

Miguel Lourenço Pereira



BRING ME THAT HORIZON

A Journey to the Soul of Portuguese Football

BRING ME THAT HORIZON

A Journey to the Soul of Portuguese Football

Miguel Lourenço Pereira



CONTENTS

1. Horizons	7
2. Made In Africa.	13
3. Fifty Years Of Hurt	34
4. Supersonic	47
5. Game Of Thrones	66
6. Factories Of Dreams	99
7. Superman.	123
8. Colonisation	139
9. Route EN2.	157
10. Mister	175
11. New Kids On The Block.	200
12. Fairy Tales	219
13. Alive And Kicking.	236
14. Agony And Ecstasy	257
Acknowledgements	280
Bibliography	282

HORIZONS

I WAS born in the mid-1980s, a world that now seems as far away as the moons of Endor were back then. No internet, no social media and a map that still reflected a Europe politically cut in half. Football was my window to the world, as with most kids of my generation. It taught me about geography like no other teacher could. As football fans, we would learn about cities and countries mostly thanks to those unforgettable European nights or those summer international events. I can imagine now how difficult it would have been for someone my age to discover what Portugal was all about from, say, Scotland. It was no easy task. Despite a couple of European finals at the end of that decade, Portuguese teams rarely fared well in Europe and the national side was absent by default from almost every big showdown. During those years I was also an avid Subbuteo player, but it seemed impossible to collect any Portuguese team set. They simply weren't available. Eventually, I bypassed the issue by making believe that FC Porto and Brighton or Benfica and Nottingham Forest were the same. For other teams, I just got my parents to buy me white kit sets and then proceeded to paint them myself. The days seem longer when your only worries in life are how to get that Estrela da Amadora kit right.

A few years on, when video games arrived in full force, once again I faced a similar conundrum. The Portuguese league was nowhere to be seen in any of those new popular simulators so, once again, I worked long into the night just to recreate, team by team, player by player, a league that was, for some, still an exotic mystery. To cut a long story short, Portuguese football was almost invisible to most football fans: a world that appealed more to the casual readers of cult fanzines than your ordinary supporter. Then, out of the blue, everything changed.

Was it Figo and his controversial transfer? The Golden Generation that conquered the hearts of so many during Euro 2000? The collective party that was Euro 2004, the all-conquering arrival of the 'Special One' or the infinite catalogue of step-overs of Cristiano Ronaldo? It's almost impossible to tell. But one thing was certain. At the turn of the millennium Portugal became one of the most hyped football nations in world football and it has remained so for the past 20 years. The country that seldom made it to big tournaments, prompting locals to always support someone else, was suddenly reaching the last stages and eventually, even winning trophies. Three Champions League finals hosted in ten years, including two in a row during the COVID-19 pandemic, made the country a safe harbour for football fans. Clubs who had a respectable albeit forgotten history were now household names. FC Porto is still the last team from outside the Big Four leagues to win the Champions League – it has been 20 years now since that remarkable campaign of Mourinho's men – while Benfica and Sporting are known not only for their fierce rivalry but also because of the talents they produce at an astonishing rate: players that now fill the world's most renowned sides. For a while,

HORIZONS

Portugal had the most celebrated manager, player and even football agent, something that was unheard-of and atypical of a nation less populated than the whole of metropolitan London. But was the country so different, or was it just simply a change of perception from others that prompted this newfound sense of identity? It was both.

Portugal was one of the latest western European nations to fully embrace democracy after suffering the longest dictatorship in Europe. In the year 2000 in some ways there were people living as if they were still at the beginning of the previous century. So many years in the dark also meant a profound lack of self-belief. People lived in fear and grew accustomed to fearing everything else, especially if it came from abroad. No wonder Portugal, closed within itself, was a riddle inside an enigma for strangers. It was the same for those who lived there. Ironically, that was also the very nation that was once proudly known for setting sail into the ocean, searching for new horizons, and embracing perils without having the faintest idea of what they would find. Those sailors showed bravery and a strength of will that took them to worlds unknown to the Europeans of the day, be they the vast unexplored shores of Brazil or small islands in Indonesia. Wherever you went, some Portuguese sailor likely had been there before.

All that sense of adventure was lost in time and football became no exception. The glorious Benfica side of the 1960s, which owed much of its glory to the fundamental influence of African football in a society that still today fights with racism and prejudice, was the exception rather than the rule. And it could have stayed that way if not for a military coup in 1974 that removed the blindfold from the people's eyes.

Things began to change and did so at a dramatic pace. Entering the EU removed a sense of inferiority towards neighbouring Europe and brought with it a new economic muscle that expanded the game in regions that had been until then, banished from the elite. Looking for new influences, Portugal developed a curious cultural and emotional relationship with its former colony Brazil that made the country the preferred starting point in Europe for some of the best South American footballers of the day. The World Exposition of 1998 in Lisbon returned a sense of pride that had been lost, continuing a trend that began a decade before with the exploits of a bunch of kids who stormed the world under the guidance of the man who would transform the way youth football was looked upon, Carlos Queiroz. Local musical bands flourished, embracing a more rock-minded sound and a more individualistic approach: a sort of cult of the self that would eventually find its way into football as well, mainly thanks to the two legendary figures that stormed the world in the new millennium, José Mourinho and Cristiano Ronaldo. All those profound social changes were best mirrored in football, setting the template for a nation that rediscovered itself and learned to smile once again.

It was not an easy process though, and, as with everything, football still bears the scars of a country profoundly divided between a deserted interior that highly contrasts with the vibrant cities around its coastline. A nation that also includes two archipelagos lost in the middle of the Atlantic, now rediscovered by tourism, which are still suffering from decades of abandonment. As an essentially three-club nation, Portugal has given birth to some of Europe's most iconic teams over the past century but, at the same time, once in a while, it still manages to offer unexpected journeys into fairy tales

and remarkable rebirths. And while it can boast of having produced perhaps Europe's finest player and one of its most decorated managers, the fact is that many of its most brilliant stories and heroes are still largely unknown to the outside world.

So, how come such a small nation cornered in a tipping point of Europe became so central to the world's game? Why is there not a single kid today who doesn't know all about a country that, a few decades ago, seemed so mysterious to many? In 2030 Portugal will even be one of the six nations that will host the first transcontinental World Cup, the most important and viewed sports event in the world. The horizons of Portugal have changed and with perspective always comes a change in perception. There are still flaws and blank spots that need to be addressed. Being part of the periphery means living permanently over the edge. As crowds descended, a culture of suspicion over the game arose, fuelled by the verbal aggression that thrives in social media today. Rivalries have become bitter, egos have supplanted identities. The collective celebrations around Euro 2004 now seem far away. There's a sense of doom that clouds those who live in a loop existence, one where people sometimes simply prefer to put that old blindfold back on instead of looking far ahead. But in a sense that's also part of a wider trend. What matters is that kids today no longer need to manually paint their Subbuteo sets or spend hours editing teams on the next-gen video games. Now, as they play in the streets or at brand new football academies, these same kids who will fuel the passions of tomorrow already know the nation's soul inside out. And they are perfectly aware that, most likely, the world's best player of 20 years from now might be playing alongside them, whether they are on the beach in the Algarve, on a muddy grass field in

BRING ME THAT HORIZON

Guimarães or in a street park around Lisbon. Like their ancestors, who once set sail into the unknown, they too are looking over the sunrise, fearing nothing, waiting for what that colourful horizon may bring.