

## RONALDO

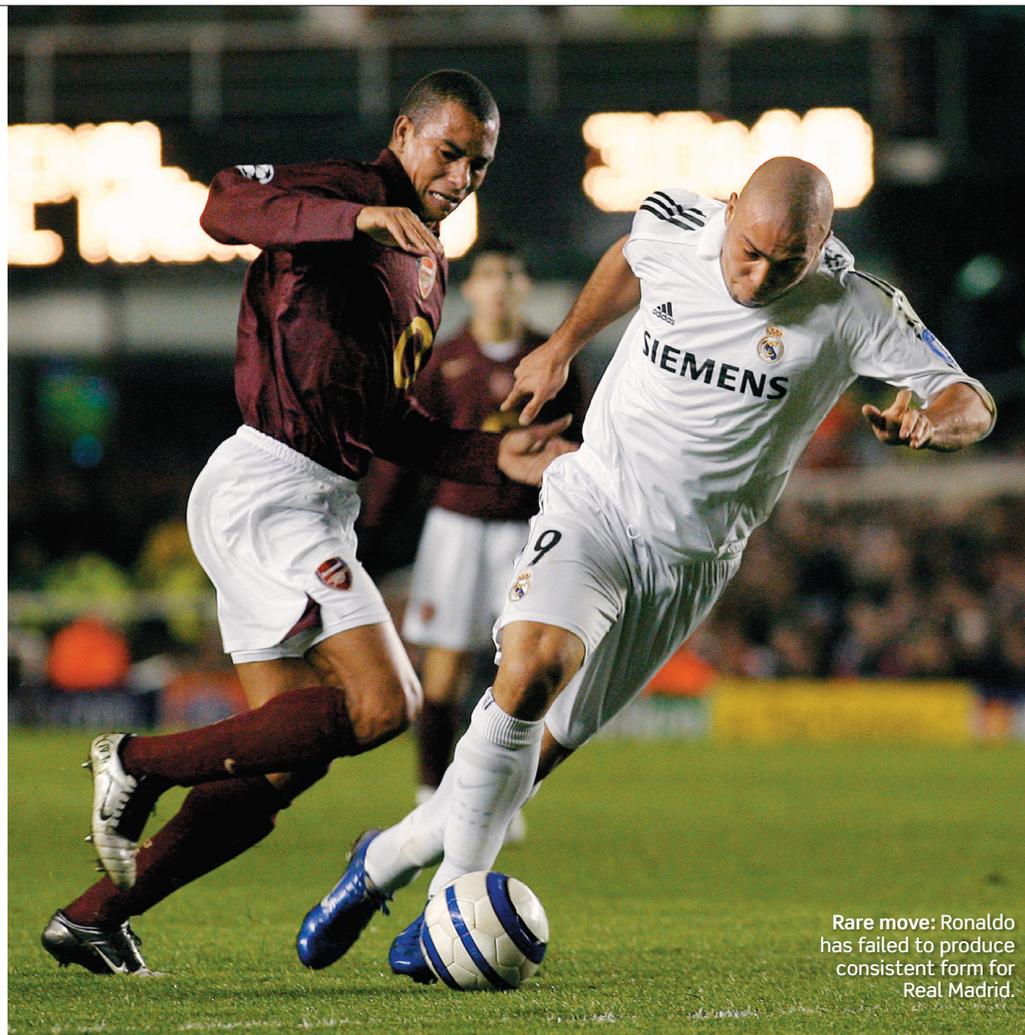
“Australia are not used to World Cups, but we respect our opponents.”

His weight and fitness have always been questioned (*The Guardian* newspaper in England recently described him as the “large-boned non-trier”) and his near-undroppable Galactico status has given the impression that he doesn’t rouse himself for every game, that he can coast through large parts of the season and turn it on for special occasions. Real Madrid’s Champion’s League exit at the hands of Arsenal, however – big nights by any standard – featured 180 minutes of Ronaldo anonymity, and drew further accusations about his weight.

The striker has spent a large part of the season under fire from fans about his form and fitness; a far cry from 2000, when despite the fact Ronaldo was absent through injury, his name was often chanted from the stands. What seems clear is that form and fan-disaffection are now feeding each other. “All I want is for people to treat me with respect and that is not happening,” he complained recently. “I am not saving myself for the World Cup. I want to do a lot to arrive in Germany full of confidence. I want to rediscover my happiness. I have always said that I don’t want to be where I’m not loved.”

The fact that he scored for Brazil in a mid-week win over Russia before finding no place in the Real squad that weekend, is a clear example of the Ronaldo conundrum. In contrast to many players, he seems

**Ronnie’s girls (L-R):** Milene (world “keepy-uppy” record-holder) Domingues, MTV VJ Daniella Cicarelli and current partner, Brazilian model Raica Oliveira.



Rare move: Ronaldo has failed to produce consistent form for Real Madrid.

to find his best form and enthusiasm playing for his country rather than his club. He has scored an astounding 57 goals in 90 games for Brazil. Perhaps Ronaldo, whose English has never approached fluent despite years in Europe, is more comfortable on the pitch surrounded by his compatriots .

Another reason for Ronaldo’s wild form fluctuations could be his chaotic personal life. In 1999, in a match made for sporting heaven, he married Brazil’s best female footballer, Milene Domingues, also the world “keepy-uppy” record-holder (55,187 touches in 9.06 hours). They had a son, Ronald, but divorced after four years. Flings with other models was followed by marriage to Brazilian MTV VJ Daniella Cicarelli. Within three months she had become pregnant, miscarried, and the couple divorced. No wonder he can’t concentrate on scoring goals.

But in the flesh, it is hard to see any evidence of his troubles, or reasons for the fans’ discontent. He looks honed: a sleek, bull-necked, gentle-eyed assassin. The image of the world-class athlete still at the height of his career. Is this the kind of man who’s going to worry about H Kewell of Merseyside and Sydney? No, it isn’t.

Which is not to say he’s going to give anything away. Asked for tips from the high table for one of the least-experienced teams, he damn well smiles again. “There is no key to success that I can give you. Each national team will try to eliminate the others. And as far as Australia is concerned, even if I had a clue, I would not give it to you.”

Isn’t there *any* feeling in Brazil about the match Australians have been shouting about for months?

“Australia are not used to playing in World Cups, but we try to respect all of our opponents, because

PHOTOGRAPHY: AP (DOMINGUES); CARLOS ALVAREZ/GETTY IMAGES (OLIVEIRA); DYLAN MARTINEZ (TOP); FERNANDA CALFAT/GETTY IMAGES (CICARELLI).



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