

RONALDO

Spacemen:
Ronaldo with his
fellow Galacticos.



in football you cannot say you are definitively better than the others.”

Perhaps not, but with Brazil, you can make a good case. Ronaldo talks like a man well aware history awaits him. But even if he makes it to Germany uninjured, for the first time in 10 years his place is not guaranteed. The current world-best player is Barcelona's Ronaldinho, whose every game is a masterclass in technique, vision and enthusiasm. The dark horse is “the Tank” – Adriano of Inter Milan, a giant,

intimidating striker in irresistible form – while the unknown is Robinho. Just 22, and the latest unhelpfully dubbed the “next Pele” by Pele himself, Robinho is another star prised from his natural environment by Real Madrid's money and hurried into the team. The skinny kid with his slippery runs and dazzling step-overs could be everything, or nothing. But none of it is designed to help Ronaldo sleep well at night.

In his favour are his performances for his country. He played in 15 of Brazil's World Cup qualifying

WANT MORE?

- See what the Soccerroos are up against: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCjNyTULoyY&search=Brazil%20football
- Follow Brazil's preparations at <http://ffifaworldcup.yahoo.com/06/en/w/team/overview.html?team=bra>
- Brazil's greatest team yet? See www.v-brazil.com/culture/sports/world-cup/1970-Mexico.html

matches, and with 10 goals was his country's (and the South American group's) top scorer. They include the hat-trick of penalties he both won and scored in the 3-1 victory against Argentina. His goals-to-games ratio is amazing – in the 2002 World Cup he scored in every match except the one against England. He is almost certain to play a large part in Germany.

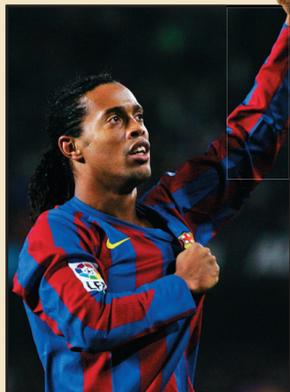
“It will be a great team because there's a lot of competition,” he states carefully. “We have a very large population where everybody loves football, so there's a lot of great players trying to make the national team. Brazil right now has one of the best teams that we have ever assembled.”

Just in case we haven't got his “minnows beware” point, he hammers it home. “The World Cup is difficult for everybody: all the best players from all the best countries are coming to play. I believe that countries with less tradition and less experience in World Cups will not have the same benefits. They are going to be all excited about being at the World Cup, but the opportunities of going to the next round will be a little more difficult for them.”

But don't despair. Perhaps our greatest weapon is that global football's radar still sweeps just above our heads. Every World Cup brings its bolters, its surprise attacks and shock defeats. Ronaldo and co may not know the names Kewell, Cahill and Viduka yet. But they will. **A**

The Boys from Brazil

Ronaldo's teammates include some of the greats of the modern game



Ronaldinho

Barcelona are arguably the world's best club side, and Ronaldinho is certainly their inspiration. Whether spraying the ball around, shielding it, carrying it forward to the opposition with a frightening surge or spearing in lethal free kicks, he's the world's best player and proves it every game.



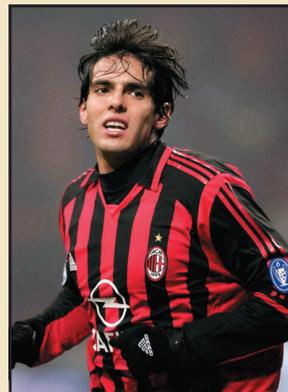
Adriano

No one predicted the rise of Adriano, except perhaps the man himself. Atypically Brazilian in style, he is huge and brutally effective near the goal. He prepares for big matches by attending nightclubs and is reportedly disliked by his Inter Milan teammates. It doesn't seem to bother him much.



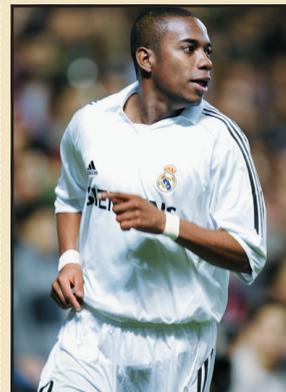
Julio Baptista

If anything, the rise of big midfielder Julio Baptista has been even more startling. “The Beast”, given an attacking role at Spanish club Sevilla, plundered 18 league and five UEFA Cup goals in 2004. Waving \$33 million in one hand, Real Madrid then reached out and grabbed him with the other.



Kaká

A tireless goal-scoring midfielder, whose consistent form and partnership with Ukrainian hit-man Andriy Shevchenko at AC Milan have revived the club's fortunes. He finished eighth in the 2005 FIFA World Player of the Year awards, has improved since, and is a vital part of the Brazil machine.



Robinho

No player faces greater expectation in Germany than Robinho. Touted as the next “world's best” for at least four years, his body seems to have matured and caught up with his talent. He harnesses superb technique and mesmerising skills, but will those big international defenders let him show it?

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES (ADRIANO, BAPTISTA, KAKA, ROBINHO, RONALDINHO); REUTERS (RONALDINHO).