



SOCCER GREATS

The
Best
of All
Time

Tom Streissguth



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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
What Makes the Great Soccer Players Great?	
Chapter One	7
Pelé	
Chapter Two	15
Johan Cruyff	
Chapter Three	23
Diego Maradona	
Chapter Four	31
Cristiano Ronaldo	
Chapter Five	39
Lionel Messi	
Chapter Six	48
Kylian Mbappé	
Source Notes	56
For Further Research	58
Index	60
Picture Credits	63
About the Author	64

Cristiano Ronaldo

Great soccer players start their training young. When they're kids, they join others in hard-fought matches in the streets. They play all day and late into the evening. If there's no school, they start again early the next day. A few can play on grassy fields, with real goals and nets. But many have to use pavement. For one young player growing up in the 1990s, the narrow and hilly stone-paved streets of the Portuguese island of Madeira turned out to be the best possible training ground.

Born on February 5, 1985, Cristiano Ronaldo dos Santos Aveiro was the youngest child of Maria Dolores dos Santos and José Dinis Aveiro. The couple had four children. They lived in a small house in a poor quarter of Funchal, the capital of Madeira. Maria worked as a cook and housekeeper. José was a part-time laborer and an equipment manager for Andorinha, a local soccer team. He named his youngest son for Ronald Reagan, an American president whom he greatly admired.

Young Ronaldo had one interest, one obsession, in his life. "All he wanted to do as a boy was play football," said Fernão Sousa, his godfather, many years later. "He loved the game so much he'd miss meals or escape out of his bedroom window with a ball when he was supposed to be doing his homework."¹³

Starting for Sporting

Playing in narrow lanes near his home, Cristiano developed great skill as a dribbler. He was a natural athlete who worked hard on his game. To the other players, it seemed his feet could do anything with a soccer ball. But he wasn't so great at

Christiano Ronaldo (seen at age two) was the youngest of four children. All he wanted to do as a boy was play soccer.



passing. He always wanted to be the star, the center of attention. While running in the streets, he had just one thing in mind: goals.

It was his dream to play for a pro club in Portugal or Spain. But like any other good player, he had a tall ladder to climb. In 1992, when he was seven years old, he started for Andorinha. Three years later, he joined Nacional, another Madeira club. He was soon noticed by scouts from mainland Portugal. In 1997 Sporting Clube de Portugal offered twelve-year-old Cristiano a tryout. The club then accepted him for its youth squad.

For the next six years, Cristiano would live in Lisbon, the nation's capital. He missed his family and friends and struggled with loneliness. But he worked hard on the field. When his schoolwork began to interfere with his training, he dropped out. Sixth grade was his last year in school. In 2002, when Ronaldo was seventeen, he was promoted to Sporting's top pro squad, playing in Portugal's Primeira Liga.

That season, the Sporting manager gave him a few starts. He was still young and inexperienced, but he played well. He drew

the attention of fans and more scouts—this time, from England, Spain, and Italy. Arsenal, a top English team, invited him to visit their stadium in London. The Arsenal coaches were ready to give Ronaldo a trial after Sporting's season was over. But nothing was signed, and other teams were still interested.

Playing for the Red Devils

The English powerhouse team Manchester United also knew about Ronaldo. The team's managers had scouted him in Portugal. They knew Arsenal and other European teams wanted to sign him, so they had to act fast. In the summer of 2003, United arranged a match against Sporting. For the Portuguese team, this would be the first match played at Estádio José Alvalade, their new stadium in Lisbon. The match took place on August 6.

The Manchester United players had already played several international exhibition games. On this day the players were tired from a long flight from the United States. Even if they had been in better condition, they were still no match for the seventeen-year-old Ronaldo, who ran circles around the veteran United players. By halftime, Ronaldo's quick runs and expert dribbling had completely exhausted John O'Shea, the player assigned to defend

Replacing a Legend

Manchester United has a long record of success in England's Premier League. Their fans expect to see a championship team on the field every year. In 2003, when Ronaldo and his Sporting club arrived in Lisbon to play Manchester United, manager Alex Ferguson had a problem. He needed to replace David Beckham, the sensational midfielder who had just left United for Real Madrid. And he needed to do it quickly.

Although he was still young, Ronaldo was already known to European teams. Against Manchester United he made a spectacular showing, running the defenders ragged all over the field. Ferguson agreed to buy the rights to Ronaldo right after the match. The initial plan was to allow Ronaldo to finish the season with Sporting. But then Ferguson asked him to move to England immediately. At first, Ronaldo would join the team for training. Halfway through the 2003–2004 season, he began coming into games as a substitute. As a sign of his expectations, Ferguson assigned Ronaldo jersey number 7—the number worn by Beckham, George Best, Eric Cantona, and other United superstars.

Soccer Stats

As of early 2025, Ronaldo had scored 913 goals in official league and international matches. He has said he hopes to break the record set by German striker Erwin Helmchen in 1951 of 989 goals.

him. Ryan Giggs, one of the Manchester United players, recalled that match to soccer author Guillem Balagué: “He looked like a tall, gangly player. . . . All of a sudden he started passing players on the outside, then on the inside. . . . I suddenly sat up. A few of us started giggling, mostly at John O’Shea, who was defending him.”¹⁴

Several of the players spoke to their coach, Alex Ferguson, about the young Portuguese kid who was tearing up their defense. They wanted Ferguson to sign him immediately. In fact, Ferguson had already reached an agreement with Ronaldo’s agent, Jorge Mendes. Arsenal had made a reasonable offer, but United was a much wealthier club with the resources to do better. United agreed to pay Sporting a transfer fee equal to about \$19.8 million. Ronaldo’s yearly salary also increased—dramatically—from about \$26,400 to about \$2.2 million.

Adjusting to England

Although the Manchester United players appreciated his talents, it took time for them to accept Ronaldo as a teammate. He was a confident teenager who wanted the ball on every occasion. The English players saw him as a bit of a showboat. While running on the wings, he rarely attempted crosses—passes meant to set up strikers and forwards for goals. Instead, he preferred to work his dribbling magic and make his way toward the goal, alone, for a clear shot. He saw the more experienced players as his assistants. When they didn’t pass him the ball, he would get angry.

On any other team this might have been a problem. But United had its share of skilled dribblers and natural scorers. When Ronaldo drew two or three defenders, it helped open up the field for the team’s offense. This allowed another forward or midfielder to get open for a run at the goal.



Manchester United acquired Ronaldo (left) in 2003 from Portugal for \$19.8 million. His new teammates appreciated his talents, but it took time for them to accept him as a teammate.

In Ronaldo's first season with the team, Manchester United won the Football Association Cup, the English football championship. With Ronaldo on the roster, the club would win three titles in the Premier League, England's top professional league.

The 2007–2008 season turned out to be one of the best of Ronaldo's career. He scored 31 goals, making him the leading scorer among all European teams. United won the Champions League title, a tournament of the top pro teams in Europe. In 2008 Ronaldo was named FIFA World Player of the Year. In the following year, United went to the Champions League final but lost to Barcelona.

A Dream Come True

Despite the loss, other clubs kept a close eye on Ronaldo. Ever since he was young, he had dreamed of playing for Real Madrid, a team playing in Spain's La Liga. One of the best clubs in Europe, Real had a fierce rivalry with Barcelona, another excellent

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INDEX

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.

- Ajax team, 15
- Angel, Henk, 16, 17
- Aparicio, Salvador, 39–40
- Arantes, Celeste, 7, **8**
- Arantes do Nascimento, Edson.
See Pelé

- Ballon d'Or, 36, 44
- Barcelona, 4
 - Cruyff becomes manager of, 21–22
 - Maradona joins, 24–25

- Camorra (gang), 29
- Champions League, 35
- Clairefontaine (French soccer academy), 48
- Clique* (magazine), 54
- Cociffi, Gabriela, 29
- Coman, Kingsley, 53
- Copa America (website), 58
- Copa del Rey (Spain's national championship series), 26
- Coppa Italian, (Italian national tournament), 28
- Cruyff, Johan, 15–22, **18, 21**
 - with Ajax team, 17–18, 21
 - attempted kidnapping of, 23
 - becomes manager of Barcelona, 21–22
 - birth/early life of, 15–16
 - joins Barcelona, 19–20
 - soccer stats, 18, 22
 - as young boy, **16**
- Cruyff turn, 20

- de Brito, Waldemar, 8
- Di María, Ángel, 46
- dos Santos Aveiro, Cristiano Ronaldo
 - birth/early life of, 31–32
 - as child, **32**
 - founds CR7, 37
 - as galáctico, 55
 - joins Sporting Clube de Portugal, 32–33
 - with Manchester United, 34–35, **35**
 - with Real Madrid, 36–37, **37**
 - soccer stats, 34, 36
- Dybala, Paulo, 53

- Elizabeth II (queen of England), 14
- Eredivisie (Dutch pro league), 17
- Eusébio, 5

- Fàbregas, Cesc, 42
- Ferguson, Alex, 33, 34, 36
- FIFA, 27, 59

- Glória, Otto, 12
- Goal.com (website), 59
- Golden Shoe trophy, 44
- Guardian* (newspaper), 27
- Gvardio, Joško, 46

- Haaland, Erling, 6

- Iglesia Maradoniana (Church of Maradona, Rosario, Argentina), 28
- Instagram, 41
- Izilein, Godwin, 12