

LEANNE COWAN

The Millwall Lionesses footballer thanks her favourite player for motivating her to break through and succeed with a smile

Dear Ronaldinho,

I want to start off by saying thank you for inspiring a generation to fall in love with the beautiful game. Your courage, creativity and audacity meant I aspired to play like you, so I started to attend weekly Brazilian soccer schools. I was eight at the time but this is when my love for the game became unconditional and I couldn't see myself doing anything else. At first it was tough, I was the only girl and the boys didn't think I should train with them. I was often picked last when it came to games, but this only motivated me to work harder. I practised skills, passing and dribbling every day after school, and all the extra work was rewarded a few months later when I signed for Millwall U10s.

You were a technical magician a level above the rest, but you stood out more because you had the biggest smile on your face every minute you went on the pitch. Through it, I could feel your love for the game and I was inspired to wear that same smile every time I played, even if the boys thought I couldn't. I soon showed them a thing or two and, no matter the score, I'd be grinning from ear to ear. The love and passion you inspired me to have for the game allowed me to make the journey from Millwall's U10s team, through the academy, to the first team in 10 years. When I was 18 I spent my debut, 90 minutes I'd worked towards my whole life, with a huge smile across my face.

I remember the Nike *Joga Bonito* advert that showed you replicating skills and unbelievable goals you'd scored as a boy. I was blessed to be part of the Nike *Nothing Beats A Londoner* campaign and it felt as if I was following in your footsteps. Producing some fancy footwork, a cheeky nutmeg and flicking the ball over someone to smash it into the top corner. The whole experience was life-changing. It was crazy to see myself on TV, big screens in the cinema and on Nike Town's wall in London. I hope I inspired young Londoners and young people across the world just like you inspired me – to be courageous and chase their dreams with big smiles on their faces.

I'll close this letter the same way I started it, with a thank you for breaking the mould. Thank you for teaching us to smile through life, even when things aren't going our way. Thank you for pioneering a new generation of skilful, daring and exciting footballers. Happy retirement 'Dinho, keep smiling.

Yours truly,

Leanne Cowan

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