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Ronaldinho

Ronaldo de Assis Moreira (1980–) was born March 21, 1980, in Pôrto Alegre, Brazil. Everyone calls him “Ronaldinho” (rah-nahl-DEE-noh). His family was poor. When Ronaldinho was 8 years old, his father drowned in a swimming pool after suffering a heart attack. Ronaldinho found comfort in soccer. He debuted for Brazil’s national team at age 19. He then joined the Brazilian soccer club Grêmio, which sold him to the French team Paris Saint-Germain in 2001. However, he continued to play for the Brazilian national team



and in 2002 helped it win its fifth World Cup. In 2003, he moved again, this time to Barcelona, Spain. He was named FIFA World Player of the Year in 2004 and 2005, and in 2006, he helped Barcelona capture the 2006 European Champions League crown. His dazzling skills and ever-present smile have made him a fan favorite throughout the world.

Many Brazilian soccer players are known by only one name, like the famous stars of the past—Pelé, Zico, and Socrates. Ronaldinho’s full name is Ronaldo de Assis Moreira, but he was given his nickname early in his soccer career. In his home country, Brazil, the people speak Portuguese. Adding “inho” to a name in Portuguese is like adding “y” to a name in English, as in Johnny or Freddy. When Ronaldinho emerged as a young star there was already one “Ronaldinho” playing soccer in Brazil. Soccer fans gave the

new Ronaldinho the nickname “Ronaldinho Gaucho.” This was because he was born in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, where people are known as “gauchos” or cowboys. Eventually the first Ronaldinho, who is four years older, became known just as Ronaldo, and Ronaldinho Gaucho became known as Ronaldinho.

Early Life

Ronaldinho was born Ronaldo de Assis Moreira on March 21, 1980, in Pôrto Alegre, Brazil. His father, Joao, and mother, Miguelina, already had a son, Roberto, and a

daughter, Deisi. His father worked in the shipyards of Pôrto Alegre and later as a security guard at the Pôrto Alegre Soccer Stadium. His mother worked part time at a nursery school. Ronaldinho and his older brother, Roberto, loved to play soccer with their father. But when Ronaldinho was just 8 years old, their family soccer games came to an end. His father drowned in a swimming pool after

Ronaldinho kicks the ball into the box during a soccer match between Spanish First Division teams, FC Barcelona and Real Sociedad.



Ronaldinho

suffering a heart attack. The family wondered how they would survive without him.

Miguelina, Ronaldinho's mother, took a full-time job as a civil servant at the town hall to support her three children. Times were hard, but Roberto and Ronaldinho found comfort on the soccer field. There, they could remember the fun times they had had with their father, playing the sport they all loved. The brothers excelled on

the soccer field. Where the soccer skills their father had taught them would lead them next was beyond imagination.

Training with Bombom

Ronaldinho, unlike many other Brazilian soccer stars, did not grow up in a *favela*, or Brazilian slum. His hometown, Pôrto Alegre, is the capital of the Brazil's southern most state, Rio Grande do Sul. But Ronaldinho's neighborhood was in a poor area of Pôrto Alegre. People lived in wooden huts and drove on dirt roads. Ronaldinho played soccer every day on those roads and in fields near his house. The skills he learned on those dirt roads made Ronaldinho a soccer magician.

Ronaldinho loved soccer more than anyone. After hours of playing, his friends got tired. One by one, they left the field and headed for home. But Ronaldinho played on. With no friends left to play with, he would play soccer with his dog, Bombom. Bombom was a mutt, a dark mixed-breed dog whose name means "chocolate candy" in Portuguese.

"Bombom loved to play with me," Ronaldinho said. "When all my friends got bored, I would play with him. We would stay battling for the ball all day. I had to work

Barcelona's Ronaldinho, right, duels for the ball during a 2005 match in Barcelona, Spain.

That year, Ronaldinho won the Golden Ball award to become the European Player of the Year.

hard on my moves to keep him from getting the ball. We were inseparable. He was my great companion."

Nothing kept the young Ronaldinho from playing soccer.

"When it was raining," he said, "I would stay in the house dribbling past chairs and tables. I always spent most of my time as a kid with a soccer ball. That helped me become good at it."

Ronaldinho continued to play soccer of all forms. He played with large balls and small ones. Like Pelé and other soccer greats before him, he played indoor "futsal," which uses a small heavy ball that hardly bounces. When he joined an organized outdoor club team, his coach, Claudio Roberto Pires Duarte, said, "We couldn't teach him anything. He already knew it all."

Practice Pays Off

Ronaldinho joined the youth team of the professional club Grêmio. Ronaldinho would practice with

Career Highlights

Scored 23 goals in a single game at age 16

Helped Brazil win the U-17 World Youth Championship at age 18

Helped Brazil win the 1999 Copa America (South American Championship)

Scored 9 goals at the 2000 Olympics

Twice named FIFA Player of the Year (2004, 2005)

Named FIFPro World Player of the Year (2005)

Became UN Ambassador Against Hunger in 2005



the team for four hours a day and then on his own for two hours every evening.

His dedication and hard work paid off. When he was 16, he scored 23 goals in a single game. That feat caught the media's attention for the first time. He was selected by Brazil's U-17 team and helped it win the World Youth Championship in 1997.

In 1998, he made his professional debut at Grêmio, scored plenty of goals, and was called

up to play on Brazil's full national team in 1999. He helped Brazil win the 1999 Copa America (South American Championship). Then, at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia, he scored nine goals. The whole world was taking notice, especially the Europeans.

It's common for young talented Brazilian players to move to Europe. Clubs there pay much higher salaries. Cash-strapped Brazilian clubs rely on the income they get from selling players to foreign clubs.

Suddenly, Ronaldinho was worth a lot of money to Grêmio. In 2001, the French soccer club Paris Saint-Germain offered to buy Ronaldinho for \$15 million. It was too much for Grêmio to pass up. The deal was made, and Ronaldinho packed his bags for France. He was just 21 years old.

Even though he was living in France, Ronaldinho continued to represent his country on Brazil's national team. In 2002, he joined soccer stars Ronaldo and Rivaldo

“I hope that as a kid from a poor family who has managed to fulfill his dream, I can inspire other children who are fighting to escape poverty and hunger.”

—Ronaldinho

Ronaldinho

in what was dubbed Brazil’s Ro-Ri-Ro attack. In the 2–1 quarterfinal win over England, Ronaldinho beat England goalkeeper David Seaman with a curling 42-yard free kick. Ronaldo and Ronaldinho helped Brazil win its record fifth World Cup. At that time, Ronaldo was considered the world’s greatest player.

But in the next few years, Ronaldinho climbed over Ronaldo to take the throne as world’s greatest player. After Brazil won the 2002 World Cup, Ronaldinho moved to Barcelona, the renowned club in Spain. Once again his skills brought his team a lot of money. This time, Barcelona paid Paris Saint-Germain \$45 million for his rights.

But What Position Does He Play?

With Barcelona, Ronaldinho’s dazzling moves became the talk of the soccer world. Ronaldinho moves all over the field. His position is midfielder, but he plays everywhere: on the right, the left, and in the middle. Sometimes he plays deep in the midfield. Other times he pops up in the opponent’s penalty area to score. Coaches usually tell players to stay in a particular position, but Ronaldinho is allowed to roam where he likes.

Casting His Spell

Ronaldinho has been praised and revered because his style of play is so entertaining. He began to do things with the soccer ball that soccer fans had never seen before. When he was profiled in Germany’s magazine *Der Spiegel*, reporter Dirk Kurbjuweit wrote, “He casts his spell with his dribbling, his passing, and his goals.”

When Ronaldinho gets the ball, the defenders begin to worry and the crowd gets excited, knowing he’s likely to pull off one of his dazzling tricks.

Ronaldinho’s favorite move is the “Elastic.” He caresses the ball with the outside of his right foot, then the instep before changing directions in a split second and leaving the defender in the dust. He says he learned that move by watching videotapes of 1970s Brazilian star Roberto Rivelino.

The “Stepover,” known in Brazil as the *pedalada*, is the one defenders fear the most. With a stationary ball at his feet, Ronaldinho steps over it with his right foot, then his left, and continues alternating until the defender is dazed, and then Ronaldinho darts downfield.

Besides his amazing dribbling moves, during which Ronaldinho utilizes all parts of both feet, his passes create countless opportunities for teammates.

“To have the chance to play with him has been fantastic,” said forward Henrik Larsson, Ronaldinho’s Swedish teammate at Barcelona. “I know that whenever I play and he’s playing, I only need to make the runs. There’s not many runs you make that he misses. He always sees you.”

Does He Look before He Passes?

Ronaldinho strokes, lobs, curls, and flicks balls to his teammates before defenders have a chance to predict their course. One of his trademark passes is the “Blind Pass” or the “No-look Pass,” when he looks one direction but releases the ball in the other.

He says he learned it by watching American basketball games on television as a child, when he was enchanted by Magic Johnson.

“You always have to think of ways to complicate the lives of defenders,” Ronaldinho said. “The Blind Pass is a perfect way to change the direction of the play and unbalance defenders.”



Ronaldinho is named the United Nations Sport for Development and Peace spokesperson.

Ronaldinho is also a prolific goal scorer. He has scored in nearly half of his appearances for the Brazilian national team and for Barcelona. His goals come in all forms, from long distance, from close-range after a slalom through the defense, and from free kicks. Among the best free-kick takers in the world, Ronaldinho credits his brother Roberto for teaching him the proper approach.

“You have to tune out everyone in the stands and on the field and concentrate,” Ronaldinho said. “On a free kick, it’s you, the ball, and the goalie. You need only three or four steps. The accuracy comes from how you use your foot, turn your arm, and balance your body.”

“I Am Ugly, but I Have Charm”

At one point in his career, some people said that Ronaldinho didn’t have the good looks to become an international megastar. Others said his personality wouldn’t appeal to sponsors who wanted to hire athletes to sell their products.

But Ronaldinho simply smiled and joked, “I am ugly, but I have charm.”

In fact, the ever-present wide-toothed smile of Ronaldinho has become a welcome presence as the world of soccer has become more and more serious. England’s *Guardian* newspaper wrote, “People love Ronaldinho because he embodies the soul of the sport rather than the science.”

Ronaldinho is surprised by his popularity, but he is using his fame to help the world’s children as an Ambassador Against Hunger for the United Nations. “I grew up with children from very poor families, and I’ve seen the effect hunger can have,” Ronaldinho said. “I was lucky soccer rescued my family from poverty. Now I want to help the World Food Program rescue other kids who aren’t so fortunate.”

What Will the Future Hold?

No matter how many awards, titles, and accolades he has won,

he always says he can improve: “I need to mature a lot as player. There are many areas in which I can get better, such as left-footed shots.”

That’s why Ronaldinho still stays on the field after his team’s practices end, sometimes for an hour, working on free kicks and other skills.

Bombom is long gone, but Ronaldinho has new dogs at his home in Castelldefels, a beach town south of Barcelona. “I keep dribbling with them all the time, too,” he said.

He walks down from his villa, where his sister and mother also live, to the beach, where he flicks the ball around, juggles it, and practices dribbling tricks, just like he did when he was a poor boy in Pôrto Alegre.

Further Study

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