Have we seen the last of the player the Italians call Il Fenomeno ("the Phenomenon")? Ronaldo's latest knee injury, suffered just six minutes into his much-awaited comeback bid, raises doubts whether the Brazilian star will ever regain his pre-World Cup '98 form.

BY SIMON EVANS
in Milan

Ronaldo, the greatest talent of his generation, faces an uncertain future after collapsing barely six minutes into his comeback from knee surgery. After an absence of almost five months following the operation, the 23-year-old Brazilian returned in the Italian Cup final against Lazio on April 12, only to be carried off when the same right knee collapsed.

It was particularly poignant his leg gave way just as he was showing a glimpse of the old Ronaldo — running goalwards, his upper body swerving from side to side, the Lazio defense backing off, uncertain of what the striker was going to do next.

Television archives are full of the great goals Ronaldo has scored from such runs, whether as a teenage prodigy with PSV Eindhoven or as the hero of the Nou Camp crowd in Barcelona.

But they are fading memories.

Aside from a debut season, when he scored 25 goals in 35 games for Inter, Italian fans have seen little of those trademark runs and spectacular goals.

Not since the 1998 World Cup finals has he been close to performing at the lofty level that put him close to greats such as Diego Maradona and Johan Cruyff.

The starting point for his troubles was the World Cup final when Brazil lost to France and Ronaldo wandered the field almost in a daze, prompting reports he had been taken ill before the match.

Injuries, in particular knee problems, have since plagued him, and it seems that whenever he offers a glimpse of his old self, disaster strikes, shuttering the hope he will again show the talent that prompted the Italian press to dub him Il Fenomeno.

Last season, he was restricted to just 12 appearances for Inter, four times being forced out of action by knee and muscle problems.

This season, with Inter spending $50 million to bring Christian Vieri from Lazio to play alongside him, there were hopes that with the pressure on his new partner, he would be able to ease his way back to his best.

He seemed to be on his way when he gave Inter the lead in the Milan derby on Oct. 23. But just after he had celebrated the goal, he was sent off when the referee controversially ruled he had elbowed AC Milan defender Fabian Ayala.

He was on target again Nov. 21 in the Serie A match with Lecce but then damaged his knee in a freak accident when he twisted his leg on a divot.

Ronaldo was operated on in Paris nine days later.

Four months away from soccer followed, but off the field, Ronaldo used the time to get married in Rio on Christmas Eve, and recently his wife, Milene, gave birth to their son, Ronald.

He also found time to promote children's charities and offer help to school and sports projects in Kosovo.

From his image as a somewhat naive young man, earning a huge salary and plenty of extra income from sponsorship deals, he had become a husband, a father and a supporter of good causes.

The creation of the "new Ronaldo" was to be completed in Milan when he returned to the field of play.

The sight of him writhing in agony as he was carried off the field shocked players of both teams, and even the Lazio crowd, not known for its generosity of spirit, applauded him.

"I'm really, really sorry for him," said Lazio's Swedish coach, Sven Goran Eriksson. "We all know who Ronaldo is. He's the No. 1 in the world. We know what he suffered since the World Cup and over the last two seasons. Even if he's an opponent, our feelings are the same."

SYMPATHY FROM MARADONA.

Messages of sympathy poured in from around the world to the Paris hospital where Ronaldo is recovering from a second operation on his injured knee surrounded by his family.

Maradona, under treatment for cocaine-related heart problems in Cuba, was among the first to offer support to the ailing Brazilian striker.

"Your pain is my pain. I wish you a speedy recovery. Signed: Diego Armando Maradona." Havana, read the fax to Ronaldo. A statement from Professor Gerard Saillant, who operated on him for the same injury four months ago, said the latest knee operation was "totally successful."

Ronaldo is suffering from a rupture of the patella ligament in the right knee that will keep him out of competitive action for up to eight months.

Saillant said he had no worries about Ronaldo's application to a rehabilitation program drawn up for this year, and he put the new injury down entirely to bad luck.

NO ONE AT FAULT.

Ronaldo's latest knee problems do not go the way of fellow former European Player of the Year such as Marco van Basten and Matthias Sammer.

Van Basten, Europe's top player in 1988, 1989 and 1992, was forced into early retirement before he was 30 after being plagued by a recurring ankle injury.

Sammer, the Ballon d'Or in 1996, looks unlikely to come back from a recurring serious knee injury operated on for the last time more than two years ago when he was 30.

Ronaldo has age on his side, but fans around the world must be asking themselves if he will ever be quite the same again. (Reuters)