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ADU

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Les Carpenter / Times staff columnist

Can 14-year-old legs carry sweet burden of youth?

The kid smiled and the adults were charmed. Fourteen-year-old Freddy Adu signed his name to millions of dollars last week and then gave the pen to his mother.

"To keep for a very long time," he said.

Grown men almost wept.

"Freddy, don't ever change," said the commissioner of Major League Soccer.

In his office at Seattle Pacific University, Dan Tripps, a professor of physical education and a skeptic of anything involving teenagers and fame and large sums of money, watched Adu give his adolescence to professional soccer and almost approved.

"I was taken by his demeanor," Tripps said. "He's clearly more mature than his 14 years. He's very impressive."

Freddy Adu seems almost too good to be true — a 14-year-old whisked as a child from poverty in Ghana after his mother won a lottery to come to the United States, a child touched by luck who also happens to be the best young soccer player in the world. And then this child, as it turns out, is unfazed by the lights, the adults and the piles of money.

Too many times, this story has a bad ending.

As Tripps watched the announcement of Adu's signing with Major League Soccer, a name kept running through his head — Ken Griffey Jr. This is the way it started with Griffey, with a stage filled with smiles, with a child more gifted than all the other men, a child who appeared able to handle everything that would come his way.

Griffey was five years older than Adu when his spikes first touched the Kingdome's turf. His father played beside him. And as time went on, it turned out Griffey was more fragile than anyone could have ever guessed simply by watching him chase fly balls.

Maturity can be a dangerous thing at an age where innocence reigns. On Wednesday, Adu stepped from childhood into a world that routinely devours people twice his age. And just because he smiled a lot and just because he gave a pen to his mother doesn't mean he won't still become soccer's Todd Bridges, a star with too much too soon.

The announcement of his signing was made at Madison Square Garden. That night, another one-time teenager who was too good to be true came to play basketball in the same building. Kobe Bryant, who speaks several languages and was seen as the one person built to handle the NBA at a young age, spent much of his time before the game talking about his arrest on rape charges and denying that he has become a lost soul in his mid-20s.

There are signs Adu will be different. His last two years have been spent at the Bradenton, Fla.,

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headquarters of his representatives, IMG. There, he works with coaches and trainers and sports psychologists who try to prepare him for everything he will eventually face as a celebrity. The IMG people are constantly pairing him with its star athletes, having him talk with Cowboys defensive back Roy Williams and Jaguars quarterback Byron Leftwich as well as several of the players from the national soccer team.

He is even videotaped during practices and weightlifting sessions so he can later watch to see how he carries himself even while going through simple exercises. He is aware of virtually every movement he makes.

"He came to us at 12 and he was very much 12," says Trevor Mowad, IMG's associate director of mental conditioning. "There is a lot about Freddy that is very much a 14-year-old, too."

But there is this as well. Adu has a poise, a confidence the IMG people — long accustomed to child prodigies and prima donnas — rarely see.

"People talk about having *it* whatever *it* is," Mowad says. "He has *it*."

Maybe Freddy Adu is The One, the player who can survive the flood of gold and light that swallowed up so many other children before him. Maybe a childhood of soccer on glass-strewn Ghanaian streets left him so appreciative that the golden ticket to America would never ruin him. Unlike the parade of young tennis stars and gymnasts and figure skaters who danced across our television screens, he has been given nothing.

A multimillion-dollar contract from a professional soccer league and the promise of millions more from shoe endorsements might really seem like a gift from the heavens.

But at an age when he should be throwing spitballs in geometry class, Freddy Adu will instead be cashing a monthly check that can buy him a fleet of Lincoln Navigators — what will that mean in six years when he is 20 and his MLS contract expires?

Can the plea of the soccer commissioner really be heard?

Can Freddy Adu really never change?

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