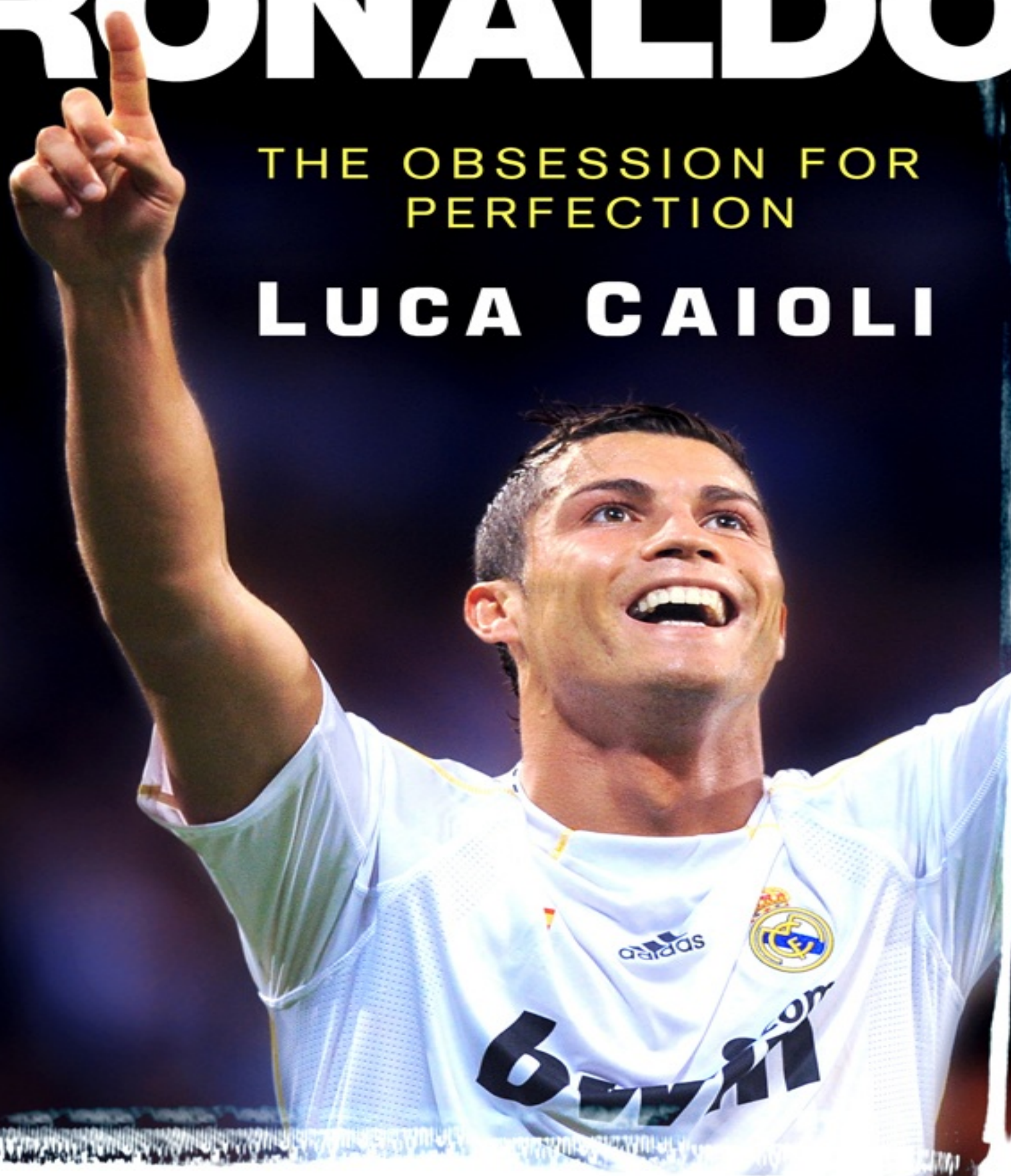


FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING  
TORRES AND MESSI

# RONALDO

THE OBSESSION FOR  
PERFECTION

LUCA CAIOLI



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# **RONALDO**

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PERFECTION

**LUCA CAIOLI**



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‘I love being Cristiano Ronaldo.’

‘I love what I do, I love my life, I’m happy.’

‘I consider myself a winner. I win more often than I lose. I always try to stay focused. I know it’s not easy, but nothing in life is easy. If it was, we wouldn’t have been born crying.’

‘I’m a competitive person and that’s never going to change. Obviously I’m growing up and becoming more mature. But the way I think doesn’t change.’

‘I have faith in my abilities. I always have done.’

‘I am who I am. The way I act, what others see – that’s the real me.’

‘I have never altered my behaviour for anyone. If they like me, great. If not ... they can stay away. They don’t have to come to my games.’

‘Those who know me know who I really am, my personality, my character.’

‘I’m very close to my family. I was close to my dad and I’m still close to my mum and siblings. My family is my rock. They’ve been incredibly supportive; they’re always there for me when I need them. They have helped me so much, and I try to be there for them as they have for me.’

‘The people who know me well love me. The few people who live with me, the people I train with every day, those who work with me ... they think highly of me because they know what I’m like. Of course, other people have a very different opinion because they don’t know me. I can understand that.’

‘I always speak my mind. I tell it like it is. That might be what others don’t like about me.’

‘I don’t pay any attention to what people say about me. I don’t read the newspapers or magazines. Everyone’s entitled to their opinion.’

‘There have been lots of lies spread about me ... that’s the price of fame.’

‘I think people are jealous of me because I’m rich, good looking and a great footballer. There’s no other explanation.’

‘I’m always ready to learn, to hear different opinions.’

‘I’m someone who is very easy to live with. And I feel very lucky because if I ever need to talk about anything, I have the best friends in the world.’

‘I’m a normal guy and I have feelings just like anybody else.’

‘I’m the kind of person who loves a challenge – I always have. My entire life is geared towards finding new challenges.’

‘I’m generally quite a positive and well-balanced person.’

‘To me, getting on with people is more important than money.’

‘Having a good quality of life is more important than money.’

‘I’ve had a great education. My parents taught me to be myself, not to change for anyone. If people like me, fine. If not, it doesn’t bother me.’

‘I like seeing the people around me happy, smiling, content.’

‘You don’t win anything in this life without overcoming the kinds of obstacles that I’ve encountered.’

‘I used to cry every day when I was a little boy growing up in Lisbon. I still cry – I cry a lot of tears, both happy and sad. It’s good to cry. Crying is just part of life.’

‘I have no time for people who lie to me – to me lying is one of the worst traits. It makes me really angry.’

‘Talking incessantly is not my style. Talking too much isn’t good for your image.’

~~‘I don’t like talking about my private life. I don’t like drawing attention to it but I don’t hide anything either. Let people gossip if they want to. If people want to sell their story, that’s up to them. I’m not interested.’~~

‘I’m a smart kid – but no one’s perfect and that includes me.’

‘There are days when it’s not easy being Cristiano – days when I’d love to do something normal and I can’t. But I know how to handle it and to be honest I’m not uncomfortable with this kind of life.’

‘If you love football, then there’s no doubt you’ll love watching Cristiano Ronaldo.’

‘I get to do the thing I love most in life – play football.’

‘I’ve already won everything there is to win, but I’ll never stop trying to win until the day I retire. That’s just who I am. I believe in a bad run of form, but not in letting it get you down. Mental focus is paramount when it comes to achieving your goals. And the key is to keep setting those goals.’

‘My aim, my ambition, is to be the best. Ultimately, if I come within reach of being the best, the great – although what I’d really love is to go down as one of the best players in history. I’m grateful to God that I’ve won the trophy for best player in the world, but I’d like to win it again, this year or next. I’m definitely going to get that Ballon d’Or again.’

‘I believe I’m a well-rounded footballer, although there are always countless ways to improve. I’m not referring to specific elements of my game, I just mean generally. You have to grow as a complete player. You can’t just focus on shooting or dribbling.’

‘Dribbling and dodging is the way I play. I’ve played like that since I was little. I love dodging and feinting, getting past the opponent. I know that people get annoyed when I dodge past them, or when I bicycle kick or backheel the ball. But I’m not trying to make fun of my opponents, that’s just my style. I didn’t change it when I was in England and I’m not going to change it whether I’m in Spain or Brazil.’

‘My goal-scoring technique is a secret I’ll never divulge. I just think about which side I’m going to go for, I look at the goal, the goalie and the defenders, and I shoot. When I take the shot I say to myself “Make it a good one Cristiano”.’

‘I always try to score goals, play well and help the team. But I never think I have to score in every game. If you think that way you end up not scoring at all. Where there’s talent, ability and technical quality, the goals come naturally. So I don’t get too worried if I don’t score. If I play well, if the team plays well, the goals will come.’

‘It doesn’t matter where we play or who we play, in every match I go out onto the field to give it my all, play the way I know how, and do everything possible to ensure we win.’

‘When I get home after losing a game, I don’t talk to my mum or any of my family. They know who I’m like and they know how I react. I’ve been known to cry after certain losses.’

‘What’s my biggest weakness? I don’t know ... I like to be great on every level, not just physically but mentally too. There’s no single aspect that I work on more than others. I just want to keep getting stronger.’

‘Footballers are people too and naturally the things that happen in our lives affect us as much as the next person. But the higher level you are professionally, the stronger you have to be to ensure that it doesn’t affect your performance. That’s what we’re paid to do.’

‘During the season, my life is quite calm and focused – it’s all about football. Sometimes it’s about enjoying life and on other occasions it’s about working hard. During the holidays I might like to let off steam with my friends, but when I’m working, nobody can fault my attitude. I try to set an example as a professional, and that shines through when I play. If you go out partying every weekend there’s no way you can give it your all on the pitch.’

‘I like to look after my body, it’s an important part of my life and my profession. I don’t have any particular routine, I just train. I eat whatever I want but in moderation. I have good genes so I don’t



put on weight, but I do have to work hard to maintain my fitness.'

~~'When I'm on the pitch or training I'm happy because I love playing football. It's my passion, it's what I enjoy.'~~

'I consider my team-mates to be friends because I'm with them every day. The team is my second family. Apart from the people I live with, they're the people I spend the most time with.'

'I love it when there's a lively atmosphere in the changing room, when everyone's enjoying themselves and feeling positive.'

'When I step onto the pitch I'm fearless. The opposition defenders don't bother me; they're just out there to do their job. I don't believe any player intends to cause injuries. Ninety-nine per cent of players are honest and just want to do the best they can for their team. Of course, some of them will try to stop me by fouling me – if they didn't, they wouldn't be able to stop me. But I try not to worry about it too much.'

'I think the footballing industry should protect and nurture the players who try to make it fun and creative, who try to give the fans a fantastic show. That's the most important thing, because there would be no football without the fans. It's thanks to their fans that teams like Real Madrid, Manchester United and Barcelona are world renowned.'

'I try to ignore provocation because there's no place for it in football. People who try to stir things up are just looking for trouble. What people say really doesn't bother me, I just ignore it.'

'When people say bad things about me it falls on deaf ears. I only hear those who shout about how great that Portuguese boy is. I don't need insults to motivate me.'

'The ones who insult me are always the first to ask for my autograph when they see me in the street. I don't understand why they're so negative, I really don't. I can understand if they're afraid of me, but not if they're rude. People love you in the airports and then they hate you on the pitch – that's why my team-mates always say, and it really rings true.'

'I'm not the kind of person who spends the whole afternoon at home watching four or five matches. It's not that I don't like football, I just don't like watching it on TV. I prefer to play. When I'm not on the pitch I only watch Real Madrid games, and the really big matches.'

'If I weren't a footballer, I would have liked to go back to studying. But I was training with the Sporting Lisbon first team from age sixteen so I couldn't stay in school. I would have studied marketing or been a PE teacher.'

'I'd like to be remembered as a role model, as a footballer who always gave a hundred per cent, who put on a good show – and who won absolutely everything.'

### **Author's note**

*These quotations are extracted from interviews with the following media: RTVE, Antena 3, Telecinco, Intereconomía TV, Cadena SER, Cadena COPE, Real Madrid TV, Marca, As, A Bola.*

*‘On the one hand I had a happy childhood; on the other hand it was unusual because I left my family and moved to Lisbon at the age of twelve*

The three-bedroom concrete council house where Cristiano was born no longer exists. In 2007, the house at 27A Quinta do Falcão, in the Santo António neighbourhood of Funchal, capital of Madeira, was demolished to avoid problems with squatters.

The Aveiro family had long since moved on by this point. Cristiano’s mother Dolores now lives in a big white house overlooking the Atlantic in São Gonçalo, at the other end of Funchal – a beautiful home bought for her by her son, near the homes of his brother Hugo and sister Katia.

The once impoverished Quinta do Falcão, with its cluster of council blocks on the mountain slope, has undergone a transformation in recent years thanks to investment from the European Union. New housing complexes have sprung up and the area has become acceptable to the Portuguese middle classes, many of whom have been horrified by the house prices on the coast.

At the end of a narrow little road where the footballer’s house used to stand, there is now an empty patch of overgrown scrubland, a five-a-side football pitch, and a bar. But it’s not unusual for fans to find their way down here, and for a few Euros the cabbies take them on a tour – his birthplace, where he grew up, his school, where he first played football ... in Portugal’s collective imagination he has succeeded in eclipsing such illustrious visitors to Madeira as Winston Churchill, Empress Elizabeth ‘Sissi’ of Austria, Charles I of Austria, George Bernard Shaw, the poet Rilke, Christopher Columbus and Napoleon.

Madeira is an Atlantic archipelago some 860 kilometres from Lisbon, comprising two inhabited islands – Madeira and Porto Santo – and three minor, uninhabited islands. Hailed by the tourist guides as the ‘garden of the Atlantic’, Madeira island sits on a volcanic rock 57 kilometres long by 22 wide, a mountain range which rises up from beneath the sea to a summit of 1,862 metres at Pico Ruivo, its highest peak. The capital, Funchal, has a population of 110,000.

It was here that Cristiano was born, at 10.20am on Tuesday 5 February in the Cruz de Carvalho Hospital. He was 52 centimetres long at birth and weighed nearly nine pounds. A fourth child for Maria Dolores dos Santos and José Dinis Aveiro, younger brother to Hugo, Elma and Katia. It was an unplanned pregnancy, with just eighteen months between him and Katia, and now there was the issue of what to name him.

‘My sister, who was working in an orphanage at the time, said that if it was a boy we could name him Cristiano,’ recalls Dolores. ‘I thought it was a good choice. And my husband and I both liked the name Ronaldo, after Ronald Reagan. My sister chose Cristiano and we chose Ronaldo.’

Cristiano Ronaldo dos Santos Aveiro is duly baptised in the Santo António church – a day which coincidentally is marked by football. In his spare time, José Dinis helps out as a kit man for amateur football club CF Andorinho in Santo António. He asks team captain Fernão Barros Sousa to take on the role of godfather to his new baby. The ceremony is booked for 6.00pm, but first there’s a match at 4.00pm – Andorinha are playing Ribeiras Bravas.

Reverend António Rodríguez Rebola is getting nervous. He has already baptised the other children and there is still no sign of either father or godfather. Dolores and the godmother-to-be are following him around the church, baby in tow, trying to keep the priest calm. Eventually Fernão and Dinis

arrive, half an hour late, and the ceremony can finally get underway.

The first photos in the family album show baby Cristiano, big eyes staring straight at the camera, dressed in a little blue and white outfit and white booties, with gold bracelets on both wrists, a gold ring, and a long chain with a crucifix around his neck. As he gets older, the photos show his hair forming into a little tuft of curls and his smile becomes gappy after losing his front teeth.

Dinis is the town hall gardener, while Dolores works hard as a cook so that she can put food on the table for her own children as well. Like thousands of Portuguese citizens, Dolores had emigrated to France at the age of twenty, where she spent three months cleaning houses. Her husband was going to join her, but when he wasn't able to she returned to Madeira. They already had two children.

Life isn't easy for the Aveiro family – it's difficult for anyone who lives far away from the luxury hotel industry which has colonised the coast. It's a small home for a family of six – and whenever there's a storm the house leaks in dozens of places. Dolores fetches bricks and mortar from the town hall to try to keep the problem under control.

But today, Cristiano remembers that time as a happy childhood. At two or three years old, playing in the yard or on Lombinho Street, he began to discover his best friend – the football.

'One Christmas I gave him a remote controlled car, thinking that would keep him busy,' recalls his godfather Fernão Sousa, 'but he preferred to play with a football. He slept with his ball, it never left his side. It was always under his arm – wherever he went, it went with him.'

Cristiano goes to nursery at the Externato de São João da Ribeira, a school run by Franciscan nuns. At six, he joins the local primary school. For secondary school he attends Gonçalves Zarco, better known as the Barreiros school because of its proximity to the Barreiros stadium, where renowned Portuguese team CS Marítimo play. Cristiano is not the studious type. He doesn't fare too badly but he's no bookworm either – he is happy just to scrape a pass.

One of his class teachers, Maria dos Santos, remembers her former pupil as 'well behaved, fun and a good friend to his classmates'. When asked about his favourite pastime, she says: 'From the day he walked through the door, football was his favourite sport. He took part in other activities, learnt songs and did his work, but he liked to have time for himself, time for football. If there wasn't a real ball around – and often there wasn't – he would make one out of socks. He would always find a way of playing football in the playground. I don't know how he managed it.'

It was football in the playground and football in the street. 'When he got home from school, I used to tell him to go to his room and do his homework,' says Dolores. 'He always told me he didn't have any. So I would go and start the cooking and he would chance his luck. He would climb out the window, grab a yoghurt or some fruit, and run away with the ball under his arm. He'd be out playing until 9.30 at night.'

As if that wasn't enough, he began to skip classes to go out and play. 'His teachers told me I had to punish him, but I never did. He had to practise as much as possible to become a football star.' As his son would later acknowledge: 'I was always playing football with my friends, that's what I loved doing, that was how I spent my time.'

He plays in the street because there is no football pitch in the neighbourhood. One particular street, Quinta do Falcão, proves to be a challenge when buses, cars and motorbikes want to get through. They have to remove the stones marking out the goalposts each time and wait for the traffic to pass before resuming the game. The games they play are intense battles between households, between gangs of friends. They are games that never end. The only hiccup is when the ball lands in one of the neighbours' gardens – and if it's old Mr Agostinho's garden he always threatens to puncture the ball and tell Dolores and the other mothers to keep their children in check.

There's a well where Cristiano spends hours on end kicking the ball against the wall alone. The well and the street are his first training grounds. It's here, between the pavement, the asphalt and the car, playing against kids young and old, that Ronaldo learns the tricks and techniques which will make him great and become his signature style. 'He used to spend all day in the street, doing authentic tricks with the ball. It was as if it was attached to his foot,' recalls Adelino Andrade, who lived near the Aveiro family.

'When it came to football he was truly gifted,' maintains Cristiano's sister, Elma. 'But we never dreamed he would be where he is today.'

At six years of age, Cristiano has made his first foray into the footballing world. His cousin Nuno plays for Andorinha and Cristiano has been to the ground a number of times with his father. Nuno invites him to come and see him play, and asks him if he would like to join one of the teams. Cristiano joins the practice and decides to give it a go. Dolores and Dinis are happy with their youngest son's decision – they have always loved football. Dinis and his older son Hugo are Benfica fans, while Dolores adores Luís Figo and Sporting Lisbon.

In the 1994-95 season, nine-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo dos Santos Aveiro is awarded his first sporting licence, number 17,182, from the Funchal football association, and dons the light blue stripes for Andorinha. It's a local club with a long history, founded on 6 May 1925. The name Andorinha is Portuguese for a swallow, which according to legend derives from one particular footballer's superb shot which was followed by the flight of a swallow.

Primary school teacher Francisco Afonso, who taught Cristiano's sister Katia, has dedicated 25 years to coaching in the Madeira junior leagues. He was Ronaldo's first coach and he has never forgotten the first time he saw him on the Andorinha pitch, age seven.

'Football was what Cristiano lived for,' he says. 'He was fast, he was technically brilliant and he played equally well with his left and right foot. He was skinny but he was a head taller than other kids his age. He was undoubtedly extremely gifted – he had a natural talent that was in the genes. He was always chasing the ball, he wanted to be the one to finish the game. He was very focused, he worked equally hard regardless of where he was on the pitch. And whenever he couldn't play or he missed a game he was devastated.'

Club president Rui Santos tells a juicy anecdote about a match during the 1993-94 season. Andorinha versus Camacha, who at that time were one of the strongest teams on the island. At half-time Andorinha were losing 2-0 and 'Ronaldo was so distraught that he was sobbing like a child who had his favourite toy confiscated. In the second half he came onto the pitch and scored two goals leading the team to a 3-2 victory. He definitely did not like to lose. He wanted to win every time and when they lost he cried.'

'That's why he was nicknamed 'cry-baby' explains Dolores. He cried and got angry very easily – if his team-mate didn't pass him the ball, if he or someone else missed a goal or a pass, or if the team wasn't playing how he wanted. The other nickname he acquired was *abelhinha*, 'little bee', because he never stopped. Like a busy bee, he was always zigzagging across the pitch. Years later in Madrid Cristiano would christen his Yorkshire Terrier with the same name.

'A footballer like Ronaldo doesn't come along every day,' adds Rui Santos. 'And suddenly when he does, you realise he's a superstar – different from all the other kids you've seen play.' Unfortunately Andorinha was one of the weakest teams in the league, and when they faced the likes of Marítimo, Camara de Lobos or Machico, the matches were something of a whitewash. Ronaldo didn't want to play because he already knew they would lose. But his father would come home, cheer him up and persuade him to put his kit and boots on and join his team on the pitch. Only the weak give up, and

would say – and it was a lesson that little Ronaldo would never forget.

In a few short years his name becomes known across the island. The two big island clubs, Nacional da Madeira and Marítimo, begin to take an interest in the little bee. Talk of a kid who knows how to play ball reaches the ears of Fernão Sousa, Cristiano's godfather, who is coaching the young Nacional da Madeira team. 'I was delighted to discover that they were talking about my godson,' he says. 'I knew he was playing football but I had no idea he was so good. He was streets ahead of the rest. He handled the ball beautifully and he definitely had a bright future ahead of him. I immediately realised that this kid could be a godsend to his family.' Without the slightest hesitation, he decides to bring him to Nacional. 'I talked to his mother. I told her it was the best thing for him, and we reached an agreement with Andorinha.'

But it wasn't all as simple as Sousa makes out. Dinis would have preferred his son to go to Marítimo. The club's historic Almirante Reis ground is close to the family home. Plus the kid bleeds green and red – his heart beats for Marítimo. No one can argue, so Rui Santos arranges a meeting with both clubs to discuss possible offers. The Marítimo youth team coach doesn't turn up to the meeting with the Andorinha president, so Cristiano goes to Nacional in return for twenty balls and two sets of kit for the junior team.

It's a deal which isn't worth much at the time, but Andorinha will go down in history as the first club of a Ballon d'Or winner, and will later receive funding from the municipality. Today, the old ground has been replaced with an artificial surface complete with floodlights. And that's not all. The deal with Nacional is sealed in Madeira's history books – just as Raúl's transition to Real Madrid from the Atlético Madrid youth team became legendary across Madrid, purely because (the story goes) the Red and Whites didn't want to pay the bus fare for the kid to get to training.

Cristiano is just ten years old when he arrives at Nacional – and his mother is more than a little concerned. 'My husband was always encouraging him to play with older kids. I was worried he could hurt himself or break a leg, but Dinis always said, "Don't worry, they can't catch him, he's too fast."'

The fact that he is somewhat skinny and bony doesn't escape the attention of the Nacional coaches who are quick to recommend that he eats more to help him fill out a bit. But when it comes to assessing his credentials, they are in no doubt. 'We saw immediately that he was fantastic,' says António Mendonça, Cristiano's coach during his two seasons playing in black and white. 'His skills were already highly developed: speed, dribbling, shooting, lightning execution. Street football had taught him how to avoid getting hit, sidestep the opponent and face up to kids much bigger than he was. It had also strengthened his character – he was extremely courageous.'

Now it's up to Mendonça and the other coaches to help him understand that football is a team sport. Ronaldo is capable of getting hold of the ball in his own half and heading for the goal – without passing to anyone on his team. His opponents don't bother him. Losing isn't an option; he wants to win everything. He cries and gets angry with his team-mates when something goes wrong. 'They pick up with it because he used to score so many goals,' says Mendonça. 'We won all our games nine- or ten-nil.' But his individualism and pride are a problem. He behaves as if superior to the others and it's difficult to give him advice – it has to be in private, never in front of the staff.

In the 1995-96 season at Nacional, Cristiano wins his first regional title in the league for ten- to twelve-year-olds. Clubs like Porto and Boavista, the big clubs in 'the rectangle' (as islanders call mainland Portugal), begin to take an interest in him.

Fernão Sousa thinks it's about time and only fair to let his godson take the plunge. For the second time, he contacts someone who will change the boy's future: João Marques Freitas, assistant to the district attorney and president of the Sporting Lisbon club in Funchal. He is the one who tells the

powers that be at the Green and Whites about this incredible kid from Quinta do Falcão. Sporting sent someone over to talk to the family. Before long, Ronaldo is saying goodbye to his childhood, his family, his friends and his island. It's time for him to make his way to the continent.

*'It was the most difficult time in my sporting career*

He has never been on a plane – he has never even left the island. This is the toughest challenge he has ever faced and he is so nervous that he cannot sleep the night before.

His godfather Fernão Sousa is accompanying him to Lisbon. It's 1997, it's the Easter holidays and Cristiano is on his way to a trial at Sporting Lisbon. He would have preferred to go to Benfica, a team loved by both his father and brother. But his mum has always been a Sporting girl and she has a hunch her son will be as great as Luís Figo. Besides, you can't turn down one of the greatest clubs in the capital. Sporting has the best youth academy in Portugal, counting the likes of Paolo Futre, Figo and Simão as among its alumni, while current players include João Pinto, Quaresma, Hugo Viana and Nani.

He's convinced he can do well there. He knows he's good and he thinks he can persuade the Green and White coaches that he's good enough. But he's only twelve years old, and when he finally arrives at the youth team training ground it's incredibly overwhelming.

Coaches Paulo Cardoso and Osvaldo Silva are there to observe him play. They are not particularly impressed by Ronaldo's physique – he's a scrawny little kid. But once they see him in action it's a whole different story. The boy from Quinta do Falcão gets hold of the ball and takes on two or three opponents. He's relentless – a one man show: feinting, dribbling and driving the ball up the pitch.

'I turned to Osvaldo and I said, "This one's different, he's something special,"' recalls Cardoso. 'And we weren't the only ones who thought so. At the end of the training session all the other boys were crowding around him. They knew he was the best.'

The Sporting coaches are impressed by the trial. They want to see him play again the next day, at the training ground next to the old José Alvalade stadium. This time, youth academy director Aurélio Pereira will be there to observe him.

'He was talented, he could play with both feet, he was incredibly fast and when he played it was as if the ball was an extension of his body,' says Pereira. 'But what impressed me more was his determination. His strength of character shone through. He was courageous – mentally speaking he was indestructible. And he was fearless, unfazed by older players. He had the kind of leadership qualities that only the greatest players have. One of a kind. When they got back to the dressing room all the other boys were clamouring to talk to him and get to know him. He had it all, and it was clear he would only get better.'

On 17 April 1997, Paulo Cardoso and Osvaldo Silva sign Cristiano's player identification document. It reads: 'Player with exceptional talent and excellent technique. Of particular note is his ability to dodge and swerve, from stationary or while moving.' Next to 'enrol' there is a tick in the 'yes' box. He plays as a central midfielder, or 'in the hole' as the coaches say. Cristiano Ronaldo dos Santos Aveiro has passed the test – he can play at Sporting. But first they have to reach a deal with Nacional da Madeira.

After a week in Lisbon, Ronaldo returns home to life on the island. It's up to the coaches now to arrange the final details of the transfer. Nacional owes Sporting 4,500 Portuguese 'Contos' (22,500 Euros) for Franco, a young footballer who has transferred there from Sporting. Cristiano's signing could be an opportunity to waive the debt, but 22,500 Euros for a twelve-year-old kid is an exorbitant price. 'It was unheard of,' agrees Simões de Almeida, the club's former administrator. 'Sporting ha

never paid anything for a youth player.'

~~Aurélio Pereira and the other coaches have to convince the administration that it's worth investing so much in one boy. On 28 June 1997 Pereira prepares a new report, adding the following postscript: 'Although it may seem absurd to pay so much for a twelve-year-old boy, he has enormous talent, proven during his trials and witnessed by the coaches. It would be a great investment for the future.'~~

These few lines are enough to win over the club's finance director and the transfer is agreed.

In the last week of August, Cristiano Ronaldo leaves Madeira to settle in to the Sporting youth academy. It's an extremely difficult time for a twelve-year-old. He still remembers the emotional day when he had to say goodbye to his family.

'My sisters and my mother were crying. I was crying,' he recalls. 'Even when I was on the plane and we had just taken off, I thought of my family crying about me and I started to cry again.'

Ronaldo will be moving into Sporting's residential accommodation for youth players who have come from other parts of the country. It consists of seven dorms and a living room and is located inside the Alvalade stadium just next to the three training grounds. Ronaldo is the youngest resident and he'll be sharing a room with Fábio Ferreira, José Semedo and Miguel Paixão. Other residents come from Mozambique (a former Portuguese colony), the Algarve and Vila Real. Their schedule is strict: school until 5pm followed by training.

The first day of school is a traumatic experience. He is late to class and the teacher is already taking the register. He is number five. As he stands up and recites his name he can hear some of the students at the back of the classroom making fun of his Madeiran accent. The dialect is very different from the Portuguese spoken in the capital, almost a different language entirely. He sounds strange. He sounds poor. He sounds like an islander, and no one can really understand him. Cristiano loses his temper and threatens his teacher with a chair.

He becomes the laughing stock of the class and he feels like an idiot. A few days later he insults a coach who has asked him to clear up the changing room. 'I'm a Sporting player and I don't have to pick up anything off the floor,' he retorts. It's not a good move. His punishment involves missing a number of games. And of course, he cries – almost every day. He is homesick for his family, his island and his friends.

'It was very hard,' he says. 'It was the most difficult time in my sporting career.' He finds it impossible to get used to the locals, life in the apartment, the rules and the stress of big city life. Everything is different – everything is complicated. Lisbon is another world to him. He calls home two or three times a week.

He buys a 50-unit phone card and goes down to the phone box. It saddens him to hear his mother's voice, it makes him cry and miss her even more. Dolores tries to cheer him up, telling him to ignore the jokers at school. She often has to console him and convince him that his life and his future are over there in Lisbon, at the Sporting youth academy. In the end she has to fly out to the capital because Cristiano says he can't take it anymore. He wants to quit, abandon his dream and go home to the island so he can be with his family.

'Cristiano's mother was a key factor in determining who he has become today,' affirms Aurélio Pereira. 'She often took our side over her son's. She helped us and she helped Cristiano.' When the boy goes home and doesn't want to return to Lisbon, his godfather also intervenes to ensure that he stays at the academy.

The first year is quite an ordeal. But gradually he begins to adapt. 'In difficult times you learn a lot about yourself,' CR7 will say years later. 'You have to stay strong and focus on what you really want.'

'He had a lifelong dream – he wanted to be somebody,' says Paulo Cardoso. 'He wanted to be



professional footballer with all his heart.'

During those tough early years he has a Madeiran tutor, Leonel Pontes, who accompanies him to training and to school. 'Ronaldo was decisive in everything he did,' he recalls. 'He wanted to be the best at everything – table tennis, tennis, pool, table football, darts, athletics – he wanted to beat every opponent, be the fastest. He had to win no matter what sport he was playing. I think one of the reasons he got to where he is today is because he always wanted more.'

They find him in the gym at 1am lifting weights without permission. He does press-ups and sit-ups in the dorm and trains with weights around his ankles to improve his dribbling. When his team-mates head for the showers after training sessions, he stays on the pitch, practising free kicks against a wall of life-sized targets. He eats two bowls of soup with every meal because they have told him that he plays well but he's too thin.

On Sundays he's the 'ball boy' when Sporting play at home, retrieving the ball when it goes out of play. He gets to see some of the club's greatest players up close, feel the atmosphere at the ground and earn five Euros. At the end of each match he and his team-mates pool their money and go to the pizzeria. They buy one pizza and get two more to take home.

His first salary at Sporting amounts to ten Contos a month, around 50 Euros. It's enough to cover the textbooks, exercise books and backpack he needs for school, as well as clothes and daily spending money. But one day Dolores calls the club to inform them that 'Ronaldo didn't buy his lunch at the canteen, he spent all his money on chocolate.' It's funny because, although he has been forced to grow up quickly and leave his childhood behind, he is still just a kid. 'I regret not having really enjoyed my childhood,' he will say years later in an interview just before the South African World Cup.

He is expected to behave like an adult, living autonomously and taking responsibility for all his own washing and ironing. He is there to be a footballing apprentice, not a child. He is also forced to face the reality of his family's problems. At fourteen, Cristiano is aware that his father Dinis is a chronic alcoholic and that his brother Hugo is a drug addict. He is shocked, but he can't let it overwhelm him. His older brother is admitted into a rehab clinic in Lisbon, and after various relapses he manages to get clean. His father, on the other hand, does not.

Luckily, life at the academy begins to improve. 'Thanks to his extraordinary talent and hard work Ronaldo began to adapt to his new life and become the centre of the team,' says Pontes, his tutor. 'The other players began to pass him the ball because they knew he was the best.'

He's a leader on and off the pitch. In the documentary *Planet Ronaldo*, aired on the Portuguese TV channel Sic, Pontes narrates that on one occasion when Cristiano and three team-mates were mugged by a gang on the street in Lisbon, he was the only one who didn't try to run away, despite being the youngest. He fought back to defend what little money they had in their wallets. The muggers dispersed without any cash.

The Sporting youth academy doesn't just take care of its promising young players on the training ground. It provides them with a tutor so that they can excel in the Crisfal local day school. Ronaldo loves football but going to school is more of a hobby. He likes science but can't stand English. He is a decent student and does the bare minimum, but football, friends and work experience as a ball boy distract him from his school work. In the end, he has to choose between sport and his studies. He speaks to his mother and makes a decision: he will drop out of the ninth grade.

The club's directors try to help young players overcome any issues of acclimatisation, offering counselling with a psychologist. They also maintain a strict discipline policy. Ronaldo has not forgotten what it was like to feel the force of that discipline in his youth team days.

In the final round of the championship Sporting has to face Marítimo, the team from Cristiano

home town. The chance to return to his island, his town, to the stadium where he played his first matches – to see his whole family and his school friends – is more than he could have hoped for.

But Cristiano has been behaving badly at school and the directors decide to punish him where it really hurts. He won't be going with them to Madeira. 'I saw the list and I wasn't on it,' he says. 'I checked it four times and ... nothing. I started crying and stormed into the training centre angrily demanding an explanation. It was tough but I learned a very important lesson.'

The academy expects players to adhere to strict guidelines. Along with the team doctor, the directors take charge of each player's physical development. In Cristiano's case, they monitor his bone density to see what his maximum height will eventually be. It looks promising – all being well he should reach 1.85 metres. But at fifteen they discover a serious problem.

'The club informed us that his resting heart rate was too high,' his mother revealed in *The Sun*. 'I had to fill in a mountain of paperwork so that they could admit him and do some tests. Eventually they decided to operate. They used a laser to repair the damaged area of his heart and after a few days of recuperation he was discharged. Before I knew exactly what was going on I was really worried that he might have to give up football.' He had a congenital defect which meant his pulse was higher than the normal rate, but hadn't affected his career. 'A few days after the procedure he was back training with his team-mates,' said his mother. 'He could even run faster than before.'

He not only runs fast, he also moves up the ranks with incredible speed. At sixteen Ronaldo is undoubtedly the academy's star player. He is the only player in the club's long history to play for the Under 16s, Under 17s, Under 18s, second team and first team in a single season. In August 2001 he signs his first professional contract. Four years, 2,000 Euros a month and a 20-million-Euro buyout clause. He moves from living in the academy dorms to a hostel near the Marques de Pombal square, the heart of Lisbon, just until he is able to find his own apartment where his family can come and visit him more often. The boy has grown up; he's more independent and he decides to find a new manager. He leaves Luis Vega, the man who manages Figo, and places the future of his career in the hands of Jorge Mendes.

In August 2001 the Sporting first team gains a new manager. László Bölöni is a Romanian original from Hungary, a former star midfielder for Steaua Bucharest who won the Champions League with them in 1986. He has spent eight seasons in the dugout at French team AS Nancy, and after a brief stint as the Romanian national coach he has accepted the job at Sporting.

In his first year he wins the league and the Portuguese cup, and he takes note of players like Cristiano, Ricardo Quaresma and Hugo Viana. He is keen to promote Cristiano to the first team as soon as possible. In fact, CR7 does get to train with the top players on occasion. The medics don't advise him making the leap just yet, as he is still growing, but it's clear that it won't be long before the kid from Madeira makes his debut.

# Seventeen years, eight months, two days

*‘They’ve yet to see the real Ronaldo. This is just the beginning.’*

A green and white bus is on its way to the Sporting academy in Alcochete. It’s 1 July 2002 and it’s Cristiano Ronaldo’s first day with the first team. Romanian coach László Bölöni has promoted him for the preseason alongside three other B team players: Custódio, Carlos Martins and Paíto.

‘I hope to play well and be able to stay with the first team. I want to do my best and try to live up to the coach’s expectations,’ declares a humble Ronaldo, adding: ‘Playing alongside João Pinto and Jardel is a dream come true. They are amazing role models for any footballer.’

The first match is scheduled five days later against Samouquense, a first division team from the Setúbal district. They win it 9-0. The next is against Rio Maior: 5-0 in favour of the Sporting Lions. Ronaldo is on top form, and he scores a goal, but Bölöni decides to proceed with caution.

The kid is used to playing up front, but the manager puts him on the left wing – he can make good use of his speed there, but it’s also better because he’s not physically up to taking on the opposition’s midfielders yet. He doesn’t disappoint. He is fast, he has good ball control and he creates trouble for his markers.

The coach repeats his tactics on 14 July, at Sporting’s official 2002-03 season presentation match in front of all the fans and shareholders at the José Alvalade stadium. Their opponents are Olympique Lyonnais, current French champions. It ends in a one-all draw, but it gives the crowd a chance to watch the jewel in the youth academy’s crown.

‘This boy is one to watch,’ writes *Record*. ‘He knows how to lose his opponent, he can dribble, and he has a nose for goals.’ It’s true – Cristiano scores a goal on his first appearance at a ground where just a short while ago he was a mere ball boy. The referee wrongly disallows it.

Less than a week later it’s time for a rendezvous with another French team, Paris Saint-Germain. The game ends 2-2, and Cristiano Ronaldo has another surprise in store. After the game, when everyone is expecting him to be gracious and emotional and to say that it’s been the happiest night of his life, the Madeiran offers: ‘The shareholders have yet to see the real Ronaldo. This is just the beginning.’ He is cheeky, irreverent and very sure of himself. Nonetheless, he has played well on the left wing, he has taken three shots, and there is already talk of a new star Lion.

The manager is quick to play down the impassioned outburst. ‘Ronaldo is a young man with excellent skills, but he is not yet a fully-fledged player.’ In any case, he is only prepared to bring him on in small stints of fifteen or twenty minutes at most, and at the moment it’s only in the summer friendlies, like in the Benfica derby on 27 July, or against Pontevedra on 1 August. But gradually the boy starts to become an integral part of the Lions’ game and the results are flowing thick and fast.

On 3 August, Sporting face another green and white team, Seville’s Real Betis, who have come over to Maia. In the 77th minute László Bölöni makes four substitutions. Danny comes on for Barbosa, Luís Filipe for Quaresma, Diogo for Niculae and Rui Bento is replaced by number 28, ‘Ronaldo Cristiano’ as it says in the programme. Quaresma scores in the 27th minute, Alfonso equalises in the 30th, and Barbosa puts them in the lead in the 53rd – 2-1 to the Portuguese team.

In the 84th minute Alfonso nets his second goal of the night, bringing the scores level once again. He feels like the point of no return and two minutes later Casas tries for the victory goal. Only a spectacular dive from César Prates keeps it out. The game goes into extra time and now it’s time

see what this seventeen-year-old kid can do.

~~Defensive mistake from a confident Juanito. His team-mate takes a free kick and he takes it on the chest. But he doesn't control it well enough, the ball bounces away from him and Cristiano is on it like a shot. He steals the ball with a backheel, then brings it back in front of him and heads for the left wing. He dribbles towards Betis goalie Toni Prats, and from an impossibly tight position on the far left corner of the area he spies the open goal and aims for the far corner, evading Rivas whose desperate leap to deflect it is in vain. It's a phenomenal goal, demonstrating ability, technique, control, potential, and instinct in the box.~~

Cristiano erupts into celebration mode, running round the pitch and blowing kisses into the stands. It's his first goal in the Sporting strip and he deserves the 3-2 victory. The Portuguese press call it a 'work of art'. The goal has cemented his self-confidence and any last trace of fear has vanished. He had previously been nervous when playing with the first team – he felt he didn't quite match up, like he was just a boy among men. Everything has changed now – although people still don't know who he is. The TV network credits the goal to Custódio, and the Spanish press can't stop talking about the incredible goal by Custódio, his team-mate who had come onto the pitch just minutes before him.

'I dedicate this goal to my family, especially my mother Dolores who is here with me in Lisbon,' an ecstatic Cristiano Ronaldo tells Portugal's morning tabloid, *Correio da Manhã*. He thanks his manager for being 'a great coach who has taken big risks on the young players and helped me to integrate in the first team'. And not forgetting the fans: 'I know they care about me and I am going to work hard to live up to their trust in me, to thank them for how they have welcomed me. I will do my best and hopefully I'll succeed.'

Eleven days later on 14 August, the gods are smiling on him once again. It is his debut in an official match, in the Champions League qualifiers at the Alvalade. The opponents are none other than Héctor Cúper's Inter Milan. Ronaldo comes on for the Spaniard Toñito in the 58th minute. He immediately comes up against veterans Javier Zanetti and Marco Materazzi, who between them have more years of footballing experience than Ronaldo has been alive. They make Cristiano's life extremely difficult but by the end, despite the 0-0 scoreline, he has managed to pull off a stunning performance. His flashes of brilliance, albeit isolated, have the stands buzzing with anticipation. Not bad for a debut.

The criticism from the Portuguese press concerns excessive dodging and feinting and individual one-on-ones on the parts of Ronaldo and Kutuzov, the other junior member of the Lions' attack. In other words, they don't know when to give up the ball. It's a youthful vice which can only be corrected through years of training.

He is certainly capable of entertaining the crowds, and he proves it on his second outing, on 2 October 2002 in the Portuguese SuperLiga. The current title holders are at home to Moreirense FC who have been promoted from the second division. As matches go it's not particularly special. But Cristiano is in the starting line-up for the first time, and at seventeen years, eight months and two days old he makes history as Sporting's youngest ever goal-scorer. He scores 'a monumental, majestic, unbelievable goal ... there are not sufficient adjectives to describe this young Sporting prodigy's achievement', scream the SportTV commentators.

It's the 34th minute: Ronaldo gets a backheel from Toñito just over the halfway line, he dodges past two defenders, slaloming back and forth for some 60 metres; he follows it up with a bicycle kick on the edge of the area to wrong-foot another opponent and slides it smoothly past Moreirense goalkeeper João Ricardo, who makes a desperate dash out into the box.

Cristiano tears off his shirt, hugs his team-mates and runs towards the stands. Bölöni celebrates with his colleagues in the dugout. He is the one who took the risk and changed Ronaldo's position. It's

risk which has paid off in spades.

Back to the match: number 28's performance is not over yet. Despite the presence of Brazilian striker 'Super Mário' Jardel – last year's Golden Boot, back on the Sporting team sheet after four months of injury – Cristiano is the playmaker, scoring the winner and taking it to 3-0 with a spectacular header. The only thing that mars the occasion is when Cristiano's mother Dolores faints in the stands. Perhaps it's the excitement of her son's performance, but in the end it's just a scare.

The following day Ronaldo dominates Portugal's front pages with his 'monumental goal'. The journalists milk the opportunity to tell his story, from his first street games in the 'slums' of Madalena in Santo António. They interview his childhood coaches. They try to get hold of his father. The poor man has only seen the highlights – he followed the match on the radio because Andorinha were playing at the same time. He says that everyone on the island has mentioned his son's success and they joke that he should see if Sporting will loan him to Andorinha so that they can win something for a change.

José Dinis maintains that his son is a force of nature who has played ball day and night since he was a little kid. He hopes he will have a great future and will keep maturing as a person as much as a player. He has no desire to be famous simply because he is the number 28's father, but he definitely won't be missing his son's next match. He's already bought a plane ticket to see him at Belenenses on his first trip to Lisbon in six years.

It's not just the Portuguese press that are interested in the newcomer's profile. Ronaldo is also making waves across Europe, thanks to his goals and his name – let's not forget that the original Ronaldo (Ronaldo Nazário de Lima) is enjoying his umpteenth comeback and has just helped Brazil win the Korea/Japan World Cup on 30 June 2002. He is the tournament top scorer with eight goals. Italy's *Gazzetta dello Sport* is already talking about the 'new Ronaldo' on its front page.

What does the kid from Madeira think about such a comparison? 'I would never dare to think about it. Real Madrid's Ronaldo is a superstar, he's the best player in the world. He's my favourite player.'

Cristiano's performance in the first team has been outstanding. He has become the fans' golden boy. László Bölöni has the utmost faith in him, but competition is fierce, with Jardel, Quaresma, João Pinto, Toñito and Niculae already on the strikers' roster. At the end of the season, Ronaldo has played in 25 games and only started in eleven of them. He has scored three goals in the league and two in the cup.

It hasn't been a great run for Sporting. They are out of the race for the Champions League, having been beaten 2-0 by Inter in the return leg at the San Siro. They are also out of the UEFA Cup, losing 3-1 to Serbia's FK Partizan in Portugal and drawing 3-3 in the second leg. On 1 May they are knocked out of the Copa de Portugal by Naval in the quarter finals. And they fail to hold onto their league title. They finish third, 27 points behind José Mourinho's Porto and sixteen behind Benfica.

Bölöni bows out of the dugout – a moment of great sadness for his number 28. 'I really enjoyed working with him. He was the one who moved me up into the first team,' says Cristiano. 'Without him, I would probably still be in the B team.'

The new manager is Fernando Santos. Cristiano doesn't know him but he has heard that he is god-natured, he favours a high level of discipline and he is a god in the footballing world. With his arrival the rumour mill is rife with speculation about the possible departure of the academy's star player from the first team. Santos is forced to make a statement, declaring: 'Ronaldo is a key player as far as Sporting is concerned.'

Cristiano can only hope that this is the case, and explains that he wants to stay at Sporting. 'I want

channel all my energy into helping the club win the titles that evaded them this year. I have played with Sporting since I was twelve years old and I want to win championships with this team. If I go without winning anything it would leave a bitter taste in my mouth. But that's life. Let's see what the future holds ...'

*‘It wasn’t about being the best player in the tournament*

1985: Jean-Pierre Papin from Valenciennes is the top goal-scorer and wins the trophy for France.

1991: During his time with AS Cannes, Zinedine Zidane’s brilliance gets him as far as the final, where the Frenchmen then lose to England. Southampton’s Alan Shearer is the star player with seven goals in four games.

1992: Benfica’s Rui Costa gives an exceptional performance – player of the tournament and top scorer.

1997: AS Monaco’s Thierry Henry is the top scorer and best player, and he wins the title with France.

1998: Juan Román Riquelme from Argentina’s Boca Juniors is crowned player of the tournament and the European clubs are outraged.

The Festival International Espoirs de Toulon et du Var, or the ‘Toulon Hopefuls Tournament’ as it is known in English, began in 1967 as an Under 21 club tournament. In 1974 it switched to national teams only. It is not recognised by FIFA, but it has long been considered a place for talent-spotting the youngsters who years later are confirmed as global superstars.

The 31st tournament, between 10 and 21 June 2003 is no exception. Against all predictions, the player of the tournament is named as Javier Mascherano. The boy who will one day become the star of Barcelona and the Argentine national team is currently at River Plate, and he helps Argentina to third place in the tournament. Two years later he will transfer to SC Corinthians in Brazil, then move on to the Premier League where he will join West Ham and later Liverpool.

Ronaldo, who was tipped for the top prize along with Italy’s Pagano and Argentina’s Rivas, will have to console himself with the accolade of youngest finalist.

‘Winning the player of the tournament prize wasn’t what was most important,’ declares a modest Cristiano. ‘It was more important for the team to come out on top – and we have. We’ve won the trophy.’

After winning in 1992 and 2001, Portugal lifts the Toulon trophy for the third time, beating Italy 3-0 in the final, and putting on a fantastic all-round performance. Sporting’s number 28 is also learning about introspection.

‘I have done what I came here to do. In three of the fixtures I think I played well but in the other two I was a bit tired,’ he confesses. ‘It’s not surprising when you consider how many games are squeezed into such a short space of time.’

In each of the national teams, CR7 has always played alongside slightly older team-mates. He was fourteen when he joined the Under 15s and sixteen when he went to the Under 17s. He is eighteen in the Under 20s team in Toulon, where he makes an impression right from the start during the first match against England in Nîmes on 11 June.

Portuguese coach Rui Caçador had promised an attacking formation and he is true to his word. He puts Danny in the hole, Ronaldo and Lourenço on the wings, leaving the giant Hugo Almeida to fill the gaps in the opponents’ defence. After ten minutes of careful observation, Portugal take the reins, and despite the fact that the three goals don’t come until the second half, their superior performance throughout crushes their opponents. Cristiano scores the decisive third goal and makes an impression

not only on the national team staff, but on the numerous coaches from the top teams who are always out in force at Toulon looking for potential signings.

Barcelona scout Juan Martínez Vilaseca is one of them. After seeing Ronaldo in action he declared that 'He is an extremely interesting player. He has unique characteristics that make him a promising young man. If he stays focused on his career, one day he will be able to play for one of the big European clubs if he puts his mind to it. It won't be long before he's one of the best players in Portugal, no doubt about it.'

This young footballer is no longer an unknown among the footballing powers that be – Vilaseca is not the only one who thinks highly of him. For a while now he has been courted by some of Europe's biggest clubs. Arsenal, Man United, Liverpool, Chelsea, Juventus, Parma, Atlético Madrid, Barça and Valencia have all shown an interest in the boy from Madeira.

Gunners manager Arsène Wenger has extended a personal invitation to Cristiano and his mother to come to London in January 2003 to talk about the future, visit the club and get to know striker Thierry Henry, whom Ronaldo greatly admires. The conversation continues on his return to Lisbon, but Wenger is keen for him to stay there for another year before making the leap into the Premiership.

Inter have the same idea: they're willing to pay the transfer fees but they think the kid should stay and train in Lisbon a bit longer. Inter scout Luis Suárez, winner of the 1960 Ballon d'Or and ex-Inter and Barça midfielder, had received a call from a friend tipping him off about a really good player who was excelling in the Sporting youth academy. He had seen him once or twice before he debuted with the first team and he was convinced they should speak to his family and sign him as soon as possible.

According to inside sources, Valencia have already put 500 million pesetas on the table. And Ronaldo is apparently also in talks with Atlético Madrid who, according to the Spanish press, have joined the Iberian teams in the race to sign the young sportsman.

Even Liverpool manager Gérard Houllier has taken his scouts' words about the Madeiran marvel to heart and has flown over to France to see the new Portuguese phenomenon in person. When he sees him play there is no doubt in his mind: he believes he is one of the most promising youngsters in Europe and he wants to bring him to Anfield. There are murmurings in the press about an offer of a Liverpool player and 7.5 million Euros in exchange for Ronaldo, and there's talk of it being finalised within a few days. Cristiano's agent Jorge Mendes has met with the Liverpool representatives and the Lisbon club is ready to give the go-ahead for the number 28's departure to the birthplace of the Beatles.

Cristiano says that he greatly admires English football (although it's not his favourite style – he prefers the Spanish game). 'Liverpool is one of the top English clubs. It would be a dream for any player,' he concedes. On the other hand, he has no reason to leave Sporting in such a hurry.

But the press want to know how the eighteen-year-old feels about having caught the eye of all the scouts in Toulon and having a whole slew of clubs clamouring for his attention. 'I don't feel pressure by it all,' he replies. 'I am just excited and happy to know that the big clubs and the top names have noticed me. It gives me strength and encouragement to try to improve every day. But I haven't spoken to anyone yet, and no one has made a concrete offer to Sporting. I know there's a lot of talk in the press, but right now my main objective is to get the team to the final and help them win. That's what I have to focus on.'

And he does. Another fantastic performance on the wing against Argentina, whom many consider to be the favourites to go all the way. But Portugal beat Mascherano's men 3-0. Next they face Japan in Fréjus, but they are in for a nasty surprise. Having thought that the most difficult match was behind them, Rui Caçador's men relax and suffer an unexpected defeat, 1-0 thanks to a goal from Mogi. 'W



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