



DIRTY MONEY

How Fossil Fuel Sponsors are Polluting Sport

Foreword

Like billions of others, I've been entranced by the recent Euros and Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Sport gives us the opportunity to share athletic triumphs, be inspired by stories of achievement and expand our understanding of the possibilities of humanity.

As a former international footballer and broadcaster of many female and male FIFA World Cups, I've had the privilege of experiencing some of those moments first-hand. However, over the past few years, I've also had a front row seat watching the landscape of commercial sport change.

Sponsorships are, of course, vital for the survival of many clubs at both elite and grassroots level. They underpin the economic model of sport and enable us to live our dreams - but we must ensure these partnerships align with the aspirations we have as a species and are in our collective interest.

Recently, the social licence of sport has been increasingly appropriated by oil and gas companies, eager to align themselves with moments of inspiration and with legendary athletes to deflect from the damage they are causing. Not just to sport. But to the planet. This report could not be more timely for a much needed reckoning in sport.

It lists 205 current deals worth over \$5.6 billion and it's sobering, though unsurprising, to see that my own sport, football, leads the league of shame for fossil fuel sponsorship. In the Australian context, mining company Hancock Prospecting's sponsorship of the Australian Olympic Team, Swimming Australia and Rowing Australia are well known and lend the credibility of great athletes to a company seeking to increase our fossil fuel emissions.

The issue is about more than where money comes from; it's about the future of sport and the planet it relies on. My own home country of Australia is already on the frontline of bushfires, droughts and record breaking floods which provide vivid reminders of the devastating and compounding repercussions of climate change. As this report sets out, no one is immune. Unpredictable and extreme weather means sport at both grassroots and elite levels is harmed by climate impacts.

The Olympics and Paralympics in 2032 will be hosted in Brisbane, and Australians are characteristically eager, for sport is in our DNA. But for too long, the uncomfortable questions regarding the oil and gas sponsors who are undermining our safe future and that of sport have been ignored.

We, as athletes, fans, and custodians of sport, must address them.

Sport has always been a driver of change and a force for good. This is our opportunity to push for partnerships that reflect the values of respect, excellence and integrity that should be at the heart of sport - and to draw a clear line for a sustainable world.

There is no place for fossil fuel sponsors in sport. Not if we want to ensure a future where sport still exists.

Craig Foster
40th Captain of Australian Men's Football Team
and Broadcaster



Craig Foster

Source: Matt Hrkac

Executive summary

Fossil fuels are far and away the leading cause of climate change. The burning of oil, gas and coal contributes to 75% of greenhouse gas emissions and 90% of carbon emissions. The fossil fuel industry has known about its impact on the planet for decades - and has spent millions trying to hide the destruction it has caused and will cause in the future.

Sport is increasingly one of the areas oil and gas companies are using to greenwash their reputation, betting billions on sponsorships that allow them to paint themselves as public-spirited, generous corporations. The findings in this report suggest that a combination of state-owned and private fossil fuel companies are spending at least **\$5.6 billion on sponsorship of global sport across 205 active deals.**¹

Few sports are untouched by fossil fuel cash. From football, Formula 1, cricket and cycling to golf, rugby and snow sports, fossil fuel companies are betting big on sport to help them maintain their profits and social licence. In terms of active deals, the top four sports targeted by fossil fuel sponsorship are football (with a minimum of 58 active deals), motorsports (39), rugby union (17), and golf (15).

At the same time these 'Godfathers of climate chaos' - as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres describes them - are **undermining the future of sport and making our common world a more dangerous place.** The UN estimates the costs of tackling the climate crisis could hit \$300bn by 2030. This report looks in detail at the growing role of Middle Eastern oil states and the sponsorship activities of four fossil fuel companies in particular: **Saudi Aramco, TotalEnergies, Shell** and petrochemical giant **Ineos.**



Fossil fuel companies are spending at least \$5.6 billion on sponsorship of global sport

Source: WOTW and Brandalism

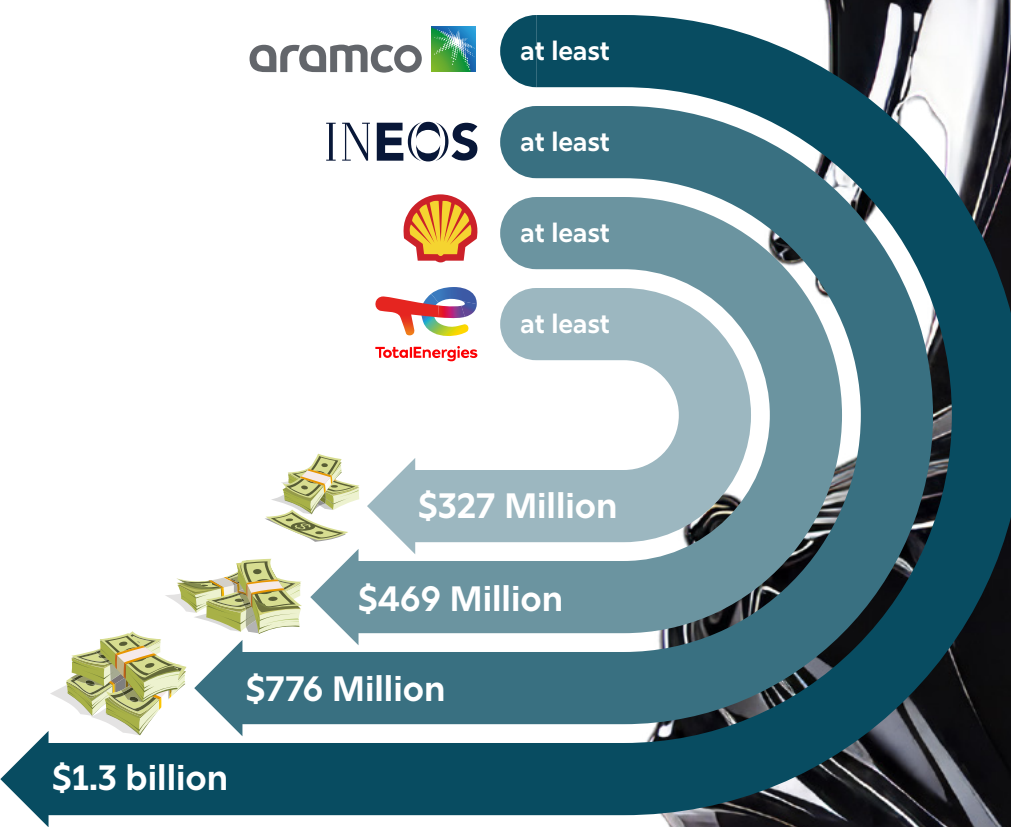
¹ These 'active' deals include some that date from 2011 and others that are scheduled to last to 2030.

Fossil fuel companies are seeking to associate their product, whose air pollution alone is estimated to kill over five million people a year, with sport's immense social capital and positive health impacts. They do this for many of the same reasons that tobacco companies sponsored sport before it was largely banned - to portray themselves in a positive light and normalise their activities in the eyes of billions of sports fans. These types of sponsorship deals buy so-called 'social licence' to operate, in an attempt to divert attention from their role in fuelling the climate crisis and harming human health.

While significant, these figures are just the beginning. The sponsorship figures discussed here exclude the vast sums spent acquiring sports ventures within the global sports industry - something the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been particularly prolific at over recent years. For instance, the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) spent a reported \$2 billion creating the breakaway LIV Golf series.² On an even larger scale, the oil-producing state of Qatar reportedly spent over \$200 billion on the FIFA 2022 World Cup.

Several other elements obscure the true scale of fossil fuel sponsorship in sport. **Most deals lack transparency regarding the exact amounts involved, the duration and the conditions attached.** The available information also fails to capture the full range of donations, payments in kind and quid-pro-quo that can, in certain circumstances, arise from the soft power accrued from such partnerships.

This report throws light on one aspect of money spent by major polluters in the global sports industry. We hope it will encourage others to turn on the floodlights, to reveal the full degree to which sport is being used as a tool to enable and legitimise an industry that is doing vast and lasting damage to the very climate that sport depends upon.



The Big Four: the largest fossil fuel sponsors of sport

² Note: Whilst the PIF is not an oil company, its finance is substantially drawn from its 16% stake in the \$1.8 trillion oil firm Aramco.

Introduction

UN climate scientists are clear that **fossil fuels are responsible for 90 percent of carbon dioxide emissions** that are driving the deadly climate impacts we are seeing unfurl across the world today. This year, when global temperatures are at an **all time high** and ecological crises are playing out across countries including Kenya, Brazil, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, it is critical to question fossil fuel sponsorship and the impact it has on climate change, vulnerable populations and the future of sport itself.

The sport industry is worth an estimated **\$471 billion**, a figure projected to rise to **\$680 billion** by 2028, with the sponsorship market worth around **\$105 billion** now and tipped to push past **\$189 billion** by the end of the decade. Sports sponsorship regularly ranks in the top five ways to promote products and companies and is consistently valued by corporate marketeers as a **"trusted vehicle"** for marketing and communications.

Given its scale and global reach, sport also offers prestige to sponsors. Fossil fuel companies recognise this 'soft power' and bid competitively to sponsor high profile events, teams and individual athletes with global name recognition to **endorse their products** or countries. These **corporations use sport to improve their brand image, particularly in the face of growing calls for climate action**, and to help maintain profits

in saturated markets. This practice not only misleads the public and hinders decarbonization efforts but also directly contradicts the urgent calls for climate action, including the UN Secretary-General's call for a **ban on fossil fuel advertising** akin to the restrictions on tobacco advertising.

Both governments and corporations use sport to bolster their reputations and forge new relationships. From Wimbledon Centre Court to executive boxes at the Champions League Final, sport venues are theatres of networking, lobbying and deal-making.

Recent research and campaigns have drawn attention to the **growing prominence of petrostates in sport** and the rising trend of using sports sponsorship to promote both fossil fuel firms and the high carbon products dependent on them, such as flights, cars and cruises.



Saudi Crown Prince **Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud**, FIFA president **Gianni Infantino** and Russian President **Vladimir Putin** at the World Cup opener in Moscow.
Credit: Sipa US / Alamy Stock Photo

Although many companies and countries provide funding to high profile sports, the Gulf states - and in particular Saudi Arabia - are increasingly using the enormous sovereign wealth derived from fossil fuel production to invest in the global sports industry.

State spending is huge and problematic. For example, as negotiations between LIV and the established PGA golf tours continue, it's reported that the PIF's spend on golf might grow by a potential further \$3 billion. The original sum plus this figure of direct investment into sport (the source of which is largely income from fossil fuels), which sits outside what can be accounted for as conventional sponsorship, would alone double the total value of specific fossil fuel company sponsorship deals we have found. To put these figures into perspective, after the oil-producing state of Qatar was controversially awarded FIFA's 2022 World Cup, it reportedly spent \$229 billion on staging the tournament. Around 80 percent of Qatar's government revenue comes from fossil fuels, so, if spent proportionally, they were the source of over \$180 billion spent on promoting Qatar's association with football. However, this report focuses mainly on estimating the total scale of sponsorship, and these examples are not sponsorship as commonly understood.

This report estimates specifically how much money is flowing from fossil fuel companies (both state owned and private), through sponsorship into high profile sports. It examines in detail several large sponsors, including state-owned entities whose deals are even less transparent than those involving the oil majors of the Global North. It does not include the much larger 'structural spending' mentioned above, that includes buying assets such as clubs and venues, nor state sponsorship of sports where a state's source of income is overwhelmingly from the sale of fossil fuels.

Here we examine the pathways sponsorship money takes, the motivations of those behind it, and the likely consequences for sport and the planet. But this exercise is hampered by the lack of publicly available information on how much money is being spent, the length of sponsorships and whether other donations or 'payments in kind' were included in such deals. Even where more detail is available, figures may not include additional spending on public relations, social media, hospitality and other promotional work. **This means the actual amount of fossil fuel company money in sport is very likely to be many times greater than the figures revealed in this report.**

Motivations

- The sports industry is worth an estimated \$471 billion, projected to rise to \$680 billion by 2028.
- FIFA alone generated \$7.6 billion in revenue between 2019 and 2022.
- There are an estimated five billion football fans - a huge potential market for companies wanting to build brands - while cricket claims an estimated 2.5 billion fans, tennis 1 billion fans and sports like basketball, hockey and volleyball not far behind.
- Elite sports offers a place for power-brokers to meet and influence other wealthy, influential people (see image on page 5).
- Sport helps bolster political power, both domestically and internationally, distracting attention from state activity that might otherwise provoke criticism and allowing states to accrue prestige and receive visits from global leaders.
- Sport's positive associations with physical health and values such as teamwork and respect are the basis of 'sportswashing', where brands and states use association with sport to detract from unhealthy, damaging practices and negative reputations.

The Gulf oil money pot

- More than \$4.5 billion has been invested in sports leagues and clubs by the Gulf states' sovereign wealth funds in 2020-2023, according to an analysis by the Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute.
- Qatar spent a reported \$229 billion **on staging the 2022 FIFA World Cup**. During construction of its new stadiums, there were multiple allegations of corruption and outcries over the deaths of migrant workers.
- The World Cup is likely to return to the Gulf in 2034, with Saudi Arabia **confirmed as the sole bidder** in October 2023 and due to be confirmed as host in late 2024.
- Big ticket boxing came to the UAE in 2019 with The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) 242 and high profile fights in 2022.
- There are now **four annual Formula 1 races in the Middle East** – in Bahrain, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.
- In football, Gulf states own Paris Saint-Germain (Qatar), Manchester City (UAE), Newcastle United and Sheffield United (Saudi Arabia), plus many feeder clubs.
- The Saudi Pro Football League spent \$907 million on players in 2023, second only to the UK Premier League's \$1.39 billion spend.
- Cycling receives significant funding from the Gulf states. Bahrain Victorious participated in the 2024 Tour de France and the Australian team now called Jayco-AlUla saw the Saudi Arabian Al Ula resort and culture site become title sponsor for both the men's and women's teams for 2023-2025.³ The UAE-sponsored team ranked top in the 2023 UCI World Tour and UAE Team Emirates dominated the 2024 Tour de France.

³ *The Green Bullet*, Matt Rendell, Seven Dials, London 2023

Credit: DPPI / Alamy Stock Photo

Why it matters: sport and climate change

The futures of sport and the climate are deeply entwined. Sport's viability is already being challenged by the realities of a warmer world, with significant climate impacts affecting athletes, fans and tournaments. Heatwaves, flooding and storms all play their part in rising numbers of match cancellations and pose an increasing financial burden on sports, with grassroots clubs bearing a particular burden.

At times, athletes face life-threatening risks: in the US, at least 11 American football players at the student and professional level died of heatstroke between 2018 and 2022. At the US Open (tennis), where playing temperatures topped 33°C, tennis star Daniel Medvedev pleaded with officials that "one of us is going to die". In response to these impacts, event organisers and athletes have attempted to adapt through shifting competition dates and training to beat the heat, but there is only so much that can be done.

Within the world's most popular sport, football, **climate impacts threaten some of the most iconic stadiums in the game.** In the wake of the devastating floods in southern Brazil this summer, which killed hundreds and displaced millions, the nation's most renowned stadiums stood inundated with water and fixtures were abandoned for weeks. As climate impacts are inherently non-linear, the global infrastructure of sport will be able to handle the unfolding impacts until, all of a sudden, it won't. The images of flooded stadia and athletes suffering the effects of deadly heat are a glimpse into sport's future unless drastic action is taken.

“With global temperatures continuing to rise, climate change should increasingly be viewed as an existential threat to sport,”

Lord Sebastian Coe,
President of World Athletics.





What is often omitted from the dominant approaches to calculating sports' emissions footprint (see Appendix B, page 22) is the additional effect of sport promoting, approving and consistently championing polluting products and high-carbon lifestyles. Air France, for example, was a key sponsor of the Paris 2024 Olympics this summer. One recent study estimated that **each euro of sponsorship from the airline would generate 38.2kg/CO2e of emissions** through promoting air travel. Similar calculations can be made for car and fossil fuel companies.

Meanwhile, the growth in funding of sport by fossil fuel companies is creating dependency and risk. While countries seek to adopt increasingly ambitious policies in order to achieve their legally-binding climate commitments, sport is becoming a billboard for polluting products and lifestyles. This is counter to prevailing fan attitudes, who care more about climate

change's impact on sport than sponsors want to believe: a recent Australian survey of fans found **83% of respondents believed that sport in the country had already felt the impacts of climate change** and 54% of respondents would be excited if their Australian Football League (AFL) clubs were to go carbon neutral. An international survey by Capgemini also found that 67% of football fans feel disappointed that their teams and players aren't prioritising environmental sustainability. French teams have already adopted the policy of travelling by train within France and this summer UEFA publicly encouraged train travel for players by partnering with German rail company Deutsche Bahn, reporting a 75% decrease in flights in the group stage, although the previous European Championships had, disastrously from a transport pollution point of view, been staged in 11 different countries.

Climate impacts on athletes and events

Past Disasters

- Smoke from devastating bushfires disrupted the **2020 Australian Tennis Open**, choking players and spectators.
- The **Tokyo 2020 Olympics** moved long distance running events north as the capital's sweltering summer weather now makes running there in summer dangerous.
- The **2019 Rugby World Cup** in Japan was disrupted by unprecedented rain and winds from typhoon Hagabis.

Perilous Predictions

- Of nineteen previous locations holding the **Winter Olympics**, only ten will still be reliable winter sports hosts in 2050, and just six in 2080.
- By 2050 39 of the 92 stadiums in the top four leagues of English football will face a high risk from more than three climate hazards, such as extreme rainfall, drought, flooding, and windstorms.
- One in six of the **British Open Championship** golf courses, including St Andrews, Troon and Carnoustie, are unlikely to survive the century due to flooding.

Methodology

Due to the confidential nature of many sponsorship deals and the lack of data in the public domain we applied the following methodology to generate conservative but reasonable estimates.

To supplement data from the SportBusiness Sponsorship Deals Tracker, an industry standard source, we gathered news articles and press announcements to collate aggregate data on currently-active energy and petrochemical sponsorship deals within sport. Sometimes, publicly-available reports on specific deals between fossil fuel companies and sports rights-holders contained a monetary value, but most often they did not.

As of March 2024, we found 205 active deals between energy and petrochemical companies and professional/elite sport. There may be many more that are not reported or recorded on company websites, or picked up by the database we used. Of the 205 active deals we found, only 41 came with a monetary value attached, emphasising the lack of transparency around these commercial relationships.

To bridge this gap, the report makes informed estimates through comparisons with other, similar sponsorship deals where the total spending is known:

1. To compare and assess average deal values we gathered data from sponsorship deals with other industries (e.g. electronics, alcohol, transport) in the same sports category from within the SportBusiness database and other publicly available sources that did have a monetary value attached (both active and expired).⁴
2. This data was then used to calculate average annual values to fill the significant gaps present within the reporting of fossil fuel deals.

See example, right, for this methodology in practice.



Methodology example: TotalEnergies has been the 'Main Sponsor' of a French cycling team since 2016, but no figure has been disclosed for how much the deal is worth.

Therefore, following our methodology we first calculated the sum value of all 'Main Sponsor' cycling deals listed on the database where individual values were given and then calculated the mean average of this as a reasonable estimate for Total's sponsorship spend.

⁴ SportBusiness is an industry leader in sports media research with a 25-year track record. More detailed information on SportBusiness' own methodology can be found [here](#).

Estimating active fossil fuel sports sponsorship deals

Sport	Number of active deals (in March 2024)	Rounded Estimated Deal Value (TOTAL) - USD	Estimated Avg Deal Length (Years)
Football	59	994,500,000	2.77
Motorsport	40	2,186,300,000	3.8
Rugby Union	17	65,200,000	3.59
Golf	15	209,000,000	2.2
Ice Hockey	15	192,600,000	4.07
American Football	8	640,700,000	3.25
Basketball	8	289,100,000	3.75
Multi-Sport	8	147,400,000	2.88
Aussie Rules Football	7	24,500,000	3
Tennis	6	37,600,000	2.17
Baseball	4	199,400,000	4.5
Cricket	3	10,300,000	2.33
Cycling	3	486,000,000	6.83
Handball	3	2,500,000	2
Rugby League	3	9,800,000	1.67
Motorcycling*	2		2
Sailing	2	68,200,000	5
Athletics*	1		2
Badminton	1	5,200,000	5
	205	5,568,300,000	3.31

*a lack of data for Motorcycling and Athletics meant they did not meet our criteria for generating an estimate)

Four big spenders on sport



Aramco

Total emissions (1938 – 2022): 68,832 (MtCO₂e)

Saudi Aramco is currently the world's most profitable company, with an income of \$231 billion for 2023 and \$98 billion of dividends paid to shareholders. Aramco's direct impact on climate change is substantial - it is one of the world's largest corporate greenhouse gas emitters, estimated to be responsible for over 4% of the global GHG emissions since 1965, and 5% of global emissions from 2016-2022. Aramco is a cash generator for Saudi Arabia, with a chain of command hand-picked to support Saudi Arabia's leadership. Its chairman, Yasir Al-Rumayyan, was personally chosen by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman al Saud (MBS) and is not only governor of the PIF, but also chairman of Golf Saudi (which promotes participation in golf domestically), president of the Saudi Golf Federation (which governs the game within Saudi Arabia), and chairman of Newcastle United. In 2024, Aramco was unveiled as

FIFA's "Major Worldwide Partner" in a deal expected to run until 2027 and worth a reported \$100 million a year. After months of speculation, in October 2023 Saudi Arabia's designation as host of the 2034 men's football World Cup was confirmed and in February 2024, Aramco announced a sponsorship deal with Concacaf (the governing body for football in North and Central America and the Caribbean). In 2020, Aramco signed a long-term global sponsorship deal with Formula 1. It also has a strategic partnership with Aston Martin Racing, which intends to use the partnership to "focus on development and commercialization of fuel-efficient engine technologies for road vehicles, and the development of more efficient hybrid engines in motorsport," prolonging the use of fossil fuels in the team's engines.

Sport	No. of active deals	Annual value (estimates)	Total value (estimates)
Motorsport	4	\$81.5m	\$495.7m
Football	3	\$216.3m	\$757.6m
Golf	2	\$14.1m	\$35.9m
Cricket	1	\$14m	\$56m
Sum	10	\$314.1m	\$1,296m

Totals in this section of case studies differ from the overall summary due to a later cut-off date for data.

INEOS

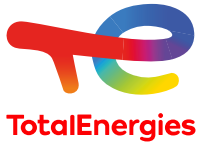
Ineos

Total emissions: Unavailable

Formed in 1998, Ineos is a relatively new multinational petrochemical company but it is already the world's fifth largest firm. The company was founded and is privately owned by Sir Jim Ratcliffe, the UK's richest man, and two other individual shareholders. Ineos' sports sponsorships range across motorsports, cycling, football, sailing, rugby and field hockey. The private structure of Ineos means that it faces less scrutiny than other publicly listed firms and can follow its owner's personal preferences. Ineos invested heavily in fracking sites in the UK with the aim of becoming a market leader, but earthquake scares at drilling sites led to widespread public disapproval and the UK government imposed a moratorium on fracking in 2019. Ineos was forced to review the value of its assets downwards by \$80.5 million as a result.

The "INEOS Sports family", which is how the company's website describes their sports financing, ranges from multi-year Main Partner deals to ownership shareholdings and one-off funding for special events. One such agreement is the six-year deal landed with New Zealand's famous All Blacks rugby team, which includes support across five of their "Teams in Black". The investment in Mercedes' F1 team in 2020 was worth \$128m, with Ineos committing to a 5-year full sponsorship deal. Meanwhile, in 2023 Ineos signed a multi-year sponsorship deal with UK football team Tottenham Hotspur and successfully bought a 27.7% stake in Manchester United, worth an estimated \$1.6 billion. Cycling has also benefited from Ineos largesse, with the budget of professional cycling team INEOS Grenadiers estimated at \$54.3 million for 2019, in a deal reports suggest will last for at least eight and a half years, allowing for inflation and a [ballooning riders' wage bill](#), making it worth at least an estimated \$461m in total.

Sport	No. of active deals	Annual value (estimates)	Total value (estimates)
Football	2	\$13m	\$62m
Sailing	2	\$9.8m	\$68.5m
Motorsport	1	\$26.1m	\$129.3m
Rugby Union	1	\$9.8m	\$55.4m
Cycling	1	\$54.3	\$461.5m
Sum	7	\$113m	\$776.7m



TotalEnergies

Total emissions (1934 – 2022): 17,584 (MtCO₂e)

TotalEnergies has a long record of poor performance on sustainability. It is known for riding roughshod over local communities, allegedly forcing people off their land in Uganda and Tanzania with its EACOP pipeline and displacing indigenous people in Argentina for its Vaca Muerta shale gas project. It has also worked with dubious governments, providing funds for Burma's brutal military dictatorship from the 1990s through the Yadana gas project and allegedly continuing to supply Putin's Russia well into the Ukraine war. In addition, it has damaged the environment directly through failures in operations, reportedly burying millions of litres of toxic water in Yemen since the 1990s, contaminating local freshwater. According to think-tank Carbon Majors, TotalEnergies ranks 19th in the world for historic emissions (1934 to 2022), continues to advocate for the advancement of the role of fossil fuels in the energy mix and is a member of a number of industry associations that oppose climate regulations.

TotalEnergies' sports sponsorship programme has included such major international events as the Rugby World Cup 2023 in France and the TotalEnergies Africa Cup of Nations, a seven-year deal worth \$247m. Like other oil majors, it has strong links to motorsports with a claim to be developing high tech options for green fuels, and involvement with Formula E. TotalEnergies also sponsors cycling through its eight-year partnership with Team TotalEnergies, one of France's top racing teams. Total is targeting Asian brand recognition via its partnership with the Badminton World Federation (BWF) to sponsor the BWF World Championships, the BWF Thomas & Uber Cup Finals and the BWF Sudirman Cup Finals.



Sport	No. of active deals	Annual value (estimates)	Total value (estimates)
Rugby Union	5	\$5.4m	\$32.6m
Football	4	\$37m	\$254.3m
Badminton	1	\$1.1m	\$5.4m
Baseball	1	\$8.7m	\$17.4m
Motorsport	1	\$8.7m	\$17.4m
Cycling	1	\$1.5m	\$12.5m
Sum	12	\$62.4m	\$339.6m



Shell

Total emissions (1892 – 2022): 40,674 (MtCO2e)

Shell is one of the biggest climate polluters in the world, ranking 9th on the historic emitters list (1892-2022). The activities of its subsidiary, Shell Petroleum Development Company, in the Niger Delta have been notorious for spillages, environmental damage and shocking treatment of local communities. In 2021, a Dutch court made history when finding Shell liable for dangerous climate change - the first time a corporation has been found liable.

Shell has a history of covering up its environmental damage. In 1988 it commissioned an internal report on the dangerous global warming effects of CO2 emissions in which Shell's analysts warned of the ecological breakdown, but argued that the "main burden" of addressing climate change rested with governments and consumers.

Shell's investment in sport is long-standing and covers the whole breadth of sport across the globe, from football, cycling and motorsport to surfing and golf. Shell is particularly close to Ferrari through its F1 long-term partnership, and Shell scientists have also collaborated with two Formula E teams, Mahindra and Nissan e.dams on electric technologies. While renegeing on climate pledges and doubling down on commitments to its core fossil fuel business, initiatives like this are used as greenwash for the company. In the US, Shell is the official fuel sponsor for Indycar and the NTT Indycar series, has its name on the Houston Dynamo football team's stadium and is an official partner to the the New Orleans Saints American football team, and the Sacramento Kings and New Orleans Pelicans basketball teams. The company entered esports in 2019 by sponsoring the League of Legends European Championship (LEC) event. Following its 8-year sponsorship of British Cycling in 2022, more than 700 organisations and individuals signed an open letter to British Cycling calling for the governing body to renounce its deal with the oil giant.



Sport	No. of active deals	Annual value (estimates)	Total value (estimates)
Motorsport	5	\$65.2m	\$187m
Basketball	2	\$21.7	\$92.4m
Tennis	2	\$6.5	\$9.8m
American Football	1	\$28.3	\$139
Aussie Rules Football	1	\$1.1	\$2.2
Baseball	1	\$8.7	\$8.7
Cycling	1	\$3.3	\$19.6
Football	1	\$4.3	\$7.6m
Ice Hockey	1	\$3.3	\$3.3
Motorcycling*	1	-	-
Sum	16	\$142.4m	\$469.6m

(*a lack of data for Motorcycling meant they did not meet our criteria for generating an estimate)

Individual athletes

The sponsorship of individuals has become a standard part of any company's strategy and - in the case of the biggest stars - may rank as a higher priority than support for a club or team. Although some individual athletes have commanded significant influence for decades, social media and 24-hour media coverage today has made stars accessible to an extent that is unrecognisable from even a decade ago. Crucially, this platform is highly commodifiable.

Stars like Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, Tyson Fury and Anthony Joshua have all been successfully recruited to spend time in the Middle East as part of sponsorship deals. Other top sponsorships of individual athletes who are encouraged to align their social media with supporting fossil fuel brands include Kenyan marathon star Eliud Kipchoge, sponsored by Ineos, US pro surfer Sage Erickson, Canadian race car driver Amber Balcaen, and US pro mountain biker Samantha Soriano, all sponsored by Shell.

It is very hard to find quantitative information on individual stars' sponsorship deals, although industry sources say they may vary from \$50,000 in the lower ranks, to \$200-500,000 in the mid-tier all the way up to millions of dollars for superstars. The investigative website DeSmog has discovered **hundreds of examples of fossil fuel giants paying influencers nearly \$60 million since 2017** in an attempt to convince millennials that oil and gas companies are not the bad guys. Fossil fuel firms' greenwashing is harder to spot when it comes via influencers who appear to be expressing genuine opinions and who specialise in getting people to like them online.

Sporting influence – footballers made 15 of the 20 biggest ever Instagram posts

Rank and Account	No. of likes (millions)
#1 Lionel Messi	75.2
#2 Egg Gang	61.1
#3 Lionel Messi	54.4
#4 Cristiano Ronaldo	42.4
#5 Lionel Messi	41.7
#6 Lionel Messi	34.2
#7 Cristiano Ronaldo (view)	34.1
#8 liz_6	34.0
#9 Cristiano Ronaldo	33.8
#10 XXXTentacion	33.2
#11 Lionel Messi	32.6
#12 Cristiano Ronaldo	32.1
#13 Cristiano Ronaldo	32.0
#14 pop_cj6	30.5
#15 Lionel Messi	29.5
#16 Cristiano Ronaldo (view)	27.7
#17 Cristiano Ronaldo	27.6
#18 Zendaya @zendaya	26.3
#19 Lionel Messi	25.8
#20 Kylian Mbappé	25.6

Table showing most popular Instagram posts of all time, fifteen of which are from football players. Numbers 7 and 16 feature content about Ronaldo's Saudi club, Al-Nassr FC. Source: Forbes (August 21, 2024)



Credit: Sports Press Photo / Alamy Stock Photo

Messi and visit Saudi

Superstar footballer Lionel Messi reportedly stood to receive up to \$25 million over three years from Saudi Arabia to promote its campaign "Visit Saudi". The country has struggled to attract large numbers of leisure tourists because of their strict no-drinking policy, severe restrictions for women and documented systemic human rights abuses.

Messi has had to give a few commercial appearances, make social media posts and take annual all-expenses-paid vacations to the Kingdom with his family and children, sharing positive images of those trips - marked with a Saudi-approved hashtag - with his global online following, including his 472 million Instagram followers. And it works - a recent post garnered around 17 million likes and more than 78,000 comments.

One key clause, according to the New York Times, ensures that Messi cannot say anything that might "tarnish" Saudi Arabia. Although the validity of the contract has not been corroborated, it was this clause that provoked criticism.

Spotlight on Saudi Arabia

Over the last decade, oil states in the Gulf region – especially Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Bahrain – have drawn attention because of the enormous sums they've invested to bring the world's sporting elite into their backyard and, conversely, to place the names of the states over elite sporting events and their luxury hospitality suites where so much international soft politics happens. The funding of sport by Saudi Arabia is particularly important because of the scale of investment and who controls it.

Saudi's funds come primarily from state-owned oil, gas and petrochemicals company **Saudi Aramco**, the most profitable of all oil and gas producers, by far the world's biggest producing oil company, and therefore responsible for the most climate-related damage. If Saudi Aramco were a country, it would have the 5th largest emissions (behind China, the US, India and Russia). Its claims to be diversifying away from fossil fuels are dubious at best. In fact, in March 2024 Aramco CEO Amin Nasser said: "We should abandon the fantasy of phasing out oil and gas, and instead invest in them adequately, reflecting realistic demand assumptions."

Saudi Arabia also has a track record of undermining global efforts to tackle the climate crisis through lobbying to remove anti-fossil fuel language and acknowledgement of climate change from key agreements and statements. A 2023 paper by US and UK academics found Riyadh responsible for "decades of systemic obstruction", as demonstrated most recently at COP28 when the Saudis tried to obstruct a global fossil fuel phaseout pledge. Meanwhile, InfluenceMap's LobbyMap platform assesses climate policy engagement for over 500 companies and 250 industry associations globally. Among Climate Action 100+ companies, the largest corporate GHG emitters, **Aramco ranks in the bottom 10%**, with only 13 companies lobbying more actively against climate policy.

"If sportswashing is going to increase my GDP by 1%, then we'll continue doing sportswashing,

Mohammed bin Salman al Saud,
Crown Prince and Prime Minister,
Saudi Arabia, 2023.

Crown Prince and Prime Minister **Mohammed bin Salman al Saud (MBS)** presents himself as a moderniser but retains highly authoritarian control over the 34 million-strong population, both through direct rulings and via a network of family members and close allies. He is alleged to have been involved in the 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the detention of some 400 Saudi business people in the Riyadh Ritz Carlton hotel, where they were allegedly tortured and forced to make astronomical payments to the Saudi state. A disputed figure of \$28-107bn was 'returned' to the Saudi treasury, labelled as stolen, but this event was understood to be about consolidating power and reorganising resources firmly into the hands of MBS.

The country's PIF is valued at an estimated \$900 billion and aims to be the world's largest sovereign wealth fund by 2030. A major shareholder of Saudi Aramco, PIF financing of global sports forms part of Saudi Arabia's strategic "Vision 2030", launched in 2016 as a comprehensive reform process of the Kingdom's economic, political and social structures, with the intention of attracting new foreign investment that might help the country diversify its economy. Since then, Saudi Arabia has played host to numerous international sporting events and poured resources into the sports sector, not only to establish itself as the Middle Eastern sports hub but also to become a major player on the global sports and geopolitical stage. Key to achieving this is becoming a major host of international sport. It has already secured 85 major events, including the recently won multi-year partnership with the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) to stage its finals from 2024-26, the finals of a revamped Asian Champions League football tournament, the 2034 Asian Games, the 2027 Asian Cup, the Asian Winter Games of 2029 and its bid for the 2034 football World Cup.

“What sets Saudi Arabia apart from most other countries is that it sees its national interest as best served by obstructing intergovernmental efforts to tackle climate change,”

Climate Social Science Network

A large, dynamic splash of black liquid, possibly oil, dominates the top half of the page, creating a sense of movement and pollution.

Play the Game's 2023 report on the strategy of Saudi Arabia toward funding sports mapped 795 positions held by key Saudi decision-makers in 156 different Saudi Arabian entities and [more than 300 Saudi sponsorships in sport](#). Although this network is fairly extensive, much of the real power was revealed to be concentrated in relatively few hands, also exposing significant conflicts of interest involving influential Saudi authorities. A small number of people hold multiple leading positions within nominally separate but state-owned entities, together forming the inner trusted circle surrounding MBS. For example, the Minister of Sport, His Royal Highness Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Saud, holds at least 12 major leadership roles in organisations, ranging from President of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee, to President of the Union of Arab Football Federation and Board member of the [Events Investment Fund](#), which aims "to develop sustainable infrastructure and strategic partnerships for the culture, tourism, entertainment and sports sectors". Another mainstay of the Saudi politics and sports sphere is Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud, currently Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the USA, who is also a member of the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee and a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Women in Sports Commission.

Saudi Arabia currently registers a score of 8 out of [a possible 100](#) in the Freedom in the World report, which assesses civil liberties and political rights within nation states. Amnesty International records that Saudi authorities have adopted "a [zero-tolerance policy for any criticism, no matter how innocuous](#)", and documents that citizens are being sentenced to decades-long prison terms for peaceful political comment. This abysmal human rights record presents a challenge to World Cup organiser **FIFA, which has accepted Saudi Aramco as a 'Major Worldwide Partner' till 2027**, despite claiming that it is determined to apply the [United Nations' guiding principles on human rights](#) to its work. Several sports federations have made agreements with Saudi Arabia and there are concerns that these might include [restrictions on athletes speaking out](#) on issues such as human rights as a condition of funding. For example, Formula 1 [banned political statements](#) after champion racing driver Lewis Hamilton publicly criticised Saudi Arabia's human rights record.

Saudi Arabia has been sponsoring sport for many years, and is particularly known for its controlling stake in the UK's Newcastle United football team, Formula 1 sponsorship and the contentious LIV Golf league. It also funds sports from horse racing and boxing to tennis and the growing industry of esports. Even critics such as the traditional international golf tours [have buckled](#) in the face of the huge amounts of cash involved when Saudi Arabia offered a lucrative truce deal. In 2022, the breakaway LIV Golf series announced a \$250m, eight-event invitational series, which then became a 14-event league in 2024 after confirmation of an extra \$2bn of funding from the PIF. After initial shock, anger and attempts at disruption by the PGA Tour and the DP International Tour, both have now reached an agreement for a merger with the PIF, with potentially more funding still to come.

Formula 1 banned political statements after Lewis Hamilton criticised Saudi Arabia's human rights record.

Conclusion and recommendations

At the end of COP28, the international climate conference held in 2023 in the oil-rich United Arab Emirates, governments agreed to transition away from fossil fuels in a “just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade”. While governments need to set the parameters and pace of this phaseout, every sector and part of society has to play a role in ending the era of fossil fuels, including sport.

The United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, has spoken out regarding the all-encompassing approach that must be taken to phase out fossil fuels and the speed now required. In June this year, Guterres called upon “every country to **ban advertising from fossil fuel companies**” and urged the professional services and creative industries to “stop taking on new fossil fuel clients, from today, and set out plans to drop your existing ones”. Why? Because “fossil fuels are not only poisoning our planet – they’re toxic for your brand”.

As the most popular global sector to participate in and watch, sport has an enormous opportunity to contribute to the pace of change, curtailing the social licence of fossil fuel companies. Sport also has globally

renowned brands to protect - its governing bodies are quick to acknowledge and celebrate the universal language of sport, which transcends cultures and languages, and its ability to bring billions of people around the world together.

But if sport is used as a billboard to promote the very companies, products and lifestyles that fuel climate breakdown, it becomes at best an obstacle to climate action, and at worst fans the flames of a heating planet. Right now, sports’ universality is being used to legitimise expansion of international mega-tournaments rather than to stimulate necessary conversations about how to cut emissions and address the climate crisis. Rather than harnessing this latent power and potential, sport seems to be taking

backwards steps. The most powerful step it could take to contribute to climate action is stop promoting major polluters.

For clubs and governing bodies who agree that a new direction is needed, guides on practical action are available such as the Badvertising campaign’s ‘How to [screen-out polluting sponsors](#)’.

We recommend that, as a minimum, sports organisations and governing bodies should adopt the following measures:

1. Introduce tobacco-style bans on sponsorship from fossil fuel companies.
2. Actively seek and encourage more sustainable sources of funding in sports sponsorship.

3. Require full transparency on sponsors’ emissions data and measures undertaken to reduce emissions (both direct and indirect), and that these be compatible with science-based international climate targets.
4. Carry out due diligence on any potential donor’s record on climate change, screening out contributions from those not in line with Paris Agreement goals.
5. Embed sponsorship agreements into Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) strategies.

Appendix

A. Oil companies: national vs private corporations

National and private oil companies are both problematic sponsors but present different challenges.

National oil companies (NOCs) are responsible for producing the [majority of the world's oil and gas](#). In countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Mexico, NOCs are the dominant fossil fuel operators. The fiscal health of such countries can depend on how well these NOCs are run. According to the Natural Resource Governance Institute (NRGI), 62% of NOCs exhibit "weak," "poor" or "failing" performance on public transparency, including on reporting expenditures, transfers to the government and the breakdown of oil and gas production from different sources.

Private companies and corporations listed on stock exchanges present different challenges. Entirely privately owned companies in this field are rare, but Ineos, a major sponsor of sport, is an example - it features highly centralised control and a lack of transparency in comparison to publicly listed companies, which are beholden to a much wider array of shareholders.

Publicly listed corporations that are registered in jurisdictions where transparency is high, where the rule of law is strong and where Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) principles are taken seriously, can theoretically be investigated and held accountable for transgressions such as pollution, human rights abuses and corruption.

In many countries, companies and individual directors can be fined or even [held personally responsible](#) for failure and damage. However, many fossil fuel companies are huge global entities with multiple subsidiaries, able to use an array of accounting and legal complexities to [avoid accountability](#).

B. Sport and global emissions

The sports industry has mostly been late to start looking at its own contribution to climate change. Research for Play the Game (an initiative promoting democracy, transparency and freedom of expression in sport) calculates that global sport, which accounts for 0.6% of global GDP, is probably responsible for generating 0.6% of global emissions, or 300–350 million tCO₂e; the equivalent of a country like Spain or Poland. In the most widely used international accounting tool, the Greenhouse Gas Protocol, emissions are categorised into three groups or 'scopes', depending on how they have been produced.

Scope 1 refers to direct emissions from processes owned or controlled by an organisation. This would include on-site fossil fuel use for power and heating.

Scope 2 covers the emissions generated by electricity, steam, heating, and cooling purchased by an organisation.

Scope 3 covers all the emissions associated with processes and consumption in an organisation's value chain.

In the case of sports organisations, Scope 1-3 could include purchased goods and services such as sports and office equipment, employee catering, employee travel, spectator travel, and waste disposal, especially from event catering.

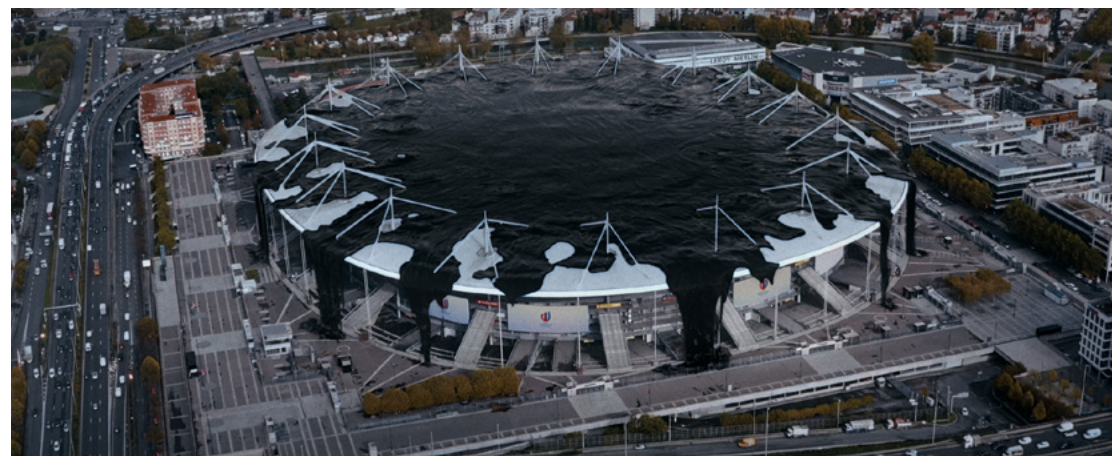


Image: Greenpeace and Studio Birthplace

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