8 The Greatest

Background

The discussion about who is the greatest player in the history of football is one that will probably go on for as long as football itself exists. The most popular argument put forward is that Pelé is the greatest footballer of all time, although many people attempt to discredit this by pointing out that he didn’t play outside of Brazil when he was in his prime and many of the teams he scored so many goals against were not of a high standard.

While this is perhaps harsh on Pelé, for those who are too young to have seen him play, it’s very difficult to be sure that he was the greatest of all time. It’s difficult for modern football fans to watch Lionel Messi play and imagine that there could possibly have been anybody better than him. For a young fan, watching predominantly black and white footage of Pelé in action is far less desirable than watching Messi in full colour with cameras dotted around the pitch capturing his every movement.

The contentious nature of this topic is a perfect classroom discussion tool for teachers. The question itself (Who is the greatest player of all time?) can even elicit robust argument from some normally reserved students.

Jargon buster

final pass n final pass to a team-mate that leads to a goal; the team-mate who makes the final pass is normally credited with an assist; in the 2011-12 Barclays Premier League season, the top scorer was Robin Van Persie with 30 goals, but he was credited with a further 9 assists, making a contribution of 39 goals to Arsenal’s season total of 74 goals; goalscorers who also assist their team-mates in finding the net are not only a great asset to a team, but are usually very popular within the group

fourth official n fourth member of the refereeing team who stands near the sideline (or touchline) between the technical areas of the two team managers or coaches during a game; his main responsibilities include assisting the referee in his administrative duties, checking players’ equipment (i.e. ensuring they are not wearing jewellery etc.), informing teams and supporters of time allowances and so
on, overseeing substitutions, and acting as intermediary between match officials, stadium security and team officials

**sweeper** _n_ (also _libero_ _n_) defensive position situated between the goalkeeper and defensive line, more flexible than the traditional central defender role; the main function of the role is to ‘sweep up’ the ball before it crosses the line for a goal; this position has gone out of fashion, but was highly successful in Italy up to the 1990s, and German legend Franz Beckenbauer famously developed a more offensive component to the role to great effect when captaining his national team to the World Cup in 1974

**zonal marking** _n_ tactical system of defence made famous by former Italy and Milan coach Arrigo Sacchi in the late 1980s / early 1990s; each defender covers an area of the pitch, rather than marking a particular opponent

**Activity assistant**

1) Perform a tense review with the students by asking them three questions:
   (i) *Who are the best players in the world at the moment and what are their achievements?*
   (ii) *Who were the best players from the past and what were their achievements?*
   (iii) *Which players are going to be the most important players of the next ten years and what will they achieve?*

2) With reference to the Franz Beckenbauer reading exercise on page 65, emphasise the fact that Beckenbauer won the World Cup as a player (he was the captain when West Germany won the 1974 World Cup) and as a manager (Beckenbauer won the World Cup as a manager in 1990.) Ask the students to choose five modern players that would make good managers and ask them to explain why they chose these players.

3) Ask the students to choose the best eleven of all time, using only players from their home countries. Each student should write his eleven players and the reasons for choosing each of the players.

4) Review comparative and superlative adjectives by asking the students to compare the physical and technical attributes of each player in their ‘best eleven’ with players chosen by another student. *Who is taller? Who is more skilful?* etc.

5) Ask the students how they feel about referees. The initial reaction of students towards referees is often negative. Ask the students whether they think the referee has an easy job or a difficult job. Then ask the students if they would like to referee or not, and ask them to provide reasons for their answer.