read. I think he's done more than anyone to bring soccer/football into the mainstream of American sporting consciousness. He's equal parts fan of both the international sport and the MLS. The world's full of experts who look condescendingly down their noses at the brand of the game practiced in the America's professional league. Wahl's not one of those. While he fully accepts the differences in quality of the MLS vs. European standard-bearers Premiere League/Serie A/Primer Liga/Bundesliga, he also takes the long view: who could of guessed 20 years ago how soccer has seeped into daily sporting life here? Wahl's world is one in which soccer will, ultimately, prevail as this country's Number 1 sport. Think of "The Beckham Experiment" as a 'long read' form of the quality journalism that Wahl delivers to his SI readership. He has inside access to the first two years of David Beckham's move to the LA Galaxy. Despite the highest of expectations, those two years were - from a professional standpoint - a mess for Beckham. Beckham's first season (2007) could be called "the injury year," the second season, the...trainwreck. As Wahl aptly puts it, "Welcome to the 2008 Los Angeles Galaxy, aka Dysfunction Junction." After detailing an unfathomable 12-game losing streak, Wahl pronounces his verdict: "Beckham's American adventure had officially turned into...the soccer equivalent of Ishtar or the Spruce Goose." Yes, three years on, the Galaxy ascended to the championship with Beckham still playing a leading role.

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