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PROMOTING THE MOST POLLUTING FORM OF TRAVEL?

Why **UEFA** should drop
airline sponsors

PLANES OVER PLANET

When you tune in to watch the UEFA Champions League, you will find that you have planes on the brain. Why? Because airlines are one of the largest sponsors of this elite festival of European football, covering billboards, TV adverts, players' shirts and even whole stadiums.

This might not seem like a problem, but it is. In a world that is increasingly experiencing the impacts of the climate crisis, elite football continuing to use its massive global platform to promote polluting companies is not just careless - it is reckless. Time and time again, UEFA and elite clubs put polluting companies over the future of football and the planet.

It does not have to be like this. Football, with its billions of followers worldwide and its ability to transcend languages and cultures, could be a powerful tool for transforming individual attitudes and collective behaviours to prevent climate breakdown and ensure that future generations can continue to enjoy the beautiful game.

While we have a long way to go before achieving that, this briefing explores the connections between European football and airlines, the environmental issues with aviation as an industry, and why football must cut ties with polluting companies.

1. FOOTBALL VS. AIRLINES

The connection between elite football and airlines runs deep and stretches beyond advertising and sponsorship. International and domestic football depend on frequent air travel, with elite teams often chartering private jets to and from games in order to navigate an increasingly congested fixture schedule.

This type of behaviour is so embedded that teams often choose to fly when rail and road links are available; and laugh at the prospect of using other modes of transport.



There are, however, some positive trends. Forward-thinking clubs, from FC Nantes in France to a selection of clubs in the English Football League, have committed to travelling by bus or train in order to cut emissions and show that leadership is possible in this area. But with European-wide tournaments expanding to incorporate more teams across greater distances, aviation emissions are set to take-off.

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Within elite football, airline sponsors are everywhere. From the Etihad Stadium and the Emirates FA Cup to numerous shirt sponsor deals, many of the best players of this generation are moving billboards for the most polluting form of travel available to humans. The 2023-2024 Champions League started with a total of seven airline sponsors on shirts and five of those have made it into the final Round of 16: Etihad - Manchester City, Emirates - Arsenal, Emirates - Real Madrid, Riyadh Air - Atlético Madrid and Qatar Airways - PSG.

Every Champions League night in this Round of 16 will feature an airline sponsor. Many other clubs have smaller deals with airline sponsors.

Through sports sponsorship, airlines associate themselves with the positive association of football and make people forget about their polluting, climate-wrecking business.



These sponsorship deals, excluding the Etihad Stadium deal for which the number is not available, have a combined annual value of €317.3 million. The total value of the deals tabulated is at least €917 million. Deal valuations are calculated via the SportBusiness Sponsorship Database 2024.

Team	Sponsor	Type
Real Madrid	Emirates	
Paris Saint-Germain	Qatar Airways	
Manchester City	Etihad	 
Arsenal	Emirates	 
Atlético Madrid	Riyadh Air	
Internazionale	Qatar Airways	
Borussia Dortmund	Eurowings	
Lazio	AerItalia	
PSV	Eindhoven Airport + Corendon	
UEFA Champions League	Turkish Airlines	

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2. AIRLINES VS. PLANET

Air travel is the most carbon-intensive form of travel on earth and there is no low carbon way to fly, despite many misleading claims made by the airline industry. Put simply, flying is the fastest way to heat the planet.

If left unchecked, aviation emissions are expected to double or triple by 2050 and, in doing so, will consume up to one-quarter of the global carbon budget under a 1.5°C scenario. In short, lowering demand for aviation is the only sensible and immediate way to cut emissions from air travel. Yet advertisements, including those within football, do the exact opposite: they encourage and normalise frequent air travel. Research shows the impact of airline advertising adding up to 34 million tonnes of CO2 emissions per year.

Flying is an elite activity. In France, 2% of the population take 50% of the flights. In the United Kingdom, 15% of the population takes 70% of the flights. In 2022, aviation emissions reached almost 800 Mt of carbon dioxide. The non CO2-effects of aviation come on top of this. They lead to a warming effect possibly up to three times worse than the warming caused by aviation's CO2 emissions.

Serious action to limit airlines' disastrous climate impact is long overdue. At the EU level, airlines lobby to stop serious climate action. With this record of pollution, they work hard to protect their reputation.

They have very often been found guilty of greenwashing; in the Netherlands, KLM is taken to court to make them stop greenwashing their polluting business once and for all.

Associating themselves with famous football clubs and players is an important part of their strategy to protect its reputation.

3. EXTRA-TIME: WHAT CAN WE DO TO CHANGE THE GAME?

Airlines follow the playbook of big tobacco: they mislead the public into believing their product is not harmful and pay sports stars to do their bidding. UEFA and governments can also take a leaf out of the regulatory tobacco playbook: do everything to reduce the demand for polluting activities, including an advertising ban.

Just like with tobacco, UEFA can implement a fossil ad ban. In fact, their commitment to the [UN Sports for Climate Action Framework](#) might already oblige them to do this. One of the principles of this framework is to “promote sustainable and responsible consumption”. Advertisements for polluting products on shirts and the hoardings around the pitches are a direct contravention to this commitment.

Under the UN Sports for Climate Action Framework, UEFA also committed to a 50% emissions reduction by 2030, compared to pre-pandemic figures. With the ever expanding European club competitions, they are going in the wrong direction. It is time for UEFA to stand on the side of players and fans, rather than on the side of big polluters.

We call upon UEFA to adopt a fossil ad ban, so big polluters can no longer use football to sell their dirty products. They also urgently need to reorganise the football calendar, making it smaller and more regional. This will not only reduce emissions from flying, but also have a positive impact on overburdened players and make football more accessible for fans.

ABOUT US

Fossil Free Football is an organisation of football fans campaigning for a ban on sponsorship and ad deals with polluting companies and for serious climate action by football associations.

Badvertising: 'Badvertising' is a campaign to stop adverts and sponsorships fuelling the climate emergency.

Game Changer Sponsorship Pledge: fans, athletes, clubs and organisations can pledge their support to the Game Changer Sponsorship Pledge to help bring an end to climate-wrecking companies, such as airlines, laundering their reputations through the sports and teams we love.

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