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World Cup 2006 | The Legends

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Most Bonito

By JOHN CARLIN

You look at Ronaldinho, the world's most talented and lethal soccer player, and what you see is the smiling epitome of Brazil's culture of pleasure. You look at John Terry and you have a deeper understanding of how it was that a small island nation once conquered half the known world. Terry — the captain of the English Premier League champions, Chelsea, and pillar of his national team's defense — has the height, the bulk and the air of cold command of the red-coated British sergeant who in days of empire instilled terror in his troops and enemy forces alike. When the two went head-to-head in a game earlier this year, it was more than a clash between two different ways of playing soccer, of approaching life; it was the proverbial case, or so it seemed, of the unstoppable force meeting the immovable object.

It happened in March, at a critical moment in last season's clash of European titans, Ronaldinho's Barcelona against Chelsea, in the round of 16 in the Champions League tournament, club soccer's biggest competition. The score was 0-0, and 12 minutes were left in the game. Ronaldinho received the ball in the center of midfield, 15 yards from the Chelsea penalty area. Around him were four Chelsea defenders. Ronaldinho left one of them for dead and avoided two more. The fourth, the last man standing between him and glory, was John Terry. Ronaldinho's response was to do what he does better than anybody else: the unthinkable. Having mesmerized the Chelsea ranks with the speed of his feet and the swerve of his dancing hips, he met brute force with brute force — and won. He shouldered the English Goliath — perfectly fairly — to the ground. And it was from this abject vantage that London's finest looked on, a picture of defeat, as the samba-loving Brazilian whipped the ball low and true, past the Chelsea goalkeeper and into the net.

That electric sequence of events — barely four seconds elapsed between Ronaldinho's receiving and dispatching of the ball — captured, for the watching millions, one of soccer's great truisms: the English invented the game, but the Brazilians perfected it. They found the game brick and left it marble. They patented what has become known the world over as *jogo bonito*, the beautiful game, a style of soccer that combines exuberance with success and that Ronaldinho, more than any other player alive, embodies. People respect winners, they admire them, but they don't always love them. The bright, canary-yellow shirt of the Brazilian national team — the *canarinho* shirt, they fondly call it in Brazil — elicits feelings in soccer fans everywhere that unite reverence for Brazil's unquestioned supremacy (it has won the World Cup, held every four years, five times in the last half century) with an affection, a warm sense of personal ownership, that transcends the sport's inherent tribalism. Every neutral fan following this month's World Cup will want Brazil to win, and every soccer-lover with

a national stake in the competition will have Brazil as his second team. Soccer is the world's biggest religion, cutting across race, faith, geography, ideology and gender like no other global phenomenon. Brazil is the religion's favorite church.

Why the love? Some of it comes from the fact that Brazil is a country without enemies. That a defeat at home to Uruguay in the World Cup final in 1950 still ranks, in all seriousness, as one of the greatest tragedies in Brazilian history bespeaks a nation without much of a war-making tradition. Brazilians prefer a rip-roaring carnival. More important, perhaps, is the appearance of racial harmony that Brazil's national team projects. Some players are black, some are white, but usually they are a blend of the two, the shades and shapes representing the range of types that come from the Amazon basin, from West Africa and from the European countries that have contributed so much to the genetic cocktail: Portugal, Italy and Germany. The first superstar of Brazilian soccer was the green-eyed, curly-haired Arthur Friedenreich, who scored the winning goal in a celebrated 1-0 victory over Uruguay in 1919. Racial stereotypes — blacks are more graceful, say, or whites more tenacious — break down. Ask any Brazilian who, in terms of pure skill, was the greatest Brazilian player ever, and chances are he'll be torn between the competing claims of the brown-skinned Garrincha and the blond Zico.

All this would be of merely anecdotal interest, however, were the Brazilians not so darn good. For the first six decades after the arrival in 1894 of soccer's first evangelist in Brazil, a handlebar-mustachioed British gent by the name of Charles Miller, Brazilian soccer made few waves beyond Latin American shores. But then, in 1958, when the World Cup was held in Sweden, Brazil's impact on the competition was seismic. Thanks to grainy black-and-white images still replayed on TV today, the aftershocks of a goal scored in the final by a 17-year-old named Pelé, a spindly unknown, continue to deliver their timeless thrill. What Pelé did no one had ever seen before. Wearing the clumpy boots of the era, he flicked the heavy leather ball used in those days over the head of a towering Swedish defender, spun around him, got to the ball before it touched the ground and drilled it, on the volley, into the net.

Brazil also won the next World Cup, held in Chile. This time Pelé was out injured most of the tournament and Garrincha was the star of the show. The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano says of Garrincha, in a lyrical little book titled "Soccer in Sun and Shadow," that "in the entire history of football no one made more people happy." Partly deformed from birth by polio (one leg was shorter than the other and both were bent like bows), he possessed such genius with a ball at his feet that each game he played became, as Galeano writes, "a circus ... a party." Clown and juggler at the same time, he entrenched the myth — so much a part of the Brazilian legend — that in his country people play soccer less for victory than for fun.

Brazil's apotheosis, and Pelé's, came in the 1970 World Cup in Mexico. The consensus is absolute among soccer's intelligentsia that this was the greatest team ever to grace the game. Some debate lingers as to who was the greater player, Pelé or Diego Maradona (who would win the World Cup with — or rather, for — Argentina in 1986, also in Mexico). But no one questions the pre-eminence — the peerless combination of flamboyance and effectiveness — of that 1970 Brazil team, with its supporting stars like Jairzinho, Rivelino, Gérson and Tostão.

A lean period followed: it would be 24 years before Brazil won the World Cup again. But such was the power of the spell cast by that triple-winning Pelé team that the legend not only remained alive but, as legends do, flourished. It didn't matter how strong or weak they looked on paper, no team ever got the pulse racing the way the canary-shirted Brazilians did. Then in 1994, led by Romário, Brazil resumed its dominance by winning the World Cup in the United States. Brazil lost in the final against France in Paris in 1998, but then won again in Yokohama in 2002 as the unstoppable onslaught of "the three R's" — Rivaldo, Ronaldo and Ronaldinho — swept all before them.

This time around Brazil is again the favorite to win, on rational as well as sentimental grounds. A 4-1 crushing of Argentina (a two-time World Cup winner and always among the favorites) in a tournament in Germany last summer has lent force to an idea that has been building since 2002: that Brazil would not only win again, but do so in a fashion not seen since 1970. Ronaldo, the game's most admired striker in recent years and three times the winner of the FIFA World Player of the Year award (voted on by all the national-team coaches and captains), is back. So is Cafu, the captain, and Roberto Carlos, the most offensive-minded left back in the history of the game and the one with the most thunderous shot. Three new young superstars have emerged: Adriano, a bull of a man up front with the touch of a ballerina; Kaká, a midfielder who glides over the grass like Gene Kelly; and the young Robinho, small and doe-like but reckoned by many in Brazil to be a Pelé in the making. And, most exciting of all, this year's team has Ronaldinho, the reigning two-time winner of World Player of the Year and winner of the no-less-prestigious European Footballer of the Year prize last November. In May, he led Barcelona to its second consecutive La Liga title in Spain and to European victory in the Champions League.

Whatever happens at this World Cup (and there are some who worry about the aging legs of Ronaldo, Roberto Carlos and Cafu), Ronaldo de Assis Moreira, an attacking midfielder known to everyone as Ronaldinho, has already done more than enough not only to keep the Brazilian legend alive but also to breathe new life into it. Not so much because of what he has achieved (an enormous amount for a player who just turned 26), but because of the manner in which he has done it. Like Pelé, he scores sublime goals, and lots of them; he is arguably the world's best and most penetrating passer, the master of the assist; he may be unequalled in the dominion he exerts over the ball. On top of all that, he plays with a big smile on his face, even when he misses a shot. Whereas so many professionals in every sport seem to carry the world's worries on their faces as they play, Ronaldinho radiates the fun of a carefree 8-year-old boy. Which happens to be how old he was when his father suffered a heart attack in a swimming pool and drowned. After that shock, which he has never forgotten (following every goal he scores, he looks up to heaven and points a finger that says, "For you, Dad"), Ronaldinho might be excused were he introverted or morose. Yet he seems the exact opposite.

He is courteous, too — one of those "After you," "No, after you" types — and seems to have few of the airs and graces one might expect of a regular superstar, to say nothing of the most globally celebrated sportsman alive. He does not strut so much as shuffle, and when asked to describe that goal during which he sent John Terry tumbling to the ground, he gracefully makes excuses for the Englishman. "I had the good fortune to be coming at him having built up some speed, while he was moving from a standing position," he says, "so I had a big advantage."

While proudly Brazilian — "I just love the way we play the game!" — Ronaldinho acknowledges a debt to Europe, whose faster, more aggressive style of play has obliged him to become a more complete, "much stronger" athlete physically. (And a lot richer: Brazil is a dynamic and sensual country, but also a poor one — in Europe, players can earn 5 or 10 times more money than they can in Brazil.) Still, Brazil provides an edge, in Ronaldinho's view, in the extra degree of obsessiveness with which soccer permeates national life. "It doesn't matter where you go in Brazil, it doesn't matter where you look, there are people playing football. All day and all night, children with children, fathers with their sons, grandfathers with their grandchildren, adults with adults, women or men — everybody, everywhere. And if they're not playing with a ball, they'll be playing with a soft-drink can."

Yet there does seem to be some essential characteristic, something more than mere quantity, that distinguishes Brazilian soccer from that played by everyone else. Juca Kfourri, a leading TV and newspaper commentator in Brazil, likes to compare Brazilian soccer with the English original. The latter, he says, "is more tactical, more disciplined, more rigidly adhering to the rules the coach imposes. In Brazil, methods exist in order to be dismantled. That is why, when Brazil and England have played, Brazil almost always wins by scoring goals that are not out of the book, goals that come as a complete surprise."

Tostão, who played with Pelé on Brazil's team in 1970 (beating England along the way), is a huge fan of Ronaldinho, and he agrees with Kfourri that what sets Brazilian soccer above the rest is what he calls its "daring" imagination.

"Globalization has obviously impacted on soccer, too," says Tostão, who is now Brazil's most respected sports newspaper columnist. "Strategy and tactics are practically the same the world over. In that sense, soccer has become more like basketball. Even in terms of sheer skill, the difference is not all that great between one country and another. And good technique can be taught. Look at a player like Zidane," he explains, referring to Zinedine Zidane, the midfielder for Real Madrid and the French national team. He has as much ability on the ball as any Brazilian. That is why, Tostão says, the difference lies in the mind. "Brazilian soccer has more of the imponderable about it. There is more variation in the Brazilian game than in the European one. Brazilian players have more of the magic of invention."

The English team captain, David Beckham, Tostão suggests, has the skill to do what a Brazilian player might, but he doesn't because he is trapped in his English cultural mind-set. He cannot tap into what Tostão says is "the imaginative unconscious of Brazilian football, transmitted down from one generation to the next."

That collective unconscious is what Ronaldinho perhaps refers to, without quite articulating it that way, when he addresses the conundrum of how it is that all of the top Brazilians play in Europe yet somehow contrive to function as a team when they put on the *canarinho* shirt. "We left Brazil young but remained there till we were at least 15, usually more," he says. "So we all served the same apprenticeship, and when we meet in the national team, there is an ease of understanding. Also, to be in the Brazil team you have to play football of very high quality, and when you play with people so good, the game becomes easy and things work out naturally." (Ronaldinho is determined, however, as is Tostão, to dispel the myth that Brazilian players are so naturally gifted

that victory comes easily to them, no sweat or discipline required. "It's an absolute myth," Tostão says. "We play a collective game, as disciplined as anybody else's." Ronaldinho says: "We prepare for a game a lot more than people imagine. People think that we run out on the pitch, all laughter and joy, and then it's goal, goal, goal. No.")

Ronaldinho may get close to the secret of Brazilian soccer — the alliance of discipline and skill with superior imagination — when he explains his role with the team. "When I train," he says, "one of the things I concentrate on is creating a mental picture of how best to deliver that ball to a teammate, preferably leaving him alone in front of the rival goalkeeper. So what I do, always before a game — always, every night and every day — is try and think up things, imagine plays, which no one else will have thought of, and to do so always bearing in mind the particular strengths of each teammate to whom I am passing the ball. When I construct those plays in my mind, I take into account whether one teammate likes to receive the ball at his feet or ahead of him, if he's good with his head and how he prefers to head the ball, if he's stronger on his right or his left foot. That's my job. That is what I do. I imagine the game."

Ronaldinho imagines the game so well that something is happening in the world of soccer that would have seemed unthinkable 10, 5 or even 2 years ago. People are beginning to wonder whether Ronaldinho may be worthy of mention in the same breath as the holy twosome of Pelé and Maradona. "The big polemic is already on here in Brazil," Kfoury says, "and older guys of my generation, we resist making that comparison, naturally. But you know what? There is no way of avoiding it — Ronaldinho is reinventing football. He is the most creative, most entertaining player we've seen anywhere in years."

Maradona himself said much the same thing in an interview with the Spanish daily Sport. "It's impressive how Ronaldinho can combine both technique and speed," the Argentine said. "It's only possible because he has a privileged mind. He's such a quick thinker. He knows what he's going to do before the ball gets to him. ... He's a show on his own."

Indeed, he's such a one-man show that, Kfoury points out, Tostão caused a great flutter in the soccer world when he asked in a recent column in Brazil's biggest newspaper, Folha de S. Paulo, whether Ronaldinho might be placed on the highest pedestal of all. It was a momentous thought, and mildly shocking, coming from a man who had had the good fortune to play in the Brazil forward line 36 years ago alongside the player known ever since in Brazil as O Rei — the King.

"Yes," Tostão admits, "I have raised this question. I have made the point that in 2002 Ronaldinho was as important a player as any in the Brazil team, and yet today he is more of a footballer than he was then. Look, I played with Pelé. Pelé has always been the greatest for me. And I believe Ronaldinho is still beneath him, but — "

But that goal against Chelsea? That triumph of Brazilian poetry over English prose? Wouldn't Pelé have been proud of that? "Yes. But it's not just the goals Ronaldinho scores. It's those passes he lays on a plate for his teammates. He knocked a great Milan team out in the semifinal of the Champions League that way, delivering a magically weighted assist. His passing is as decisive as his goals are.

"Yes," Tostão continues, pensive, hesitant, flirting with a heresy, "it is possible. Who knows? A year from now, we could be saying that Ronaldinho is as good as Pelé was."

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