



Forbes ranks Ronaldo, Messi, and Benzema among sports top earners in 2026

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Forbes names top earning athletes of 2026

The world's top-earning sportsmen are making billions, according to [Forbes's annual list](#) of the world's highest-paid athletes. Their earnings reflect ballooning sponsorship deals, investments, and commercial rights.

Mega contracts, lucrative brand deals, and sponsors

Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo topped the list with a total income of \$300 million, driven by a mega contract with [Saudi Arabian club Al Nassr](#) and lucrative endorsement deals.

Lionel Messi came in fifth globally with \$140 million, maintaining his position among sport's highest-paid athletes. He also retains a strong commercial profile off the pitch.

The report confirmed that the total income of the top ten athletes exceeded \$1.4 billion in one year – the highest total in the history of *Forbes's* ranking – reflecting a major transformation that transcends the boundaries of sport itself.

Football's oil money boom

Forbes reported that the 2026 list also included LeBron James, who came in fourth in basketball with \$137.8 million, while Japan's Shohei Ohtani came in fifth in baseball with \$127.6 million. Stephen Curry ranked sixth in baseball with about \$125 million.

Frenchman Karim Benzema came eighth in football with \$110 million, and American Kevin Durant came ninth in basketball with \$103.8 million. The top ten is completed with a wide sporting diversity.

The report also indicated the continued influence of the Saudi Pro League in reshaping the global salary market, by [attracting](#) first-class stars and raising the wage ceiling in football.

Top athletes earn record \$1.4bn

According to *Forbes*, the top ten athletes collectively made more than \$1.4 billion in one year – the highest total in the history of the rankings.

The average age of athletes on the list was 37, the highest in *Forbes*'s history. This reflects the continued dominance of veteran stars at the top of the financial table, despite the rise of a new generation of talent.

The report pointed out that athletes' sources of income no longer depend only on salaries, but also on personal branding, advertising contracts, investments, and social media platforms, which have become key drivers of modern sports wealth.

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