CARMA

Global Sport's Highest Earners

Professional Athletes and their Reputation and Remuneration

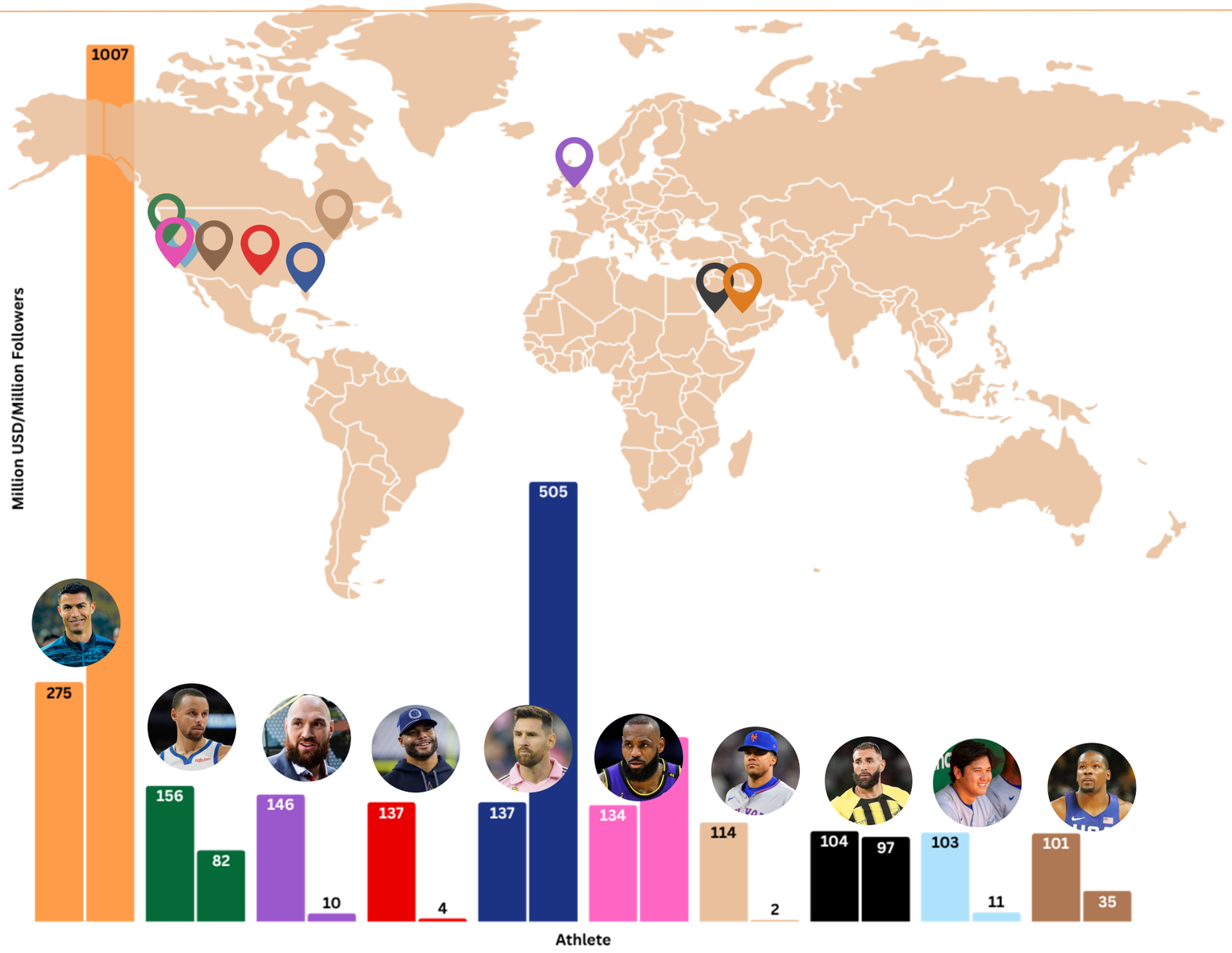


OVERVIEW

The release of Forbes' 2025 list of the world's highest-paid athletes sparked widespread reaction across social and news media. The top 10 alone generated widespread admiration, debate, and surprise. This year's rankings showcase a striking blend of global appeal and platform power. Cristiano Ronaldo, with unmatched social reach (653M followers), tops the list in both earnings and influence. But many of the top athletes exhibit just a fraction of his reach, opening questions about how both social media reach and on-pitch success relate to overall earnings.

	Earnings	Social media followers
1.Christiano Ronaldo	$275 Million	1,007 Billion
2.Steph Curry	$156 Million	82 Million
3.Tyson Fury	$146 Million	9.7 Million
4.Dak Prescott	$137 Million	3.7 Million
5.Lionel Messi	$135 Million	505 Million
6.Lebron James	$133.8 Million	212 Million
7.Juan Soto	$114 Million	2.2 Million
8.Karim Benzema	$104 Million	97.4 Million
9.Shohei Ohtani	$102.5 Million	10.9 Million
10.Kevin Durant	$101.4 Million	35.2 Million

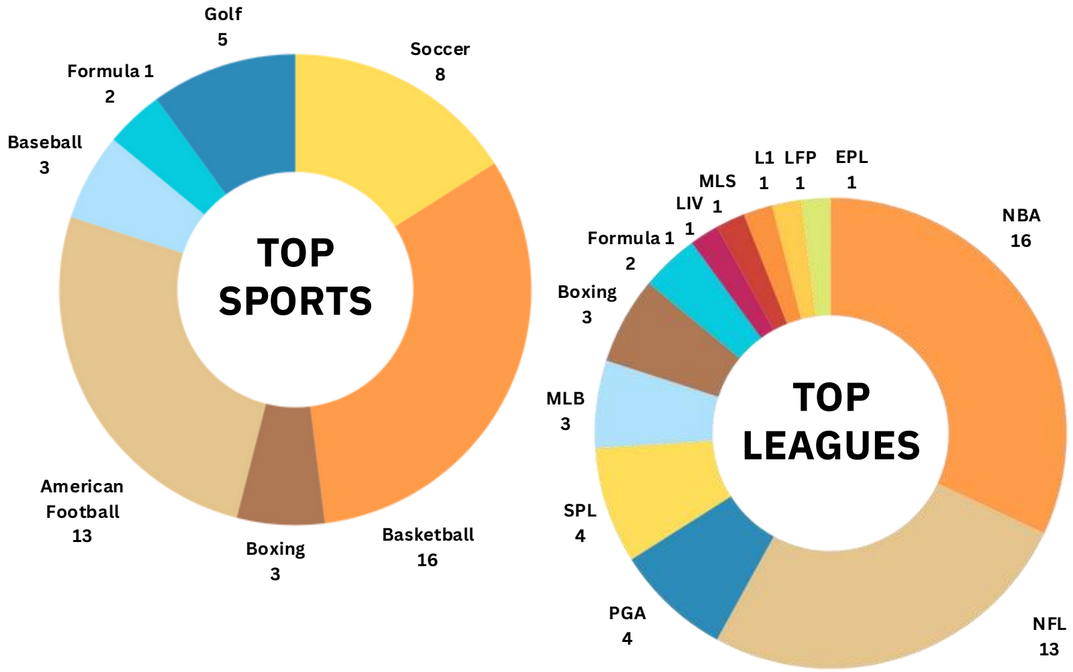
- Cristiano Ronaldo led athletes in both earnings and online engagement, though his social media showed higher volatility than others. This was particularly true in comparison to his rival, Lionel Messi, who generated more consistent positivity from fans.
- American athletes dominated the Forbes top 10, but international stars like Ronaldo, Messi, and Shohei Ohtani drove far higher global engagement.
- Athletes with strong brand stories or emotional campaigns - like Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Anthony Edwards - saw the most positive sentiment, regardless of income rank.



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WHICH SPORTS PAY TO PLAY?

Basketball was the most represented sport in the 2025 Forbes Top 50, with 16 athletes, followed by American football (13) and soccer (8). This reflects the NBA's global brand appeal and high individual endorsement potential, even compared to more team-centric leagues. In terms of leagues, the NBA led with 16 athletes, while the NFL followed with 13. Baseball (MLB), boxing, and golf had smaller but consistent showings, indicating that earning power outside the big leagues still exists—but is increasingly rare.



Interestingly, PGA golf and Saudi Pro League footballers also made the list, showing how individual success and global media interest can elevate athletes in traditionally lower-paying leagues.

USA AND AMERICANS RULE THE ROOST

The 2025 list remains heavily US-dominated, with 29 American athletes. This underscores the commercial strength of US-based sports leagues and domestic endorsement markets. This trend is reinforced by the dominance of the NBA and NFL.



However, international stars continue to make a powerful impact. Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, and Shohei Ohtani exemplify how global popularity and massive followings can outweigh league market size in determining earnings.

The UK contributed three athletes, while countries like Brazil, France, and Japan had two each. A further 17 countries were represented by one athlete, highlighting a wide global spread - even if the financial power remains concentrated in North America.

BBC SPORT ***Ronaldo tops Forbes highest-paid athlete list again***

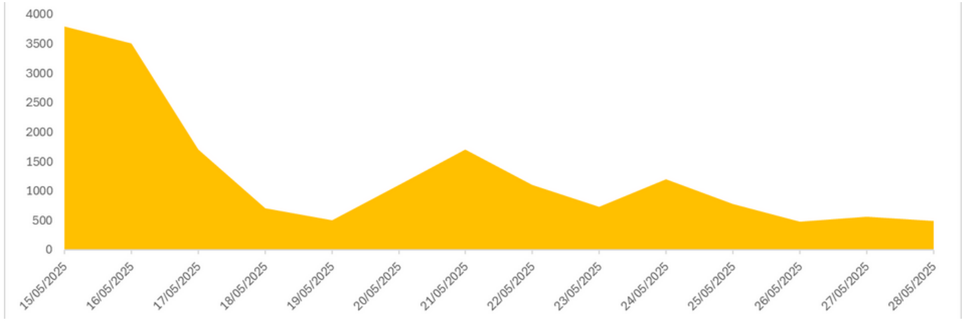
THESPORTSTER ***Tyson Fury Lands In Top Three On Forbes Highest-Paid Athletes List***

Mail Online ***Cristiano Ronaldo tops Forbes sport rich list ahead of Steph Curry after raking in £206 MILLION, as big-money Brit breaks completes top three - but best-paid Premier League star is down in 34th!***

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REACTION OF THE PUBLIC

While the Forbes Top 50 list sparked widespread conversation, the sentiment it generated varied sharply between athletes. The top three most paid athletes - Cristiano Ronaldo, Stephen Curry, and Tyson Fury - all saw significant sentiment boosts when associated with the list, with each receiving a jump of over 40pp in positive posts. Curry in particular saw his positivity nearly double to 68% in Forbes-related mentions, suggesting admiration for his earning power even among critics.



In contrast, LeBron James and Juan Soto saw more polarised reactions. LeBron's sentiment remained mixed, with only 36% positive despite commentary focusing on his legacy. Soto in particular saw a dramatic spike in negativity (45% negative, up 17pp), hinting at backlash over his inclusion in the top 10.

Meanwhile, younger stars like Kevin Durant, Shohei Ohtani, and Karim Benzema maintained or improved their already strong sentiment, showing how the perception of their value aligned with both on-pitch performance and fan reliability. However, a consistent theme across the majority of athletes in discussion of the Forbes article was negativity around the fact that women were completely absent from the list.



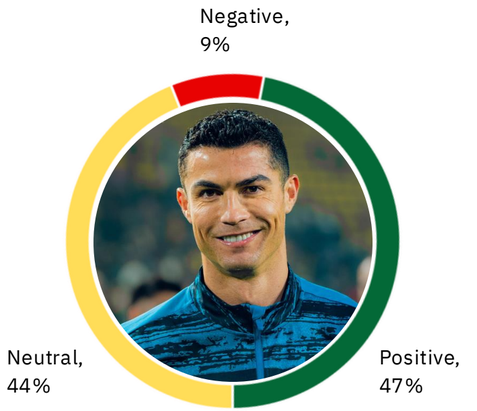
% of positive and negative posts in social media discussions relating to the athlete and Forbes' list. Figures at the end shows the comparison to all social media discussions regarding the athlete.

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RONALDO VS MESSI

The “GOAT” discussion that shows no sign of ending

The Messi vs Ronaldo GOAT debate surged again in the two weeks following the release of Forbes’ 2025 highest-paid athletes list. With both icons among the top earners, social media lit up with comparisons - not just of legacy, but of both image and performance.

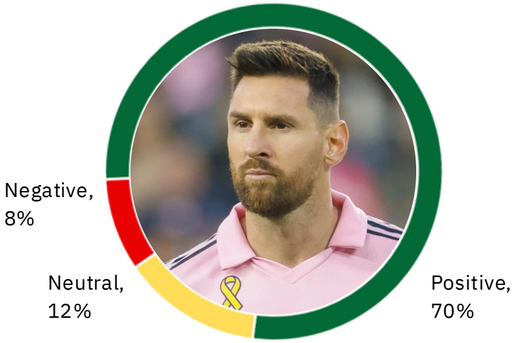


17K posts discussed Ronaldo as the “GOAT”

Christiano Ronaldo

Saudi Pro League - Al Nassr

Ronaldo was mentioned in 17K GOAT-related posts with 146K engagements and a lower overall positive sentiment than Messi. Praise focused on his Premier League stats and influence on training culture. However, some users criticised his perceived arrogance and decision to move to Al Nassr. When Messi was not mentioned in GOAT discussions, Ronaldo’s positive sentiment increased to 65%, suggesting the direct comparison dampens his social media reception.



36K posts discussed Messi as the “GOAT”

Lionel Messi

Major League Soccer - Inter Miami

Messi appeared in 35.9K GOAT-related posts, with 464.7K engagements. Fans celebrated his World Cup win, legacy at Barcelona, and impact at Inter Miami. While some critiqued his quiet demeanor, many viewed it as humility. Notably, Messi’s sentiment remained strong whether Ronaldo was also mentioned or not, reinforcing a reputation that stands independently. On May 18, he was declared the greatest of all time by the IFFHS, further spurring debate.

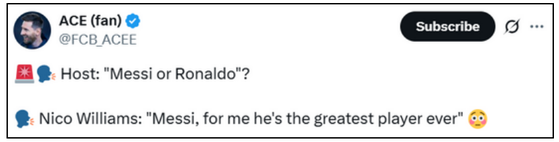
Other Factors At Play

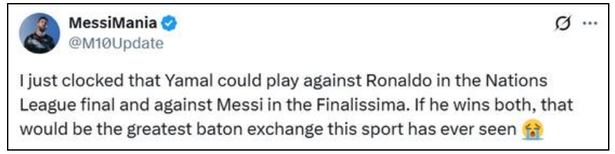
Relationship with Clubs

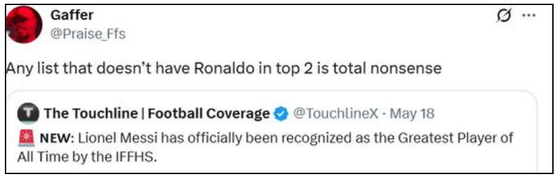
Support vs Blame

Lionel Messi’s time at Inter Miami drew 38.4K posts, with 29% positive and 15% negative sentiment. Criticism focused on the team’s poor form, not Messi himself. Fans frequently cited his 66 goal contributions in 52 games as proof of continued quality, framing him as a standout player surrounded by underperformers.

Meanwhile, Cristiano Ronaldo’s stint at Al Nassr sparked 30K posts, with only 6% positive and 38% expressing negative sentiment. He was widely blamed for poor results, dressing room issues, and failed expectations. Some defended his efforts, arguingin Al Nassr’s management failed to provide adequate support, while others said he cannot single-handedly carry a team at his age.







The Rising Star

Two Different Legacies

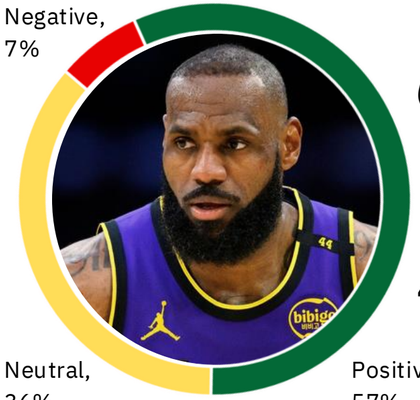
Mentions of young prodigy Lamine Yamal alongside Messi (166.3K posts) and Ronaldo (70.5K posts) revealed telling differences. Yamal served as a lightning rod for many of the common narratives about both players.



He was framed as a “spiritual successor” to Messi, drawing comparisons in terms of play style and influence. In contrast, posts linking him to Ronaldo focused more on ambition and attitude - highlighting traits like his confidence, swagger, and proactive social media presence.

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SPONSORSHIPS AND NEW CHALLENGERS IN THE NBA

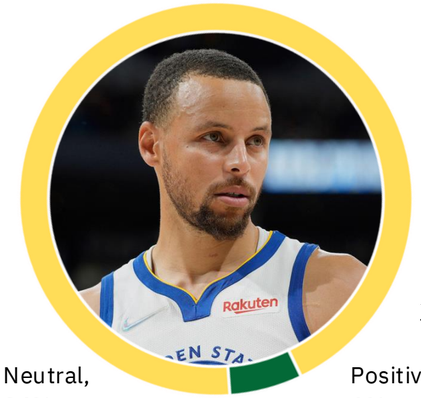


4.5K posts

LeBron James

Los Angeles Lakers

Lebron's 22-year Nike partnership dominated discussion. Most posts celebrate his sneaker legacy, though a few criticize shoe design and Nike's labor ethics. Notably, this anniversary was the only driver of content, highlighting Lebron's legacy as his most important asset.

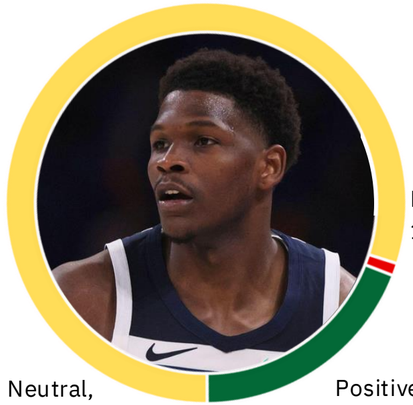


365 posts

Stephen Curry

Golden State Warriors

Curry was mentioned mostly in passing during discussions about Under Armour's financial downturn. He received little direct attention, and sentiment remained neutral throughout.

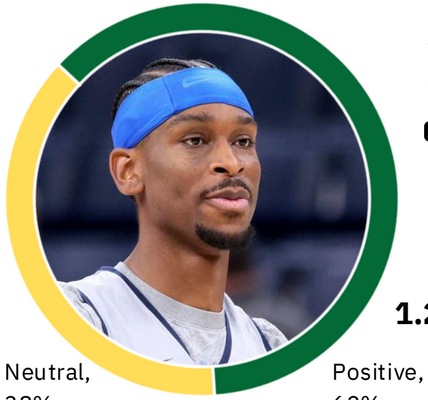


1K posts

Anthony Edwards

Minnesota Timberwolves

Engagement was driven by Edwards' "King Slayer" moment and new Adidas sneaker releases. Fans discussed the design and performance of new models favourably, especially the AE1 Low and AE2.



1.2K posts

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander

Oklahoma City Thunder

Sentiment was overwhelmingly positive. Converse's Mother's Day tribute and SGA dedicating a new shoe to his wife, combined with his recent MVP award, generated high praise and strong community engagement.

Changing of the Guard?

LeBron James still dominated earnings and attention, but new stars are on the rise. While LeBron drew the highest volume of posts, his sentiment was mixed - driven by both legacy celebrations and criticism of his brand choice. In contrast Shai Gilgeous-Alexander generated ower volume for Converse but significantly more positive sentiment, fuelled by his emotionally resonant brand campaigns. Anthony Edwards, similarly, is on the rise thanks to standout court performances. Stephen Curry, once a central figure, appears to now sit between eras - respected, but no longer the focus. The Forbes list shows who earns the most today. Social media suggests who's capturing the future.

Figures refer to X mentions of each player and their respective brands in the two weeks following Forbes' Top 50

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ALMOST TIME FOR A CHANGING OF THE GUARD?

The list of highest-paid athletes revealed more than just wealth, it spotlighted a growing battleground between American legacy and Middle Eastern ambition. From Saudi Arabia's grip on boxing and golf to the rise of Gulf-hosted F1 races, certain nations are buying their way into sport's most exclusive arenas. The Top 50 reads like a ledger of influence, where U.S. control is no longer a given.

Baseball: Americans may be losing their grip on its favourite pastime

Forbes' 2025 list signals a shift in baseball's hierarchy, with no American players among the top earners for the first time - a striking change for a sport long considered the nation's pastime. With stars like Shohei Ohtani and Juan Soto leading the way, global talent is not only redefining the game on the field but also dominating its financial spotlight.

$283.9 million

3 athletes

3 nationalities



Shohei Ohtani

100.2K posts



Juan Soto

40.7K posts

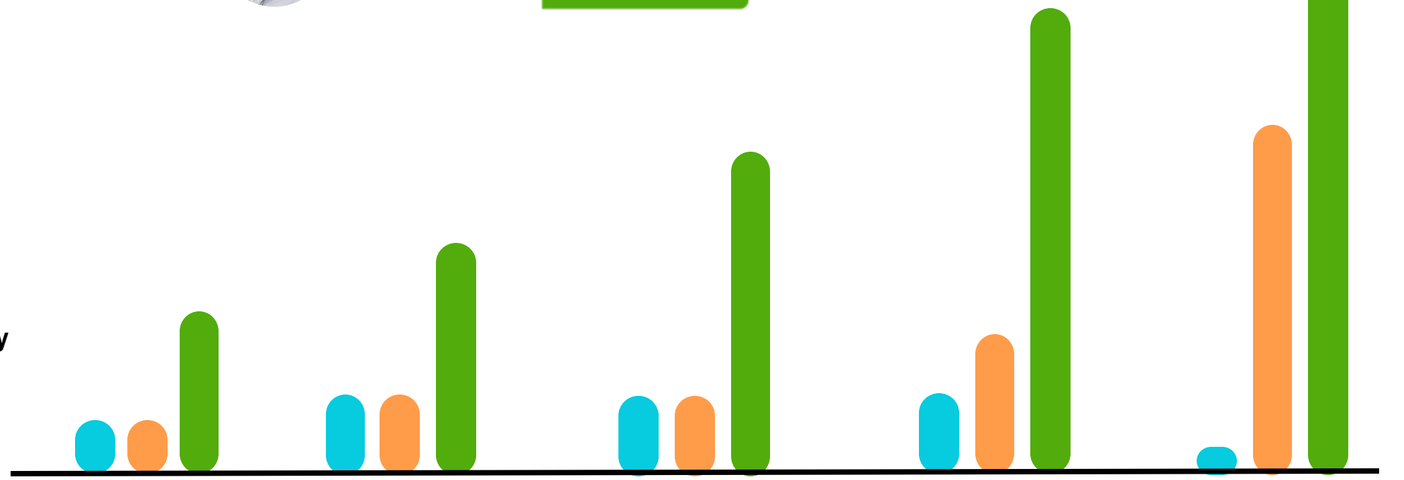
NFL: The bastion of US sport dominance

Forbes' 2025 list shows quarterbacks continue to reign financially, with nearly every NFL name in the Top 50 playing the position. The lone exception, wide receiver Justin Jefferson, underscores how exclusive the path is, shaped by early development and elite systems. Unlike any other sport on the list, all NFL athletes are American, revealing a domestic dominance unmatched in global competition.

$1 billion +

13 athletes

1 nationality



F1
$158 Million
2 athletes
2 Nationalities

BASEBALL
$283.9 Million
3 athletes
3 Nationalities

BOXING
$327 Million
3 athletes
3 Nationalities

GOLF
$389.4 Million
5 athletes
3 Nationalities

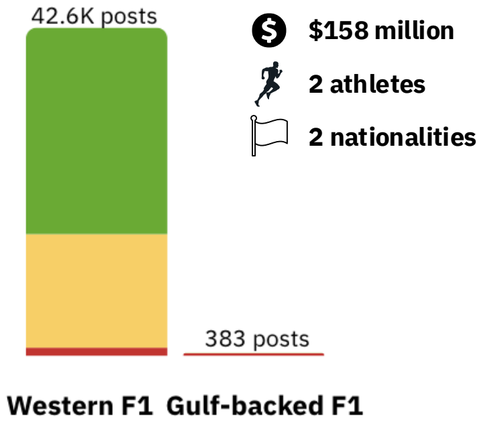
AMERICAN FOOTBALL
$1 Billion +
13 athletes
1 Nationality

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SPORT THE NEW BATTLEGROUND?

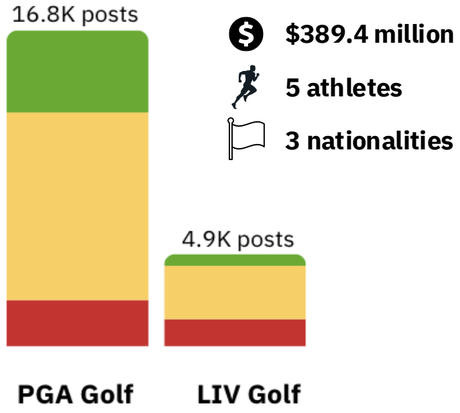
Formula 1: Global glamour, but leadership friction is driving the story.

The Verstappen vs Hamilton rivalry resurfaced after Forbes' 2025 highest-paid athletes list dropped. With just two drivers in the top 50, it's clear F1 is less about individual earnings and more about the narrative of control between corporate and sovereign wealth. It highlights the sport's shifting power dynamic, where U.S. ownership and Middle Eastern influence now compete for control of F1's future. On X, Gulf-backed F1 saw little mention in the West, however, and social discussions of it were 89% negative.



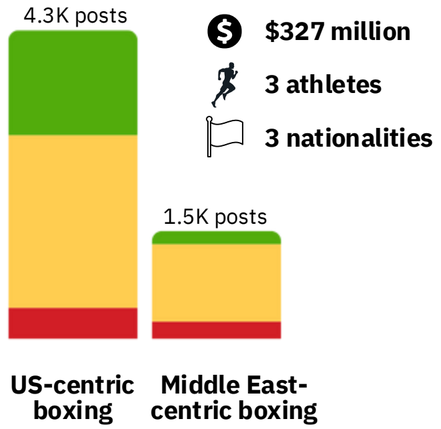
Golf: Legacy vs investment

Forbes' 2025 list captures golf's deepening divide. The PGA Tour, rich in prestige and legacy, faces off against the financial might of LIV Golf, now headlined by top earner Jon Rahm. With players split across rival tours and only uniting at the majors, the sport's most elite moments now double as battlegrounds for influence and identity. While PGA Golf continued to dominate social conversation, LIV Golf saw increasing relevance to X users.



Boxing: The power of Riyadh is bringing the biggest fights to the fans, but resources are still pooling at the top

Saudi Arabia's investment in boxing has delivered blockbuster fights, but not widespread earnings. Despite massive events, only three fighters made the Forbes list. This highlights how financial rewards remain concentrated at the top, even as the Middle East shapes the venue and visibility of the sport. US-centric boxing generated a higher rate of positive discussion among social media users.



The Forbes 2025 list shows where money flows - but also where power is shifting. American leagues still dominate the earnings leaderboard, but Middle Eastern investment and international athletes are a growing presence both on the stage and on social media

CARMA

CARMA is a global media intelligence firm providing insights through monitoring and analysis of earned media coverage and social media conversations. With advanced analytics capabilities and integrated market research, CARMA brings clarity and insight to the complex media landscape, helping thousands of organisations understand and shape their media narrative.

Discover CARMA's suite of solutions, our team of analysts, and the work we do.

Let's keep the conversation going...

Contact Chadwick Rubin to discuss any of the findings of the report or how CARMA can create something similar for your organization

Thank You

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