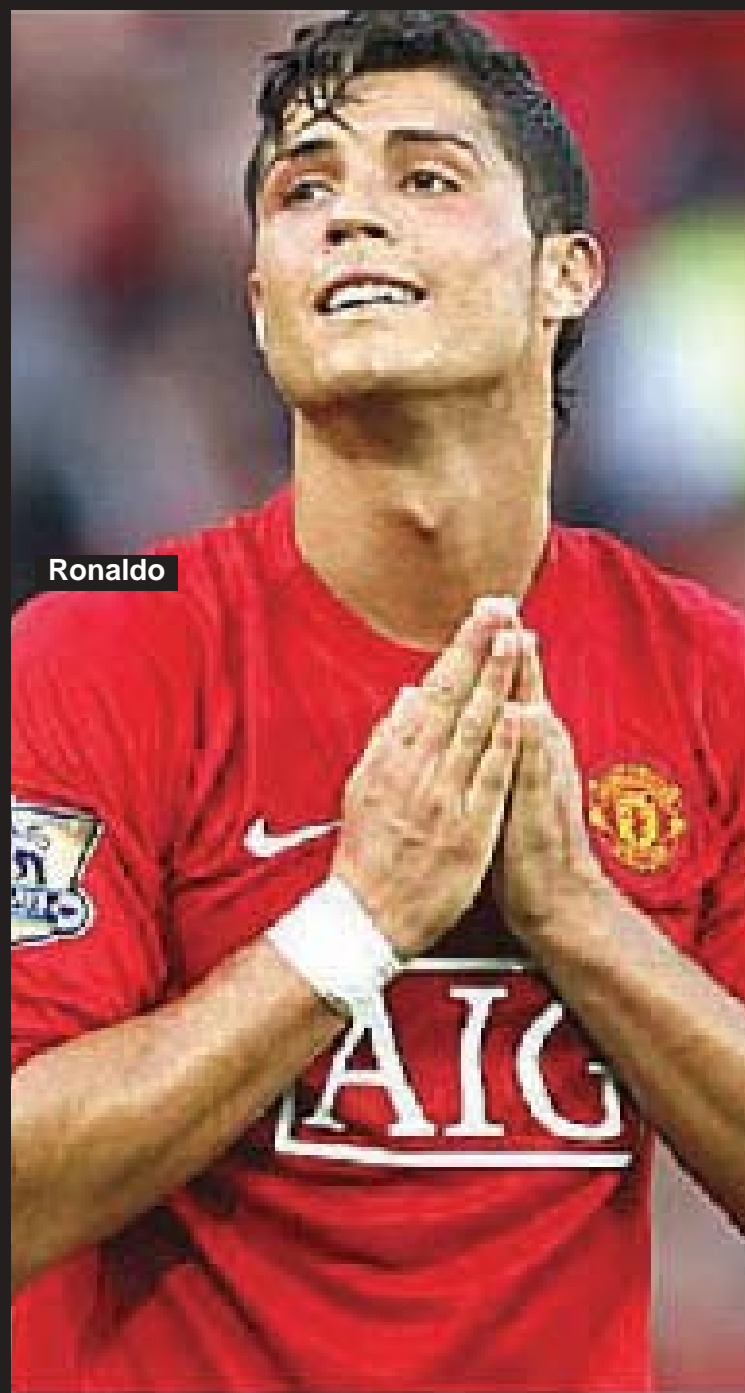


Ronaldo woos United fans but Real love will be back

By Ian Herbert

Ronaldo is expected back at Old Trafford today for the first time since a summer saga in which he seemed set on manipulating a transfer to Real Madrid



Ronaldo

Even when his explanation is composed so plainly and yet articulately, it is hard to find much sincerity in a player whose ego allowed him to sanction the publication, in what passes as a biography, of an image of himself smouldering in a shower beside the caption: "I like to feel good with my body."

Cristiano Ronaldo's summer romance with Real Madrid will be best remembered for the way he batted his eyelids only at the Spanish press corps during the European Championships; for his eagerness to sanction suggestions that keeping him at Old Trafford was tantamount to slavery as he limped out of an Algarve clinic in plaster. But for those with longer memories – the Manchester United fans whose gallows humour about the loss of the world's finest player has been characterised by the Ronometer in the redcafe chatroom – the night of 21 May will take some getting over. That was when he buried his face in the mud of the Luzhniki stadium, walked around the pitch with a European Cup winners' medal around his neck and, when asked if he was staying, promptly told the world: "I never promise nothing."

Ronaldo, whose choreographed renewal of vows with Manchester was delivered to the Portuguese Publico newspaper's Bruno Prata – the husband of Manuela Brandao, an employee of Jorge Mendes who minds the player and wrote the biography with him, had a different version of that Moscow night to tell yesterday. "I'm going to say something here that I've never told anybody. If we hadn't been European champions I probably wouldn't have even thought about going to Madrid," he told Prata, suggesting that United's success meant he had won all there was to win. The facts are rather different. Ronaldo dropped his first hints a full week beforehand – delicately but deliberately to a journalist from the Spanish broadcaster Antenna 3, barely 30 minutes after Sir Alex Ferguson had spoken, voice hushed, about the historical significance of the final, 40 years on from Munich.

In many ways, Ronaldo's latest utterance is as calculated as that piece of innuendo. After Ferguson flew into Lisbon three weeks ago and told Ronaldo a transfer was a no-go, Plan B was the contrite interview. Judging by one significant dis-

closure – Ronaldo's declaration to Prata that: "My coach was kind enough to come and visit me in Lisbon a few days ago" – the interview seems to have been conducted immediately after the endgame and held back for publication just before his expected return to Manchester today.

Judging by United chatroom traffic, it seems to have worked. The player has certainly done enough to head off the kind of hostile reception Emmanuel Adebayor received at the Emirates on Saturday and he need not fear the boos Rio Ferdinand encountered three years ago after stalling for six months over his contract – on the face of it, a far lesser offence.

In part, that is because United are the winners in this story for our times, in which a player tries to take control, agitate for a move without asking for one and so override a contract which rewards him well. It is also because football supporters have short memories when it comes to a player like Ronaldo, whose brilliance outshines his love of the bathroom mirror. And it is because United have got one over on Real Madrid.

But it is also because the term betrayal is hard to define. Carlos Tevez has declared his wish to return to Argentina in time – possibly four years. Is it a betrayal if he chooses to do so in two? For a 23-year-old Ronaldo has served a mighty long time at United – six years – and it is hard to take issue with what he told Prata about his love of Spain, its one-hour flying time from his mother and its cultural appeal – "everyone realises Spanish and Portuguese culture and lifestyle are more similar". Viewed that way, plainly and without this summer's subterfuge, his admission that he wishes to leave in the end makes sense. Ronaldo might consider himself "a kid" but a further six years at United would take him virtually to the age of 30 and the point of his footballing decline.

The player's departure next summer now looks likely – William Hill already have him at 5-6 to be at the Bernabeu this time next year – but there should be decent odds on him also leaving a hero. Ferguson will allow him to escape without censure because he is an old man in a hurry this season to match Liverpool's 18 titles and defend a European Cup – the true sign of greatness, as Rio Ferdinand observed on Tuesday. - *Daily Mail.UK*

The biggest hypocrite...

CRISTIANO RONALDO sank to new depths of hypocrisy yesterday with a shameless display of blatant grovelling.

Having spent the summer saying he wanted to join Real Madrid, Ron insisted: "I never wanted to leave against United's will."

"When they turned down the offer, the people at United made it very clear how much they wanted me."

"I didn't fully understand it at the time – but now I can really appreciate it."

His feelings for boss Alex Ferguson were even more moving.

In a declaration of unabashed love, the 23-

year-old winking winger added: "Believe me, it makes me proud to know how much he thinks of me."

"And he knows I feel exactly the same way about him."

"He has been one of the most important people in my playing career."

"Not only because of what I've learnt and continue to learn from him in sporting terms but also in human ones as well."

"I love the passion he has for football. If it were humanly possible I would like to have him always by my side."

"Of course it's not possible but it shows how much affection, admiration and

respect I have for him."

"He has always been like a second father to me at United. I'll never forget it was him that explained the significance of the United No 7 shirt, which will always be my shirt."

"Alongside my agent, Sir Alex has been the most important person I've known in my career."

"Because of this, because of the special relationship that exists between us, I know he'll understand that there are times when a father has to worry only about what's best for his child."

Asked if he is afraid of the reception he might get when

he next plays, Ronaldo replied: "No, it's possible but I hope it doesn't happen."

"I know I'm a good professional, I know no one's harder on me than myself and that's never going to change, under any circumstances."

"I'm very aware of what this club has done for me."

"I'll be forever grateful. United and its fans can be sure I'll never forget them, no matter what happens."

Putting his hand on his heart, the Portugal star added: "They're special and they'll always have a place here."

Ronaldo would have cost a world-record £75million had

a deal been reached with Real.

And he added: "I confess one of the reasons I had the courage to say what I did was the fact United would be compensated."

"The figure mentioned would serve as some compensation for the debt of gratitude I owe the club, at least in material terms."

"If we hadn't been European champions I probably wouldn't have even thought about going to Madrid."

"But after we'd won the Champions League I felt I'd helped win everything there was to win. We'd won the Premier League twice and I'd won a host of individual

awards.

"So I felt I needed a new challenge."

"I never hid the fact I wanted to play in Spain – at Real Madrid in particular. I thought this could be the right moment."

"People have to understand at the age of 18 I arrived at United but even at that moment, I was thinking about playing in England for some years and THEN going to play in Spain."

"Why lie? I'm not going to be a hypocrite. I said exactly what I thought. I have a dream of playing at Real and people can't be upset about me fulfilling a childhood dream."