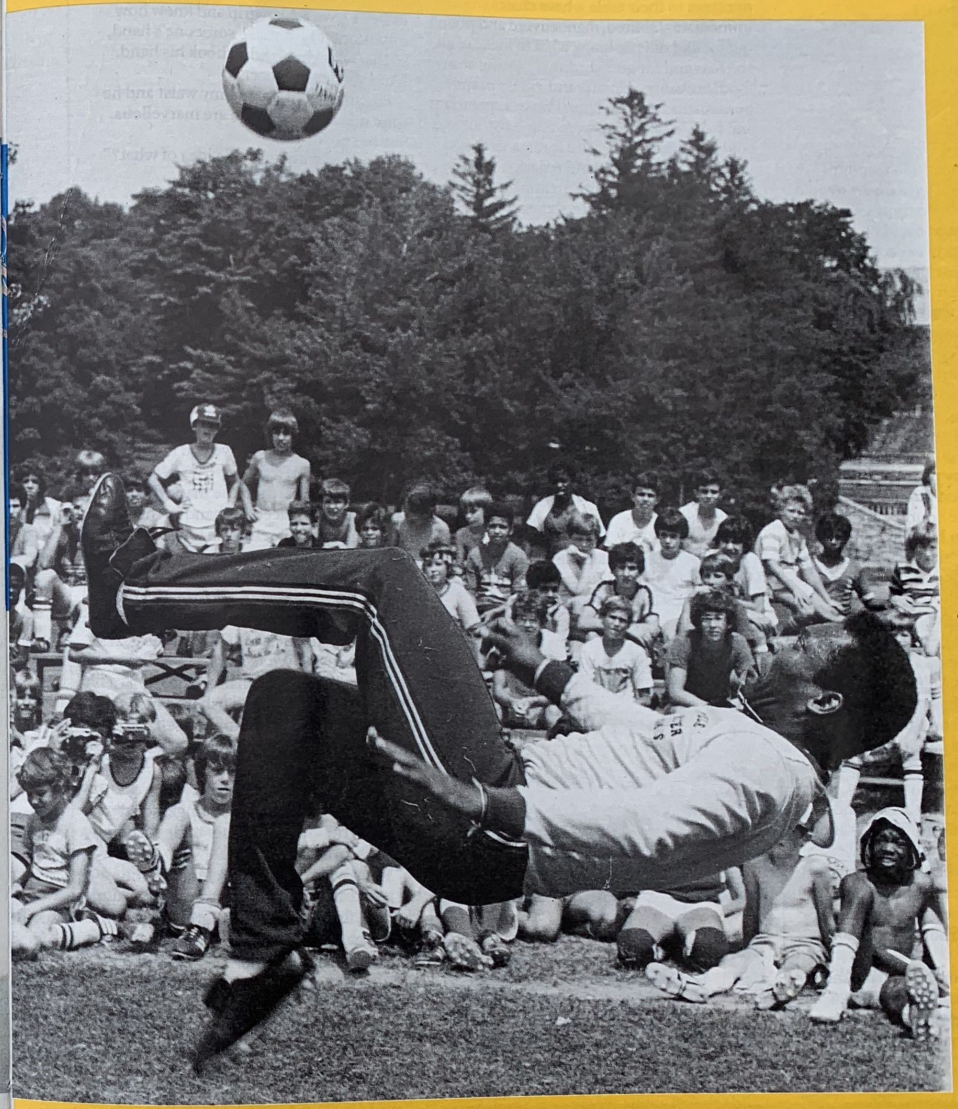


As an 18-year-old dancer, *Heather Dune* dated the world's greatest footballer — with no idea who he was. This is her story



My summer romance with a man called Pelé

The dormitories were full of all kinds of performing artists, but we dancers owned the campus. We could do things with our bodies that nobody else could do — contort our limbs, lift our legs over each other's heads, do splits against a wall or a tree. Then a football camp started and a bunch of players were given a wing in the dorms, and our campus was suddenly inundated with little boys eager to kick a ball about. We turned our noses up and flounced off in the opposite direction. Sports? Yuck.

When we are young we have the audacity to believe that we are invincible, and as an 18-year-old in the summer of 1978, I was no different. When my parents announced their divorce, I dropped out of college, hitchhiked around the country and tried to avoid myself. When I finally went home, my mother was a broken shell of the strong woman she had been and my father was stern and cold.

"What are you doing with your life?" he had asked me. Though he was vice-president of a car corporation, he had also studied dance at the New York Metropolitan Opera Ballet. He knew what it took to become a professional dancer. "You have to start training, seriously. You have to work for it."

That's how I ended up at Manhattanville College, just northeast of New York City, with a bunch of performing artists and a bunch of bloody footballers. The day after they arrived, we passed their football pitch. We ignored them but their practice came to a halt. Even the football was still as we gambolled across the grass, our legs stretching into jetés, airborne splits, like Matisse's dancers.

That lunch, the room was buzzing more than usual. One of the soccer coaches, a Latino man with long curls touching his shoulders, came over to where we were standing. "Will you eat with us?" We carried our trays to their table where chairs were immediately shifted, manoeuvred and pulled out for us. I did not know what to make of all the fuss and sat quickly down, staring at my food, probably a banana and a glass of milk, perhaps an apple for later. I was a vegetarian, and in 1978 salad bars were non-existent and yoghurt was considered a foreign delicacy.

"You can't live on that." A dark-complexioned man with an impish smile admonished me, looking at my food.

"She's been eating nothing but cereal for weeks," said my friend Angie.

"Tonight you come with us for a real dinner," he proclaimed. His curly-headed friend, Rildo (I think he was called Rildo; it was a long time ago), put his arm around Angie's chair and we were paired off: me with this man; Angie with Rildo. I had and still have no idea why he chose me.

That evening the men greeted us. The dark-skinned man with the aquiline features — hooded eyes, arched nose, carved lips that held that impish smile — took my arm. "Your name is?"

"Heather."

"Heaven?"

"Heather." I enunciated the "th".

"And your name is?"

He laughed at me. I looked at him expectantly.

"You're serious?" His brown eyes scanned my blue ones.

"Pelé."



"Hello, Pelé…" He didn't mention his last name but then I hadn't told him mine either. I have a good grip and knew how important it is to shake someone's hand, so that was what I did. I shook his hand. "And you teach soccer?"

His arm swept around my waist and he spun me, laughing. "You are marvellous. She has no idea!"

I laughed with him. "No idea of what?" He roared with laughter.

The steak house was one of those mock-Tudor places, everything — the walls, the decor, the tables and chairs — dark and heavy. The patrons were dressed in golf plaids or were men with suits and ties. The women had their hair done up and wore high heels. Everyone was white. As we entered, a hush fell over the room. People stopped eating and leant to whisper and point. I looked to see who they were pointing to. My date smiled, nodded to these strangers.

"It's a pleasure… to have you here," the maître d' stammered.

Like a dance partner, the man whose name was Pelé placed his hand in the small of my back and directed me towards the oak stairs. People murmured as we passed. Upstairs a heavy oak table was set and waiting for us. When the maître d' shut the door and left us, the team erupted with glee at the reception below. "Did you see that?" They chortled. "We're stars."

Pelé pulled out the chair to the right of the head of the table and ushered me into it, then took the head seat for himself. When I get nervous, I begin to tremble like a leaf and my teeth chatter.

"You are chilled?" he asked.

I nodded. He snapped his fingers and asked for the air conditioner to be turned down. I stared at my menu.

"What will you have?" Pelé asked me.

I gazed at the menu — steak, lamb, chicken, fish… "A baked potato?"

"Is that all? Let me feed you. You're too thin. Eat a steak, like me."

"I don't eat meat," I said. I also didn't want to cost too much money; I didn't want to be one of those girls who owed her date in flesh. I was still a virgin, after all.



Heather Dune dancing in 1984. Above: with her parents, c1974



Pelé, then playing for New York Cosmos, is escorted from the pitch after the final game of his 21-year career, October 1, 1977. Below right: teaching at his soccer camp

"You must have a salad too. I insist." I answered with a nod, refused the wine he poured, sipped my water and began to nibble at some dry bread.

Angie and a few others devoured their dinners, wine, bread; they flirted with a sureness I could only imagine and I felt myself fade. Still, they looked at me jealously. I was sitting beside the man who had caused people's heads to turn.

Pelé cut a slab of butter and plopped it into the middle of my open potato. "You need calories," he said. "I am going to feed you." He put his hand on the nape of my neck where my collarbone arched through the skin at a dangerously sharp angle. At almost 5ft 9in, I weighed just 115lb. "I need someone to keep me company and you need to eat. You will be my dinner date."

I nodded.

Rildo put his arm around Angie. "And you will be mine. We are going to Studio 54 this week. You will come with us, no?"

Mine and Angie's eyes met across the table as we both screamed, "*Yes*!"

While the others flirted and ate, Pelé and I spoke about the hard work of being in training, be it dance or football. I told him of my dreams to dance at Carnegie Hall. We discussed the hours that go into achieving the physical standards that are demanded of our professions. He knew more about ballet than modern dance, so I explained the differences to him. He confided in me that he was going through a difficult divorce.

"I ASKED HIS NAME. HE LAUGHED AT ME. 'YOU'RE SERIOUS? PELÉ.' HE DIDN'T MENTION HIS LAST NAME"



Take the "A" Train filtered through the speakers of the upstairs room. "I love this song," I chirped excitedly.

"Dance for us!" Pelé signalled the waiter to turn up the music and I did what I did best. Angie and I moved out onto the floor. We did a little swing, then let go of each other's hands and began to move freely and without inhibition. The boys were soon up and dancing with us. Beneath us, well-fed, sedate white Americans dined, while up above six dancers and six footballers found a level playing field.

On our way back to the dorms, one of the guys told Pelé that he knew of a lake where we could swim. The next thing we knew we were running into the dorms for our bathing suits. It had to be close to midnight when we splashed into the warm black water. The dancers' pale arms and faces were lit by a crescent moon, but only Pelé's white teeth reflected in the dark — nothing but smile.

How's the workshop?"

The pay phone was in a small, stuffy room that had once been white but had now yellowed with age. "I had a date last night," I told my brother Loch and then paused, embarrassed. What would he think of me going out with someone and not even finding out his last name? "Pelé something… I don't know his last name. He plays soccer."

"You went out with *the* Pelé?"

"I don't know." I was confused. Maybe there was more than one player whose name was Pelé. I had never even watched ➤

PREVIOUS PAGES: HEATHER DUNE. EILEEN MILLER. THESE PAGES: GETTY IMAGES, HEATHER DUNE



a game of football. "You've heard of him?"

"He's only the greatest soccer player in the world. I can't believe you've met Pelé!"

I could tell Loch thought it was a real waste, me going out with Pelé and not even appreciating who the guy was.

"He's sort of old," I confessed. Thirtysomething is old to 18-year-olds. I waved to the girl on the other side of the door, who was waiting for me to get off the phone as my brother told me of Pelé's great feats — the 50-yard kick, the way he kept a ball in the air with his knees… "He's the reason they call it 'the beautiful game'. He's like the Baryshnikov of soccer."

It seemed odd to me to describe any sport as beautiful. "He's going to take me to Studio 54!" It was the one thing I could connect to: a nightclub and dancing. The real Baryshnikov went there.

The next afternoon, the football players were still at practice, driving their young charges to use their heads, feet, chests. We watched them dart about the field then decided to abandon them to the humidity and August heat. We headed instead for the local reservoir for a dip. I was the first to strip and dive in, followed immediately by the others. The cold water struck our extremities. We danced. Leapt. Splashed.

By the time we headed for campus, meal service had ended so we raided the next morning's cereal boxes. Angie went to find our new football friends to see if we could get another free dinner. "They've gone without us," Angie moaned. "Tonight was Studio 54. Pelé was looking for you."

That night I lay in my single bed and thought about all I was missing. I could hear the beat of the disco in my heart and imagined the crowd parting as I took over the floor, spinning like a whirling dervish. It could have been my moment to be noticed

Pelé at his soccer camp at Manhattanville College in upstate New York, 1976

— to become one of the beautiful people on the arm of the man known for the beautiful game. Instead, I had been skinny-dipping.

"You call yourselves dancers?" our tutor screamed at us. "Your legs should be by your ears. Gravity is an illusion. Stop making it look like work." Even the piano accompanist pounded angrily.

"Get in the air. One, two, three — leap!" My back arched, legs and arms flashed. My calves ached and my shins grew discoloured with bruises. We finished class in a lump, hyperventilating on the floor, and headed back to the dorms, hungry and sore.

"We missed you last night." Rildo ran up behind us. Pelé walked.

Angie kissed Rildo's cheek. I blushed. Was I supposed to kiss Pelé?

Pelé looked at my damaged shins and smiled sympathetically. "You look like a footballer."

I nodded appreciatively at the bruises on his own legs.

"Tonight, it will just be the four of us." He danced with the soccer ball. He knocked it over to me and I caught it.

"Not your hands. Catch it with your knees. Your feet."

I tried copying him, lifting my knees up to my chest, but the ball went too high and bounced across the grass.

He laughed. "Harder than it looks."

I took my heel in my hand and stretched my leg over my head. "So is this."

He agreed. "We should do a dance — you take our movements and make a dance. How about it?"

"Cool."

It was settled. He would arrange it.

"Dinner tonight, we go some place very quiet," Rildo told us. "No more anywhere that people know Pelé." A dark cloud passed over Pelé's normally bright face. A model and he had made front page of the tabloids.

"It wasn't serious," he looked at me with sorrowful eyes. "They make it look as if I am having an affair and I am not."

Angie and I showered, dressed and met them by the car — no more meeting in lobbies. Paparazzi had found the school. That would be the way of it from then on — meet by the car, pick up Pelé from the fire escape, look for a restaurant that had an empty car park and no paparazzi. I forgot about the cafeteria and the cereal in cardboard boxes and began to eat real food.

A devout Catholic, Pelé worried about what all the tabloid stories would do to his reputation. It was the beginning of the age of celebrity and he had a presence, demeanour and face that did not hide well. "I must protect you from all this," he said, worried that my reputation would be sullied too. "I feed you. That is all. No one understands."

I understood. Dancing eight to ten hours a day and eating fewer than 1,000 calories, there was little left of me by the end of the day. "Tonight you eat dessert," he said. "I insist. Look at your waist." His hands could meet when he wrapped them around it. For once that evening, I ate dessert.

For the dance performance Pelé had planned, we gathered in the studio — dancers on one side, footballers on the other. We had a record player for music and a soccer ball for a prop. Our audience was a bunch of giggling little boys. Pelé started, showing us how to feint and dribble; his focus always on the ball.

"That's like how we spot for a turn." I took fifth position and did a double pirouette. Another dancer did an aerial turn from both feet and landed on one knee.

One of Pelé's team-mates demonstrated a kick and we performed battements: legs straight, knees to noses. We started slowly, then suddenly Pelé was moving in ways we had never seen. He showed us how to make our legs go one way while the body faced another. We caught on and followed, adding our own variations. It was the rhythm of his moves that I could not duplicate; like a Coltrane riff, he was hard to follow. Then one of his guys performed a bicycle kick

"IN THAT MOMENT I SAW HIM FOR WHO HE REALLY WAS: THE BARYSHNIKOV OF SOCCER. FINALLY, I TOO WAS IN AWE"

— the floor was hard, but he fell backwards with ease. We tried it. "Better to do that on the grass," Pelé warned, too late.

The bones of my back hit a bit too hard. I rolled my eyes and bent over to catch my breath. He laughed and egged us on. Pelé was clearly enjoying showing us up. With one deep breath I shook the kink out of my back and headed back to the floor to accept Pelé's challenge. Soon we were piling movement upon movement, twisting this way and that. His eyes sparked with light and mirth and in that moment I saw him for who he really was: the Baryshnikov of soccer. My brother had been right. Finally, I too was in awe. There was art in his sport.

Most often that summer we ate at a small diner where the food was not terrible and no one seemed interested or knew who Pelé was. As we always did, Angie and I jumped out of the car first to make sure no one had found our dinner spot. If there were any photographers, we were to go back out to the car and we would leave. If we did not come out, Rildo and Pelé would come in a few minutes later, after we had been seated.

That night, two boys — almost teenagers — catcalled as Angie and I stepped out of the car. "What are you white chicks doin' around here. Don't you know any better?"

I looked at them as if they were crazy. "This is Westchester, not Harlem," I told them. I grew up outside Detroit and wasn't about to be out-toughed.

"We got shit here too, bitch."

"What'd you say?" They couldn't have been older than 12.

"I called you a bitch, bitch."

"What's your problem with us? We can't eat here?" I said.

"We don't want your kind round here."

I laughed, ruefully. Not backing down. Angie gestured to get inside. And then Pelé came around the corner, his eyes dark and unsmiling. They fell over each other and dropped their bicycles.

"Pelé? My man! Pelé! Whoa, shit! Can we get your autograph?"

He put his arm around my waist, the one he could measure with his hands. "I want you to apologise to my date."

"Hey, we didn't know. They looked, you know…"

"No, I do not know. They look like ladies to me. Didn't anyone teach you to treat ladies with respect?"

They shuffled their feet along the ground. The bravest one shot me a look. "Sorry."

"That's an apology?" Rildo slapped the head of the child; hard enough to let him know Pelé meant business. "You want an autograph and you offend his date? Why should Pelé do anything for you?"

The teens came out with a proper apology and then, like a good teacher, Pelé began to tell them how to behave in the world, with women, with respect. I pondered the idea that Pelé thought I was "a lady". I felt more like a girl, but it was quite clear that my date was a man. And this man thought of me as a woman.

Up to that point in my life, I had gone out with boys who had fumbled and gotten nowhere. Pelé asked for nothing but company. Maybe he wanted someone who had no idea who he was and saw instead him as an individual. Not a star; just a man.

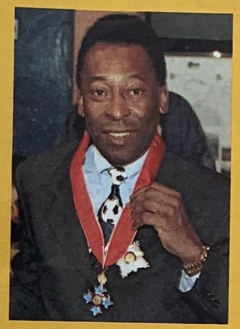
The next day, I had to fly home for a family emergency and by the time I got back to college, the footballers were gone and that summer of dance and dreams was coming to an end.

"Soccer is ballet with a ball," Pelé had told me after watching us translate football into dance. Great athletes, like great dancers, go through life's syncopated rhythms and know how to catch the waves that pull others down. I still don't know Pelé's last name, but I know who he was — he was the first man in my life to treat me like a woman. And while we were never more than dinner companions, it is the memory of his arm that I still remember now. In the car park that night, Pelé gave those boys his autograph only after they promised never to speak badly to a woman again. "You want to be like me?"

"Yeah!" They looked up at this man, who was and still is a role model to so many.

"Then you should be playing on the field, not hanging out looking for trouble." As the boys jumped on their bicycles and rode off, Pelé's voice soared across the car park and hit his goal. "Work at the game. Practise at life." ■

What happened next?



Pelé

By the summer of 1978, Edson Arantes do Nascimento — aka Pelé or *O Rei*, the King — had won a record three World Cups with Brazil and scored 77 goals in 92 games, making him Brazil's joint-top goalscorer of all time. After retiring in 1977, he took up a patchwork of charity, political and personal projects, which included serving as Brazil's sports minister from 1995 to 1998; movie cameos; an album of football-themed songs; and being the face of brands such as Mastercard and Viagra. In 1997 he was awarded an honorary knighthood by the Queen (above). He married three times and had seven children. He was diagnosed with colon cancer in 2021 and died on December 29, 2022.



Heather Dune

After her chaste summer of love with Pelé, Dune moved to New York and studied under the renowned choreographer Martha Graham. She danced at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center but in 1984 dislocated her pelvis, ending her dance career. She became a writer and is the author of four books, including the international bestseller *The Nine Hundred*, the story of the first young women taken to Auschwitz. Her partner is British and they split their time between Herefordshire and the Hamptons. She never saw Pelé again, though he had a home near hers in the Hamptons for a time. "I regret that I didn't visit, but I was worried that he wouldn't remember me."

EILEEN MILLER, GETTY IMAGES, HEATHER DUNE