Name: _____ Date: _____

How Has Ronaldo Lasted So Long?

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1165 words

Who is Cristiano Ronaldo, and how has he lasted so long? The short answer fits on a roster card. He is a Portuguese forward, born on February 5, 1985, in Funchal, on the island of Madeira. Through November 2026 he is 41, and he plays for Al Nassr in Saudi Arabia. The long answer is about time. He scored his first goal as a pro on October 7, 2002, for Sporting in Lisbon. That was more than twenty-four years ago. This book asks how a body and a game last that long.

He did not start as the player he is now. In August 2003, at 18, he joined Manchester United in England. The Premier League later called him a talented teenage "bag of tricks." Its review of that season said he played a part in three goals with his dazzling trickery in his first game, a 4 to 0 win. He was a winger, a player who works near the sideline and tries to beat defenders one on one. At that age, tricks were the job.

The job changed. In March 2017, the magazine FourFourTwo looked at his season averages. At 32, it wrote, he rarely ran down the sideline. He made fewer than one successful dribble every 90 minutes, which it called his lowest ever. Instead he saved his energy and waited for a promising move, and then he broke free inside the penalty area to take his shot. The article also credits his coaches. Ancelotti at Real Madrid, Santos with Portugal and Zidane at Madrid each used him closer to the goal. The winger had become a finisher.

The goal totals show how he scored. UEFA's records page splits his 146 goals for Portugal by body part. Most came off his right foot, and 28 came off his head. A header usually means a player was close to goal when a cross came in. That fits a finisher more than a dribbler, which is what FourFourTwo described. But the list cannot say where each header was taken, so it cannot prove why his game changed.

What does age do to a player's body? A 2025 study followed 98 players from one team in Brazil's top league. Sensors tracked them in official games. Speed, stamina and explosive moves all peaked at about 25 to 26 years old. After 32, the players made fewer sudden, high-speed efforts, but the distance they ran stayed about the same. Only 11 players were that old. These are averages from one team. They say what usually happens to a group. They do not predict any one person.

The study's authors add a hint. A player who loses some burst, they write, can make up for it with his position, his experience and his reading of the game. That sounds like the change FourFourTwo described. But the study never measured Ronaldo, and it counted only players who finished whole games. So it shows what is possible. It cannot show why this one career has gone on so long, and it makes no claim to.

How long do careers last? A 2025 study looked at 4,117 English pro players. It measured a career as the time from a player's first professional game to his last. Outfield players averaged 11.6 years. Those who reached the Premier League and played for their country averaged 14.8 years. By our arithmetic, Ronaldo's span from October 2002 is about twenty-four years. That is far past the average. But the study covers English players only, so it is a comparison, not a rule.

What does Ronaldo say? In June 2019, UEFA.com asked him how he stays at his best and defies his age. His answer was short: "It's the preparation – my work ethic." He was 34 at the time. Five years later, on the day of his 900th goal, the news agency AP quoted him on the same subject. Only he and those around him, he said, know "how hard it is to work every day." Both are his own explanations, in his own words.

An explanation is not a measurement, and the two kinds of evidence here do different jobs. The studies describe groups of players. The interviews give one man's view of his own life. None of the studies above measured his own training, rest or recovery. So nobody can say, from them, how much each part counts. A career this long probably has more than one cause. The honest answer to the question in the title is that some of it can be seen and some of it cannot.

Meanwhile, the count goes on. The 900th goal came on September 5, 2024, in Lisbon, against Croatia. AP called him the first man to reach 900 in official matches for club and country. The word official matters, because ESPN notes that Pelé and Romário claim to have reached 1,000 when friendly games are added. The Guardian wrote in 2021 that there is no official all-time table of goal scorers. Who counts depends on who is asked.

Some records do have an official keeper. UEFA keeps the Champions League's. Through July 2026 its articles list Ronaldo with 140 goals, the most ever. They also list 17 goals in one season, 2013-14. And they say he is the only player to score in three finals. One was in Moscow in 2008, where he scored with a header. His United team won on penalty kicks. Those kicks are not part of the game, so they do not count as goals.

For Portugal, UEFA's records page, updated in September 2026, lists 146 goals, the most for any man. Portugal won the European Championship in 2016, beating France in the final in Saint-Denis. In June 2025, it won the Nations League, a contest between European national teams. Ronaldo scored in a draw with Spain, and then Portugal won on penalties. UEFA noted that he was the first player over 40 to play and score in that final.

ESPN called the World Cup the trophy that has always eluded him. He played in his sixth in 2026. On June 23, in Houston, he scored twice against Uzbekistan in a 5 to 0 win. He became the first player to score in six World Cups. AP noted that, at 41, he was the second-oldest player to score in one. He added a penalty against Croatia on July 2. Portugal lost to Spain, 1 to 0, in the round of 16 on July 6.

Back with his club, the count kept moving. On October 29, 2026, Al Nassr beat Al Kholood, 5 to 3, and Ronaldo scored three goals in 15 minutes. ESPN said it was his seventh hat trick for the club, a hat trick being three goals in one game. Its tracker then listed 985 career goals and counted him 15 goals from 1,000. The next entry would be number 986. The count began with one goal for Sporting in 2002, and, through November 2026, it is still going.

Questions

1. According to the book, how did FourFourTwo describe the change in Ronaldo's game by 2017?

A. He dribbled more every year
B. He saved energy and waited for chances inside the penalty area
C. He stopped playing near the goal

2. Why does the book say the Brazilian study cannot explain Ronaldo's long career?

A. It never measured Ronaldo, and it counted only players who finished whole games
B. It was done before the year 2000
C. It found that players never slow down with age

3. In this book, what does official mean in 'the first man to reach 900 in official matches'?

A. Scored in front of a big crowd
B. Scored with the right foot
C. Counted under the rules for real matches, not practice games

4. What did the English study find about outfield players' careers?

A. They averaged 11.6 years
B. They all lasted more than twenty years
C. They were shorter for players who reached the Premier League

5. Why does the book say it cannot rank the causes of Ronaldo's long career?

A. Studies have already ranked every cause
B. Each cause has been measured in a lab
C. None of the studies measured his own training, rest or recovery

6. Why do penalty kicks after a tied final not count as goals in the game?

A. The goalkeepers wear gloves
B. They are not part of the game itself
C. Only the first kick counts

Words to know

winger: sideline attacker
forward: scoring player
official: officially counted

average: typical amount
explosive: sudden, powerful

Answer key: How Has Ronaldo Lasted So Long?

1. B. He saved energy and waited for chances inside the penalty area
2. A. It never measured Ronaldo, and it counted only players who finished whole games
3. C. Counted under the rules for real matches, not practice games
4. A. They averaged 11.6 years
5. C. None of the studies measured his own training, rest or recovery
6. B. They are not part of the game itself