

Ronaldinho's Smile

Yesterday Barcelona, defending champions of the Champions League, needed a win over tough Bundesliga competition Werder Bremen to escape the group stages of the tournament and earn a spot in the knock-out round. There has been a lot of talk this year that Ronaldinho is taking a break, that he isn't sharp, or as my friend John Maris said, that "he's fallen off a cliff." The world's chief practitioner of the jogo bonito, the beautiful game, put doubts to rest yesterday at Camp Nou about the future of happy football with two touches...

The first came early in the game when Rafa Marquez, the elegant Mexican defender with the smoky telenovela stare, drove one of his signature 40-yard passes toward Ronaldinho on the flank. Ronaldinho watched the ball closely as it spun towards him in the air, he glanced at the dispositions of the approaching defenders, and for no other reason than the desire to exhibit his mastery over the physics of the game, at the very last moment he turned his head sharply and took the ball directly on the back of his head, the side with no eyes, and in the process knocked a perfect header down to Deco's approaching feet. As they say in the motherland, it was pure exuberance. I can remember, not so long in the past, when that type of display was disapproved of. But the landscape of the game has changed for a lot reasons. The personalities of the players have grown, and the necessity for technical prowess has become so paramount that its demonstration, apparently gratuitous, can send a frightening message. What that pass with the back of the head did yesterday was tell a stern, hard-tackling Bremen team, that Ronaldinho was happy, and I'm pretty sure their central defenders had a sinking feeling as a result. When Ronaldinho is happy, he smiles a lot. When he smiles a lot, he chases the ball around like a baby tiger, so natural and unaware of his physical prowess, and so consumed by the fun of watching the ball, that the defenders become essentially invisible. This is a completely new kind of soccer to me. Some people point to Zinedine Zidane as its forebear but, even as I love Zidane and know his impact on the game, Ronaldinho is creating something new.

I remember seeing Zidane in his first big international role, the Euro Championship in 1992 I think, and thinking he was slow. I'd loved the French team for a while and Zidane had been hailed as its new king. He disappeared in the tournament, the balls never found him, he looked unhappy, I was unhappy. We all know what happened after that. People figured out you just have to kick it to him over and over again and at some point the game turns into him and he glides through it, lazering passes to peoples feet, walking past defenders, demoralizing whole teams and defenses with his ease. What did Zidane do? He pixelized the field in a new way. His control and vision were so superior that he actually expanded the field and the options of play so dramatically that he was playing a different game from his opponents. A defender closing him down, even a really thoughtful one, would close three of his possible five doors of escape and then guess at the last two, taking one and leaving the rest for his teammates, only to watch Zidane climb out a window that didn't exist. This happened over and over again and he became more and more clinical and competitive in his exploitation of the defenders' best energy over the course of his time at Juventus. But Zidane played with a concentration and ferocity, a desire for perfection, that was not joyful as much as it was sublime. It was beautiful in its mathematical cleanliness and imagination.

What Ronaldinho is doing comes sure enough from Brasil. But even in Brasil, where the game, influenced by the ginga of capoeira, is an expression of the self, it is not ordinary for the game to be so joyful, so playful. The revolution that will result from Ronaldinho's play will be breathtaking. International soccer has become huge business. It is now, in every way, the world's largest sport. As a result the physicality of the game has become freakish. For a long time, this had a deadening effect on the imagination of the game. No longer. The game is becoming so physical, so fast, so perfect, that only a child can succeed. Here comes Ronaldinho, the child at play, to prove it. His imagination cannot be limited to competitive logic, his movements cannot be read simply by way of their martial outcomes. He is just playing and playing and playing, chasing the ball and reacting to it. The fundamental difference in the way Zidane and Ronaldinho play is that Zidane needed a flat field to do what he did. He would have dominated on concrete, and probably did in the streets of Marseille. But Ronaldinho could play on the side of a hill, reacting to the changing landscape with laughter, taking joy in the newness of each movement. Enough lyricism.

In the 13th minute of the game yesterday, Barca got a free kick just outside the box on the center right side of goal. Ronaldinho is absolutely lethal from this range, but he prefers to be a few meters further back so that his curling ball has time to dip down under the bar. Generally right footed takers like to be on the left side of goal as well, as they are then able to exploit their natural bend to either corner. So while it was a close free kick and dangerous, it posed its challenges.

Add to that fact that Ronaldinho has gotten so good at scoring these that defenders have actually gotten good at defending him when he's this close. They've figured out that if they all jump in unison when he strikes the ball they add a foot of height to the ball, making it nearly impossible for Ronaldinho to get it to dip down under the bar unless he hits it absolutely perfectly. In soccer free kicks the wall is responsible for half of the goal, or a quarter, and the goalie for the rest. A kicker can beat the wall or beat the goalie. Ronaldinho does both, so the goalie has to play his kicks straight. He lined up his free kick as he normally does, looking down at the ball and glancing a few times mysteriously at the goal. He took his normal run-up, which is controlled and muscular. His stride, like a ballerina's or a martial artist's, originates in his ass. Just as he was about to strike the ball, he opened up his hips and exposed the side of his right foot to the ball, executing a precise and ordinary push pass directly under the feet of the jumping members of the wall, and the ball rolled at a measured but fairly leisurely pace passed the helpless goalkeeper who seeing the ball impossible late, dove to preserve his dignity and not out of hope of saving the shot. It was a funny and happy trick, and Ronaldinho smiled very wide after it. The grown-ups will have to think very seriously about whether or not to jump in the future.