



Silva strikes gold

Neymar da Silva Santos Junior moved from Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain in 2017 for a record breaking €222m. But even amid World Cup fever and all the hype, the boy from the streets of Sao Paulo never forgets his family, nor his roots.

Neymar Jr was not in a position to make many choices as a young boy.

Along with his parents, Neymar Santos Sr and Nadine da Silva, and younger sister, Rafaella Beckran, the whole family lived in his grandparents' house. His father, who held down three jobs to make ends meet, described Praia Grande as the place where the people of Sao Paulo "threw their garbage".

But Neymar Jr stood up for his decision to play street football and futsal, rather than try and emulate his heroes Evair, Marcos, Rivaldo and Alex on turf.

"It definitely helped me to develop a fast game and that Brazilian smartness," said Neymar, whose family lived in a modest home until he graduated from the famed Santos academy in Sao Paulo in 2000.

"I had a very happy childhood and I can still remember waking up every morning just wanting to play football – even though I knew I had to go to school.

"As soon as I arrived home I used to grab my football and go straight out and I'd play until late at night with my friends.

"Nothing else seemed to matter to me at that age.

"Now, every time I think about my childhood I think about my family, friends, and football. Nothing has changed."

Neymar remains a humble man, but he has been at the centre of one or two life-altering affairs. His €222m move from Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in 2017 smashed the world-record transfer fee and his agent – Neymar Sr – pocketed a cool €24m. The father and son team

received heavy criticism from all corners for the move.

Despite the best efforts of Qatari investors, playing for PSG is not conducive to Neymar's very public desire to become the best footballer in the world. At Barcelona, he forged a strong partnership with Lionel Messi, where he could play apprentice to the Argentine master and five-time Ballon D'or winner.

Prior to the 2018 World Cup, there was great speculation that Neymar could be returning to Barcelona – or possibly even to great rivals, Real Madrid, with a move to Manchester (City or United) also touted.

Another enormous transfer fee would follow, but at least the boy from Brazil would be back on track to becoming the best player in the world, rather than lingering in Europe's fifth best competition, France's top flight Ligue 1.

Life at PSG started well, with a flurry of goals and an instantaneous connection with Edinson Cavani and Kylian Mbappe, but things quickly soured. First, a public spat with Uruguayan Cavani over who would take a penalty, then reports of a fall-out with manager Unai Emery over tactics. PSG made an early exit from the Champions League after a 5-2 loss on aggregate to Real Madrid, and a week later Neymar fractured a metatarsal against Marseille.

Conspiracy theories pointed to the fact that Neymar had returned to Brazil to celebrate his sister's birthday every March since arriving in Europe, but the operation, crutches and absence from PSG's Ligue 1 title – and Brazil's World Cup build-up – suggests it is just coincidence.

The World Cup proved a welcome distraction for Neymar, who does his best talking on the field. With 54 international goals in 84 games before turning 26, Neymar is fast closing in on Brazilian greats Romario (55), Ronaldo (62) and Pele (77) at the top of the goalscoring records. He reached 30 international goals faster than Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo.

Neymar may have arrived at his second World Cup short of fitness after more than three months out, but he was undoubtedly more ►

Left: Neymar is a global brand ambassador for TCL, a leading consumer electronics brand



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experienced than the 22 year-old who missed Brazil's 7-1 drubbing four years previously through a fractured vertebrae.

"The difference is hard to explain," said Neymar, who captained Brazil to their first Olympic gold medal in men's football at the 2016 Olympics.

"But I think I'm more experienced, more wise, more 'cascudo', as we say in Brazil."

Despite Brazil's shock exit in the 2014 World Cup semi-final, he was fourth highest scorer, with crucial goals against Croatia, Cameroon and Chile.

For many, Neymar is well on the way to etching his name in the history books as the greatest striker of all time to wear Santos' famous white jersey – next to the legendary attacking force of Dorval, Mengalvio, Coutinho, Pele and Pepe.

Although it was another Brazilian great, Zito, who

Above: Neymar says faith guides him, as he often demonstrates by donning the '100% JESUS' headband

Right: Neymar and his girlfriend; 22-year-old actress and model, Bruna Marquezine, on the red carpet at an event hosted by The Foundation for AIDS Research in Sao Paulo

discovered the 11 year-old boy playing in a futsal tournament, Neymar credits Antonio Lima Dos Santos with his success.

Lima – who played with Pele at Santos FC and for Brazil – asked the club if they would create a new age-group to foster the precocious talent. He weaned Neymar off junk food, put him on a special weights programme, transitioned him from a pure striker into a playmaker and taught him how to use his left foot.

Today, Lima suggests that Neymar has the ability to unite people with the beauty of his football, but claims, "you can't compare any player with Pele because you will never find another one like Pele."

"In terms of attitude, they are the same," Lima, now 76 years old, admitted.

"Neymar also has something that even Pele doesn't. The speed of his feet and the way he can move the ball. The vision of the game, too, you can compare them. After training, Neymar would always come to me and say 'Mister, I would like to take some free-kick... can I?'"

While he has forged a party boy reputation, Neymar is firmly focused on becoming the best player in the world and has a team around him 24/7 to drive towards that. He once famously said: "I am the best player in the world. Ronaldo and Messi are from another planet".

The 2018 World Cup presented an opportunity for all

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three to lay their claim and Neymar was not open to distractions prior to the tournament.

"I have a girlfriend, but during physiotherapy, she has to wait," he said after the metatarsal injury.

"I play poker, which is my favourite hobby, while treating my injury. I play video games at my computer while treating my injury.

"You see a lot of players that have potential but do not reach their goals. It's sad. But I think anyone who dreams about it should get focused, remain attached to his family, trust his family and have friends around.

He needs to get focused, train and always give everything." ➤



Neymar is especially close to his sister Rafaella Beckran, and has a tattoo of the glamorous social-media star on his arm. He also has an image of mother.

With the success of Neymar's youth career and added income, the family bought their first property, a house next to Santos' Estadio Vila Belmiro. The quality of life vastly improved, with Neymar earning 10,000 Brazilian Reals per month (US\$2,700 today) at 15 and 125,000 Reals per month (US\$33,735 today) a year later. At 17, he signed his first full professional contract, was upgraded to the Santos first team, and began signing his first sponsorship deals. Aged 21, he moved to Barcelona for €57m.

Neymar could have joined Real Madrid as a 14-year-old. He travelled to the Spanish capital, but chose the "cultural values" of growing up in his home country. He has told how he is guided by the love of God and often wears a '100% Jesus' headband – and



even adorns his son with the same message on occasions.

Davi Lucca da Silva Santos was born in August 2011 to 19-year-old Neymar and 17-year-old Carolina Dantas. Although the couple are no longer together, they appear to manage an amicable relationship and Neymar is often pictured with his son at training, after matches and in public.

Now, the Brazilian is with 22-year-old actress and model, Bruna Marquezine, who he met in Rio de Janeiro in 2012.

Named on the TIME 100 list of the most influential people in the world, Neymar's popularity is growing, as is his \$140m net worth, which is enhanced by a \$5-8m per annum endorsement from Beats by Dre.

Regardless of his worth, Neymar has always had a reputation of being inclusive, often spending hours speaking to large groups of children. While at Santos, Neymar celebrated a birthday by inviting everybody at the club – from cleaners to the President – to a party, and in 2015, he founded the Instituto Projeto Neymar Jr.

"At Jardim Glória, the neighbourhood I lived part of my teenage years, in Praia Grande, we began our activities with the capacity of assisting 3000 kids and teenagers per day. It's an educational and sports complex that helps children from seven to 14 years old and their families." ■

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Above: Neymar breaks from training to talk tactics with his son
Below: The combination of flair and street skill made Neymar a favourite at Barcelona

