

Sportswashed: Ronaldo Heads to Saudi Arabia

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It just keeps getting darker and darker. For the professionally ignorant, things are only getting better. With one of history's great events of sportswashing concluded – the 2022 Qatar World Cup – another state famed for its cosmetic distractions and moneyed seductions made a splash. Cristiano Ronaldo of Portugal, his sun setting and his prospects diminishing among Europe's top clubs, was signed to play in Saudi Arabia.

He had been seething and fuming at Manchester United, increasingly cast into peripheral, bench warming roles. The inner truculent brat screamed and found a voice on the ever humbly named show Piers Morgan Uncensored. In a [conversation](#) between brats who felt they had been mistreated over the years, the impression given by Ronaldo was always going to be a love of the game over cash.

“Is it also that you want to keep playing at the highest level? That you want to play Champions League football, you want to keep breaking records?” asked Morgan. In the manner of a ghost writer mulling over the bleedingly obvious, Morgan persisted. “Again, it comes back to my gut feeling about you that, if it was just about the money, you'd be in Saudi Arabia earning this king's ransom. But that's not what motivates you, you want to keep at the top...”

Whether he was already being courted by the money goons in Riyadh is hard to say, but if that was the case, Ronaldo was keen to keep up appearances. He wanted goals, to score in the big leagues, to be in the service of the elite clubs. “Exactly, because I still believe that I can score many, many goals and help the teams. I believe I am still good and capable to help the national team and even Manchester United.”

The king's ransom, however, is exactly what he came to accept, though he aggrandised his own appeal by [claiming](#) to be hot property on the international transfer market. “I had many offers in Europe, many in Brazil, Australia, the US, even in Portugal.” At around £172 million, it will be the [largest amount](#) forked out for a football player in history, beating that offered Lionel Mess for his final four years with FC Barcelona at £137.2 million per annum.

And Ronaldo only needs to play till June 2025.

Ronaldo will be helping Al-Nassr FC, whose administrators and backers are already moist with delight. “History in the making,” their twitter account [crowed](#). “This is a signing that will not only inspire our club to achieve even greater success but inspire our league, our nation and future generations, boys and girls to be the best version of themselves.”

History in the making. This is a signing that will not only inspire our club to achieve even greater success but inspire our league, our nation and future generations, boys and girls to be the best version of themselves. Welcome [@Cristiano](#) to your new home [@AlNassrFC pic.twitter.com/oan7nu8NWC](#)

— AlNassr FC (@AlNassrFC_EN) [December 30, 2022](#)

There is something sickly about such hailing: it projects a fantasy brand of equality, a delusion underwritten by cash. And there’s lots of it. Ronaldo is there to add rich lashings of sugary cover to the Kingdom’s broader agenda, which has reached across sporting fields such as golf, boxing, tennis, and Formula One. “We will support the rest of our clubs for qualitative deals with international stars soon,” came the solemn [promise](#) of the Saudi Minister for Sports, Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal.

As for the player himself, he shows little clue about who he is doing this for. “It’s not the end of my career to come to South Africa,” he [said](#) at his first Saudi press conference, even with the message of “Saudi welcome to Arabia” in his backdrop. The faux pas did little to dampen the enthusiasm of fans and officials. “You don’t need to know the name of a country to make 200 million euros,” [remarked](#) one. Nor, it would seem, its role in perpetrating humanitarian disasters, murdering journalists and indulging in mass executions.

Like Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is luring the big stars like stain removing agents for bloodstained clothes. Messi may well be considered a footballing demigod among fans and his countrymen, but like Ronaldo, he is keen about the way money talks. In May 2022, the Argentinian master became tourism ambassador for Riyadh. “We are excited for you to explore the treasures of the Red Sea, the Jeddah Season and our ancient history,” [exclaimed](#) Minister for Tourism Ahmed Al Khateeb in twitter-land. “This is not his first visit to the Kingdom and it will not be the last!”

The broader Saudi agenda here is clear enough. Such signings are also intended to improve the country’s chances for hosting the 2030 World Cup. Last year, Riyadh revealed it would be proposing a joint bid for the games that might also include Egypt and Greece. “Definitely the three countries would invest heavily in infrastructure and would definitely be ready,” Al Khateeb [insisted](#) in an interview last November. “And I know by then Saudi Arabia would have state of the art stadiums and fanzones built.”

Ronaldo, his challenged geography aside, is clear about one thing: he doesn’t want to retire gracefully and live off his accumulated treasure. Football now is less relevant than Mammon’s calling. That is something the House of Saud knows all too well.

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