



REAL MADRID: ANOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER CRISIS

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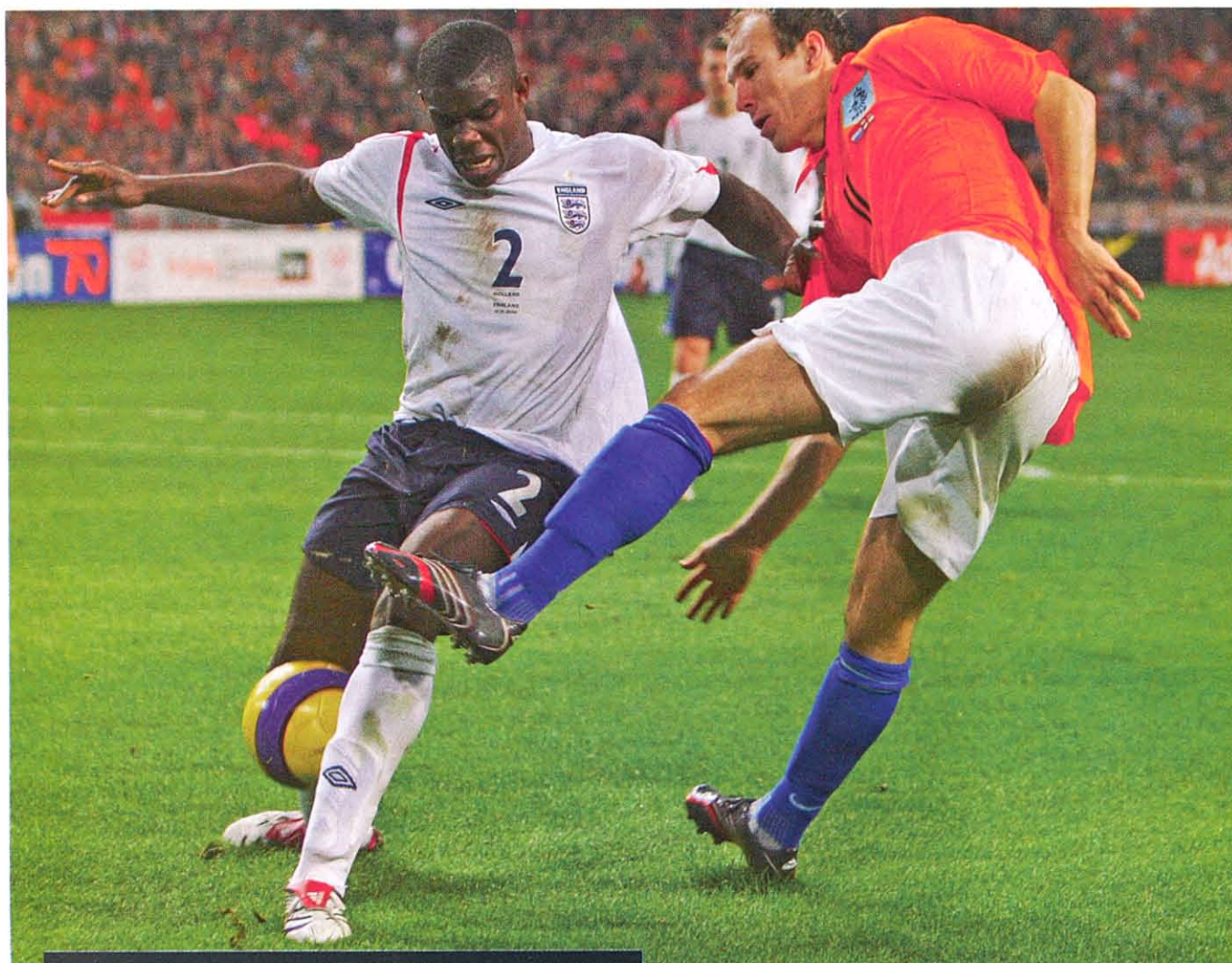
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Cristiano Ronaldo leads the

CLASS OF 2007

TALENT SCOUT SPECIAL
8 YOUNGSTERS TIPPED FOR THE TOP THIS YEAR





MICAH RICHARDS

England defender schooled the Brazilian way

IN JUST OVER a year, Micah Richards has risen from virtual unknown to full England international and got the pundits purring about his qualities. But though the Manchester City 18-year-old has made his mark at right-back, that's not the full story of this precocious talent.

"We first tried Micah out as a defender, but he didn't do too well," says City's academy director Jim Cassell. "My first impressions were that he looked like he'd be a good athlete, but he was slightly clumsy and very, very uncomfortable with the ball."

This view was shared by Angus Martin, a coach at the Brazilian Soccer School in Leeds, Richards' home city. "He wasn't miles ahead of the rest of the group, technically," Martin says. "But he was physically strong and had great character. His dad, Lincoln, was with him all the time and he gave his son both guidance and discipline. There were never any complaints from Micah when you asked him to do something. His commitment was amazing."

This commitment was evident as Richards put in many extra hours honing his skills and improving his fitness at the soccer school even after hooking up with first Oldham Athletic and then City as a 14-year-old.

"Once he got into our training programme it became very clear that Micah would be a good, competitive player," Cassell says. "His energy

'He put in many extra hours honing his skills and improving his fitness'

level was superb, his ability to leap for headers was outstanding and he had a real eye for goal. We actually saw him as a box-to-box midfielder."

But he made his full senior City debut at right-back against Charlton in February last year, and it's been in that position he has blossomed. In November, he made his senior England debut in the 1-1 friendly draw away to Holland.

"Micah had an excellent debut, gave a

mature performance and has great potential for the future," said England boss Steve McClaren. Where that potential will be fulfilled is still open to debate.

Richards has been turning out in the City midfield of late to help the club through an injury crisis. Cassell says: "His natural position could be in central defence. A lot of boys go into the first team in wide positions to start with, but Micah is a great man-to-man marker and he's excellent in the air."

What can stop Richards, then? Letting his rapid rise go to his head, maybe? Not according to Martin and Cassell.

"Micah keeps in touch with the Brazilian Soccer School and is still the same nice lad from before," Martin says.

Cassell agrees: "[City manager] Stuart Pearce is constantly reminding Micah about keeping his feet on the floor. But whenever I've spoken to him lately he seems the same lad he's always been."

Howard Johnson