

PHENOMENON

THE INCREDIBLE CAREER OF
BRAZIL'S

RONALDO



DANIEL WILLIAMSON

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Chapter 1

Dadado, the Boy With Two Birthdays

IT WAS at the São Francisco Xavier hospital, on 18 September 1976, that Sônia gave birth to her third child. Weighing 3.3kg, the boy was named after the man who delivered him: Dr Ronaldo Valente. Sônia had superstitiously not planned a name, believing it to be a bad omen, and chose the new arrival's moniker rather spontaneously.

Like many of football's greats, Ronaldo was born into humble surroundings. They had few luxuries, but he wasn't raised in abject poverty. Bento Ribeiro is a working-class neighbourhood in Rio de Janeiro's North Zone, where he lived with his older siblings, sister Ione and brother Nelinho, at the family home on Rua General César Obino.

Sônia, then 25, worked hard to provide for her children, working long hours in menial jobs for modest pay. She took pride in her home and her young family. The fiercely independent woman was determined not to have to rely on her husband, Nélio, a loveable but wayward rogue whom she had originally met when working for the state telecommunications company.

Ronaldo's father spent days celebrating the new arrival, neglecting to register the birth immediately. The story goes that

to avoid a fine, he lied, stating that the baby had been born on 22 September. The boy's official name was listed as Ronaldo Luís Nazário de Lima.

The young Ronaldo slept with his parents, as he feared the dark. He occasionally wet the bed and used to sleepwalk. Later, he moved on to a sofa bed in the living room of the one-bedroom house. Having trouble pronouncing his name, he was affectionately nicknamed *Dadado*.

It was at the age of four that his lifelong obsession with football began when he received a lightweight plastic ball for Christmas. During daylight hours, Ronaldo couldn't be separated from his favourite new toy; kicking it around the dusty streets became more of a lifestyle and an identity than a hobby. He honed his craft on the bumpy, unforgiving, unpredictable surfaces. When he wasn't playing, he was dreaming about a future in which he could forge a career out of the game. His mother did well to shield him from the bad things happening in the neighbourhood.

In the summer of 1982, Ronaldo experienced the event that is crystallised in the minds of most football obsessives: their first World Cup. As is the tradition in Brazil, the kerb stones of Bento Ribeiro were painted in bright blue, green and yellow. Murals of heroes and the Brazilian flag were daubed on to the neighbourhood walls. Many in the community watched the games at Mr Renato's house, and the kids were treated to soft drinks and French fries. Ronaldo cried as Italy dumped the *Seleção* out of the tournament.

He attended the Colégio Nossa Senhora de Aparecida but, like many footballers, his passion lay beyond the four walls of the classroom. Much to his mum's annoyance he preferred to spend time with a ball rather than with his head buried in books. 'I could

not accept the fact that my son thought only of playing soccer,' she told Rio newspaper *O Globo* in a 1997 interview. 'What kind of future would he have? I always found him on the street playing ball with friends when he should have been in school. I know, I lost my battle.'

When he was slightly older, Ronaldo and his friends jumped the train at the weekends, heading south to play informal matches and foot-volley on Rio's famous golden beaches. As well as street football, playing on sand required a different skill set, providing a well-rounded education to the future footballer.

His first foray into organised sport came via futsal, a modified form of football particularly popular in South America and southern Europe. It uses a smaller, heavier ball and therefore tends to develop footballers with excellent close control. Unlike indoor football in the United Kingdom, where the pitches are enclosed by walls that can be used to bounce the ball off, there are boundaries in futsal, and the ball has to be controlled within the lines.

In 1986 Brazil were eliminated from the Mexico World Cup by France, following a penalty shoot-out. Around this time, the nine-year-old Ronaldo joined Valqueire, a tennis and sports club founded in 1963, one that now proudly boasts to have started his career. For his family, the bonus was that they were able to use the leisure club facilities for free. His first position was goalkeeper until one game where he played outfield, scoring four in a 5-4 victory over league leaders Vasco. He never donned the gloves again.

When Ronaldo was 11, his parents, perhaps unsurprisingly, split. Their personalities and dedication to the family home were at the opposite ends of the spectrum, and Nélio was spending

more of his time and money in neighbourhood drinking establishments. With a single parent running the household, the financial situation became much tighter for the family.

In 1988, Fernando 'Gordo' dos Santos Carvalho recruited the youngster to join him at the more established Social Ramos club. To persuade his sceptical mother, Gordo promised to pick Ronaldo up and drop him off at home afterwards and reassured her that the club would provide boots and kit.

Even at such a young age, Ronaldo was showing traits that would stand him in good stead throughout his professional career. In Jorge Caldeira's book *Ronaldo: Gloria e Drama no Futebol Globalizado*, Alirio Carvalho – one of Ronaldo's coaches at Social Ramos – said, 'What was special about him was his attitude. It was as if he had come from the moon. Nothing disturbed him, nothing overawed him, nothing threw him off his game.' After a record 166 goals in his first season, including 11 in one match, a bigger stage was required.

When he was 13, a dream trial with the club he supported, Flamengo, materialised. The team of his idol, Zico, and Brazil's most popular club, the *Rubro-Negro* were based on the other side of the city, in Gávea. For Ronaldo, it was a long trip that required him to travel alone, on two buses. Alongside 400 others, Ronaldo was part of the *peneira* (sifter), where the hopefuls are observed in a series of small-sided games. It's hardly an exact science, and there are numerous examples of players slipping through the net only to go on to have excellent professional careers. Ronaldo, however, did enough to be asked to return the following day. He asked for support with the 30 centavos bus fare, but his request fell on unsympathetic, deaf ears. To cap off a miserable day, he was mugged on the way home, losing his watch.

In 1990, the year Brazil's World Cup drought stretched to two decades in Italy, Ronaldo signed for his first 11-a-side team. One that played on grass. The version of the game in which he would make his name and fortune. Along with his friend, Alexandre Calango, the teenager joined São Cristóvão, a club founded in 1898 and based in the neighbourhood of the same name. São Cristóvão peaked in the 1920s, but by the decade of Ronaldo's birth was in steady decline. An expressway was built next to the ground which effectively hid it from view. On the other end, it's wedged in by a factory which makes spectacle lenses. Just two kilometres away stands the iconic Maracanã Stadium, the cathedral of Brazilian football where Ronaldo had watched his first professional match – Flamengo versus Vasco da Gama – with his father. Located in the north of the city, less than 20km from Ronaldo's home, proved a much more favourable distance for the promising youngster to travel. Unlike Flamengo, São Cristóvão were also happy to help out with transportation.

It was the club's general director, Ary Ferreiras de Sá, who brought the player to the Cadets, having struck a deal with his counterpart at Social Ramos to let some of their youngsters give the full-sized version of the game a go. The gangly forward quickly rose through São Cristóvão's youth ranks, scoring five in a friendly tournament soon after his arrival, and bagging a hat-trick on his under-15 debut in a 5-2 win over Tomazinho in August 1990. His stock rose rapidly and before long he was playing for the under-20s.

São Cristóvão coach Alfredo Sampaio described the youngster to Joshua Law, writing for Planet Football, in 2021, 'If there was a time that he didn't play as well, it was because of him, never because of the pressure of the game. He was never shaken by

the occasion. He was like Garrincha. He didn't care who he was playing against, he wanted to play. He trusted himself, and he was having fun.'

At this point, Ronaldo, as well as his inability to be flustered, was also described as a lazy trainer – an accusation that would stay with him for most of his career – and despite his goals he was not particularly tactically aware. He was still trying to shake off some of the habits formed in futsal. He had a pleasant, if not cheeky, demeanour as a young man although he was at times shy and a little socially awkward. At São Cristóvão he was nicknamed 'Monica', after a buck-toothed character from a popular comic book turned cartoon.

Finding the back of the net became a habit and in January 1993 Ronaldo was promoted to the first team, then plying its trade in the top division of Rio's state league system. International recognition was also forthcoming and he was called up for the South American U-17 Championship, which took place in February in Colombia. Brazil won all four games in the first phase. However, in the final stage they failed to win, missing out on a place in the FIFA U-17 World Cup in Japan. The competition was a disaster for Brazil, but on a personal note Ronaldo's eight goals added to his burgeoning stock. At club level he'd scored 44 for São Cristóvão, all from open play. Soon, with the help of two men he'd met the year before, Ronaldo would make the transition from an amateur footballer to a fully fledged professional, the next step on his exciting journey.