

# What's really in the stars?

## Show biz and big biz gang up on young talent

**NEW YORK** — Marketing, I have been told until I'm sick of hearing it, is a magical realm that harms no one and brings blessings to all.

Underlying that blissful image, so far as soccer is concerned, is the notion that marketing has no direct effect whatever on the sport itself. It merely brings in more money and creates more fans, things that, surely, must be good for soccer.

In particular, marketing is an essential tool in the creation and publicizing of stars. And the sport needs stars, everyone knows that.

This is where the things start to get into a terrible tangle. To start with, it is far from clear that everyone does agree that the sport needs stars.

We must switch to another magical world. One that, exactly like marketing, claims to be doing no harm and to be working only for the good of the sport: the world of coaching.

Don't tell me that coaches love stars. We hear of rifts between the two far too often to make that believable. To say nothing of the satisfaction that oozes from the coach when he can say, "We have no stars on this, team, we're just a family..."

Words that must grate in the ears of marketeers. They *must* have stars. Which seems to put the marketeers and coaches on opposite sides, with the marketeers as the good guys favoring players who bring excitement to the game with artistry, personality and flamboyance.

Hardly. The altruistic, good-of-the-game view is not what marketing is about. Any more than it is the aim of coaching. Both are interested primarily in winning. One on the field, the other in the marketplace.

To win on the field, coaches are quite likely to sacrifice their star players, criticize them, accuse them of selfishness, use them in limited roles, bench them.

Marketing has a less obvious but much more insidious way of damaging the stars. For the marketeers, performance on the field is secondary. Marketing is much more about gimmickry than artistry.

American soccer has the perfect example in Alexi Lalas. The marketeer's dream: great personality, a funny — and highly noticeable — red beard, plays the guitar, very articulate.

When MLS started, Lalas was considered — by far — the most important American signing. Never mind that his



**Michael Owen's fine goal against Argentina set off a marketing storm that hasn't helped his natural development.**

performances on the field were decidedly amateurish — he was star material. And MLS needed a star.

How one would ever measure whether trying to make Lalas into a star was worth it or not, I have no idea. The point I'm making is that the focus of the marketeers' attention was on qualities that have nothing to do with soccer.

In trying to assess the effects of marketing on the game's stars, one has to bring the media, especially television, into the equation. Marketing and TV are inseparable in the modern world.

A couple of years back, this is what Gianni Agnelli, the honorary president of Juventus, had to say about soccer stars:

"The fame of great players these days is much more about hype and promotion than it once was."

He cited Zinedine Zidane — a Juventus player — whom he felt had gained worldwide stardom on the basis of one good year, 1998.

That seems unfair to Zidane, but the thought that fame comes too quickly these days is worth pondering. Does too quickly mean too easily?

It may. But the opposite is much more likely. That fast-tracking the development of a star will damage rather than help his progress.

Agnelli's wry comment about Zidane achieving fame after one good year hardly tells the whole story. That same year, 1998, England's Michael Owen burst into superstardom. Not after one good year. Not even after one good game.

Owen's apotheosis came on the wings of one spectacular goal. That was enough, that World Cup goal against Argentina, for the media and the marketeers to turn Owen into the great hope of English soccer.

There was soccer talent there, undoubtedly — but Owen also had the marketable qualities of being young and good-

looking. Suddenly, it seemed he was the best player in England. Maybe in the world.

That was nearly three years ago. Owen is still a very good player, not a great one. There's still time for him to become one — but the suspicion must be high that all that early attention and force-feeding has not helped his natural development.

As soccer has accelerated into the worlds of big biz and show biz, the need for marketable stars has become crucial. As soon as a youngster shows unusual promise — or scores one great goal — his life is in danger of being taken over by others.

The shady hangers-on, we know, will cause him problems. But there will also be legitimate agents and marketeers — ostensibly working in the player's interest — whose aims are likely to prove troublesome.

Because agents and marketeers are, by the nature of their professions, people in a hurry. Patience — like waiting two or three years for their protege, their meal ticket really, to become fully productive — is not one of their more obvious virtues. They want their star to be a star *now*.

Alas, there is not much to be done about that. Marketing and TV are here, and their influence is not going to go away. It is up to soccer itself to take proper care of its young talent.

If young players need protection, it should logically come from the coaches. Alas again. You won't hear many coaches mouthing the phrase I used above — natural development.

As soon as a youngster shows exceptional promise, he's likely to be whisked away from his youth coach — the one figure in all this who might advise patience — and into the hands of the senior coach, whose life is dominated by the importance of results.

If the player is with a small club, it will be looking to sell him, waiting only for the right moment to make as much money as possible.

None of that sounds like natural development. But, just as academies and centers of excellence have replaced street soccer, it's what we've got. It is the new natural development.

We can only hope that Michael Owen has weathered the marketing storm of so much so young. And that Pablo Aimar — just two games for Valencia, and the superstar hype is in full gear — will come through unscathed.

*(Paul Gardner's column appears weekly in Soccer America)*



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