

He's back, but for how long

ANGSHUMAN ROY

Calcutta: After his second goal against Uzbekistan on Tuesday, Portugal captain Cristiano Ronaldo wheeled towards his fans at Houston Stadium and roared: "I am back, I am back."

It had been a difficult week. The 41-year-old had been panned after a no-show in Portugal's 1-1 draw against the Democratic Republic of Congo — a result that surprised those who had tipped them as pre-tournament favourites. Tuesday's 5-0 romp changed the mood sharply. Ronaldo scored twice and became the first player to score in six World Cups. The nerves in the Portugal camp, and in the man himself, will have eased. But doubts remain.



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CRISTIANO RONALDO

When tougher opponents arrive in the knockout rounds and press higher up the pitch, does Ronaldo still have the speed to beat a defender on the break? Can he create the space that a modern No. 9 like an Erling Haaland must find? The answers will come later. For now, his fans will settle for what they saw on Tuesday.

Uzbekistan, despite sitting in a low block, were less disciplined than Congo had been — and Portugal punished them for it.

A Ronaldo at his peak would have added two more. In the opening minute, Nuno Mendes broke free on the left and whipped in a delightful delivery. The Ronaldo of 2019 would have reached it without breaking stride. This is 2026, and despite a desperate lunge, he could not connect. In the second half, Bruno Fernandes fed him with a sumptuous lob; the best Ronaldo could man-

age was to collide with Uzbek goalkeeper Abduvohid Nematov. Late on, another ball came in from the left and again the lack of pace was plain to see.

Yet the goals he did score were a reminder of why he remains one of the era's finest strikers. The first was textbook: a Joao Cancelo cross, a right-footed finish, the familiar SIUUU celebration — then a sprint to the bench to share the moment with teammates. The second was better still. He timed his run to perfection, latched onto a Bruno Fernandes pass, and his favourite foot did the rest.

"God helps those who work hard," Ronaldo said after the match. "It was a difficult week, a dark week. It felt like I'd retired from football. But I hung in there, as I always do, because I believe in hard work more than anything else. It was tough. I have to admit, but we're back."

The pressure on him before kick-off had been considerable. His eternal rival Lionel Messi, the Argentina captain, already has five goals in this tournament and is now the all-time leading scorer in World Cup history. France's Kylian Mbappe and Norway's Erling Haaland have four apiece. Ronaldo had none — until Tuesday.

Portugal coach Roberto Martinez was measured but warm. "I believe both players have improved football over the years and their rivalry is important for them to grow," he said. "Ronaldo is an icon and a role model in the national team. Not just the scoring — the passes, the chances created. He is a role model when it comes to the World Cup."

The way his teammates rallied around him on Tuesday bore that out. Uzbekistan coach Fabio Cannavaro — a standout defender in his playing days who captained Italy to the 2006 World Cup title — was characteristically blunt in his assessment of the former Real Madrid star. "As a defender you need to be ready and you need to be close to him in the box," Cannavaro said. "If you give him one centimetre in the box, you are dead."

He is back, then. Up to a point.

RONALDO'S WORLD

WORLD CUP CAREER Tournaments **6** Matches **24** Minutes **1,945** Goals **10** Assists **2**

Cristiano is the first man to score at six World Cups. Here's a break-up of his goals:

- 2006, GERMANY** Matches 6
- 2010, South Africa** Matches 4
- 2014, Brazil** Matches 3
- 2018, Russia** Matches 4
- 2022, Qatar** Matches 5
- 2026, USA-Mexico-Canada** Matches 2

Cristiano Ronaldo's look of utter relief after scoring his second goal in Portugal's win on Tuesday. (Reuters)

SCORERS AT MOST WORLD CUPS

- CRISTIANO RONALDO (Por)** 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2022 & 2026
- LIONEL MESSI (Arg)** 2006, 2014, 2018, 2022 & 2026
- UWE SEELER (Ger)** 1958, 1962, 1966 & 1970
- PELE (Bra)** 1958, 1962, 1966 & 1970
- MIROSLAV KLOSE (Ger)** 2002, 2006, 2010 & 2014

AGE FACTOR? NAH!

- At 41 years 138 days, Cristiano became...
 - The oldest player to score more than one goal at a World Cup match
 - The second-oldest player to score at the World Cup after Cameroon's Roger Milla (42 years 39 days) in 1994
 - The oldest scorer for Portugal at the World Cup (he was also the youngest)
 - One half of the pair — with Uzbekistan's Bekhruz Karimov (18 years 320 days) — which had the biggest age gap between two starting XI players in a World Cup match. The gap? 22 years and 183 days

OWN GOALS FILL THE CUP

This World Cup is proving to be one for own goals with nine of them till Tuesday's Portugal-Uzbekistan game. At the last World Cup, in Qatar, there were only two own goals in the entire tournament. So why the rise in numbers? It's difficult to pinpoint one reason, but the answer lies somewhere between the facts that this expanded edition has some of the weaker defences and superb strike forces in action.

