



They all want to share in the Ronaldinho experience - Barcelona's most recent signings for the 2004-2005 season are from left to right, Larsson, Belletti, Giuly and Deco

The Ronaldinho effect

It is hard to believe the dramatic transformation that has taken place in this team in just twelve months

MICHAEL BUNN

Barcelona fans who are still frustrated at how Spain dashed their hopes so cruelly in Euro 2004, are in luck, because what is happening at Barça suggests the *culé's* can start getting their hopes up for the next season.

It is hard to believe that a team that was struggling for more than half of last season is now an attractive destination for some of Europe's most in-form footballers, but that is just what has happened. The latest (almost-definite) signing is Deco, the playmaker behind Porto's recent Champions League victory who is now metamorphosing into Figo's successor as the emblem of the Portugal team.

Everybody wanted him - especially Chelsea - but Deco was only interested in Barça, and for one reason; he said to his manager Jorge Mendes four days ago: "Jorge, help me, I want to go to Barça to play with Ronaldinho". And so the Ronaldinho magic is spreading beyond the pitch to attract players who Barça president Laporta could only have dreamed of signing a year ago. For example the defender Belletti, another Brazilian (though Deco has recently taken on Portuguese nationality) who has been signed for three seasons, also mentions his desire to play with his friend Ronaldinho as being the main reason why he has come to Barça.

Meanwhile, today's big signing is Ludovic Giuly, the Monaco player who was one of the main reasons for the French team reaching the Champions League final.

All these signings suggest that Ronaldinho's wizardry on the pitch is being matched by the financial miracles Laporta is bringing about. How can a club that was left almost bankrupt by the crazed spending spree Gaspart went on four years ago afford so many stars? One reason is the deals that the canny Catalans have struck (i.e. swapping Quaresma in the Deco deal with Porto) but also because of what Marc Overmars called "an ethnic cleansing of Dutch players", by

which Overmars, Cocu, Reiziger and (it's only a matter of time) Kluyvert have all been kicked out, saving the club enormous sums of money as a result of the over-generous contracts that the hapless Gaspart had offered them. The only Dutchman left will be Van Bronckhorst, as Barça have negotiated an extension of his loan from Arsenal. Meanwhile, Edgar Davids seems to be out of the club's future plans. "We only want players who really want to wear the Barça colours", a club spokesman said yesterday. Henrik Larsson will also be joining the club, though as he is on free transfer from Celtic, the *culés* can't really complain about signing someone who, at 32, is ap-

proaching the fag-end of his career.

But this extravaganza of signings is not over yet, as Laporta still wants two centre forwards - maybe Bayern's Ballack, Deportivo's Luque (being a Catalan will make him a popular choice) or the Cameroon star Samuel Eto'o, whose skill at goalscoring is only matched by his tendency to lose his rag on the field.

They all want to come and play with Ronaldinho and Laporta must be blessing the day the Brazilian star agreed to sign, as he not only resuscitated the team, he is also proving the ideal bait to attract players that will make Barça's next season a memorable one - but this time for the right reasons.



David Beckham's form has been poor for several months, even before Euro 2004

Pérez hits out as Beckham blames his poor fitness on Real Madrid

MICHAEL BUNN

Following England's horror exit from Euro 2004, Beckham has been trying to spread the blame. After moaning about the state of the penalty spot during the shootout with Portugal, he has now come up with another reason why things went wrong.

Yesterday he admitted that he had not been fit enough for the championship, though he added that this was partly the fault of Real

Madrid's training regime. The problem was, he said, "they didn't do as much conditioning work as we did at Manchester United".

Madrid president Florentino Pérez lost no time in replying to the accusation; he conceded that while "training had not been sufficient...we will put that right next season". However, he then went on to criticise Beckham's behaviour during the past year. "Who was it", he said "who didn't train during the

Christmas break? Who keeps flying to England when he is asked to rest?

Beckham's poor form has also affected his marketability, and doubts exist as to his world-class status. But perhaps the fact that his wife's has deigned to come and live in Madrid next year (where, she has said without a trace of irony, "I will be continuing with my career") will be a settling influence on Beckham, and will help him to regain some of his sparkling past form.