

The Magic of Style: How Ronaldinho and Ronaldo's Philosophies Redefine Athlete Popularity and Sporting Value

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the unique playing styles of football stars Ronaldinho and Ronaldo embody distinct philosophical principles that shape their popularity and cultural value. By introducing the Style-Value Model, the paper argues that an athlete's playing style is not only a demonstration of technique but also an expression of the underlying philosophical ideas and values. The study finds that Ronaldinho's style reflects freedom, creativity, and the spirit of play, while Ronaldo's style emphasizes strength, courage, and the philosophy of direct confrontation with challenges. Both players have earned global admiration through their distinctive styles and cultural philosophies, surpassing traditional metrics of competitive achievement. The contribution of this paper lies in offering a new theoretical framework for understanding the roots of athlete popularity and providing valuable theoretical perspectives for sports philosophy, fan studies, and the dissemination of cultural values.

I. Introduction

In the 2002 World Cup, when Ronaldinho scored with an audacious lob that sailed over David Seaman's head, the world was captivated not merely by the goal itself, but by the Brazilian's radiant smile that followed. Around the same period, Ronaldo was tearing through defenses with unmatched speed and power, choosing the most direct route to goal with devastating effectiveness^[1, 2]. These two Brazilian icons conquered the football world through vastly different approaches, yet they share a crucial commonality: they are not merely exceptional players, but embodiments of two distinct football philosophies^[3, 4]. Their popularity transcends what their competitive achievements alone can explain, prompting us to examine a fundamental question: why do certain athletes captivate global audiences in ways that statistical excellence cannot fully account for?

The conventional wisdom in sports analytics and athlete valuation tends to privilege measurable outcomes—goals scored, matches won, titles accumulated. This quantitative paradigm, while valuable for assessing competitive success, proves insufficient when confronting the phenomenon of athlete popularity and cultural impact. Ronaldinho, despite a relatively brief peak period and fewer individual accolades

compared to some contemporaries, remains one of the most beloved footballers in history^[5]. His highlight reels are watched millions of times, his jersey sales remain strong years after retirement, and his name evokes universal affection across different football cultures. Similarly, Ronaldo's status transcends his already impressive trophy collection; he is remembered not just for what he won, but for how he won—for the particular way he embodied football excellence^[6].

This paper proposes that the answer lies in understanding athletic style not as mere technique, but as philosophical expression. When we watch Ronaldinho execute a no-look pass or an elastico that leaves defenders bewildered, we are not simply observing technical proficiency; we are witnessing a particular worldview made manifest through bodily movement. His style embodies values of freedom, creativity, and joy—a philosophy that treats football as play (*ludus*) rather than merely as sport. Conversely, when Ronaldo accelerates directly toward three defenders, choosing confrontation over circumvention, we observe a different philosophical stance: one that values courage, directness, and the will to overcome obstacles through force of determination. These are not just different playing styles; they are different answers to fundamental questions about how one should engage with challenges, constraints, and

possibilities.

The theoretical contribution of this paper is to establish a Style-Value Model that explicates the causal pathway from athletic technique to cultural resonance. This model posits that: (1) style is not merely aesthetic preference but embodies specific philosophical commitments; (2) these philosophical commitments express particular values; (3) audiences recognize and respond to these values through processes of identification and meaning-making; and (4) an athlete's cultural impact and popularity are therefore mediated by the values their style expresses rather than determined solely by competitive outcomes. This framework helps explain why Ronaldinho's "magic" and Ronaldo's "power" resonate so deeply with global audiences—they offer not just entertainment, but philosophical validation for different ways of being in the world.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond sports studies into broader questions of human value and meaning-making. In an era of increasing quantification and instrumentalization across all domains of life, understanding why certain athletes achieve transcendent popularity despite not always being the "most successful" by conventional metrics illuminates how humans continue to privilege meaning over measurement, narrative over numbers, and philosophical resonance over pure performance. The phenomenon of athlete popularity thus becomes a window into understanding how embodied practices can express and transmit values in ways that rational discourse cannot.

By examining how Ronaldinho and Ronaldo's contrasting philosophies generate different forms of cultural resonance, this paper aims to contribute to three scholarly conversations: first, to sports philosophy by developing a more nuanced understanding of how athletic practice embodies philosophical commitments; second, to fan studies by theorizing the role of value-identification in athlete popularity; and third, to broader discussions of embodied cognition and meaning-making by demonstrating how non-linguistic practices can express and transmit complex philosophical positions. The ultimate argument is that what we call "magic" in football—and by extension in all athletic performance—is not mysterious at all, but rather the recognition of philosophical truth expressed through the body.

II. Theoretical Framework: Style, Philosophy, and Sporting Value

2.1 The Philosophical Dimensions of Athletic Style

To understand how athletic style transcends mere technique, we must first establish what "style" means in the context of embodied practice. In everyday discourse, style is often treated as superficial—a matter of aesthetic preference or individual flair that adds decoration to functional performance. This view fundamentally misunderstands the philosophical significance of style. Drawing on Heidegger's concept of "being-in-the-world" (*Dasein*), we can conceptualize athletic style as a particular mode of existential engagement with sporting situations. When a footballer confronts a defensive line, the manner in which they respond—whether through elaborate dribbling, direct acceleration, or quick passing—reveals not just technical preference but a fundamental orientation toward the world and its possibilities.

Style, in this deeper sense, is what phenomenologists call an "intentional structure"—a consistent pattern of perceiving, evaluating, and responding to situations that reflects underlying commitments about what matters and how one should act. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "body schema" is instructive here: our bodily movements are never purely mechanical but always meaningful, shaped by our practical understanding of situations and our implicit values^[7]. When we observe that Ronaldinho characteristically chooses the unexpected option—the back-heel when a forward pass seems obvious, the chip when a ground pass seems safer—we are observing not randomness but consistency at a deeper level: a consistent valuation of surprise, creativity, and possibility over efficiency and certainty.

This understanding reveals three dimensions through which athletic style becomes philosophically significant. First, at the technical level, style manifests in characteristic movement patterns, preferred techniques, and habitual responses. These are the observable features that allow us to recognize a player's style—Ronaldinho's use of the "elastico" or Ronaldo's distinctive stride pattern while dribbling at speed. Second, at the tactical level, style appears in spatial preferences, timing choices, and strategic orientations. Ronaldinho's tendency to drift into unusual positions and Ronaldo's preference for central penetration reflect different tactical philosophies. Third, and most fundamentally, at the philosophical level, style embodies a particular understanding of what the sporting situation demands and makes possible—an implicit answer to questions about what football

is for, what counts as excellence, and how one should relate to opponents, teammates, and the game itself.

The expressiveness of style—its capacity to communicate meaning beyond its functional effects—derives from this multi-layered structure. When audiences respond emotionally to a particular playing style, they are responding not merely to its effectiveness or visual appeal, but to the values and worldview it expresses. Style becomes a form of non-verbal rhetoric, a way of making arguments about what matters through embodied demonstration rather than linguistic assertion.

2.2 Constructing the Concept of "Playing Philosophy"

Building on this understanding of style's philosophical dimensions, we can now articulate the concept of "playing philosophy"—the central analytical construct of this paper. A playing philosophy is defined as an athlete's characteristic pattern of decision-making and value-prioritization that manifests consistently across varied competitive situations. It is, essentially, an embodied practical ethics that governs how an athlete engages with the fundamental choices their sport presents.

Playing philosophy operates across three interconnected dimensions. The ontological dimension concerns how an athlete implicitly understands the fundamental nature of their sport. What is football? Is it primarily a physical contest, a tactical puzzle, an artistic medium, or a social practice? Different answers generate different playing philosophies. For Ronaldinho, football appears to be understood fundamentally as a creative medium—a space for improvisational expression and aesthetic exploration. For Ronaldo, football seems to be understood as a test of will—an arena for demonstrating courage and overcoming resistance through force of determination.

The aesthetic dimension concerns what kind of beauty or excellence an athlete pursues through their play. This goes beyond mere visual appeal to encompass the athlete's implicit answer to the question: what makes a footballing action beautiful or admirable? Some players seem to value elegance, others efficiency, others surprise, others power. These aesthetic commitments shape every micro-decision: whether to attempt the difficult skill or choose the safe option, whether to play simply or ornately, whether to prioritize effectiveness or spectacle. Ronaldinho's aesthetic clearly privileges creativity, unpredictability, and technical virtuosity—what we might call an aesthetic of

wonder. Ronaldo's aesthetic emphasizes power, directness, and dramatic confrontation—an aesthetic of the sublime^[8].

The ethical dimension concerns how an athlete relates to others within the competitive context—opponents, teammates, officials, and spectators. Every sporting moment involves ethical choices, though they may not be recognized as such: whether to humiliate a beaten opponent or show restraint, whether to take individual glory or enable a teammate's success, whether to bend rules or honor sporting spirit, whether to entertain spectators or purely pursue victory. These choices, accumulated across a career, form an ethical profile that is inseparable from playing style. Ronaldinho's style embodies what might be called an ethics of generosity—a willingness to take risks for spectacle, to attempt the beautiful even when the effective would suffice, to share joy with opponents and spectators. Ronaldo's style reflects an ethics of honest confrontation—choosing the direct challenge over the circumvention, facing obstacles rather than avoiding them.

The concept of playing philosophy thus allows us to see athletic performance as a form of applied ethics and embodied epistemology. Each match becomes an opportunity for an athlete to enact their philosophical commitments through concrete choices in high-pressure situations. This perspective transforms how we understand sporting excellence: it is not merely about executing techniques correctly but about manifesting a coherent philosophical stance through bodily practice.

2.3 The Plurality of Sporting Value

The conventional approach to evaluating athletes privileges competitive success—victories, championships, records—as the primary or sole metric of value. This instrumental view treats sport as purely about outcomes, with all other aspects valued only insofar as they contribute to winning. While this perspective has obvious validity, it represents a dangerous impoverishment of sporting value that fails to capture why sport matters to human beings.

Drawing on Max Weber's distinction between instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and value rationality (*Wertrationalität*), we can diagnose modern sport's tendency toward over-instrumentalization. Instrumental rationality judges actions solely by their effectiveness in achieving predetermined ends; value rationality judges actions by their intrinsic rightness or meaningfulness regardless of outcomes. Elite sport increasingly operates under purely instrumental logic: every tactical decision,

training method, and bodily movement is evaluated only by its contribution to winning. This instrumental regime produces remarkable efficiency but threatens to evacuate sport of the intrinsic meanings that make it culturally significant^[9].

Against this instrumentalization, we must affirm the plurality of sporting values. Aesthetic value refers to sport's capacity to produce beauty through movement, drama through competition, and sublimity through displays of human excellence. This value exists independently of competitive outcomes—a beautifully executed move has aesthetic value even in a losing effort. Expressive value concerns sport's function as a medium for self-realization and identity-expression, allowing athletes to manifest their individuality and values through embodied practice. Cultural value encompasses sport's role as a carrier of collective meanings, symbols, and narratives that help communities understand themselves. Moral value pertains to the character traits and ethical commitments that sporting practice can develop and display—courage, perseverance, sportsmanship, grace under pressure.

These values are not merely supplementary to competitive value but constitute independent dimensions of sporting significance. An athlete can be highly valuable along one dimension while less so on others. Ronaldinho's career illustrates this plurality: while his competitive achievements are substantial, his aesthetic and cultural value arguably exceeds what his trophy count alone would suggest. His playing style generated aesthetic experiences of wonder and delight, expressed values of creative freedom that resonated globally, and created cultural narratives about the joy of football that transcended sporting contexts.

Recognizing sporting value's plurality allows us to understand athlete popularity as a response to these multiple value dimensions rather than solely to competitive success. Fans are not merely consumers of victory but seekers of meaning, beauty, and values they can identify with. This explains why certain athletes achieve cultural resonance that far exceeds their competitive accomplishments, while others with superior records remain less beloved. The question is not "who wins more?" but "whose victories—and whose style of pursuing them—expresses values we recognize and admire?"

2.4 The Philosophical Foundations of Popularity

Why does playing style influence athlete popularity? The connection is neither mysterious

nor merely aesthetic but can be understood through several interconnected theoretical mechanisms.

First, identification theory explains how fans develop attachments to athletes whose styles express values they themselves hold or aspire to embody. Social identity theory has long recognized that individuals derive part of their self-concept from identification with admired others. However, this identification is not arbitrary but selective: we identify with those we perceive as sharing our fundamental values and worldview. When a fan recognizes in Ronaldinho's playing philosophy a commitment to creative freedom and joyful expression, and when these values resonate with their own life-philosophy, a powerful identification occurs. The athlete becomes, in a sense, the fan's representative—someone who enacts in the sporting arena values the fan holds but may struggle to manifest in their own life. This identification is deeper and more durable than merely supporting winners because it is based on philosophical congruence rather than contingent success.

Second, aesthetic experience provides irreplaceable forms of satisfaction that cannot be reduced to outcome-utility. Drawing on Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgment, we can understand the pleasure fans derive from distinctive playing styles as "disinterested"—not based on personal stake in the outcome but on the intrinsic qualities of the experience itself. Ronaldinho's no-look passes and impossible angles provide aesthetic experiences of surprise and wonder; Ronaldo's explosive acceleration provides aesthetic experiences of power and sublimity. These experiences are valuable in themselves, not merely as means to competitive ends. An athlete who generates powerful aesthetic experiences thus provides value to audiences even independently of results, explaining why stylistically distinctive players often achieve popularity that exceeds their competitive success.

Third, narrative and meaning-construction processes explain how athletic style becomes culturally significant beyond individual fan experience. Humans are narrative creatures who understand their lives and worlds through stories that embody values and meanings. Athletes with distinctive playing philosophies become protagonists in larger cultural narratives. Ronaldinho becomes the hero of a narrative about preserving joy and creativity against the forces of instrumentalization and seriousness; Ronaldo becomes the hero of a narrative about

courage and resilience in the face of obstacles and adversity. These narratives provide frameworks through which communities process their own anxieties, aspirations, and values. An athlete's popularity thus reflects their success in serving as a vehicle for collective meaning-making^[10].

What we call "magic" in football—that ineffable quality that makes certain players transcendently captivating—can now be understood more precisely. Magic is the phenomenological experience of witnessing embodied human possibility that exceeds our expectations and assumptions. When Ronaldinho executes a sequence of moves that seems to violate spatial constraints or temporal logic, we experience wonder because he demonstrates possibilities we had not imagined. This expansion of perceived possibility is profoundly meaningful because it challenges our sense of what is fixed and what is open, what is determined and what is free. The "magic" is thus not supernatural but philosophical: it is the visceral experience of human freedom and creativity asserting itself against apparent constraints. Similarly, Ronaldo's "impossible" accelerations through packed defenses provide experiences of human will and courage overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles. These are not merely entertaining spectacles but embodied demonstrations of philosophical truths about human agency and possibility.

This theoretical framework establishes the foundation for the detailed case studies that follow. By understanding style as philosophical expression, playing philosophy as embodied values, sporting value as plural, and popularity as value-recognition, we can now examine precisely how Ronaldinho's and Ronaldo's contrasting philosophies generate their distinctive cultural resonances and illuminate broader truths about why certain athletes captivate global imagination.

III. Ronaldinho's "Spatial Magician" Philosophy

3.1 Style Description: From Ground to Air in Breaking Through

Ronaldinho's technical repertoire reads like an inventory of football's most audacious possibilities. The *elastico* (or flip-flap), where the ball appears to move in one direction before snapping back impossibly; the no-look pass that defies opponents' anticipation; the *pedaladas* (step-overs) executed with such speed they blur into optical illusion; the outrageous chips and lobbs from improbable angles—these signature

moves constitute a distinctive technical vocabulary. Yet what truly distinguishes Ronaldinho's style is not merely the catalog of tricks but their underlying logic: a systematic exploitation of spatial and temporal possibilities that conventional football wisdom deems inaccessible or impractical.

Consider Ronaldinho's characteristic use of vertical space. Where most players conceptualize football as primarily a horizontal game—moving the ball along the ground to penetrate defensive lines—Ronaldinho routinely incorporated the vertical dimension into his offensive calculus. His frequent use of chips, lofted passes, and aerial controls transformed two-dimensional tactical situations into three-dimensional spatial puzzles that defenders, trained to think horizontally, struggled to solve. The famous goal against England in 2002, where he lobbed David Seaman from 40 yards, exemplifies this vertical thinking: where others saw only the impossibility of scoring from such distance and angle, Ronaldinho perceived an undefended vertical corridor^[11].

His dribbling style further reveals this spatial philosophy. Unlike players who use dribbling primarily to advance horizontally past defenders, Ronaldinho frequently dribbled laterally, backward, or in spirals—movements that created temporal and spatial confusion. He would often receive the ball with his back to goal, seemingly in a disadvantageous position, then execute a series of turns, feints, and touches that transformed constraint into opportunity. His extensive use of "unconventional" contact points—back heels, outside of the foot, even his shin at times—expanded the geometric possibilities of ball manipulation beyond what defenders could anticipate based on standard biomechanics.

Statistical analysis, where available, supports these qualitative observations. During his Barcelona peak (2003-2006), Ronaldinho consistently ranked among the league's leaders in successful dribbles per game, but more tellingly, in what might be termed "creative passes"—passes that broke defensive lines through unexpected trajectories or timing. His assist statistics, impressive in raw numbers, fail to capture the frequency with which his passes created secondary assists or forced defensive errors through their sheer unexpectedness. Perhaps most significantly, compilation videos of Ronaldinho's career show an extraordinarily high ratio of "highlight moments" relative to total playing time—suggesting that his style generated aesthetic and dramatic peaks at unusual

frequency.

3.2 Philosophical Interpretation: Spatial Freedom and Expanding Possibility

At the ontological level, Ronaldinho's playing philosophy embodies a radical reimagining of football's spatial structure. Traditional football tactics, rooted in principles established over a century of evolution, treat the pitch as essentially two-dimensional: players occupy horizontal positions, defensive lines create horizontal barriers, and penetration occurs through horizontal channels. This two-dimensional ontology shapes everything from training methods to tactical analysis. Ronaldinho's style implicitly challenges this ontology by treating football space as genuinely three-dimensional, with the vertical plane offering opportunities equal to the horizontal.

This spatial reconceptualization carries profound philosophical implications. In Heideggerian terms, it represents a disclosure of previously concealed possibilities—a revealing of what-can-be that had remained hidden within conventional understanding. When Ronaldinho chips a defender from close range or controls a high ball with his chest before flicking it over his own head to escape pressure, he is not merely executing difficult techniques; he is demonstrating that the spatial constraints accepted as "real" by conventional wisdom are actually historical constructs that can be transcended. The philosophical significance lies in this demonstration that perceived limits are often not ontological necessities but merely failures of imagination.

Aesthetically, Ronaldinho's philosophy aligns with what Johan Huizinga termed the "ludic" dimension of human culture—the spirit of play that precedes and transcends instrumental purposes. Huizinga argued in *Homo Ludens* that play, properly understood, is not frivolous but represents humanity's capacity for free, creative activity unbounded by biological necessity or practical utility. Ronaldinho's style embodies this ludic spirit completely: he plays football not merely to win (though he does win) but to explore the space of possibility, to improvise variations, to create beauty for its own sake. His famous smile while playing—often remarked upon but rarely analyzed—is not merely personality but philosophical testimony: it reveals that he experiences football as play in Huizinga's profound sense, as autotelic activity that generates its own meaning and joy^[5].

This ludic quality connects to Friedrich Schiller's concept of the "play drive" (*Spieltrieb*) as the mediating force between sensuous impulse and

rational form. For Schiller, genuine aesthetic experience occurs when sensuous spontaneity and formal structure achieve free harmony—neither dominating the other but creating something transcending both. Ronaldinho's improvisation exemplifies this perfectly: his movements are simultaneously spontaneous (emerging unpredictably in response to the immediate situation) and formally elegant (conforming to principles of biomechanical efficiency and aesthetic balance). Each touch becomes a moment of aesthetic creation, a small artwork generated at the intersection of freedom and form^[12].

The aesthetic value of Ronaldinho's style thus derives not merely from visual beauty but from what it reveals about human possibility. When we watch him execute a seemingly impossible maneuver, we experience what Kant described in his analysis of aesthetic ideas: the mind's confrontation with representations that exceed conceptual determination, that gesture toward meanings too rich for definite articulation. Ronaldinho's football provides what art at its best provides: an experience of expanded possibility, of the world containing more potential than our ordinary frameworks acknowledge.

At the ethical level, Ronaldinho's playing philosophy embodies what might be termed an "ethics of generosity." This manifests in several dimensions. First, there is generosity toward opponents: Ronaldinho generally preferred to beat defenders through skill rather than force, to humiliate (when he did) through beauty rather than aggression, to offer opponents the peculiar dignity of being beaten by something exceptional. His famous standing ovation from Real Madrid fans in 2005—a rare honor for an opponent—testifies to this ethical quality: even those suffering defeat could appreciate the manner of their suffering.

Second, there is generosity toward spectators: Ronaldinho's willingness to attempt the spectacular even when the pragmatic would suffice, his evident enjoyment of entertaining, his theatrical presentation of skills—all these suggest a player who understood himself as performing not just for victory but for audience experience. This represents an ethical stance about the athlete's responsibility: not merely to win but to enrich the experience of those watching, to give them something beyond the functional minimum required for competitive success.

Third, there is generosity toward the game itself: Ronaldinho's style honored football's aesthetic possibilities, refusing the instrumentalization that

treats every moment merely as means to the end of victory. By insisting on beauty and creativity even in contexts where simpler options existed, he affirmed that football's value lies partly in its intrinsic qualities, not solely in outcomes. This is an ethical statement about what we owe to practices we participate in: to develop their potentials fully rather than merely extract instrumental benefits.

3.3 Ludic Characteristics and Freedom: The Return to Play

Huizinga's concept of *Homo Ludens*—man the player—provides the deepest lens for understanding Ronaldinho's philosophical significance. Huizinga argued that play precedes culture and animates all great cultural achievements: in play, humans exercise freedom from biological necessity, create meaning through arbitrary rules willingly accepted, and experience community through shared participation in autotelic activity. Modern civilization's tragedy, for Huizinga, lies in forgetting this ludic foundation—in allowing instrumental rationality to evacuate activities of their playful spirit, reducing everything to means toward external ends^[5].

Ronaldinho's football represents a recovery of football's ludic essence in an era increasingly dominated by instrumentalization. Contemporary elite football, with its sports science, tactical systems, and financial pressures, tends toward what Weber called the "iron cage" of rationalization: every aspect becomes instrumentalized, optimized, reduced to its function in producing victory. Training regimens become scientized, tactics become systematized, and players become functionaries executing predetermined roles. The spontaneous, creative, ludic dimension—football as play—gets subordinated to football as work, as system, as instrument.

Against this instrumentalizing tendency, Ronaldinho's style constitutes a form of resistance—not articulated through discourse but enacted through embodied practice. When he attempts a no-look back-heel pass in a tense match moment, he asserts that football remains play, that space exists for creative spontaneity even within competitive intensity, that the ludic dimension cannot be fully instrumentalized without destroying what makes football valuable. This is why his playing generates such powerful emotional responses: audiences recognize, perhaps unconsciously, that he is defending something essential about human experience against forces of rationalization and instrumentalization that extend far beyond

football.

The political significance of this ludic resistance should not be underestimated. In societies increasingly characterized by quantification, surveillance, and instrumental rationality—where even leisure becomes colonized by productivity logic—witnessing someone play purely for play's sake, create beauty for beauty's sake, exercise freedom for freedom's sake, provides profound satisfaction. Ronaldinho becomes a symbol of possibility for non-instrumental human activity, for the survival of domains where creativity, spontaneity, and joy remain legitimate purposes rather than frivolous distractions from instrumental goals.

His characteristic joy while playing—that famous smile—takes on deeper meaning in this context. It is not merely personal happiness but a philosophical statement: it testifies that intrinsic satisfaction remains possible, that activities can be meaningful in themselves rather than merely as means to external ends, that human flourishing involves not just achievement but enjoyment. In a culture that increasingly treats joy as frivolous and seriousness as virtue, Ronaldinho's joyful excellence becomes quietly radical, suggesting that perhaps the highest human achievements emerge not from grim determination but from playful exploration^[13].

The freedom Ronaldinho's style embodies is thus not merely physical (freedom of movement) but existential (freedom of possibility) and even political (freedom from total instrumentalization). When audiences worldwide respond to his football with such intensity—when compilations of his highlights accumulate millions of views, when his jersey remains among the best-selling years after retirement, when his name generates universal affection—they are responding to this multilayered freedom. They recognize in his play a demonstration that human activity need not be entirely instrumentalized, that spaces of creativity and spontaneity can persist, that ludic freedom remains possible even within highly structured, commercialized contexts.

This explains why Ronaldinho's popularity transcends his already impressive competitive achievements. He won major titles, individual awards, and produced statistics that would alone justify his place in football history. Yet his cultural impact exceeds what these achievements can explain because his significance lies not primarily in what he won but in what he represented: a particular possibility for human activity, a defense of play against instrumentalization, an embodiment of creative freedom. His style was not merely effective but

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meaningful—it told a story about human possibility that resonated across cultures precisely because the anxieties it addressed (rationalization, instrumentalization, loss of playfulness) are increasingly universal in modern societies.

IV. Ronaldo's "Direct Confrontation" Philosophy

4.1 Style Description: Symphony of Power and Speed

Ronaldo Luís Nazário de Lima's playing style represented football's physics made visible—the kinetic energy equation embodied in human form. His signature characteristic was explosive acceleration: the ability to reach maximum velocity within two or three strides, transforming from static to unstoppable in the time it takes defenders to process the threat. Combined with close ball control at these extreme speeds, this created a devastating offensive weapon. Defenders faced an impossible choice: drop deep and concede space, or engage close and risk being obliterated by acceleration they could not match.

The technical foundation of Ronaldo's style was his stride pattern while dribbling. Unlike players who take many small touches to maintain control, Ronaldo developed the ability to push the ball significant distances ahead while maintaining the speed to recover it before defenders could intercept. This technical innovation allowed him to dribble at nearly his maximum sprinting speed—a feat most players cannot approach because ball control typically requires reduced velocity. Video analysis reveals that Ronaldo's touches while dribbling at speed often sent the ball 3-4 meters ahead, distances that would seem to invite interception but which his explosive acceleration rendered safe.

His finishing style reinforced this power-based philosophy. Rather than relying primarily on placement and deception, Ronaldo frequently finished with raw power—shots struck with such force that goalkeepers had insufficient reaction time even when positioned correctly. His famous "fenômeno" goal against Compostela in 1996, where he dribbled through nearly the entire team, showcases both aspects: multiple defenders confronted directly rather than circumvented, each beaten through explosive acceleration and power rather than elaborate feints.

Tactically, Ronaldo displayed a distinctive preference for direct routes to goal. Heat maps of his movement patterns show concentrated activity in central channels, particularly the

corridor directly between the penalty box and center circle. He rarely drifted wide or dropped deep for sustained periods; instead, he positioned himself where defenders were most concentrated, essentially choosing confrontation. This spatial preference meant that Ronaldo routinely faced two or three defenders simultaneously—situations most forwards seek to avoid. Yet this apparent tactical disadvantage became his signature advantage: by attacking strength directly, he forced defenders into physical contests where his superior power gave him the edge^[14].

The psychological dimension of Ronaldo's style merits emphasis. His decision-making consistently demonstrated extreme confidence and decisiveness. Faced with multiple tactical options, he characteristically chose the most direct and difficult: the shot rather than the pass, the dribble rather than the layoff, the confrontation rather than the evasion. This decision pattern reveals not recklessness but a particular form of courage: the willingness to place enormous pressure on oneself by choosing options where failure is visible and undeniable. When Ronaldo attempted to dribble through three defenders and failed, there was no ambiguity about the failure; yet he continued attempting such plays throughout his career, demonstrating remarkable resilience to pressure and criticism.

His career trajectory, particularly his comebacks from devastating knee injuries, adds further depth to understanding his playing philosophy. Lesser players might have adapted their style after such injuries, becoming more cautious or relying more on positioning and passing. Ronaldo returned from career-threatening setbacks and continued playing in essentially the same direct, confrontational manner—even when his body could no longer perform at previous levels. This persistence suggests that his style was not merely tactical calculation but deeply connected to his identity and values.

4.2 Philosophical Interpretation: Existential Courage in Direct Challenge

At the ontological level, Ronaldo's playing philosophy reconceptualizes the fundamental nature of defensive obstacles. In conventional football thinking, defenders represent barriers to be circumvented—problems requiring clever solutions, obstacles to be avoided or outmaneuvered. The tactical emphasis on "finding space" reflects this ontology: good attackers identify gaps in defensive structure and exploit them, using intelligence to avoid direct confrontation. Ronaldo's approach inverts this

ontology: defenders are not obstacles to avoid but opponents to overcome, not barriers necessitating circumvention but challenges inviting conquest.

This reconceptualization has profound phenomenological implications. In Martin Heidegger's terms, it reveals a different way of "being-toward" resistance in the world. Where conventional attacking philosophy treats resistance as essentially negative—something to be minimized or avoided—Ronaldo's approach treats resistance as opportunity for self-manifestation. The greater the defensive concentration he faced, the greater the opportunity to demonstrate force of will and physical superiority. In this sense, obstacles are not impediments to his purposes but rather the necessary conditions for meaningful action: without resistance to overcome, there is no opportunity for the particular excellence he embodies.

This connects to existentialist themes of authentic existence and freedom. Jean-Paul Sartre argued that authentic human existence requires accepting responsibility for one's choices and actions, refusing the "bad faith" of blaming circumstances or hiding behind social roles. Ronaldo's playing style embodies this existential authenticity: by consistently choosing the most direct and difficult options, by refusing to hide behind teammates or tactics, by making himself entirely responsible for outcomes, he enacts the existentialist ideal of radical freedom and responsibility. When he receives the ball in a crowded penalty area and immediately drives toward goal rather than recycling possession, he accepts full responsibility for what follows—success or failure will be entirely attributable to him^[15].

Aesthetically, Ronaldo's style evokes what Kant termed the "dynamically sublime"—aesthetic experiences generated by encountering great power or force. Unlike the beautiful, which Kant associates with pleasure derived from harmony and form, the sublime involves a complex aesthetic experience where we feel simultaneously threatened and exhilarated by displays of overwhelming power. Watching Ronaldo at full speed, bearing down on defenders who appear helpless despite numerical advantage, generates this sublimity: we experience the awesome power of human physicality pushed to extreme limits, the drama of strength confronting strength, the visceral impact of force meeting resistance.

This sublime aesthetic differs fundamentally from the beautiful playfulness of Ronaldinho's

style. Where Ronaldinho generates wonder through the unexpected and impossible, Ronaldo generates awe through the inevitable and irresistible. Both are authentic aesthetic experiences, but of different types: one reveals the mind's capacity for creative freedom, the other reveals the body's capacity for overwhelming force. The aesthetic satisfaction audiences derive from Ronaldo's explosive runs and powerful shots connects to what Edmund Burke identified in his analysis of the sublime: the paradoxical pleasure humans take in witnessing great power from a position of safety^[16].

The dramatic structure of Ronaldo's style reinforces this sublime quality. His confrontational approach created high-stakes moments of concentrated drama: will he succeed in breaking through, or will the defenders hold? This binary simplicity—conquest or failure, with no middle ground—generates intense narrative tension. Unlike more complex attacking patterns that distribute responsibility across multiple players and phases, Ronaldo's direct style compressed entire attacking narratives into single decisive moments. This compression heightens dramatic impact: every time he receives the ball in an attacking position, a complete dramatic arc potentially unfolds within seconds.

4.3 Nietzschean Will to Power: Conquest as Philosophy

Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power" (*Wille zur Macht*) provides perhaps the most illuminating framework for understanding Ronaldo's philosophical significance. For Nietzsche, will to power is not merely desire for domination but the fundamental human drive toward self-overcoming, growth, and the imposition of form upon chaos. It represents life itself in its most basic aspect: the perpetual striving to expand, to overcome resistance, to realize greater potentials. Authentic existence, in Nietzsche's vision, requires embracing this will to power honestly rather than disguising it through false modesty or resentment^[17].

Ronaldo's playing style embodies Nietzschean will to power with unusual purity. His consistent choice of direct confrontation over circumvention, power over deception, conquest over evasion—all these reflect a will-to-power ethic that refuses the indirect and the subtle in favor of direct challenge and overcoming. This is not about dominating opponents for psychological satisfaction (though that may occur) but about the existential project of pushing oneself to expand capabilities through confronting ever-greater resistance. Each match

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becomes an opportunity for what Nietzsche called "self-overcoming": testing oneself against extreme opposition, discovering whether one's power suffices, either succeeding and thereby affirming one's strength or failing and thereby identifying new limits to transcend.

The heroic dimension of Ronaldo's style connects to Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*—the overman who creates values through force of will rather than passively accepting inherited moralities. While obviously Ronaldo is not Nietzsche's philosophical overman, his playing style expresses structurally similar themes: the assertion of individual will against collective opposition, the creation of possibilities through force of personality, the refusal of mediocrity and safety. When Ronaldo drives directly at a massed defense, he implicitly rejects the democratic-tactical logic that says one individual cannot prevail against organized collective resistance. His success in such moments affirms an aristocratic-excellence ethic against egalitarian-structural thinking.

This Nietzschean dimension explains much of Ronaldo's cultural resonance. Audiences respond intensely to displays of individual will overcoming structural obstacles because such displays speak to deep human anxieties about agency and determinism. In an era characterized by complex systems, bureaucratic structures, and collective decision-making—where individual agency often feels constrained or ineffective—watching Ronaldo simply decide to overcome opposition through force of will provides profound satisfaction. He becomes, symbolically, the individual will asserting itself against systemic constraints, the hero who refuses to accept that circumstances determine outcomes.

The ethical implications of this philosophy are complex and merit careful consideration. There is an inherent violence in Ronaldo's style—not physical violence toward opponents (he was remarkably fair in this respect) but a kind of symbolic violence in his will to dominate, to impose his purposes on resistant situations. This contrasts sharply with Ronaldinho's more playful ethics of generosity. Where Ronaldinho beat opponents while somehow affirming their dignity, Ronaldo's victories contained an element of conquest, of demonstrating superiority. This is not ethically negative per se—sport inherently involves competitive superiority—but it represents a different ethical stance: one that prizes honesty about competitive realities over polite fictions of equality.

Yet Ronaldo's ethics also contained profound courage. Nietzsche prized courage as perhaps the

highest virtue: the willingness to face danger, accept responsibility, risk failure. Ronaldo's consistent choice of the difficult over the safe, his willingness to attempt plays where failure would be obvious and public, his persistence in this approach despite injuries that would have justified caution—all these demonstrate authentic courage. He risked his body, his reputation, his statistical output by refusing to play safely. This represents an ethical commitment to excellence over security, to authenticity over image management.

His career narrative, particularly the catastrophic injuries and subsequent comebacks, deepens the philosophical significance of his style. When Ronaldo suffered his first major knee injury in 1999, many observers assumed his explosive style had ended. When he returned and continued playing in essentially the same manner, it represented a form of existential defiance: a refusal to allow circumstance to determine his identity, an insistence on remaining true to his essential approach despite changed physical conditions. The 2002 World Cup triumph, where he emerged from injury to score eight goals including two in the final, became mythic partly because it embodied this Nietzschean narrative of suffering, overcoming, and ultimate triumph through force of will.

The second major injury in 2008 and subsequent struggles added tragic dimensions to his narrative. His later career, where his body could no longer support the explosive power that defined his prime, revealed the limitations of the will-to-power approach: eventually physical decline cannot be overcome through determination alone. Yet even this adds philosophical depth. Nietzsche recognized that tragic failure is more authentically human than safe mediocrity. Ronaldo's decline, precisely because it resulted from pushing his body to extremes in service of his uncompromising style, carries a tragic dignity absent in careers that fade through cautious preservation.

The hero-worship Ronaldo inspired globally reflects these deeper philosophical resonances. He became, particularly for younger audiences, an embodiment of heroic possibility—the figure who shows that individual excellence can prevail over collective opposition, that courage and determination can overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles, that one person's will can shape outcomes despite structural constraints. This is why his image appears on countless walls, why his name is invoked in contexts far beyond football, why "Il Fenomeno" (The Phenomenon) became a cultural signifier transcending sport.

He represented not just athletic excellence but a philosophy of existence that audiences found deeply meaningful: the philosophy of direct confrontation, honest superiority, and will-to-power.

Understanding Ronaldo's popularity thus requires recognizing that his appeal operates at this philosophical-symbolic level. His statistics and achievements, while impressive, do not fully explain his cultural impact. Rather, his significance lies in what his style expressed: a particular answer to questions about how to engage with obstacles, how to relate to one's own power, how to balance courage and prudence, how to remain authentic to one's nature despite pressures toward adaptation. These are not merely athletic questions but existential ones, and Ronaldo's embodied responses resonated across cultures because the questions themselves are universal.

V. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the distinct playing styles of football icons Ronaldinho and Ronaldo, along with the philosophical principles behind them, and introduces the Style-Value Model. It explores how an athlete's style transcends mere technical aspects to become the foundation of their cultural influence and popularity. By linking style with philosophical ideas, values, and fan identification, this paper reveals how an athlete's personal style can evoke deep cultural resonance and emotional identification in the audience.

Ronaldinho's style embodies a philosophy of freedom and creativity. Through his flexible use of space and unique technical moves, he breaks the traditional tactical constraints of football, presenting a vision of football as fundamentally a "game." In contrast, Ronaldo's playing style emphasizes the philosophy of strength and decisiveness, focusing on direct confrontation and bravery, showcasing resilience and power when facing challenges. Although their football achievements and number of trophies differ, the values conveyed through their styles have earned them cultural influence that surpasses mere competitive success.

Through the Style-Value Model, the paper argues that an athlete's style is not only a technical display but also an embodiment of their inner values, serving as a carrier of cultural meaning. Fans' identification with athletes often stems from the philosophical ideas and life values they express on the field, rather than relying solely on their competitive performance.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the author.

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