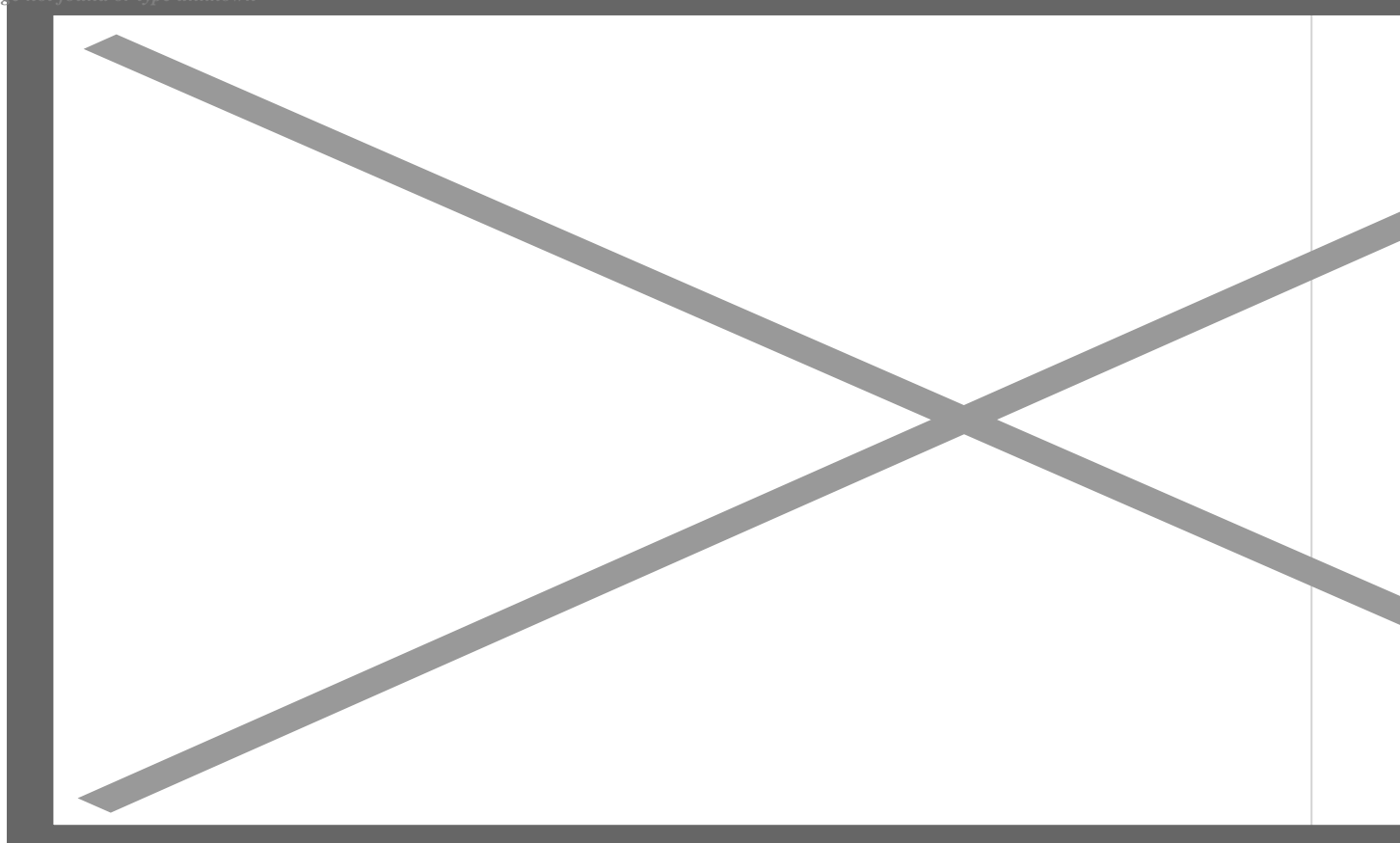


Brazilians say their last farewell to King Pelé

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Brasilia, January 2 (RHC)-- Brazilians began on Monday to bid farewell to their greatest soccer idol, Pele, in a 24-hour public wake at the stadium of Santos, the team where he forged much of his legend.

Thousands of people, some arriving from other Brazilian cities, lined up early in the morning outside the Vila Belmiro Stadium to bid farewell to the star, who died last Thursday at the age of 82, reported AFP.

They shouted 'Pelé, Pelé!' and applauded as they waited to enter the ground, where the open coffin was placed surrounded by wreaths of white flowers.

"My childhood was marked by what Pele did for Brazil, in the World Cup matches," explained Carlos Mota as he stood in line. Carlos, who is 59, traveled from Rio de Janeiro with his son Bernardo, 12. "I always told my son that there are three things that are not discussed: that the ball is round, the grass is green and Pelé is the greatest," added the bank worker.

The remains of the only player to win three World Cups (1958, 1962, 1970) arrived at the site around 03H40 local time (06H40 GMT) in a motorcade from the Albert Einstein hospital in Sao Paulo, where he was hospitalized from November 29 until his death a month later.

Several banners of different sizes decorate the stands: one with 'O Rei' on his back, showing the '10' shirt he immortalized, and others with the messages 'Long live the king', 'Pelé 82 years' or 'Shirt 10 of Santos'.

Admission will be allowed 'uninterrupted' until Tuesday at 10 a.m. local time, after which a procession will begin through the streets of Santos, 75 kilometers from Sao Paulo, and will end at a mausoleum in the city with a burial reserved for the family.

The remains of Pelé's father, brother and aunt rest in the same cemetery, from where the albino-black structure of Vila Belmiro can be seen. The funeral procession will pass by the house of the legendary ex-football player's mother, Mrs. Celeste, 100 years old, who does not know about her son's death.

'We told her, but (...) she is not aware,' Maria Lúcia do Nascimento, Pele's sister, told ESPN on Friday.

The death of the lethal and skillful ex-attacker, who claimed 1,283 goals in a 21-year career, most of them with the 'Peixe', caused shock beyond the world of football and prompted messages of condolences all over the planet.

But his death, as a result of colon cancer detected in September 2021, has not provoked massive demonstrations in Brazil for the moment: few people went to the hospital where he was treated in Sao Paulo and Vila Belmiro in the days leading up to the wake.

Possible reasons? The end-of-year vacations that lead Brazilians to move, the time that has passed (almost half a century) since 'O Rei' retired and the antipathy he arouses in some sectors of society for his silence on the military dictatorship (1964-1985) and racism.

Resting in Santos, Silvio Neves Souza, 54, went on Sunday to take a picture with the bust and statue of Pelé that adorn an outdoor corridor of the 'Peixe' stadium, decorated with some flowers and letters left by fans.

The electrician, who will not be able to attend the tributes due to his work in Sao Paulo, is confident that his compatriots will give him a farewell to match. "I'm sure it's going to be great, those two days will pass many, many people, fans, not only former 'torcedores' who accompanied his soccer, but also children' who will say goodbye to the 'king'," he told AFP.

In the surroundings of the soccer temple, some Santos and Brazilian flags with black mourning stripes or bows could be seen. Other tributes followed in Brazil, mainly during the inauguration ceremony of leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva on Sunday in Brasilia, which began with a minute's silence in his memory.

The Sao Paulo state military police announced that it will deploy a 'robust structure' for the posthumous tributes to Edson Arantes do Nascimento. It will also reinforce security at Congonhas airport, in the São Paulo capital, in view of the expected arrivals of sportsmen, politicians and authorities who will attend the wake, according to Folha newspaper.

Pelé was hospitalized for a month at the Albert Einstein Hospital until his death on December 29. From there he followed the World Cup in Qatar and the elimination of the 'Canarinha' in the quarterfinals.

"We were with him' on December 21st," explained his sister Maria Lúcia. "He was very calm, we talked a little bit, but I could already feel that he was sorry, he already knew he was leaving." (Source/AFP)

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