RONALDO SMILES AND SHAKES HIS HEAD. "I THINK YOU CAME TO test my knowledge of football," he tells *Alpha*. "Of all the Australian players, I (only) know the one that plays for Osasuna." (That'll be John Aloisi, our Uruguay penalty shootout hero.)

He has not heard of Harry Kewell. He has not heard of Mark Viduka. Nor Tim Cahill or Brett Emerton or Lucas Neill. What about our goalkeepers, Mark Schwarzer (who plays for Middlesborough) and AC Milan's Zeljko Kalac? No, to both.

When Aloisi's penalty slammed past Uruguay's Fabian Carini, it opened the door to the only truly global sport: an intimidating arena of skill, glamour, saturation media coverage and ridiculous fame.

But Australia's presence at the World Cup means nothing to Ronaldo, the Brazilian genius. For a player of Ronaldo's calibre, there are 30 other countries with their Kewells and Vidukas, their brave heroes and their magic men at this World Cup. At least he's heard of Australia.

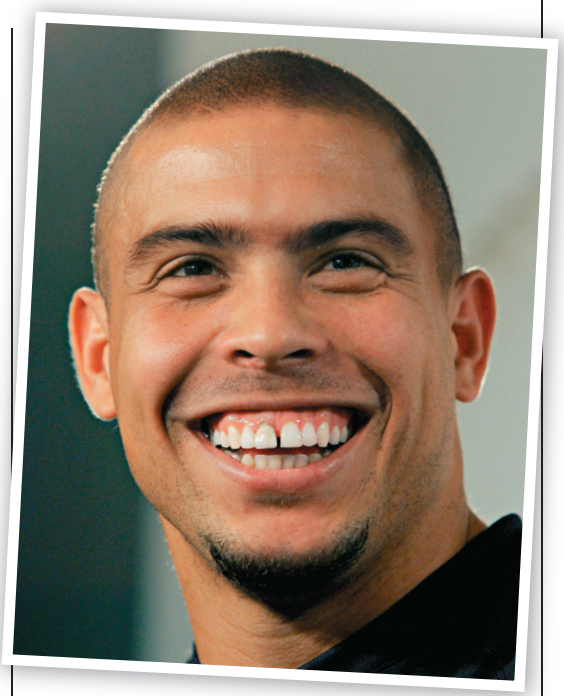
"The strength of the Australian team is going to be the head coach (Guus Hiddink), who has taken teams to a lot of tournaments – quarter-finals and beyond – he has a lot of experience. With this kind of coach you will be a hard team," he says politely.

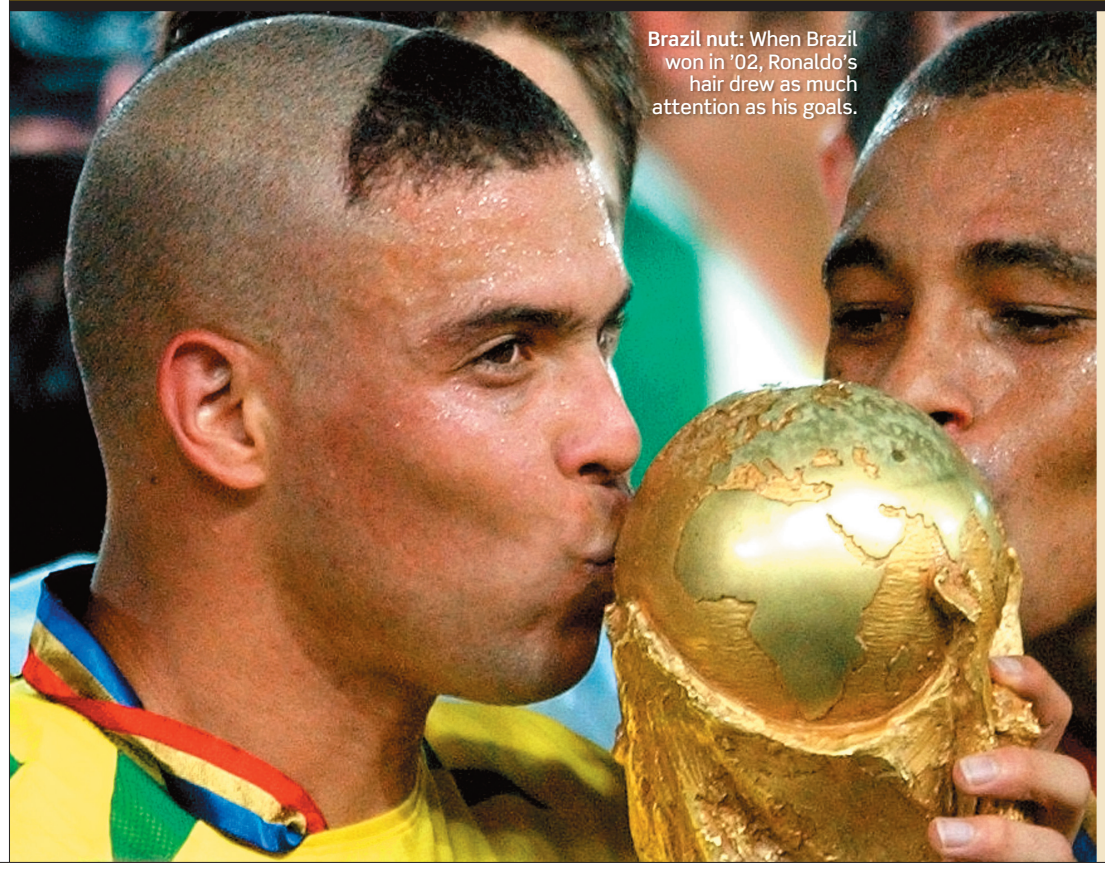
The Brazilian is speaking to *Alpha* in Munich, after the launch of a Nike boot he believes will make him even faster than he already is. He's in diplomatic mode when we ask him about his knowledge of the Socceroos. The truth is, he has no knowledge of our team and is only able to identify Aloisi from Osasuna, but he is unable to recall his name. We in Australia may think we have made it to the big-time, but that doesn't mean the big-timers have heard of us.

Whether Ronaldo has heard of Kewell or not matters little for the rest of our interview, because the man has done everything in football, and when he speaks he's worth listening to. He has been part of Real Madrid's weird malfunctioning "dream team", the Galacticos, for so long, his unique individual worth is camouflaged. Indeed, he's been famous most of his life; a feature of the skyline like the Empire State Building.

The young Ronaldo, with his pneumatic build, ferocious speed and sleight of foot, was a freak in the same way Jonah Lomu was: a whole pack of Super Trump players in one body. He was nurtured at PSV Eindhoven then Barcelona by ex-England manager Bobby Robson. Ronaldo, Robson noted, "had everything" – although his heading needed a bit of work. When Ronaldo dropped a shoulder and swung a huge thigh past the last defender, it was all over, the man was gone. The goalkeeper left to his fate.

RONALDO'S OWN fate has been a jumble in recent years. As Sonny Bill Williams is discovering, a boy driving a man's body puts huge strain on the joints. Ronaldo's knees couldn't cope with the rest of his legs and disintegrated. A steady World Cup in France '98 was infamously wiped out by his bewildered performance in the final, as France took Brazil apart. In Japan and Korea '02, he was immaculate, devastating and victorious. He is thrice world player of the year and enters Germany '06 still only 29, the World Cup holder and, with 12 goals, the third-highest scorer in the tournament's history alongside Pele. Three more and he's out on his own.





Brazil nut: When Brazil won in '02, Ronaldo's hair drew as much attention as his goals.

Ronaldo: The Facts

FULL NAME Luís Nazário de Lima Ronaldo
BORN Sep 22, 1976, Bento Ribeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
HEIGHT 183cm

CLUBS
- Brazil national team 1994–
- Social Ramos Club 1990-91
- São Cristóvão 1991-93
- Cruzeiro Belo Horizonte 1993-94
- PSV Eindhoven 1994-96
- FC Barcelona 1996-97
- Inter Milan 1997-2002
- Real Madrid 2002–

INDIVIDUAL AWARDS
- FIFA World Player of the Year: 1996, 1997, 2002
- European Footballer of the Year: 1997, 2002
- UEFA Most Valuable Player: 1998
- FIFA World Cup 2002 Golden Boot – 8 goals

BRAZIL TEAM HONOURS
- FIFA World Cup 2002 Winner
- FIFA World Cup 1994 Winner
- Copa América: 1997, 1999

CLUB HONOURS
- UEFA Cup: 1998
- Cup Winners' Cup: 1997
- Dutch Cup: 1996
- La Liga Primera División champions: 2003
- Intercontinental Cup: 2002
- European Super Cup: 2002
- Spanish Super Cup: 2003

PHOTOGRAPHY: GREGG PORTEOUS (TOP); AP (WORLD CUP).