

LUCA CAIOLI



MESSI

HEAD TO HEAD WITH THE
WORLD'S GREATEST PLAYERS



NEYMAR

FROM THE AUTHOR OF
THE BESTSELLING
TORRES, MESSI AND RONALDO



RONALDO

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About the author

Luca Caioli is the bestselling author of *Messi*, *Ronaldo* and *Torres*. A renowned Italian sports journalist, he lives in Spain.

Contents

Introduction

1 Childhood

2 The first time

3 Fathers

4 Turning point

5 Club

6 Country

7 Style and abilities

8 Secrets of success

9 Partners

10 Kids

11 Duels

12 Numbers

13 Money

14 Branding

15 Social media

16 The best three in the world

Conversation with Vicente del Bosque and Luiz Felipe 'Phil' Scolari

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Who is the greatest of them all? The best in the world? We are always asking that question. It is part of the culture of football, the collective history of lovers of the beautiful game.

It is a question that has divided and continues to divide experts, fans and entire generations. We relish any opportunity to compare and analyse – style, movement, a great play, a free kick, an assist, a goal, a match, a tournament, a World Cup, a Ballon d’Or win. We revel in opinion polls in the papers, on news sites and blogs, and pore over results and statistics. We delight in endless debates. Opinion is divided between rival fans, admirers and detractors, different nationalities. And because the collective footballing memory is a fundamental part of the experience, there is always something that evokes another player, another league, another era. This is part of the charm of being just another link in the footballing chain, this constant oscillation between present and past, without which the game would lose something of its fascination.

Who is the best? Pelé or Maradona, Di Stéfano or Cruyff, Zidane or Platini, Ronaldo Luís Nazário de Lima or Van Basten? It’s a question that has been asked thousands of times, in print, on the radio, on TV. It’s a debate that draws in everyone from coaches, players and pundits to the man on the street. Everyone has their own taste, their own opinion, their own idol.

Now the debate centres around Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior. Who is the best of the three? Is Messi better than Maradona? Can Cristiano outdo Eusebio? Will Neymar ever overtake Messi, or rise to the heights of fellow countryman 'O Rei' Pelé?

While there may not be a definitive answer to be found in these pages, there is plenty of room for opinions and analysis of the three players' journeys to stardom, their style and abilities, their achievements both on and off the pitch, their similarities and differences. The idea is simply to present the facts and figures - the key to unlocking the stories behind the three best strikers in the world, as Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari would say. Then you may draw your own conclusions.

Chapter 1

Childhood

On 23 June 1987 Celia Cuccittini is admitted to the maternity ward at the Garibaldi hospital in Rosario, Argentina. The Messi-Cuccittinis' two sons - Rodrigo, seven, and Matias, five - stay at home with their grandmother, while Jorge Messi accompanies his wife to the hospital. After two boys he would have liked a girl, but the chromosomes dictate that they are to have another boy.

The pregnancy has been uneventful, but during the final few hours complications arise. Gynaecologist Norberto Odetto diagnoses severe foetal distress and decides to induce labour to avoid any lasting effects on the baby. To this day, Jorge can recall the fear of those moments, the panic he felt when the doctor told him that he was going to use forceps, his plea that he do everything possible to avoid using those pincers, which worried him greatly after hearing horror stories about deformity and damage to new babies. In the end the forceps are not needed.

A few minutes before six in the morning on 24 June, Lionel Andrés Messi is born, three kilos in weight and 47 centimetres long, as red as a tomato and with one ear completely folded over due to the force of labour - anomalies which, as with many other newborns, disappeared within the first few hours. After the scare comes happiness: the new arrival is a little bit pink, but healthy.

On Tuesday 5 February 1985 at 10.20am in the Cruz de Carvalho Hospital in Funchal, capital of Madeira Island, Portugal, Cristiano Ronaldo dos Santos Aveiro is born. He is 52 centimetres long and weighs four kilos. A fourth child for María Dolores dos Santos and José Dinis Aveiro, younger brother to Hugo, Elma and Katia. It was an unplanned pregnancy, nine years after the birth of Katia, and now there is the issue of what to name him. 'My sister, who was working in an orphanage at the time, said that if it was a boy we could name him Cristiano,' recalls Dolores. 'I thought it was a good choice. And my husband and I both liked the name Ronaldo, after Ronald Reagan. My sister chose Cristiano and we chose Ronaldo.'

Seven years later on the very same date, 5 February 1992, Neymar da Silva Santos is born at 2.15am in Mogi das Cruzes in São Paulo, Brazil. Nadine Gonçalves' waters had broken the day before and she had been admitted to Santa Casa de Misericórdia, a huge white and blue building nestled between the narrow lanes of the city centre. It's a natural birth, no complications. He weighs 3.8 kilos, and both mother and baby are doing well. Neymar's parents didn't know they were having a boy - the prenatal scan was too pricey.

At first they are looked after by Doctor Luiz Carlos Bacci - no longer alive today - and then later discharged by Benito Klei. Klei is a União fan, and he knows the baby is the son of a União player. But it is only years later, upon seeing the birth certificate again, that he will realise he helped bring a Barcelona superstar into the world.

So, what to call the little guy? The parents haven't decided on a name for their firstborn. At first Nadine proposes Mateus, and his father agrees. They test it out for a week, but they're not convinced. Finally, when Neymar senior goes to register his son, he changes his mind and opts for his own name: Neymar, with the addition of 'Júnior'. The family will all come to call him 'Juninho'.

Lionel 'Leo' Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar Júnior are all born into humble families.

Jorge Messi is the head of department at steel manufacturer Acindar, in Villa Constitución, some 50 kilometres outside Rosario. Mother Celia works in a magnet manufacturing workshop. They own their own home, which Jorge built over many weekends with his father Eusebio on a 300-square-metre plot of family land. It's a two-storey, brick building with a backyard, in Las Heras, a neighbourhood of humble, hardworking people in the southern part of Rosario.

The three-bedroom concrete council house where Cristiano was born no longer exists. In 2007, the house at 27A Quinta do Falcão, in the Santo António neighbourhood of Funchal, was demolished to avoid problems with squatters. On many occasions Cristiano's mother has to go to the town council for bricks and mortar to repair the leaks in the property after a storm. Money is tight in the Aveiro family. Dinis is a gardener for the council, while María Dolores works as a cook so that she can ensure her kids get meals every day. Like thousands of other Portuguese citizens, she had emigrated to France at the age of twenty, where she spent three months cleaning houses in Paris. Her husband intended to join her but was unable to, and she had to return to Madeira.

Neymar's father is a professional footballer for União Mogi das Cruzes Futebol Club, a team in Mogi das Cruzes that plays in the São Paulo state A3 league. The salary is nothing special, but it's enough to live on fairly comfortably. The club also pays the rent on a modest condo at 593 Ezelindo da Cunha Glória Road, in the Rodeio neighbourhood, three kilometres from the city centre. It is here that Neymar Júnior spends the first few years of his life, together with Nadine, who is a housewife.

There is not a lot of money to spare in any of the three families, but all ensure that their children have happy childhoods. Football is, naturally, a recurring theme.

‘One Christmas I gave Cristiano a remotecontrolled car, thinking that would keep him busy,’ recalls Fernão Sousa, the Madrid player’s godfather. ‘But no – he preferred the football. He slept with his ball, it never left his side. It was always under his arm – wherever he went, it went with him.’

One of Ronaldo’s teachers, María dos Santos, remembers her former pupil as ‘well behaved, fun and a good friend to his classmates’. When asked about his favourite pastime, she says: ‘From the day he walked through the door, football was his favourite sport. If there wasn’t a real ball around for him and his friends, they would make one out of socks. He would always find a way of playing football in the playground.’

It was football in the playground and football in the street. ‘When he got home from school, I used to tell him to go to his room and do his homework,’ says Dolores. ‘He always told me he didn’t have any. So I would go and start the cooking and he would chance his luck. He would climb out the window, grab a yoghurt or some fruit, and run away with the ball under his arm. He’d be out playing until 9.30 at night.’ As if that wasn’t enough, he began to skip classes to go out and play.

As her son would later acknowledge: ‘I was always playing football with my friends, that’s what I loved doing, that was how I spent my time.’

He plays in the street because there is no football pitch in the neighbourhood. One particular street, Quinta do Falcão, proves to be a challenge when buses, cars and motorbikes want to get through. The kids have to remove the stones marking out the goalposts each time and wait for the traffic to pass before resuming the game. The matches they play are intense battles between gangs of friends. They are games that never end. The only hiccup is when the ball lands in one of the neighbours’ gardens – and if it’s old Mr Agostinho’s, he always threatens to puncture the ball.