



Game is still beautiful

AFP, Yokohama

The beautiful game is not dead after all.

Brazil forced their fans to endure some nervous moments in Sunday's final but the class of 2002 still proved themselves worthy heirs to their country's wonderful footballing legacy.

Not since Pele, Jairzinho and Tostao triumphed so magnificently in 1970 has any team lifted the biggest prize in sport playing such a spectacular brand of football.

Seven matches, 18 goals and everyone of them a joyful reminder that speed, skill and imagination still count for more than anything else in the world's favourite game.

Those who said Brazil would have to adapt their style to the dictates of the modern game if they were to win another World Cup have been proved spectacularly wrong by Ronaldo, Rivaldo, Ronaldinho and co. "If we have to play ugly to reach the objective we will play ugly," their coach Luiz Felipe Scolari had declared before the tournament.

But when you have a centreback capable of scoring with an overhead kick, as Emerson did in their 5-2 win over Costa Rica, then playing ugly is not really a serious option.

And Scolari must take the credit for allowing the marvellous talents at his disposal to operate in a style which enabled them to fully express themselves.

The 2-0 win over Germany in Sunday's final meant Brazil were the first team since their illustrious predecessors in 1970 to have won every match without needing the luck to survive a penalty shoot-out.

Ronaldo's double-strike took his personal tally to eight, more than any player has managed since Gerd Muller hit ten in 1970.

It was an outcome that few would have predicted 18 months ago when the Brazilians were mired in an unprecedented struggle just to get to South Korea and Japan after humiliating qualifying defeats at the hands of the likes of Bolivia and Ecuador.

But after a tentative start in their opening match against Turkey, which they only won with the help of a dubious penalty, the Brazilians have not looked back. With every game here their self belief has grown and they have never really been taken in serious danger.

When they went a goal down against England in the quarter-final, they always looked like they thought they could and would come back and sure enough they did. Germany put them under intense

pressure at times here on Sunday but in the area of the pitch where it really matters -- the final third -- it was always Brazil who were creating the chances.

In fact they might have had the match wrapped up by half-time if the best of those chances had not been spurned by Ronaldo.

At times in that nervous opening period it looked as if the Inter Milan striker was on course for a repeat of the nightmare he suffered four years ago, when he suffered a convulsion just hours before the final and was a pale shadow of his normal self as Brazil surrendered to France.

But Ronaldo has played this entire tournament like a man possessed with a burning desire to eradicate the memory of the blackest day of his young life and he was not about to be denied the opportunity.

When Dieter Hamann hesitated on the edge of the German box, he pounced, robbed the Liverpool midfielder and slipped the ball to Rivaldo. And when the Barcelona playmaker's shot slipped out of the arms of Oliver Kahn, there he was again to slam it home.

Twelve minutes later another piece of Rivaldo magic handed Ronaldo the chance to kill off the

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Smile big, Big Phil

AFP, Yokohama

Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari proved Sunday that there is room for discipline alongside magic in the greatest team on Earth after his side won their fifth World Cup by beating Germany 2-0.

Going into the tournament Scolari was derided to the point that he had become virtually a national hate figure by the time the side limped through with a win over Venezuela in their final qualifier.

Even Pele went on record last November as saying Brazil couldn't be considered a true contender for the title because of a lack of teamwork.

But the star of Brazil's 1958 and 1970 campaigns was waiting in line to offer his congratulations as Scolari stepped forward with his players to pick up the Cup after Ronaldo's two goals sent the Germans packing.

"It is a great feeling that Brazil are world champions. I share in the happiness and the joy that the Brazilian people are feeling right now," Scolari said after proving the doubters wrong.

a four-year battle fighting terrible knee injuries and Rivaldo wanting to sign off in his last World Cup with a winner's medal.

Both ensured Romario's absence was overcome, vindicating "Big Phil" Scolari entirely.

Scolari had promised that the side could do much better than they had showed even in beating England in the quarter-final, after which he appeared to criticise the side for playing in second gear - while conceding that 70 percent was "the optimum level because you don't need more."

Even with Ronaldo in attack beating Germany required more and the Brazilians duly stepped it up to finish their seven-match campaign with a 100 percent record - enough even to satisfy Scolari.

But true to form he was keen to single out the defence as the rock on which the triumph had been achieved.

"You want to play with enjoyment and have fun - but you want to win.

"People have criticised our defence - but it was not so bad. In my

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AND THE SCRIPT IS WRITTEN: The one and only Ronaldo pounces in on a rebound and about to score past a full-stretched Germany keeper Oliver Kahn yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Next to best

INTERNET, Yokohama

Coach Rudi Voller has absolved Oliver Kahn of all blame for Germany's World Cup final defeat to Brazil, although it was the keeper's howler that allowed Ronaldo to open the scoring.

Kahn was his usual dominant self until the 67th minute when he fumbled Rivaldo's strike, allowing Ronaldo to steal in and open the scoring.

Brazil effectively sealed victory when the Brazil striker side footed

home his second of the match from the edge of the area with ten minutes to play.

It was Kahn's heroics in goal which had ensured Germany reached the final against all expectations and Voller was quick to deflect criticism away from his keeper.

"We've got to be happy with what we achieved," Voller said. "We survived the group stage and no one expected us to get this far, and we owe a lot to Oliver Kahn who did so much for us."

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Reborn Phenomenon

REUTERS, Yokohama

Ronaldo's four long years of pain, fear and heartbreak evaporated as the world's greatest striker finally fulfilled his destiny.

The Brazilian, whose career was threatened by a terrible knee injury three years ago, buried his dreadful memories of the 1998 World Cup final once and for all with a commanding performance in the 2-0 win over Germany.

A virtual passenger four years ago following his pre-match convulsions, the 25-year-old produced a virtuoso second half display on Sunday, scoring both goals in a win that brought Brazil their fifth world crown.

The goals also earned him the Golden Boot as the tournament's top scorer with eight -- the highest total since 1970 when Gerd Mueller got 10 for West Germany.

It was a fitting reward for a man who looked the sharpest player on the field just as he has done for most of Brazil's unbeaten run.

In a tight first half he had two half-chances and, as the whistle was about to blow at the break, a good one which he fired straight at the legs of Oliver Kahn on the turn.

As the game went on he continued to look the man most likely but few would have expected the breakthrough goal to have come about as a result of a Ronaldo tackle.

He ran into a dead end in a 64th minute break and was dispossessed by Dietmar Hamann. But as the German midfielder moved away Ronaldo scurried after him and stole the ball back.

He immediately fed Rivaldo and after Oliver Kahn made his first mistake of the tournament by failing to hold the midfielder's stinging shot, Ronaldo swept the ball into the net.

He sealed the victory 12 minutes from time after Rivaldo dummied a low Kleberson cross, leaving Ronaldo time to instantly control the ball before curling his shot just inside the post.

With the game won, he was substituted in the final minute. As the seconds ticked away he was embraced by coach Luiz Felipe Scolari.

Every emotion must have been running through his mind as the whistle blew to confirm his country's record-breaking success.

Wrapped in a Brazilian flag and overcome by emotion, he walked slowly towards the huddle of celebrating players.

When they saw him coming they turned as one and he was hoisted shoulder high to be paraded in front of the delirious Brazil fans.

It was a moment he could hardly have dared imagine as he fought to come back after his devastating knee injury. Twice he broke down to spark real concern that he would not only return to the World Cup stage but might never play again.

"The goals crowned my work and the work of the whole team. I worked for 2½ years trying to recover from that injury and today God reserved this for me and the Brazilian team," he said.

He dedicated his goals to "my family in the first place and my physiotherapist who fought with me without knowing that we would be here two years later".

Just hours before the game, Ronaldo had met the French doctor, Gerard Saillant, who had reconstructed his right knee in two operations.

"It gives hope to everyone who is injured or hurt, even those who aren't sportsmen, to see that by fighting you can make it and he's back to where he was," Saillant said.

"It's hugely satisfying. I am very moved."

In an emotional reunion hours before Sunday's final, Ronaldo had thanked Saillant.

"My biggest victory is that I can play again," Ronaldo told the Paris-based orthopaedic specialist who was in Yokohama as the striker's special guest.

"I had hoped to invite you to see

Brazil versus France in the final but..." a grinning Ronaldo added.

The two embraced and Saillant playfully rubbed the 25-year-old's new hairstyle.

Saillant performed two operations on the striker's ruptured right knee. The second operation, in April 2000, was necessary after Ronaldo

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COULD'VE DONE BETTER: A grim German custodian Oliver Kahn after conceding the first goal against Brazil yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



THERE'S ONLY ONE PHENOMENON: Superstar Ronaldo exults after scoring his second goal against Germany in the final at Yokohama yesterday.

PHOTO: INTERNET