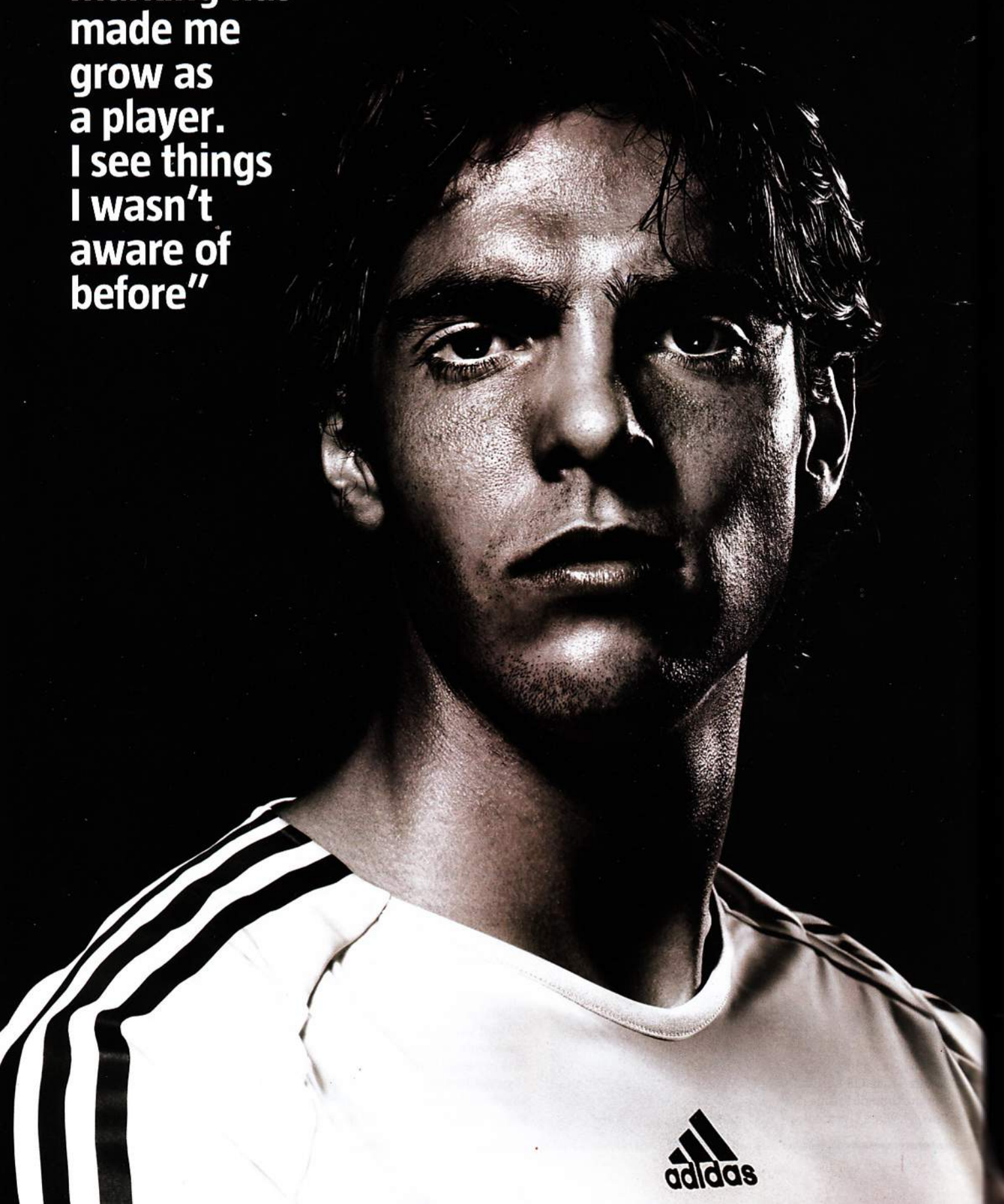


**"Tighter
marking has
made me
grow as
a player.
I see things
I wasn't
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before"**



There's a papier-mâché dummy of a butler looking over the balcony. He's not very realistic, but enough to spook you as you wander into the room. Elsewhere it's all semi-darkness and black screens. The bang and whine of a flash gun begins to feel like an audio version of Chinese water torture. We're in a warehouse-like building in a tiny chocolate-boxy village.

Did it ever occur to Kaká that life as one of the world's most coveted footballers could be so surreal? It's the morning after a big game the night before. He's spent it prancing and posturing to create the requisite number of images for adidas's moody advertising shots.

His Italian tumbles out fluently. Occasionally his mind overtakes his tongue and he impatiently corrects his own grammar. This is a bear of some brain. He's learning English "because it's a very useful language" and says he would have been an engineer like his father if it hadn't been for football.

Kaká

Milan's young Brazilian genius has a diplomat's temperament, an athlete's stamina and a skier's legs. And, he tells Alison Ratcliffe, he owes it all to God, Leonardo and Sheva

Photos Gary M Prior, Robert Wilson

Daisy-fresh, baby-faced, and 23-years-old, he's not an obvious heir to the imposing Paolo Maldini. But some have already suggested he will inherit his armband. "He's a well-balanced, laid-back young man, who is not prone to over-excitement or depression," says Milan boss Carlo Ancelotti. "He is mentally strong and already very mature beyond his years."

Between 10 and 17 September – eight days the *Gazzetta dello Sport* called "the week of Kaká" – the Brazilian scored goals worthy of a slalom skier against Siena and Fenerbahçe and renewed his contract until 2010. "The renewal will be an added stimulus for me," smiled an →

[STARRING ROLE]

under-fire Ancelotti wryly, "to stay here and coach him until 2010. It was a goal [against Fenerbahçe] and a style of football from a bygone age. It reminded me of Maradona's goal against England at the Mexico World Cup. In today's game only Ricky can do these things."

Except he couldn't last season. "First of all they left me alone because they didn't realise what I could do," says Kaká of what was an uncharacteristically tepid reception from Serie A defences in his dazzling 2003/04 debut season. "Then they started to mark me more closely. Sometimes they man-marked me."

"The other teams figured him out," agrees one of his Milanese playmaking predecessors, Zvonimir Boban. "He can't run all the way to goal with the ball at his feet any more – they just knock him over. But if he turns up without it he'll be devastating. He just needs to mature."

Kaká has already turned his brainpower to his footballing skills. "This tighter marking has

countrymen are educated to be risk-takers. But how does he reconcile Ancelotti's advice to "keep it simple" with his more audacious instincts? "Doing the simple things doesn't mean not taking risks," says Kaká. "It means keeping things as simple as possible, spending time on the ball... I try to understand the two pieces of advice in that way. Play it simple, but there are moments when you have to take risks."

And when you're something of an attacking Robocop, risks are never as risky. Real Madrid coach Vanderlei Luxemburgo calls Kaká "the standard bearer of the modern game," with the technique of a Brazilian and the physical qualities of a European. To Daniele Tognaccini, Milan's physical trainer and head of the renowned MilanLab, with its battery of equipment for monitoring the rossoneri players, he's a physiological phenomenon.

"Kaká's performance is quite strange," says Tognaccini. "He has the speed of a sprinter, but

Turibio Leite de Barros Neto remembers him at 17, nearly 6ft, but with a matchstick physique. "During 18 months of special work he put on ten kilos of muscle and was able to start fully expressing his talent on the field," says Neto.

This is a little understated on Neto's part. At 15 Kaká was only beginning to consider becoming a pro – career progression is perhaps less urgent when you are born to a middle-class, professional family rather than learning to kick a ball in the dust of a shanty-town like many a Brazilian dazler. At 18, plucked from the youth team, he scored twice in two minutes on his São Paulo debut to win the Rio-São Paulo Cup for the first time in the club's history. While fellow youth players bobbed up in the first team and sank again, the boy from the bourgeoisie stayed afloat, and in style.

That was six months after he was told he might never walk again. An incident involving his head and a chute in a water park left him

"The Milan players have lived through so much in football. It's not possible they would celebrate at half-time"

Kaká still has the stamina to sprint with joy after slaloming his way through the Fenerbahçe defence



been really important for me this season – it's made me grow as a player," he says. "I see lots of things I wasn't aware of before. I've developed in terms of reading the game, seeing space."

What about the less savoury reputation of Italian defences? "In my experience they are very hard, but I've not experienced anything underhand." No team fouling, where players take turns to bring down a danger man, so avoiding a red card, as when four Inter players were booked for halting Kaká runs in 2004? "I don't really think about these things, but some coaches must be using these kinds of strategies," he admits with a grin.

And despite Boban's predictions, Kaká can still dance through defences with a little help from his team-mates: "We did well to create space for Kaká to shoot," said Andriy Shevchenko after the Fenerbahçe encounter. "Unfortunately, few people tend to notice that 'silent' work we all do for our team-mates. We did the same thing for his goal against Siena."

His captain Maldini has praised Kaká for knowing how to take risks: a great compliment, according to the Brazilian, since his

the stamina of a long-distance runner. You don't usually find these two qualities together. He is less explosive than the greats he was compared to after that second goal against Fenerbahçe. Maradona was explosive. Baggio was fantastic over short distances. But Ricardo's endurance is incredible. He can do 100 metres, accelerating the whole way. But we've got no intention of trying to improve his explosiveness. We like Kaká the way he is."

Tognaccini suggests Kaká might enjoy an après-foot career on the slopes: "One of the qualities great skiers have is the independence of movement of the legs from the body. You only have to think of the way Ricardo moved for his first goal against the Turks: he moved his legs, but his body hardly moved at all. He has a motor intelligence that allows him to excel in any speed or endurance sport. It wouldn't surprise me if he became a great skier."

But Kaká was born mortal. "I started off as an attacker," he says. "Then, because I was too small, a coach moved me to midfield. In attack I was taking too much punishment and I wasn't managing to play." São Paulo's physical trainer

with broken vertebrae – discovered only after doctors had sent him back to his club, where he collapsed in training the next morning.

"It took me two months to recover, two very important months in my life," Kaká says. "I grew up a lot. I realised a lot of things were more important than I'd thought. It was a moment of spiritual growth – with God, with Jesus. A really important time in my life. I always read the bible to pass the time. I grew up with that kind of education. My parents are evangelicals. Then I began to have experiences with God myself. It's a very good life with God."

So good Kaká hates to keep it a secret. His boots bear the legend "I belong to Jesus" and he wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan over his rossoneri shirt in Milan's 2004 scudetto celebrations. His adventures so far do suggest someone is looking over him. Part of the recovery process after his accident involved writing a list of ambitions. He says he's forgotten half of them, because "they were all within reach" and he's accomplished every one.

Whether everyone would agree that aims such as "play for the São Paulo first team"

(at 18), "play in the World Cup," and "get a transfer to a top European side" are easily reached targets is another matter.

Kaká's 19-minute 2002 World Cup cameo against Costa Rica certainly owed something to providence. Djalminha might have nicked the squad place ahead of Kaká, but the older player's chances took a nose dive after he head-butted his coach at Deportivo La Coruña Javier Irureta. Former Brazil captain and rossonero scudetto-winner Leonardo oiled the mechanics of Kaká's transfer to Milan. Indoctrinated by his pro-Milanese patter when the pair played together for São Paulo, Kaká was not interested in any other team by the time his talent was ripe for the European market. He spurned Chelsea's advances. With Leonardo acting for Milan, the rossoneri paid a risible £5.8million (£8.5m). The tifosi were certainly laughing when he scored in three of his first four derbies.

"Sheva was very important because he'd had pretty much the same experience as me," says Kaká. "He arrived at Milan when he was young, went through everything you do with the press, with his football. He always gives me advice. He talked to me about everything: the game, on and off the pitch, the press, other teams."

São Paulo to Milan is not a difficult transition, says Kaká, a point mischievously reinforced by his countryman and rival at Inter, Adriano: "It's harder for me coming from Rio to Milan - Kaká comes from São Paulo, which is less lively and more used to working." Another trying to make the transition is Kaká's younger brother Digão, a defender on Milan's youth books. He's due to spend a year at Rimini, but when he returns Kaká knows he can only benefit from learning under youth coach Franco Baresi.

The sprinter-skier-long-distance runner's frame is awkwardly folded on a low shabby sofa in a dressing room. So far it's been a polished but slightly anodyne performance.

The Champions League final, I suggest, is compulsory question matter. He accepts this graciously. Only when I raise the rumours that Milan were celebrating at half-time does he spark into irritation. "Lots of people are looking for reasons to explain what happened," he says. "I'm the youngest at Milan. All the others are older experienced players, who have lived through so many things in football. It's not possible that an experienced player would celebrate at half-time."

By Kaká's reckoning if he wins the Champions League with Milan and the World Cup with Brazil he should be on for the Ballon d'Or. Once he's won the World Cup he plans to marry his 17-year-old girlfriend, Caroline Celico, the daughter of the Christian Dior representative in Brazil.

That should deter fans like Cristiane Sampaio from pitching up at training and proposing marriage. The 20-year-old has a Kaká tattoo and describes herself as "Kaká's angel". Understandably angered by the lesser offer of a signed Brazil shirt, she wailed that she had converted to Evangelism for her idol. Clearly for Kaká, the surreal is everyday. ★

Kaká

