

A close-up portrait of Cristiano Ronaldo, looking upwards and to the right. He has short, dark hair and is wearing a red t-shirt. The background is dark, making his face and the red shirt stand out.

CRISTIANO

RONALDO

THE BIOGRAPHY

GUILLEM BALAGUE

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Dedication

To R.

I did say you were not going to appear in the book . . .

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All quotations taken from secondary sources have been numbered in the text, with a full list provided in the bibliography. All other quotations, unless otherwise stated in the text, have been taken from interviews I have conducted or from statements at press conferences, post-match interviews and the like. All other insights have come about as a result of the extensive investigations that I have carried out for this book.

Guillem Balagué
September 2015

Prologue

WHAT WE ARE, WHERE WE ARE, WHERE WE ARE GOING

‘News is circulating that I allegedly made offending remarks regarding Lionel Messi. This is absolutely false and I have assured my lawyer takes action to sue those responsible. I have the utmost respect for all my professional colleagues, and Messi is obviously no exception.’

Cristiano Ronaldo on Facebook, 11 November 2014

Ronaldo, or whoever writes his Facebook content, was referring to statements of his that I had included in my book entitled *Messi* (Orion, 2013), the first authorised biography of the Argentinian footballer.

When I found out about his reaction on Twitter, I decided to take a step back. Clearly there was going to be uproar.

■ ■ ■

According to Manu Sainz, a journalist who was Ronaldo’s spokes-person over those controversial days, the Portuguese’s anger while on international duty with his country was ‘rife’. And the player wanted to respond as soon as possible in the most public way.

Had he not done so, the accusation, defamation or comment (depending on how you viewed it) could have gone unnoticed.

Ronaldo was attempting to crack a nut with a sledgehammer and did so by sending the above message to his one hundred million followers. Why? He would be crossing paths with Messi in a friendly match in Manchester in the coming days. He could meet him face to face and deny the allegation. My allegation. The story I was told by people very close to Cristiano.

In reality, the ‘offending’ paragraph had been in the public domain for eleven months.

Why was there such a dramatic reaction almost a year after the publication of his rival’s biography?

That week, with no domestic matches to report on and only international

games, the *Daily Telegraph* chose to publish two extracts from the paperback edition of *Messi* which had just been published. In fact, the English daily newspaper selected two excerpts already featured in the hardback eleven months earlier (Arsenal's attempt to sign Leo and the relationship between Messi and Ronaldo) and it all kicked off.

The media (initially in Spain, but then the social networks got hold of it and it quickly spread to all corners of the globe) grabbed hold of one word, took it out of context, twisted it and, in Spain, translated it incorrectly. Could that word define the most distinguished rivalry in the history of football? My career was judged and debate ensued over whether or not such things are said in a dressing room full of adrenalin-infused warriors.

The word was 'motherfucker'.

That is how I said Ronaldo referred to 'the Flea' in front of his team-mates in the dressing room.

■ ■ ■

By that point, I had already begun research on my next book. This one.

I had spoken to Cristiano regarding the possibility of chatting about his life, his way of thinking, his past. 'Yes, of course, no problem,' he told me on four separate occasions. I had also conversed with his agent Jorge Mendes, who agreed to collaborate just ten days before that Facebook post, although both of us questioned whether or not it was a good idea. I will explain why later.

I went to the Derbyshire Peak District in order to take advantage of the international break. While out jogging, I could not stop asking myself what made him respond in that way. Was a legal threat necessary?

Other people are better suited to such conflicts than me. Johan Cruyff used to say that he wanted to know where the line separating those who loved him and hated him lay, just so he would know who to fight against. Frank Rijkaard once told me that he would feel awful if he found out that even one person hated him. I know what you mean, Frank.

I spent plenty of time around the English countryside over those days. I started focusing on the colours, aromas, the sound of the branches cracking, but all that was blurred by the new questions swirling around my

head.

What can we learn about Ronaldo if we study his reaction? Was I changing my perception of him and my desire to study him? What would happen to the collaboration that had been discussed? For a start, I was unaware that my influence was such as to prompt him to react with such opprobrium. The media circus had gone to town. It was another one of those storms that surge when the names Messi and Ronaldo are uttered in the same sentence. Especially during an international break with the resultant paucity of football news.

What else was happening at the time for him to feel compelled to write such a message? There had to be more to it, something that set his alarm bells ringing.

It finally hit me some time later: there were ten days to go before voting for the Ballon d'Or closed, an award that Ronaldo was the favourite to win for the third time.

Surely his Facebook post was not just a way to prevent people from changing their vote in that year's Ballon d'Or. Or was it?

And what to say about the media's reaction?

The subject became big news and received what I consider disproportionate coverage in sports sections in newspapers and on the radio, especially in Spain. On the very night of Ronaldo's post, I spoke about the issue on Onda Cero, the radio station I work for. I did not want to do it; I wanted the *Messi* book to speak for itself. But I had just been involved in an interview with Real Sociedad president Jokin Aperribay for the radio programme *Al primer toque* and the presenter, Héctor Fernández, to whom I still owe various favours, convinced me to say something, whatever it might be.

I came out with what I have repeated ever since: 'It's all in the book.'

This is what you can read in the *Messi* book:

Ronaldo, perhaps as a symptom of the immaturity that marks so many footballers, thinks it necessary to put on a brave face in front of his teammates, not be scared of Messi and to rise to the challenge. All very macho;

very false. And that is why, according to some Real Madrid players, CR7 has a nickname for him: ‘motherfucker’; and if he sees someone from the club speaking to Leo, he also ends up being baptised ‘motherfucker’. In that environment, Ronaldo usually compares their relationship with that between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. And the Madrid players, with their less than subtle dressing-room sense of humour, have a long list of jokes that include Messi as Ronaldo’s dog or puppet, or kept in a designer handbag belonging to the Portuguese player. And much worse.

It became clear that not many people had actually read the book, nor did any of them find the time to seek out and analyse the paragraph concerned until I posted it on Twitter on the night of the Facebook post.

All that says little in favour of my weight in the Spanish media circus: almost nobody felt compelled to read my book, even though it was the first authorised one of ‘the Flea’. It also reflects the speed with which news is generated and consumed.

On returning to reality after my isolation in the Peak District, I began going over the various reactions.

A man whom I admire dearly, Paco González, had given me a rap on the knuckles on his programme on COPE radio. He stated that there are things that need not be told, dressing-room talk that should remain there. But part of his own success, aside from being a marvellous communicator, is the way in which he manages the information that reaches him from the dressing room.

A handful of journalists performed the selfless role of ‘Ronaldistas’, defending the player in the face of accusations because that is what their job consists of: being a transmission chain for the footballer.

It was not pleasant to be put under the microscope, but it gave me some idea of what players experience when they are judged by supporters for ninety minutes once or twice a week. And then again the next day by the media. Relentlessly.

■ ■ ■

Did it make sense to include that word, that paragraph, that dressing-room chit-chat in the Messi book? A year-long piece of work involving hundreds of hours of conversations and thoughts assembled in 600 pages

about 'the Flea' had turned into controversy because of one word. Did it improve it? Did it add much to Leo's story?

Maybe it did not contribute much. In reality, it said more about Ronaldo than it did about Messi, about the Portuguese's need to show off to his peers.

Maybe I should have left it out.

But, essentially, had I done anything wrong?

That last question did have an answer: everything that I publish is checked thoroughly, especially on a subject such as this one, especially in a biography. Furthermore, all books are scrutinised by the publisher's lawyers. The context, which was and continues to be ignored, was crucial: Ronaldo and Messi respect each other because of their similar footballing paths; they mix respect with feelings that you have for your nemesis but, importantly, they react to each other's success differently. Cristiano is a warrior from the moment he leaves his home, when he gets dressed, speaks or behaves like a player. He is afraid of no one. Plus, he can show no sign of weakness. On the contrary.

While I repeatedly mulled over the situation, everyone else was focusing on breaking other news: Sergio Ramos had said something or other about certain Spanish internationals' commitment. The message was implicitly understood as a jibe at Cesc Fàbregas and Diego Costa, who had withdrawn from Vicente del Bosque's latest Spain squad. One controversial story was replaced by another.

Forty-eight hours in the eye of a hurricane. Only forty-eight, but it seemed much longer.

One question remained fixed in my head: does the truth save you?

■ ■ ■

I could not stop thinking about the role of sports journalism both in England and Spain, the two countries where I know it well.

As sports writers, we only tell a portion of what we know. In fact there are almost always two conversations with our sources or interviewees: one with the microphone on and another with it off. Many stories are known

but do not come out for a plethora of reasons: be they good (insufficient sources, waiting for the right moment . . .) or bad (so as not to annoy a friend, lose a source or the fear of isolation that always accompanies breaking an exclusive).

Only part of the truth is told. Whatever we think will be of interest. Or whatever we think will sell best.

One can, or, rather, one *must*, be accurate, fair and unbiased when it comes to data. The way a story is presented and treated must be honourable, but being objective is an impossibility from the moment one word is chosen over another to describe something.

We are answerable to an ethical code, of course. And to our bosses, now more so than ever, now that work is so precarious. The person who pays calls the shots.

In fact, the person who pays defines the parameters of what is and is not true. And information is bought and sold because it is now no more than a product and even more so in the showbiz world of professional football.

Plus very powerful people make huge efforts to ensure they can influence what is written. I know that an important club president in Spain tried – unsuccessfully – to get the head of a major sports newspaper sacked for not sharing his ideas in a ploy to prevent criticism. He used personal accusations and other pressure tactics in his attempt. I shall not reveal who was involved. I will only tell you half the story for the time being.

You see? Journalism is not simply a recounting of events.

■ ■ ■

During an appearance of journalist Manu Sainz on the television show *El chiringuito de jugones* he spoke about his relationship with Ronaldo just after the player was sent off for aggressive conduct against Córdoba in La Liga:

Cristiano is exemplary even when he makes a mistake. [. . .] The other day, he was on the team bus minutes after the match against Córdoba and he told me: ‘I want you to write a few things for me. I haven’t had time to apologise and want you to write something.’ I was going to do it but I did not because the club later said it was better to do it on Twitter.¹

Write things on behalf of a player? Some people were incensed. Some labelled it terrible journalism. ‘Manu is just Ronaldo’s scribe,’ retorted others. That is, however, the reality of how a large part of the industry works: a certain level of submission is exchanged for information. What I had never previously heard so clearly was the ‘he gave me a few sentences to write down’ concept.

In England, many journalists also defend coaches or players because they are friends. I shall not reveal who. I have a soft spot for Rafa Benítez, I’ve seen him take training and how he works; I know many of the reasons behind his decisions and his way of thinking. I defend him over and above my journalistic duties because I feel that he is unfairly treated. There is a sort of crusade behind my statements about Rafa, who was not helped by the way he disrupted the status quo in the Premier League with his challenging of Sir Alex Ferguson, Manchester United, referees, the FA, even José Mourinho. I always thought if he were English he would be a national hero.

But is that journalism?

Is that intellectual corruption or are we the consequence of how the industry is set up?

I, for one, will never be able to nor shall I try to be objective when it comes to Cristiano Ronaldo. But I promise the following: read on.

■ ■ ■

You may be familiar with Oliver Sacks, perhaps the most famous professor of neurology of the twentieth century, physician, bestselling author and chronic introvert. He was curious about the world and our minds, but unable to have meaningful conversations or relationships with most people, as he explained in his beautiful autobiography *On the Move*.

Sometimes, though, he would be so astonished by the thrill of observation and could not help sharing:

I almost never speak to people in the street. But some years ago, there was a lunar eclipse, and I went outside to view it with my little 20x telescope. Everyone else on the busy sidewalk seemed oblivious to the extraordinary celestial happening above them, so I stopped people, saying, ‘Look! Look what’s happening to the moon!’ and pressing my telescope into their

hands. People were taken aback at being approached in this way, but, intrigued by my manifestly innocent enthusiasm, they raised the telescope to their eyes, ‘wowed’ and handed it back. ‘Hey, man, thanks for letting me look at that,’ or ‘Gee, thanks for showing me.’

I don’t promise objectivity, but a total commitment to the curiosity that we all have for a life like Ronaldo’s and especially his journey.

■ ■ ■

There is another issue that can endanger the relationship with the subject of a biography.

Let us imagine that I convinced Cristiano to sit down and tell me how he has got where he is using new words, unknown stories and the required sincerity. Maybe he would say: ‘I may seem arrogant, but I’m not because of this, that and the other.’ Or maybe he would admit that he is, but refuse to accept others judging him. Maybe he would say that he wants everyone to love him. Maybe he would say that he does not fancy going to work in the morning. Or that sometimes he doesn’t enjoy playing football.

But who is capable of being so brutal, open and sincere?

We all have black marks, weaknesses, issues, thoughts which we are ashamed of, chapters from the past that we try to keep under wraps, and, if they do come out, we cover them up. Even more so if we are in the public eye.

That is the limit which the biographer battles against: interviewing the subject in question does not guarantee access to the whole truth. It guarantees *the subject’s* truth.

Furthermore, Cristiano Ronaldo has been the main protagonist in a crucial image campaign since 2012, when he realised that the world did not understand him.

Jorge Mendes, the brains behind Gestifute, the most renowned agent in the football world, instigated the campaign. More doubts began circling in my head. Did I want to tell the Gestifute version of the Ronaldo story?

■ ■ ■

Around that time, I went out for a bite to eat with a very famous player. He

was a top star of a legendary team during a spell of historic title wins and now earns his living as a coach. He has been in the business for over thirty years.

‘You know you can’t tell the truth, right?’ he told me while discussing the limits of the exercise that I had undertaken. ‘They will want to control you. It is only normal they would do that.’

■ ■ ■

I had a missed call on my mobile phone from an unfamiliar Portuguese number two weeks before the whole Facebook saga. Could it have been Jorge Mendes? I had been trying to see him since the previous Christmas, which I had spent in Dubai after accepting his invitation to the Globe Awards which he has been organising for seven years.

This is an event to celebrate the success of the Mendes empire. In the one I attended, Deco, who was represented by the Portuguese agent, won the player of the decade award while Xavi Hernández, who was offered an all-expenses-paid trip to Dubai for a few days with his family, received the award for best player over the last ten years. Seriously. The titles of the awards change depending on who is in attendance. But the networking is of the highest calibre, as you would expect.

I only had a Spanish number for Mendes, who spends most of his time in Madrid and, as I say, I had been waiting for his call since that Christmas. We had exchanged a few messages and it seemed that the definitive conversation, which would determine our relationship in the subsequent twelve months when I would be writing the book, was about to take place.

From the moment the Real Madrid communications department directed my requests to interview president Florentino Pérez and the players to Mendes, and when I was told that in order to arrange a chat with Ronaldo I had to speak to his agent, I knew that everything would be decided during a difficult and possibly one-off phone call. Mendes does not beat about the bush; there are no pauses in his conversations. Bang, bang, bang and that is it. That is how you speak to Mendes. Or, more like, how he speaks to you.

I had already been to Funchal (Madeira) and Lisbon. I had spoken to Real Madrid players. I had spent time in Manchester and shared long conversations with many people who were part of Cristiano’s life. I had plenty of information. My experience with Ronaldo (interviewing him for

Sky Sports, presenting some of his commercial events) added something extra. I could do the book with the information already available to me.

But I remained determined to speak to Mendes despite the doubts about the expected fight for control of what would be written.

‘Speak to people who know me, Jorge. You’ll find out what type of writer and person I am.’

‘I’m not after an authorised book, but we could chat and you could come with me on this journey.’

I was sending him text messages of that ilk. I was receiving either negative responses or silence.

As part of my research, I read a biography of Ronaldo by Mario Torrejón, a colleague on SER radio, who collaborated with Mendes. Mario, who communicates his ideas very well in what is his first book, was able to interview the agent, Ronaldo and the Real Madrid president. I feel he did have to pay a price, however. It seems to me that many of the stories told in that biography have the GestiFute stamp on them.

I called the Portuguese number back. I thought that, if it was Mendes, I would see where the conversation took me, without committing to anything.

It was Mendes.

‘Look,’ he told me, without first exchanging pleasantries, ‘I’ve decided I’m going to help you, but don’t screw with me! I’ve spoken to people who tell me you’re a good guy.’

I later found out that Mendes had asked, among others, *Marca* director Oscar Campillo for reports and was given glowing references.

‘The problem is I don’t know what you’re going to write. You’ve done the Messi book. With Mario [Torrejón], we knew what he wanted to do and what he was writing from the first minute. I don’t really know how I can help you. I want to help you, but I don’t really know how.’

In the very first minute we were heading down a dead-end street. It was

now a battle for the upper hand.

– I don't know what you're going to write, I don't know who you're going to speak to.

– Do you want to know who I'm speaking to? I can tell you . . .

– No, you can do whatever you want.

– But everybody tells me to speak to you.

– The club should take greater responsibility. But I don't know if we'll speak because I don't know what you're doing and what you're going to write.

– We can sit down and talk it over, I'll tell you the angles I'm covering.

I explained to him that, before knowing what I was going to write, I had to do a few more interviews and the format of the book would start to take shape a few months down the line. That was not entirely true, but it gained me some time in case I needed it to finally reach an agreement with him.

Ronaldo's entourage has understood that in order to keep him happy, and also to feed the competitive beast that he is, he must be given absolute guarantees that everybody and everything, sporting institutions included, are at his service. They must keep criticism at a distance, or control it, create the narrative and keep him on his pedestal. That helps him win more Ballons d'Or and trophies. It is good for business, too.

One question remained unanswered. What happens if we disagree on something? 'We'll discuss it,' he told me.

I thought: let's take Ronaldo's transfer to Real Madrid, for example. I know what took place, I have seen the contracts, but what if Mendes does not want to explain the whole saga, including the offer he got from Manchester City that he seemed happy to consider? How can we explain from Ronaldo's point of view the story of him taking the only locker opposite a mirror in the Manchester United dressing room? Is it treated as a triviality or a reflection of a vain personality? Can we discuss narcissism? Would they let me analyse the presence (and absence) of an alcoholic father who refused help towards the end of his life?

‘Just so you know,’ insisted Mendes, ‘this is fully my responsibility. Some people in my camp are telling me not to work with you, but I understand that you’re a decent guy and we’re going to work together, we’re going to do this together, but you can’t screw me.’

We could not get away from that. He was telling me that he did not know how to help me because he did not know how to control me. I was offering him a certain level of supervision, but not complete.

I have not spoken to Mendes since the Facebook controversy.

■ ■ ■

In fact, after the Facebook post, Mendes made a few calls to the opinion makers of the Spanish media. If Ronaldo is upset, Mendes multiplies it by twenty. He wanted his friends in the media to deny the story but also to question my credibility.

■ ■ ■

Portugal and Argentina met in a friendly at Old Trafford on 18 November 2014. The build-up to the game centred around the relationship between Ronaldo and Messi. Plenty was written about their relationship and every now and then the infamous word from my book was mentioned. It had been taken out of context, planted somewhere else and allowed to grow.

I had planned to go to Manchester, but did not want to bump into either player. I could imagine Ronaldo ignoring me in front of my colleagues when, previously, he would have stopped to say hello and chat. I could imagine Messi shaking my hand, talking to me as he sometimes does. That would be enough – I thought – for somebody to reignite the story. Why open another potential can of worms?

I was also aware that the situation was probably not that serious, but my sensitivity had increased, as had my paranoia.

■ ■ ■

The Facebook post ended the debate with Mendes about controlling the content of this book, and I genuinely felt an overwhelming sense of freedom.

For Real Madrid, Mendes or Ronaldo’s version, there are official books or ones on which they have collaborated.