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Freddy Adu Biography

June 2, 1989 • Tema, Ghana

Soccer player



Adu, Freddy.

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Freddy Adu is like any average teenager. He goofs around with his friends, enjoys going to the movies, loves PlayStation, and hates doing his homework. Unlike most kids, however, he earns about \$500,000 a year. Adu's hefty paycheck comes from playing soccer. In November of 2003, when he signed with Major League Soccer (MLS), Adu became the youngest person to play for a professional American sports league since 1877. Called "the boy with the magic feet," all eyes are on the young superstar who many predict will make soccer the new favorite American pastime.

(The playing fields of Ghana

Freddy Adu is so gifted and seems so mature that people question whether he could actually be as young as he is. According to his birth certificate, however, he was born on June 2, 1989, in the seaport town of Tema, Ghana, in West Africa. Tema is known for two things: fishing and soccer. Adu was kicking a soccer ball by the time he was two-and-a-half years old. By the age of six, while father Maxwell and mother Emelia ran a local convenience store, he was playing in barefoot pick-up games with boys two or three times his own age. "I did not go one day without playing," Adu told Leslie Stahl in a 2003 *60 Minutes* interview. "It was just kicking and learning."

In 1997, when Adu was eight, his parents participated in an immigration lottery through the U.S. embassy in Ghana. According to Emelia Adu, the reason was to give her children, Freddy and younger brother Fredua, the chance for a better education. The Adus won the lottery and all four packed up and moved to the United States, settling in Potomac, Maryland, near Washington, D.C. Shortly after arriving in America, Maxwell Adu abandoned his family. To support the boys, Emelia took on two jobs, getting up at five A.M. every morning and working more than seventy hours a week.

Naturally, Freddy Adu turned to soccer, playing with other children at his school playground. His fourth-grade friends were amazed, and one of them invited him to play in a tournament hosted by the Potomac Soccer Association. It was his first time playing in an organized soccer event. Adu dazzled everyone, but was particularly noticed by financial consultant Arnold Tarzy, who was also the coach of the Cougars, a Potomac soccer team. Adu left such an impression on Tarzy that the Cougars coach tracked him down, and within forty-eight hours of the tournament Adu had joined his team. Tarzy became Adu's supporter and friend as well as his coach.

"When I'm out there on the field, I'm in a whole different world."

(The buzz starts

When Adu was ten, Tarzy suggested that he travel to Italy with a U.S. Olympic Development Program team to compete in a youth tournament for players under age fourteen. Adu's team not only won the competition, but Adu scored more points than anyone in the tournament and was named Most Valuable Player (MVP). The soccer world stood up and took notice. Adu was younger by several years than most of the players. In addition, he was pitted against players from Europe, where soccer (known as football) is king and people train seriously from a very young age. Major European teams such as Inter Milan (considered to be the New York Yankees of soccer) came calling, hoping to lure Adu to Europe.

During the following year Adu also attracted attention from the U.S. Soccer Federation and from companies such as Adidas, who were eager to have the soccer star with the megawatt smile promote their products. But Adu's mother said no. "He's too young," Emelia Adu told Amy Rosewater of *USA Today* in 2001. "I want him to get an education." Emelia Adu struggled with her decision, but felt she was making the right choice for her son.

(Learning the Language

According to sportswriter Rick Reilly, Freddy Adu "can do things with a soccer ball that make you wonder if it's not Velcroed to his feet." At a very young age Adu mastered dribbling and passing. He also tackled the most complicated of soccer moves. Several of these moves are named after the soccer players who made the moves famous. Perhaps one day young soccer players will be learning "The Adu," but in the meantime, here are some of the moves that Freddy uses to score on the soccer field.

- *Beckham*. Named for David Beckham (1975–) from England. The move is used to get a special spin, or "bend," on a ball as it is kicked toward the goal. A player uses the side of his foot to slice under the ball, at the same time leaning back as far as he can to get the most lift. The Beckham was popularized in the 2002 movie *Bend it Like Beckham*, about a young Indian girl who struggles to pursue her dream of being a soccer star like her idol, David Beckham.
- *Cruyff*. Named for Johan Cruyff (1947–) from the Netherlands. A player pretends to be kicking the ball with the inside of his right foot, but instead shifts his weight to the left foot, turns his right foot to point down, and switches the ball to his left foot. The move is used to "fake out" opponents.
- *Maradona*. Named for Diego Maradona (c. 1961–) from Argentina. The move consists of stopping the ball with one foot while making a 180-degree turn above it. It is used to control the ball and change direction.

Freddy's skills were not limited to the soccer field. He was also a budding artist. In his first art competition, which he entered in the fifth grade, Adu won the top prize in the county. He was also an exceptional student. Shortly after joining the Cougars, Adu received a full scholarship to attend The Heights, a prestigious boys' school in Potomac. He did so well that he skipped the seventh grade. Adu also played basketball, scoring twenty-eight points in his first junior varsity game.

But Adu's soccer ability was too bright to hide, and coaches continued to knock on his door. In 2001 John Ellinger, coach of the U.S. Soccer Federation's Under-17 team, asked Adu to attend a weekend tournament in Florida. After watching Adu's performance, Ellinger told Mark Starr in a *Newsweek* interview, "I see him do things I haven't seen the pros do." He described one move in particular: "The kid fielded a pass on the outside of his left foot, flicked it up and over his head—and over the defender—and corralled the ball without breaking stride."

Ellinger invited Adu to train at the federation's Soccer Academy, which is part of the IMG Academies in Bradenton, Florida. Run by the sports agency IMG, the 190-acre campus is an elite training ground for top athletes in a variety of sports. For example, only thirty of the nation's best young players are invited to attend the soccer academy. In 2002 Adu's mother agreed to let him go, and he moved to Florida, becoming, at twelve, the youngest member of America's Under-17 soccer team.

(Fancy footwork

Adu did not disappoint his coaches in Bradenton. He consistently scored high in matches against other youth squads, as well as in exhibition games against several college and professional teams. In March of 2003, just weeks after he became a U.S. citizen, Adu helped his team qualify for the Under-17 World Championships. In August he and his American teammates traveled to Finland for the finals. Adu scored four goals in two games, one a critical semifinal match against South Korea. Although his team ultimately lost to Brazil, the word was out that Adu was the kid to watch. In fact, according to one scout quoted in a March 2003 *Sports Illustrated* article, "He's going to be the best player in the world someday."

Coaches and leagues were again pounding at the door; there were even some tempting offers for Adu to train in Europe. It was reported that he was offered \$3 million from England's Manchester United. Adu turned them all down. For one thing, the Adus did not need the money, since Freddy had recently signed a \$1 million contract with Nike to endorse their sports line. In addition, Adu was itching to play with the pros. According to European Federation rules, any player transferring from outside the European Union is limited to playing in youth leagues until he or she turns eighteen. "If you're good enough," Adu remarked to Stahl, "you're old enough."

So, when America's Major League Soccer (MLS) came knocking, Adu answered. In November of 2003, he signed on with the MLS and was offered a four-year contract with a two-year league option. In January of 2004 he was snatched up by D.C. United to play professional soccer. His yearly salary: a cool \$500,000, which is almost twice that of the average American soccer player. Adu was fourteen years old; the typical age of a professional soccer player is twenty-seven.

(The Next Pelé?

Young Freddy Adu has often been compared to Pelé, considered by many to be the most famous, and perhaps the greatest, soccer player of all time. Edson Arantes do Nascimento was born in 1940 in Tres Coracoes, Brazil, the son of a soccer player. He turned pro at age sixteen and played for the Santos Football Club in Brazil from 1956 to 1974. In 1975, in an attempt to boost the sport of soccer in the United States, Pelé was signed to play with the New York Cosmos of the North American Soccer League. He played with the team for two years before retiring in 1977. Throughout his career, Pelé scored an amazing 1,280 goals in 1,362 professional games. He also holds the record as the only team player to win three World Cup titles. People were amazed by Pelé's skill on the soccer field, but they were also captivated by his charming personality and winning smile.

After retiring, Pelé continued to be active, serving as a sports commentator and traveling around the world as a soccer ambassador. In 1997 he was elected minister of sports in Brazil. In 2004 he appeared in Freddy Adu's first television commercial, for Pepsi's Sierra Mist. In his interview with Leslie Stahl, Adu relayed the advice Pelé gave him: "He told me to keep my head up and just play."

(Freddy's future

Adu missed most of D.C. United's training camp in early 2004 because he was still in school. Thanks to his high grades (he consistently



Freddy Adu warms up before a 2004 game against the Los Angeles Galaxy.

AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission.

earned straight A's) and the Soccer Federation's accelerated academic program, he graduated from high school in March, three years ahead of schedule. He then moved back to Maryland to live with his mother, who will drive him to and from practice. The Adus live in a brand new house purchased by Freddy, and Emelia Adu has finally been able to quit her job. "She doesn't work anymore. She's done," Adu told Stahl. "You know she's worked so hard." Emelia Adu has not forgotten, however, that Freddy is still a

boy. She expects him to do the usual chores that every kid does, such as mowing the lawn, doing the dishes, and vacuuming.

Adu, however, is not a normal boy. On April 3, 2004, when he took the field for his first professional match, millions of people tuned in to watch the fourteen-year-old on *ABC Sports*. The match between D.C. United and the San Jose Earthquakes was the MLS season opener and had been sold out for months. Fans swarmed the stands, chanting "Freddy, Freddy," until finally, during the second half of the game, Adu was brought in. The 5-foot-8-inch forward, however, made a very low key showing. In fact, he never even attempted to score a goal. Adu's coaches were not worried, chalking up his lackluster play to all the media frenzy. Adu himself seemed unfazed about his performance, commenting to sportswriter Joseph White on the FOXSports-world Web site, "I got it out of the way, and now I'm ready to go.... I'm glad it's over."

Adu's next goal is to play on the U.S. team in the 2006 World Cup. Teams representing individual countries compete every four years for the world championship of soccer. Until then, hopes are high that Adu will spark the interest in soccer in America that is shared by the rest of the world. Although many children play the game in school, not much attention is paid to the sport at the professional level. Discussing Adu in a November 2003 *Sports Illustrated* article, MLS commissioner Don Garber commented, "It's not just about performing on the field. It's about being a founding father of the sport for a generation."

In the midst of all the hype, however, Adu, has remained a down-to-earth young man. In a press conference held just before his professional debut and reported on the *Sports Illustrated* Web site, he focused on the upcoming game and his team: "I'm not coming out here to become the savior of American soccer. I'm anxious to get out there and play and have fun because when I'm on the soccer field that's when I'm at my happiest."

(For More Information

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And for the record, I'm against unjustified zoning restrictions that increase housing costs in cities. Then you get people asking for rent control, which makes matters worse.

♡ ↗ 4m



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Doesn't Coronavirus put into question the widely held assumption that dense, walkable cities are better than the suburbs? I think it's fine to acknowledge that

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