

Ronaldo, Fernandes, Mourinho: Why Portugal continues to produce so many stars of world football

Success is in the DNA of this nation of pioneers



Player of the Century Cristiano Ronaldo



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Last November was, once again, an extraordinary month for Portuguese football.

Cristiano Ronaldo was recognised as the best player in Italian Serie A, Joao Felix in Spanish La Liga and Bruno Fernandes in the Premier League. Jose Mourinho was also the manager of the month in England.

It is not surprising to me, as I've had the opportunity to meet and interview several Portuguese and to understand the phenomenon behind it.

So why does Portugal produce some of the best football players and managers in the world?

One big pillar is the DNA of the Portuguese with their history of exploration by land and sea, of trying to find new worlds and their ability to adapt to new environments.

In football we have to add particular characteristics to their success; recruitment and training through the excellent academies at Porto, Benfica and Sporting Lisbon.

Heads of these academies scour the country hoping to see a spark before the competition. At Benfica this task is undertaken by almost 300 scouts, and there are around 600 people involved from all three.

Another factor is the existence of second teams from these clubs. They compete in the Portuguese second division, offering younger players the opportunity to gain experience in a competitive league, rather than in an under-23 or under-21 competition as in other European countries.

Interestingly, the lack of competitiveness of the main Portuguese league can also help.

Benfica, Porto and Sporting Lisbon are head and shoulders above others in the first division, with their domination broken just twice in the last 40 years.

This superiority encourages a high-level technical and tactical approach as they attempt to break down massed defences.

It explains why, largely, only players from the three big appear on the big European stages.

Ronaldo and Rui Patricio were discovered at Sporting, Ruben Neves and Fabio Silva came from Porto and Bernardo Silva and Joao Felix, the 20-year-old star, were discovered at Benfica.



Manchester United's Bruno Fernandes. Reuters

The Portuguese way of working is like a factory assembly line. They are always discovering emerging talents and soon we will hear more about the latest arrivals, like 18-year-old Nuno Mendes from Sporting Lisbon (already coveted by European giants) and Tiago Dantas, the 20-year-old from Benfica recently transferred to Bayern Munich.

As far as football managers are concerned, there is the same foundation, good and strong training in foreign languages, and the extreme ability to adapt to new environments. It marries with the intelligent training techniques developed by Portuguese universities.



Tottenham's manager Jose Mourinho. AP

The Portuguese managers are different. They are usually young, with a university education, with excellent tactical reading and are not limited to copying, but creating their own methods.

This is their recipe for the success, and why there are seven Portuguese in the next phase of UEFA competitions.

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