

FANS TURN OUT IN FORCE FOR A GLIMPSE OF REAL HUNKS

QUEEN OF WAGS



SMILES BETTER: New boy Ronaldo shares a joke with Michel Salgado and then makes his way back to the hotel after another tough session

IT WAS a scene so bizarre that it had to be real.

For the last few days we Irish girls got a chance to play WAGs to some of the beautiful game's most beautiful stars.

And we played a blinder. None more so than Monaghan lady Mary Cunningham.

The former councillor from Clones took the wagging rights by getting snapped with not one, not two, but three of Real Madrid's biggest names as Carton House in Co Kildare played host to the Galacticos ahead of tomorrow's big game with our own Tallaght-ticos from Shamrock Rovers.

Thousands of male footie fans will flock to Tallaght hoping to witness €94 million signing Ronaldo's first game in the famous white of Madrid tomorrow, but it was us girls who put him and his team mates through their paces all week.

We got 15 minutes of Wagdom, and we loved it.

It was more Surreal Madrid as Ronaldo and his team-mates kicked a ball around in front of a delighted crowd.

The rural area has long been a hideaway for the rich and famous - but there was nothing hidden about Cristiano Ronaldo and co, who, in between kickabouts, posed for pictures with fans.

Hero

All week, they came in their hundreds to see their heroes. Large groups of teenagers walked up the long drive - one gang of about 11 lads said they were hoping the Real Madrid guys would invite them to play a match against them, just like lucky Dubs Shamrock Rovers, who will take on the might of Cristiano, Raul, Karim and co tomorrow.

Just as UnReal was the sight of a wedding party who had booked the hotel on Thursday. In tuxedos and evening dresses, they mingled with the world's media and the fans.

Golfers who had come to practice on the driving range took time off to join in the party atmosphere.

For 15 glorious minutes, we caught a glimpse of the squad being put through their paces by coach Manuel Pellegrini.

No one cared that they couldn't understand much of what he was saying as he yelled orders in Spanish.

It's not called the "beautiful game" for nothing - and watching these superstars kicking a ball around a field was enough to turn anyone into a soccer fanatic.

The Irish and Spanish security guards roaming the estate were backed up by gardai who patrolled in cars and on foot.

The Spanish security guys spoke very little English but they had clearly been under orders to go easy on the fans while keeping a

Clones woman catches the eye of top Galacticos stars



watchful eye. They laughed when some of the fans - including yours truly - mistook two of them, dressed in Real Madrid tracksuits, for team captain Raul Gonzales and new teammate Karim Benzema.

For a blissful moment, I thought I was headed for WAGdom - but had to be content with giving interviews to Spanish and Portuguese TV about what Irish girls thought of Cristiano.

I got a chance to see the winger up close - and he is even more striking in the flesh.

Dressed in the team's away kit which matched his flashing black eyes, he looked like an exotic animal let loose in the Irish countryside. The only heavy-handedness came from the Spanish PR lady, who jealously guarded Ronaldo from yours truly.

She refused to give me the microphone during a press conference - and even ordered two flunkies to yank him away just as he was about to pose for a pic with me.

TV3's Lisa Cannon had better luck. The Xposé reporter asked Ronaldo if he was trying to copy David Beckham with his skimpy shorts and metrosexual image - and whether or not they had helped pull Paris Hilton. Before he could answer that, the PR rottweiler yanked the mic away - but not before he confessed: "I always try to copy my sister and my mum but it's not possible - she's more beautiful than me."

Luckier still were brothers Oisín (10) and Oscar (7) O'Donoghue, and their parents Neil and Ashley, who got to meet most of the squad. The family from Castleknock, north Dublin, had booked into the hotel.

Oisín, who plays goalkeeper with Castleknock Celtic, confessed: "I'm a Man United fan but Real Madrid is my second favourite. It's great that Cristiano Ronaldo has been signed to Real Madrid."

Liverpool fan Mary Cunningham was happy about the €95 million transfer for another reason. "I'm absolutely delighted Man United lost him," the former councillor from Clones, Co Monaghan said as she sat in her wheel-

chair in front of the hotel.

She and her daughter Paula, who is manager of Fermanagh Ladies' GAA football team, had met Raul Gonzalez the night before. "He was lovely," Mary sighed, adding: "I suppose we are groupies."

Rugby lad David Sheridan (18) from Navan was there with his mum Patricia and friends, GAA footballer Darragh Smyth (19), pro golfer Simon Kennedy (18) and Spanish student Carlos Jimenez (17).

Simon, who is a pro golfer at Hollywood Lakes club, said he could appreciate soccer after, seeing Real Madrid in action. And he said he had heard the squad played a few rounds of golf on the famous Montgomerie course at Carton during the week.

Fling

David and Darragh were more impressed by Ronaldo's alleged fling with Paris Hilton. "Paris Hilton - well, you wouldn't say no, would ya?" Darragh laughed.

But it's not all fun and games for the squad during the training camp.

They may be staying in a luxury hotel but they are leading Spartan lives during the training camp.

When they're not training (three times a day, for 90 minutes a pop), they are staying in separate quarters attached to the spa.

They don't even get to enjoy the hotel's fine food. Instead, they eat pre-packed high-carb meals, which have been specially flown in from Spain - six times a day.

Unlike your typical tourist, these lads had come here especially for our lousy weather.

Coach Manuel Pellegrino said the cool air would make it easier for the team to train for the coming season.

These lads certainly lifted the dark clouds of the Irish recession, and no doubt Fáilte Ireland will seize the opportunity to promote Ireland as a summer camp for international sports stars.

For us Irish, the sun is shining on a new era of international soccer tourism. With Liverpool scheduled to play West Cork team Dunmanway FC next month, it's time to extend a real Irish welcome to all top teams.

And we can reveal that next up at Carton House is likely to be home to the tanned and toned thoroughbreds of the Italian national team when they take on our own boys in green.

Wannabe wags, start training now.

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