

The eternal elegance of Florian Albert

Tuesday, 01 November 2011

In football as in life, nothing is eternal. And while the passing of former Hungary international Florian Albert on Sunday is clearly a great loss to the sport, the imprint that he left on the game is unlikely to ever be forgotten.

Regarded as one of the most graceful players in history, Albert was a one-club man for his entire career, representing a successful Ferencvaros side between 1958 and 1974, a period during which the forward also starred for a Hungary team that was bent on reliving past glories.

"Florian was an extremely elegant footballer with extraordinary skill and ball control," recalled FIFA President Joseph S. Blatter in a letter of condolence to Sandor Csanyi, President of the Hungarian FA. "These qualities ensured that he was highly respected by his opponents," he added.

Albert was bitten by the football bug at the age of nine when, as the third of four children living in Hercegszanto, a small village in southern Hungary, he was enthralled by the exploits of Gusztav Sebes' celebrated Mighty Magyars, a side that included players of the calibre of Zoltan Czibor, Nandor Hidegkuti, Sandor Kocsis and Ferenc Puskas, among others.

"I learned everything I know from that team. I was a great admirer of the marvellous show they were able to put on," Albert once said.

After six years of constant progress at Ferencvaros' youth academy, Albert made his first-team debut on 2 November 1958 in a 3-1 win over Diosgyor. His simple approach and fluid style, backed by a remarkable level of technique, marked him out as one of the most outstanding players of his era. That comparisons are often drawn between his poise and that of Franz Beckenbauer, whose career partly coincided with the Hungarian's, is a sign of the esteem in which he is still held.

Pele's absence forgotten

Albert's talent outshone his inexperience, and he enjoyed a rapid rise to prominence. He won his first cap for Hungary at the tender age of 18 in June 1959, in a 3-2 win over Sweden, although he had at that point started just two matches for Ferencvaros.

One year on, the striker would score six times during his country's three group matches at the 1960 Olympic Football Tournament in Italy. This included an impressive 7-0 win over France, but he was powerless to prevent them from being knocked out 2-0 by a surprising Denmark side at the semi-final stage. The bronze medal, secured by way of a 2-1 triumph versus Italy, would offer some consolation.

During the 1962 FIFA World Cup Chile, he led Hungary to the quarter-finals, where they were eliminated in a tight 1-0 loss to the former Czechoslovakia, with Albert finishing as second-top goalscorer at the tournament.

Following a laudable UEFA European Championship 1964 performance in which the Hungarians achieved third place, he then also tasted European success at club level, propelling Ferencvaros to some of the greatest results in their history during an exceptional Inter-Cities Fairs Cup (now UEFA Europa League) campaign.

The run culminated in a memorable 1-0 victory over Juventus in the final on 23 June 1965 at the Stadio Comunale in Turin, after Fradi had eliminated Roma, Athletic Bilbao and Manchester United along the way. Florian was an extremely elegant footballer with extraordinary skill and ball control. FIFA President Joseph S. Blatter

But it was during the 1966 FIFA World Cup in England that Florian Albert truly left his mark on the history of the game. The first-round encounter between Hungary and Brazil, from which the Europeans emerged victorious 3-1, is widely regarded as one of the greatest matches the tournament has ever witnessed.

Lajos Baroti's side, boasting an Albert at the height of his powers, ran rings around the then world champions, who were deprived of the skills of Pele through injury. One of the match's most memorable moments came in the 21st minute, when Brazil goalkeeper Gilmar had to pull off an exceptional save following some entertaining head tennis inside the box between Ferenc Bene and Albert.

The 57,000 spectators present at Goodison Park in Liverpool that day likely had trouble believing their eyes because, for the first time in nearly a decade, a team was beating the hitherto all-conquering Brazilians at their own game, namely all-out attack.

The goal which gave Hungary the lead in the 64th minute again stemmed from good interplay between star strikers Bene and Albert, who sent over the perfect cross for Janos Farkas, whose volley left the keeper with very little chance.

There was then no way back for Brazil. Albert's performance made many fans forget all about the absence of Pele, and he was given an incredible standing ovation.

"I remember his sensational performance in the game against Brazil at the FIFA World Cup in 1966 in England, which cemented his standing as one of the world's top players," confirmed President Blatter.

Award and injury

The year 1967 was a memorable one for the Hungarian magician, as not only did he win the European Footballer of the Year Award, but he also saw his second son born in December. Florian Jr would later play for Ferencvaros, as well as for clubs in Israel and France.

These happier moments were followed by more difficult times, as 18 months later Albert sustained a broken leg in a clash with Danish keeper Erik Engedahl. He returned to football a year later, but was unable to rediscover the style or form with which he had made his name.

On 17 March 1974 he took part in his 351st and last-ever league match, bringing to an end a career during which he had scored 245 goals and pulled on the green shirt of Ferencvaros 537 times, all competitions combined. His international swansong came two months later in Szekesfehervar when, in front of 15,000 fans, he won his 75th and final cap in a 3-2 win over Yugoslavia. His international goal tally would forever stand at 32.

The former forward remained in the world of football, first as a coach in Libya and then in various roles at Ferencvaros, the club dearest to his heart. This legend of the Hungarian game passed away on Sunday 30 October after complications following heart surgery.

"On behalf of FIFA and the football family, I would like to pass on my sincere condolences to the Hungarian FA and, most importantly, to all of Florian Albert's loved ones and friends," Blatter concluded in his letter.

(fifa.com)