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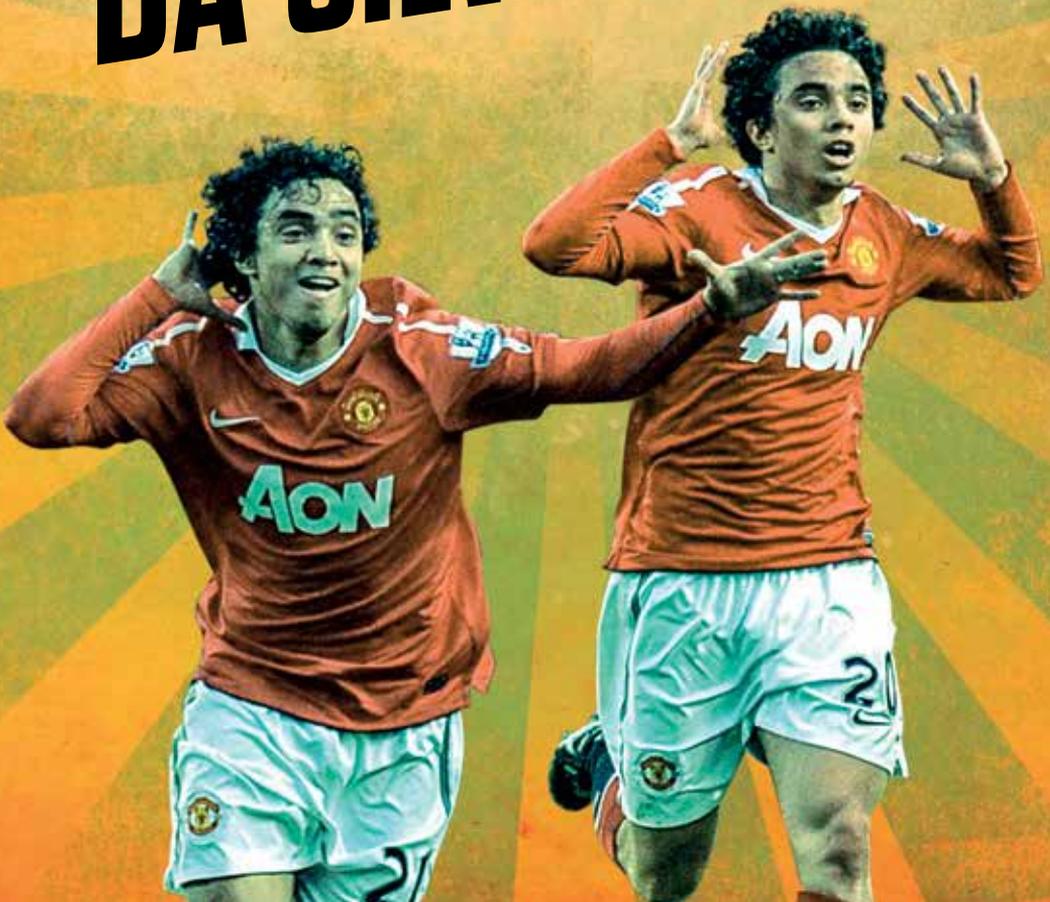
Kids

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

**RAFAEL & FABIO
DA SILVA**

WITH
WAYNE BARTON

FOREWORD BY
SIR ALEX FERGUSON



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Destination Manchester

IT'S TRUE that in 2005 our life started to change. When we were young boys we didn't ever think about leaving Brazil. But in 2005 we left the country for the first time to play in a tournament in Spain. The flight was terrible; turbulence all the way. It was the first time we ever got on a plane and it was the worst flight of our life. In Spain we were playing in a young Brazil team, but against clubs like Barcelona. This was also the first time we realised there was a different kind of pressure. There were scouts from around the world watching these games. This was a difficult tournament for us, and we didn't really do ourselves justice.

Even as a 14-year-old there is a big weight of expectation on your shoulders when you pull on the shirt of Brazil. We were probably being considered for selection anyway but it helped that Edgar Pereira was now involved with the youth selection for the country, because of how well he'd done at

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Fluminense. Soon after the trip to Spain we were called up to play in a tournament in China – the Nike Cup.

The flight to Hong Kong from Brazil was twice as long as it had been to Spain. It took a full day to get there. Thankfully, the journey wasn't so bad. At the hotel they did everything to make us feel at home, so we were eating food we were familiar with and although we did go out a few times, we didn't see too much of Hong Kong – just enough to make us appreciate that this was a completely different culture and lifestyle to what we were used to. We weren't there as tourists, though. We were there to play football. Even then there was the pressure. After all, it felt as if the tournament had been changed just for our benefit, and so we had better win it or it could have been embarrassing. The tournament had even been renamed the 'Manchester United Cup', maybe because United were doing their pre-season tour in the area at the same time.

Rafael: There was an opening ceremony where all of us got to meet Eric Cantona. This was our first introduction to a man we didn't even recognise as a legend of Old Trafford. No ignorance on our part – he retired from playing before we had internet. We had one small television in the house and we were allowed to watch cartoons and that was it. We played football – we didn't watch it, unless it was Brazil who were playing. The first great French player I remembered was Zinedine

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Zidane, for what he did in the 1998 World Cup against Brazil. Zidane is the greatest ever. We just had no idea what Cantona meant to football, what he meant to Manchester; of course, we would find out.

We played against Paris Saint-Germain in the first game and lost. It was so disappointing. The games were short – 20-minute halves. It was tough to get into a rhythm, to get into the game. The humidity also made it very uncomfortable. In the second game we played against a Swedish team, Brommapojkarna, and, to be honest, we were expected to defeat them comfortably. They were a good team – they qualified for the tournament, so they definitely had quality – but there was a difference between them and teams like Manchester United, Inter Milan, Arsenal, Borussia Dortmund, and ourselves. We were among the favourites. But we found it difficult in these games. Although we won – and then again against South African team Moroka Swallows – we went into our last group match against Tai Po knowing that if we didn't win we'd be out of the competition.

We have a close friend, Leonardo Barcellos. He didn't make it as a professional but he was in our Fluminense team and we sometimes joke with him that he saved our careers. We were having a dreadful game against Tai Po and were almost certain to be eliminated. The rain was pouring, our shirts were stuck to our skin and they were defending so well

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that everything we were trying was useless. The first half ended goalless. We've played ten, maybe 15 minutes of the second half and we can't even get a shot on goal. Nothing is coming off. We're too anxious to relax. Then Leonardo hits a long pass. Even that goes wrong. This time, though, a wrong makes a right – at least as far as we're concerned. The pass flies over the goalkeeper and into the top corner of the net. It looks like one of the greatest goals. It feels like that for us. Instantly, our mood is transformed. That goal comes so close to the end of the game and we switch into another gear, scoring two more times to win 3-0.

Okay, so maybe Leonardo didn't save our careers, but it felt like that at the time. He was very unlucky. In the next game, we play Pumas of Mexico. We put in a really good performance and win 2-0, but Leonardo was involved in a tackle in which the other boy suffered a broken leg. It's an accident; it's tough, especially when you're young, and even for the player who makes the tackle, because they have to live with it. But it was a fair challenge – which was more than could be said for the game against Estudiantes in the semi-final, a game as competitive as you can imagine for teams from Brazil and Argentina facing each other, even at that level. The aggression can cause you to lose your concentration. Not for us that day – we won 1-0 and got to the final where we played PSG, the team we lost to in the very first game.

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Revenge plays on your mind, even as a kid. Again, you could do without the distraction, but this is human nature, and this wasn't a normal situation. We're playing in a tournament with some of the biggest teams in the world. You hear stories about scouts from this or that team watching you – you know for sure they're watching you in these games. It's a series of games over three or four days that has the capability of changing your entire future. It wasn't overnight, but it had gone from us being well-known in the area in which we lived, to then playing for our country, and then hearing stories about Real Madrid wanting to sign us on top of this preliminary contact we'd been having with Manchester United: the two biggest clubs in Europe. Suddenly, your friends and parents and coaches telling you how good you are feels like reassurance instead of a compliment. It was great for a while, being so distinctive and well-known because of the simple fact we are twins. But you then are *expected* to do well and that is a different feeling for a young teenager to handle. Emotionally it was tough but all of the good advice we had from our parents and brother helped us in these moments.

Before the final, John Calvert came to talk to us. He said that whatever happened, Manchester United would still like to take us on trial. We didn't know this at the time, but United were arranging a deal with Fluminense. John's words did help take the pressure away from us. We were nowhere near as

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tense or anxious, or concerned about making a mistake, as we had been in the first game against PSG. We won 1-0, and our performance was much better this time around.

It would be wrong to say we *expected* United to make contact. We hoped they would, and we didn't know when it would happen if it did. Within a couple of weeks of the Nike Cup ending, the relationship between the clubs was made formal and we were told that over the next few months, United might take some of us on trial.

What we did not expect was for an Arsenal representative to come in and make an offer. And they offered a lot of money – but to the wrong person. Instead of approaching Fluminense, they went straight to our dad, and he – as a man of integrity and principle – refused to discuss it with them, and said they should talk to our club instead. They might have done, but we never heard any more about it.

Rafael: I went to Manchester first. It was strange to be by myself. Well, it was me and Arthur, but it was the first time being away from my brother and my family. I think I stayed in the Lowry.

Fabio: To be honest, when he was gone, I wasn't thinking that I wished I was there. But then he came back and started to talk about it and I was desperate to go. It was crazy.

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Rafael: When I first went to Manchester, they said it was for training, not for a trial. After it went well, they said they would be interested in bringing me back. I was scared, because they didn't speak about my brother. We arrived back in Brazil and the guy who was with us saw that I was worried and he said, 'It's okay, we want your brother as well. Next time you will come with him.' I was so relieved and so happy.

Fabio: From then on, it was usually all four of us. Us, Maicon Bolt and Arthur. The first day I remember walking into Carrington with John Calvert, and going straight to Sir Alex's office to meet him. I'm nodding like I understand what he is saying. John is translating everything. To be honest, I was just a little overawed by it all. But United were always showing they were keen to sign us, even when we weren't there. One day when we were back home in Brazil I got a call on my cell phone. Zero zero zero zero zero. Where the hell is this call from? It said Europe – I've never had a phone call from Europe before. 'Olá!' The voice on the other end is friendly but unfamiliar. 'It is Cristiano!' I thought somebody was taking the piss. Sir Alex has convinced Cristiano Ronaldo to call us to tell us to come to Manchester. Cristiano had been on holiday to Rio a few times so was comfortable speaking Brazilian Portuguese – we didn't know any other language, we hadn't even started learning English yet.

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When we were in England, every morning, Ruud van Nistelrooy would make sure he welcomed us. 'Bom dia!' For a professional to show that sort of attention was great, but Ruud was bigger than just a professional, he was one of the greats. Perhaps he'd been told to be friendly, like Cristiano, but the impression we got was that their welcomes were genuine. They had been in our position once, as young players moving to this big club in a different country.

Manchester United are known as a club who bring through their own players, most of them local. When we were on trial, there were so many players there who went on to become well-known in England. Danny Welbeck, Fraizer Campbell, Danny Drinkwater, Tom Cleverley. Febian Brandy was also very helpful to us and went out of his way to help us settle. We were popular boys in Brazil, well-liked by our team-mates, and fortunately we would become well-liked in Manchester, too. But not everybody was welcoming. The Eckersley brothers – local players, full-backs themselves – smashed us at every single opportunity they got. Welcome to Manchester. It wasn't exactly hate, but they weren't happy with us being there, and that was only natural. It sometimes felt like they wanted to kill us.

When it comes to talent – pure talent – then the players we played with in Brazil were just as good as those at United. Probably better in a lot of cases. But what we found in England

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was discipline and hard work. Full-backs, for example. They stayed in position much more often in England. Even at 16. In Brazil, you're up and down the byline, you just want to assist or score goals. In England they're in position, defending first. One of the first things you notice is that everyone is working as hard as they possibly can to make the most of the opportunity they have.

As soon as we had a taste of Manchester it felt very serious. We went on trial, we went to train, we signed contracts there – it was never a case of going there for a holiday. This was an opportunity at one of the world's biggest clubs and we were not going to use that chance just to go sightseeing or clothes shopping. That competitive spirit came out again. We wanted to prove that we belonged. That we could contribute.

We didn't speak English when we first arrived but it was easy to tell that Paul McGuinness, the youth team coach, was going to be very important for us, just as important as the manager in those early days. Everything he said, John Calvert translated for us. The messages were brilliant. We would always be challenged to do something. After coming off the training pitch exhausted following the morning sessions, Paul would ask, 'Right boys, time for some technical training?' And we would be enthusiastic, hiding our tiredness. 'Of course!' Everything they asked, we said yes. It didn't matter what it was. Yes, we would do it. We were desperate to impress them.

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Even if we didn't want to do it, even if we were tired. Yes, every time. We needed to impress at every opportunity. We didn't want it to look like we couldn't do it.

Fabio: We would get included in first team training. The very first session, my very first involvement, I can remember it like it was yesterday. I played a lot of video games when I was younger. I lost count of how many times I had played as, and played against, Rio Ferdinand, Ryan Giggs, Wayne Rooney, Cristiano, all of these wonderful players on the video games. Here they were in the flesh. I was actually playing with them. First moment. The ball is coming towards me in the air. Paul Scholes is coming towards me on the ground. He's giving me a welcome like the Eckersley brothers – he's letting me know that I shouldn't expect to take it easy. This is my first touch – the truth is, I didn't know what to do, I almost froze. But the ball bounced on to my foot, a perfect bounce, and it goes over his head. I instinctively move to pass it. It looks like the most amazing piece of skill. Everyone goes wild – I can remember Rio screaming at it. The truth is, it's a complete accident! I was lucky Scholes didn't smash into me.

It was so competitive at United then. All the way through the club. The first team was becoming the best in England again but the reserve side was also very talented – Gerard Piqué and

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Jonny Evans in defence, Fraizer Campbell and Giuseppe Rossi up front scoring lots of goals. The youth team – the team we would have been playing in if we were allowed – got to the FA Youth Cup final in 2007. It was a very strong time. The reason we weren't allowed to play was because we were from Brazil and didn't turn 18 until July 2008, so United were doing whatever they could to get us registered and playing as soon as possible. That included looking into getting Portuguese passports, and we were open to that, although truthfully – even though we might have said differently when we were younger – we always really wanted to play for Brazil. That was our country, that was our place. Our dad would not have been happy.

United proved they were willing to wait when they made a deal with Fluminense to sign us in February 2007. We were represented by Cassiano Pereira, an agent who, to be truthful, is more of a friend now. He had our best interests at heart and, as a businessman, knew how to deal with negotiations. United did not offer the biggest wages then – it was probably less than what Arsenal had offered – but it was much more than what we were used to in Brazil.

Rafael: I can remember the reaction of my parents when we were all told of the offer. They leaned back in their chairs – it was hilarious, like one of those WTF? memes – because

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they were so stunned. It wasn't just the money, it was the commitment for a period of time, the commitment to moving. It was an offer that would change the life of our family.

Fabio: We were like, 'Sign, sign!' But Cassiano is cool and says, 'No, you are interesting the top clubs, Real Madrid, Arsenal, they can offer more.' He was looking after us – but he knew that we were desperate to sign, and would have signed for the offer that was given, so he worked it out with United.

A couple of weeks after we signed that contract, we played in the South American Under-17 Championship in Ecuador. Our team was very good. We had Alex Teixeira and our club-mate Maicon Bolt with us but the player every single one of us thought was destined to be brilliant was Lulinha. At Fluminense there was a player called Walandy who we shared the same expectation about. Every generation has them – Brazil always seems to have several.

Rafael: Lulinha scored 12 goals but because my brother scored seven, and was a full-back, everyone gave a lot of attention to him. And he deserved it. For me, I defended more often, and in Brazil, if a player spends more time defending than attacking – even if you're a defender! – then it can be a negative thing. They think you are not so good.

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Fabio: But without you providing the security, shape and balance in defence, I do not have the freedom to run basically like a left-winger, and score all those goals. One cannot happen without the other. It is right, the reputations of the more defensive players suffer, but it isn't necessarily fair.

Before we played in the Eight Nations tournament in South Korea – which was a warm-up event for the Under-17 World Cup there a few weeks later – we had a new coach, Luis Antonio Nizzo. We won the Eight Nations, on penalties against Nigeria, but it didn't feel the same as with Edgar Pereira. We had such a special relationship with him. Nizzo wasn't a bad coach – it was just different. When we went back to Ecuador to play in the Pan American games a couple of weeks after the Eight Nations it was clear our travelling was catching up with us. Against the host nation we tired in the second half, conceding three goals and losing 4-2. We were knocked out in the group stage.

We had another long flight back to South Korea for the Under-17 World Cup in August. It started well. We won 7-0 against New Zealand and 6-1 against North Korea. That was not reflective of the quality in this competition. England had Danny Welbeck, who we knew now from spending time with him at United. Belgium had Eden Hazard in their squad.

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Germany had the brilliant Toni Kroos. Spain's squad included David de Gea and Pedro. We came up against Ghana in the round of 16. This squad featured no players who would go on to earn a full international cap but it seemed as if they were all taller than us, faster, stronger, with more energy on the day. They beat us 1-0. Maybe they were better – maybe we were exhausted. Maybe it was the new coach. No excuses. We should have done better. It was embarrassing.

Rafael: Both of us are pretty poor losers, but I'm worse. We were tired but the first thing you want to do is to play football again to win and make it better.

As soon as we returned to Fluminense, though, we discovered they had changed their mind about the deal with Manchester United. They weren't happy with it – maybe they wanted more money. They can't break the deal, though. So the solution is that we can't train or play until we go to Manchester, which is almost a year away. This is a crazy and frustrating time for us. Since the age of 11, the maximum time we have spent without being around competitive football either in games or in training has been a month. It was confusing for us – all we wanted to do was play. We never held back, we'd give our all for Fluminense if only we were allowed to. The politics of transfers has little to do with us; we were just kids.

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It is strange, because we started writing this story in the summer of 2020, at a time when the coronavirus has forced many countries around the world to quarantine, and almost all of sport stopped. This was a familiar feeling for us, but it was unwelcome. There are things in life and in sport you cannot help. In football you get injuries and suspensions and miss games. This is normal. It is not normal to be in the situation where you are fit and willing to play, and there is nothing stopping you, but you can't.

We loved our time with Fluminense but it is clear this wasn't the best way for things to end. We maintained contact and communication with Manchester United and when Fluminense made it clear we wouldn't be considered to play, the clubs agreed that we could go to Manchester in January 2008, a few months before our contract started. It wasn't a good thing to miss football but we did have the opportunity to prepare to move to England as a family which was a good thing.

Fabio: I had been with my girlfriend Barbara since I was 15 and she was 14. We were very close and I couldn't think of moving to Manchester without her coming too. So I had to talk to her father – and as a 17-year-old, you can imagine how scary that was, to tell her father that I wanted to move thousands of miles away, take his little girl halfway across

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the world. I can imagine how I would react in his position. I explained how I felt about her, that my family was going to be there too. Eventually he said he would consider it. It was not an easy decision for him, but he said he would allow it if Barbara and I got married.

He was concerned about the lifestyle footballers have. He thought about the reputation that comes with more money, and the idea of more girls being interested. But, if I could commit to marrying his daughter, he would see how serious I was, and she would also have some security in case anything did go wrong. I was happy to do that, not just because it would mean that we could go to Manchester together, but because I did, and do, love her and I wanted to spend my life with her. It was important to me to get her father's blessing because of the respect I have for him, and I think by going through with getting married, even though we were so young, I earned his respect too.

Rafael: Because all of our family were going to move to Manchester, it meant we had started to already fulfil our ambition of providing for our parents. They could move with us and they wouldn't have to work. We were so proud of this but one thing we didn't realise was how deeply that would affect our dad, for a long time, and not in a good way. Because he is so proud, because he worked every single day of his life,

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and because of the sacrifice he has given for us to progress with our life, he found the idea of his young sons providing for him very difficult and even embarrassing. In fact, for a while, he was so down that I don't think it is exaggerating to say he was depressed. It was difficult for us to understand – a time when we were so excited, and he was excited for us, but for different reasons.

As a football lover, he was so proud that we were going to play for one of the world's biggest clubs. But he struggled to reconcile that with the reality of going to Manchester and not having to work to support and provide for his family. In fact, he refused to. We had to talk to the club about it because he felt so strongly. United offered him a job as a groundskeeper at Carrington. I think that made him feel much better; the funny thing was, he didn't even take the job because of the language barrier, but I do think having the option made him feel much more comfortable and accepting of the situation.

When we arrived in Manchester in January 2008, we hadn't played any football for almost five months. We were going to have to learn to kick a ball again – not exactly the best preparation when you're going to play for one of the world's biggest clubs!