



Sporting's chance

WORDS: Tom Kundert

Under coach Jesus Jorge and dynamic president Bruno De Carvalho, Sporting are once again a major force in Portuguese football

Just three years ago, the status of Sporting Clube de Portugal, which had once proudly competed toe-to-toe with Europe's finest, was at an all-time low.

As Porto and Benfica swept up the domestic honours, the standing and credibility of Sporting was being

Green machine...Islam Slimani (centre) takes the acclaim after scoring against rivals Porto





Support...Sporting fans ahead of the big Lisbon dash with Benfica

visibly whittled away.

Sporting were simply unable to compete with their more powerful rivals. The team plunged to an unthinkable seventh-place finish in 2012-13 and years of boardroom mismanagement had put the financial viability of the entire institution at risk.

Then, on March 23, 2013 Bruno De Carvalho was elected as the club's new president. It is impossible to disassociate a sea change at Sporting with the arrival of Carvalho at the helm.

He immediately set about attacking every individual and entity he perceived as preventing Sporting from recapturing its past glories. And he hasn't stopped since. His fiercely confrontational methods are not pretty. One tirade against Porto president Pinto Da Costa insinuated he was going senile; accusations of Benfica bribing match officials have been commonplace; and he has instigated

a one-man war against football investment funds and agents. Needless to say, Carvalho has collected numerous and deep-seated enemies along the way.

But there is no doubt he has transformed the club, both on and off the pitch. Under the *onda verde* ("green tide")

Triumph...keeper Rui Patricio parades the Portuguese Cup to delirious fans after last season's Final win over Braga



slogan, the fan base has been re-energised, the club's talented young players are no longer wooed away at cut-price fees by unscrupulous agents, financial stability has been restored and, most important of all, Sporting are right back in the mix for trophies.

The sensational appointment of Jorge Jesus, the most successful coach in Portugal for the past decade, snatched from cross-town rivals Benfica, exemplified Carvalho's audacity in his quest to take Sporting back to the top.

An ex-Sporting player, as was his father, Jesus has strong emotional ties to the club. A short film shown on the giant screens at the stadium on the day he was presented, with footage of his father's playing days, almost reduced him to tears. "I can promise you that, from now onwards, Sporting will be competing for all the major honours in Portugal," he said.

The apparent match made in heaven



"I can promise you that, from now on, Sporting will be competing for all the major honours in Portugal"

Jorge Jesus, on his appointment as coach

has served to further galvanise the supporters and bring real belief that something special is happening at the club.

That enthusiasm only grew as Sporting began the season at a canter, beating arch-rivals Benfica three times and seeing off Porto to spend the vast majority of the campaign at the table summit. However, Benfica have since come back strongly, setting up a thrilling season finale.

Whether it will end in triumph for the green half of Lisbon only time will tell. But there is an inescapable feeling that Carvalho will not stop his Sporting crusade until something gives.

Will his frenzied attempts to guarantee the pre-eminence of his club blow up in smoke? Or are we about to witness a

definitive shift in the power structure of Portuguese football?

It would not be the first time it has happened. A brief overview of the history of Portuguese football reveals three epochs of hegemony, one for each of the country's traditional "Big Three".

Sporting were the first of the triumvirate to achieve a sustained period of absolute dominance, the Alvalade club ruling supreme in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly in the years straddling the two decades, when they lifted the Portuguese championship seven times in eight seasons, fired by the legendary quintet of attacking players known as the *cinco violinos* ("five violins").

The "eternal derby" ...Sporting versus Benfica



Jesus Correia, Manuel Vasques, Albano Pereira, Jose Travassos and goalscorer extraordinaire Fernando Peyroteo changed the history of Sporting and the face of Portuguese football, their relentless attacking and telepathic combination play making the Lions an irresistible force. Peyroteo's statistics especially make for eye-watering reading, as he scored a barely believable 543 goals in 334 games during his career.

From the moment Peyroteo, the first "violinist", made his debut to the time the last of the magnificent five, Travassos, hung up his boots, the Green and Whites won 10 championships and five Portuguese Cups. Playing together, the five did not lose a single game against Benfica, lost only once to Porto and were unbeaten at home. The club's annual pre-season tournament is named the Cinco Violinos in homage to the mythical fivesome.

The glory years for Sporting ended when a Eusebio-inspired Benfica wrested the reins of power from their neighbours in the 1960s and 1970s, before Porto, under the trophy-laden, controversial and ongoing presidency of Da Costa exerted their stranglehold on the domestic game.

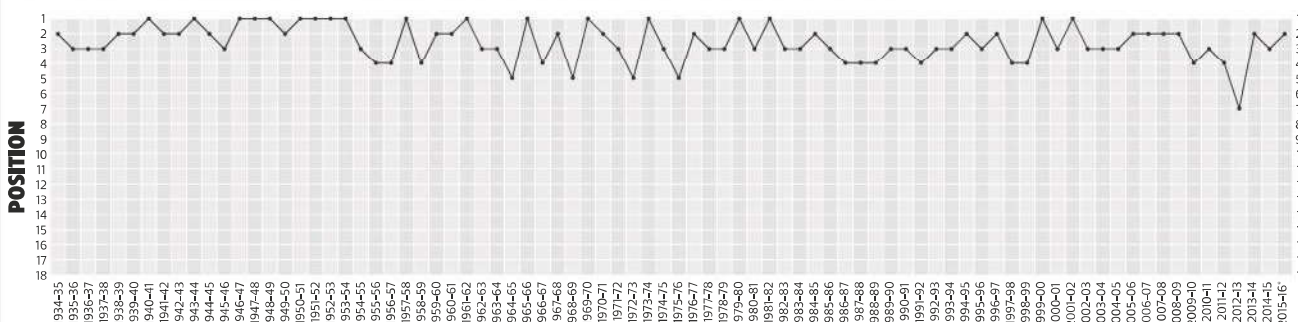
Porto's three-decade long empire of ascendancy is in apparent decline as age

SPORTING 1934-2016

League champions



BENFICA	34
PORTO	27
SPORTING	18
BOAVISTA	1
BELENENSES	1



(*as of 15.03.16)



Great expectations... Cristiano Ronaldo shows early signs of his talent against Maritimo in 2002

starts to catch up with Da Costa, paving the way for a fascinating three-way tussle for supremacy.

Since 1970 Sporting have lifted the title only five times, which shows the enormity of the mission Carvalho has tasked himself with in bringing a sustained period of success to the Alvalade.

Not that the intervening years have been all doom and gloom. While collective triumphs were few and far between, Sporting earned worldwide acclaim for producing some of the greatest talents to

The conveyor belt of talent flowing from the club's Alcochete academy shows no signs of slowing down

grace the game, particularly when it comes to wingers. Paulo Futre, Luis Figo and Cristiano Ronaldo are just three examples of footballers nurtured through the club's ranks who went on to achieve global stardom.

And the conveyor belt of outstanding talent flowing from the club's Alcochete academy, east of Lisbon on the other side of the River Tejo, shows no signs of slowing down. Sporting's success this season is built around the home-grown midfield trio of Adrien, William Carvalho and Joao Mario. It is not uncommon, even for the newly competitive Sporting, to line up with five players who came through the ranks.

What differs is that in the past the club's precociously talented prospects were sold too quickly and at too young an age to



BRUNO DE CARVALHO

Hard-headed, brazen and lashing out at all perceived obstacles to Sporting's success, the president has collected bitter enemies in his three years at the helm, but his unflinching focus on bringing back the glory days of yesteryear has galvanised the club.



JORGE JESUS

Another prickly and fiercely ambitious individual, the coach vowed upon his appointment in the summer that "from now on there will be three serious contenders for the championship in Portugal". He is making good on his promise.



ADRIEN SILVA

The club captain's calm, albeit determined, demeanour in interviews contrasts sharply on the pitch where that calmness is nowhere to be seen. A vigorous competitor always in the heat of the battle.



OCTAVIO MACHADO

Straight-talking ex-Portugal international and former Porto and Sporting coach, the general manager happily toes the party line, with public tirades common the minute he believes they get unfair treatment.



AUGUSTO INACIO

Public relations manager and ex-Sporting coach who led the club to the 2000 title after an 18-year barren spell. He has now settled his previous differences with Jorge Jesus.

THE POWER CURVE

The key figures at Sporting

THE STADIUM



Home...Estadio Jose Alvalade

One of Portugal's newly-built stadia for Euro 2004, the inauguration of the 50,000-capacity Estadio Jose Alvalade proved a famous occasion. On 6 August 2003, Sporting beat Manchester United 3-1 in a pre-season friendly and an 18-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo put in a performance punctuated with moments of such mesmerising brilliance that it would persuade Alex Ferguson to take the Portuguese magician back with him to Old Trafford where he would begin his ascent

towards global stardom.

Aesthetics play a big part in the Alvalade, with a mosaic multi-coloured design running through the whole complex, inside and out, save for the deep green undulating roof supported at each of the four corners by cables streaming down from massive metal pillars piercing far into the sky.

The facility as a whole is much more than a football stadium, incorporating a multi-sports pavilion, swimming pool, health club, clinic, shopping centre and



Waiting game... fans gather on the Alvalade steps

cinema complex, making it a hive of activity not only on match days.

The daring colour scheme is in marked contrast to the staid all-red tones of Benfica's Estadio da Luz, just four kilometres down the road. That the two stadium designs are so jarringly different is apt for two clubs who have spent a large chunk of Portuguese football history ferociously vying with each other for supremacy. It is not by chance that the Sporting-Benfica clash is known as the "eternal derby" in Portugal.

That rivalry has only intensified this season following the "defection" of coach Jorge Jesus from the red half to the green half of the city, with Sporting's contract rebel Andre Carrillo going in the opposite direction, and the two teams evenly matched in a thrilling title race.



Safety measure... a sunken walkway helps keep fans away from the pitch



Lisbon landmark...the stadium holds 52,000



bring either sporting success or meaningful financial gain. In contrast, the new regime has striven to protect their young pearls by routinely inserting buyout clauses of upwards of €45million in the contracts of their biggest assets, while complementing the local talent with experienced, proven and – by Sporting's standards – costly reinforcements.

But the contribution to the current vibrancy made by Jorge Jesus cannot be underestimated. As at Benfica, the coach has his team playing cohesive and easy-on-the-eye attacking football, while on an individual basis several players are performing at levels few believed they were capable of attaining.

Striker Islam Slimani is a case in point. Bought for €300,000 less than three

Threat...Islam Slimani

years ago, Sporting turned down six bids of up to €24million for the Algerian in the January transfer window.

Significantly, and in contrast to a succession of players of the recent past wanting away for their big pay day, Slimani is in no rush to leave Sporting. 'Jorge Jesus is a world-class coach – and I'm not exaggerating,' the burly striker recently said. 'Tactically he's a genius. It's an absolute pleasure to work with him. He makes us progress every day. It was the best decision of my career to sign for Sporting.'

With the potent

mix of fierce ambition, confidence and sense of entitlement coursing through the club's playing staff, supporters and hierarchy, there is every chance Sporting's woeful start to the new millennium will be followed by something very different.

A good example of the club's newfound self-esteem is the "NOT Sporting Lisbon" campaign, instigated on the social networks and endorsed by the club. In the not-too-distant past Sporting would have been grateful for any mention in the international press, even if erroneously referred to as "Sporting Lisbon". Not so nowadays. The club has embraced the fight to have its name correctly reported, which inherently emphasises its national dimension: Sporting Clube de Portugal. **WS**

• Bruno De Carvalho interview, page 64

Creative...Joao Mario



THE COACH



JORGE JESUS

Age 61 (24.07.54)

The swagger, energy and no little success he installs in teams goes some way to explaining the huge dollops of arrogance that typify each media conference and interview with this charismatic coach.

Convinced he is "the best in the world", Jesus made it to the top of the Portuguese game the hard way, collecting 12 clubs on his managerial CV

before finally arriving at Benfica. There, he won the title three times in six seasons (Benfica had won just one in the previous 15 years) and reached two European finals, playing a breathless brand of relentlessly attacking football.

So it shook the domestic game to the core when he walked out on the Eagles for local rivals Sporting last summer. Early signs are that he took his magic with him.

THE KIT



HOME KIT

SECOND KIT

THIRD KIT

THE SQUAD

GOALKEEPERS	<div>26</div> <div></div> <div>Azbe JUG (Slu)</div> <div>Age 24 (03.03.92)</div> <div>Became back-up to Rui Patrício after Marcelo Boeck was sold during the winter transfer window.</div>	<div>1</div> <div></div> <div>RUI PATRÍCIO</div> <div>Age 28 (15.02.88)</div> <div>A superb shot-stopper and psychologically resilient, he has been Portugal's first choice for several years.</div>	DEFENDERS	<div>13</div> <div></div> <div>Sebastian COATES (Uru)</div> <div>Age 25 (07.10.90)</div> <div>Ex Liverpool and Sunderland central defender, and, at 6ft 4in, the tallest outfield player in Portugal's top flight.</div>	<div>47</div> <div></div> <div>Ricardo ESGAIO</div> <div>Age 22 (16.05.93)</div> <div>Home-grown talent who can play in either full-back position or as a right-sided midfielder or winger.</div>	<div>5</div> <div></div> <div>EWERTON (Bra)</div> <div>Age 27 (23.03.89)</div> <div>Beanpole central defender who counts Russian side Anzhi among his former clubs. Has struggled with injuries since signing for Sporting.</div>		
	<div>4</div> <div></div> <div>JEFFERSON (Bra)</div> <div>Age 27 (05.07.88)</div> <div>Left-back who likes to bomb forward and deliver pinpoint crosses into the opposition box. Better attacking than defending.</div>	<div>21</div> <div></div> <div>JOAO PEREIRA</div> <div>Age 32 (25.02.84)</div> <div>Experienced right-back who returned to Sporting after being frozen out at Valencia. Struggled initially but has improved over the season.</div>		<div>44</div> <div></div> <div>NALDO (Bra)</div> <div>Age 27 (28.08.88)</div> <div>Well-travelled centre-back who was expected to be a back-up but has seen plenty of playing time and let nobody down with his solid displays.</div>	<div>15</div> <div></div> <div>PAULO OLIVEIRA</div> <div>Age 25 (08.01.91)</div> <div>Solid centre-back who was the boss of the back four until injury stymied his progress after Christmas. Has been linked to Manchester United.</div>	<div>35</div> <div></div> <div>RUBEN SEMEDO</div> <div>Age 21 (04.04.94)</div> <div>Fast and physical centre-back who can also play in central midfield. A big talent but struggles to keep his discipline.</div>		
	<div>31</div> <div></div> <div>Marvin ZEEGELAAR (Hol)</div> <div>Age 25 (12.08.90)</div> <div>Snapped up by Sporting in January after impressing for Rio Ave, the robust full-back has settled in well.</div>	<div>23</div> <div></div> <div>ADRIEN SILVA</div> <div>Age 27 (15.03.89)</div> <div>French-born captain who has been at the club since he was 12 and has finally realised his full potential.</div>		<div>28</div> <div></div> <div>ANDRE MARTINS</div> <div>Age 26 (21.01.90)</div> <div>Diminutive creator who has struggled for playing time this season.</div>	<div>6</div> <div></div> <div>Alberto AQUILANI (Ita)</div> <div>Age 31 (07.07.84)</div> <div>Full of experience but his appearances have been limited in Sporting's strongest sector.</div>	<div>11</div> <div></div> <div>BRUNO CESAR (Bra)</div> <div>Age 27 (03.11.88)</div> <div>Former Benfica man who has revived a career that threatened to fade away in the Middle East. Reunited with coach Jorge Jesus at Sporting.</div>		
	MIDFIELDERS	<div>30</div> <div></div> <div>BRUNO PAULISTA (Bra)</div> <div>Age 20 (21.08.95)</div> <div>Bought for a sizeable fee last summer, the combative Brazilian is seen as a long-term project. Sparsely used in the first team.</div>		<div>17</div> <div></div> <div>JOAO MARIO</div> <div>Age 23 (19.01.93)</div> <div>Cultured, elegant and creative midfielder who possesses wonderful technique.</div>	<div>14</div> <div></div> <div>WILLIAM CARVALHO</div> <div>Age 23 (07.04.92)</div> <div>Powerhouse defensive midfielder who has had half of Europe chasing him but has struggled of late.</div>	FORWARDS	<div>29</div> <div></div> <div>Hernan BARCOS (ARG)</div> <div>Age 31 (11.04.84)</div> <div>Snapped up in the January transfer window to boost Sporting's somewhat scarce striking options.</div>	<div>36</div> <div></div> <div>CARLOS MANE</div> <div>Age 22 (11.03.94)</div> <div>Gifted and quick, he has not developed as expected after making his debut two years ago, but is still a useful weapon to have on the bench.</div>
		<div>60</div> <div></div> <div>GELSON MARTINS</div> <div>Age 20 (11.05.95)</div> <div>Electrifying winger who is a handful for opposition defenders thanks to his dribbling and darting runs.</div>		<div>19</div> <div></div> <div>Teo GUTIERREZ (Col)</div> <div>Age 30 (17.05.85)</div> <div>No doubting his ability, but a questionable attitude means the local jury is still out.</div>	<div>73</div> <div></div> <div>MATHEUS PEREIRA (Bra)</div> <div>Age 19 (05.05.96)</div> <div>An exciting winger who has a fine left foot and has notched several goals despite limited first-team opportunities.</div>		<div>20</div> <div></div> <div>Bryan RUIZ (CR)</div> <div>Age 30 (18.08.85)</div> <div>The former Fulham man has exceeded expectations and is a key cog in Sporting's attacking play with the skill, creativity and vision to unlock the opposition.</div>	<div>9</div> <div></div> <div>Islam SLIMANI (Alg)</div> <div>Age 27 (18.06.88)</div> <div>Powerful and strong in the air. he has improved year on year since signing in 2013. Sporting turned down big-money bids for him in January.</div>

(All ages as of 25.03.16)

Facetoface

BRUNO DE CARVALHO (CLUB PRESIDENT)

“Football is losing its values”

“Sporting dominated in the 1940s and 1950s, Benfica the 1960s and 1970s, Porto since then.

Porto's empire seems to be crumbling. Do you think a new power shift is occurring in Portuguese football?

Unfortunately, what you say is true.

Sporting had very big teams until the mid sixties. We won seven championships in 10 years, then there was a change and the change was called Eusebio. Porto became very strong in the eighties and remained strong until six or seven years ago. Now we are trying to get Sporting back to the leadership of Portuguese football. And we want to be seen again as a winning team in Europe. But we have to take it step by step, and keep our feet on the ground, and keep focused. It's not easy. It's a long time since Sporting were at the top. We're talking about 50 or 60 years. We believe it's possible to start a new era, and that Sporting can again be what my

“We're trying to get Sporting back to the leadership of Portuguese football. And we want to be seen again as a winning team in Europe”

grandfather and my father taught me Sporting were. They were nicknamed “Cronico” because they were chronic winners. It's my goal as Sporting president to make the club like that again.

You say Sporting want to regain their competitiveness at European level, but given the financial disparity between Portuguese football and, for example, Spanish, English and German football, is that realistic?

As I said, we need to go step by step. It is a reality that the gap between the leagues is huge, but we also know that Sporting has something unique, which needs to be worked on, and a lot of people don't know this. Sporting has more than 400 delegations all over the world. We are not talking about philosophical groups or some fans who organise a supporters' club in their homes, but physical structures. We're talking about, for example, Sporting Club of Venezuela, Sporting Club of Macao, Sporting Club of Johannesburg, Sporting Club of Toronto, Sporting Club of London, Sporting Club of Paris. We have more than 400 of these structures all over the world. We are in all the continents and have been



for more than 80 years. We are now in the world's top 10 football clubs in terms of members, with 135,000. When you want something bad enough, when you work hard, when you put all your efforts together, nothing is impossible.

Will Sporting's ethos continue to be based on developing and using home-grown players?

Sporting, of course, are known because Luis Figo and Cristiano Ronaldo became the best in the world, but it's not just those two; Cedric was considered the best right-back in England after we sold him to Southampton. We are in the top three clubs as regards players who came through our academy who are now playing in Europe's five major leagues. We are the club that supplies the most players to the Portugal national team. This is our DNA. This is what we do best. To produce players, develop them and maximise their capacity. The second thing that makes people see us as a very different club is

delegations have a connection to the academies because you only gain something if you create synergies between all the parties. What we see now in our delegations is unique. You look into their eyes and you see pride, because they have been going for 80 years. One thing I think people don't realise is that football is losing its values. We have a very hypocritical situation in football. Very important people in the game have said to me: "There is nothing else in the world that can make a blue-eyed blond-haired boy look to a black man and say 'this is my idol'." I say to people that is all well and good, very philosophical, very nice, but let's stop a while and try to understand what happens. What I want is for the child to look at the player and say: "I want to be like him because he has values, he works hard, he showed me that in life you have to work very hard, you need to fight for the goals without stopping, my ultimate ambition is to be the best of the best." But this isn't what happens. The problem is



Home grown...Cedric

mark in football. When I leave I want people to believe that there are good people in football. This is not a problem afflicting only football. *World Soccer* has "global football" on its cover. The lack of principles and values is a global problem. Not only a football problem. It's a society problem. And when you have that problem you have a lot of consequences. When you have a lack of values you have financial crises in countries, you have social crises in countries, and in football you have clubs going bankrupt. We are speaking about billions of people who love this sport, and these billions of people need to receive more than emotion, they need to receive lessons of life, and football has forgotten its social aspect. If you pass the message that you can obtain success through dubious means you don't pass the proper football values, and one day in 10 years, in 100 years, I don't know, football will lose everything.

Like you, Jorge Jesus is a strong personality who is not afraid of saying what he thinks. Do you consider him the perfect coach for your Sporting project?

Yes. Jorge is the consolidation of these three years. Jorge works 24 hours a day, he has ambition, he likes excellence, he sees football as a combination of knowledge, talent and hard work. This is very important for me and for the club. We are unafraid of telling things as they are, we are strong personalities, and we are leaders. We always look for perfection. In life you will never achieve perfection, but at least, even if it's your last breath, your last thought should always be that you tried for perfection. That's why we are a very good combination. People questioned whether it was possible for strong personalities like us to work together. Let me tell you, it's so easy for people who are thinking the same way to work together. We are very good friends and have a single mind, which is merged to get Sporting to where we both want the club to be, which is the leading team in Portuguese football, and then showing the Sporting that Europe used to see.



that there is a line we refuse to cross. We don't believe in clubs owned by individuals. We believe in clubs owned by the fans. This is a very big difference between Sporting and some other clubs. We believe we can go to 49 per cent in terms of business, but 51 per cent needs to be fans. This is football's strength. A lot of clubs with the dimension of Sporting have a different view. They believe ownership can bring them success. Three years ago, people said that Sporting were three months away from closing its doors. Now we are talking about making Sporting a chronic winner.

It's interesting that Sporting have this two-pronged approach to raising their global profile...

We are speaking about two different things, but we try to make sure the

Team...Carvalho and coach Jorge Jesus

the child looks to the player and says: "He's my idol because he didn't go to school, he has all the girls he wants, he has money, he doesn't do anything, he just plays football. I want that. I want a good life and lots of money." This is not what football needs to provide for children. You need to be able to give the right values. Sporting is well-known in the world since I arrived because we have ideals, we fight for them, we have proposals for changing football. We were the face of the fight against the [third-party ownership] funds, we were the face of introducing new technologies, this is how people need to be in life and in football. They need to have values that people can understand. I don't want to live in a world where when I go to a cafe I hear people saying everybody involved in football is corrupt or bad. I'm 44 years old and I want to leave a