Name: _____ Date: _____

Who Counts Ronaldo's Goals?

Reading level 13 · 1656 words

In the 49th minute of Al Nassr's game at Al Faisaly on October 23, 2026, João Félix took a free kick and Cristiano Ronaldo went up for it. ESPN described a glancing header and said it was unclear whether he got a significant touch with his head before the ball deflected into the net off the Al Faisaly defender Andrei Girotto. Al Nassr won, 3 to 1, and the Saudi Pro League credited the goal to Ronaldo as his 982nd career goal, although Opta, the data company that supplies ESPN, judged it an own goal, as did three other statistics sites. Reports said the league accepted the referee's report, which named Ronaldo as the scorer. ESPN's count includes the goal. A goal is the easiest event in soccer to see. As this one shows, it is not always the easiest to assign.

The Laws of the Game settle one question, whether a goal counts. Law 10 says that a goal is scored when the whole of the ball passes over the goal line, between the goalposts and under the crossbar, provided that the scoring team has committed no offence. Notice what the sentence leaves out. It says nothing about who gets the credit. That is decided by the competition, which publishes official records, and by companies such as Opta and Wyscout, which supply match data. Opta says it credits a goal to the scorer or, for an own goal, to the defender who put it in. In contested cases it applies its own rules, and it aligns with the competition when that applies. Wyscout leaves an own goal out of a player's goal measures but counts it for the other team.

A career total, then, is a stack of decisions, each made by someone. ESPN's tracker, updated on October 29, 2026, reads 985 career goals in 1,343 games. UEFA and the RSSSF, a football statistics archive, both put his total for Portugal at 146. Subtract, and by our arithmetic 839 came for clubs. The clubs and the tables do not always agree: Real Madrid's own page counts 451 goals in 438 games, while Opta's data counts 450, and Juventus's farewell article counts 133 appearances, while another table counts 134. These are gaps of a single goal or a single game, and the totals themselves do not show which match is in question.

Then comes the word official. The RSSSF breaks down his games for Portugal by type: 56 friendlies with 22 goals, 52 World Cup qualifiers with 41, 44 European qualifiers with 41, 30 games at European Championships with 14, 27 at World Cups with 11, 20 in the Nations League with 15, and four at the Confederations Cup with 2. The 22 friendly goals sit inside his 146. ESPN writes that no one has officially reached 1,000 goals in competitive games, and that Pelé and Romário reach that number only by adding friendlies. Yet ESPN's own 985 appears to include his 22 national-team friendlies, because the 839 club goals in a standard career table and his 146 for Portugal add up to it. So the word competitive does not mean

quite what a reader might expect.

Is there a referee for the table as a whole? The Guardian wrote in March 2021 that there is no official all-time scorers' table, only competing claims. FIFA's website had once credited Josef Bican with an estimated 805 goals, Romário claimed 1,000, and Ronaldo's own count had just reached 770. When he scored his 900th career goal on September 5, 2024, in Lisbon, the Associated Press called him the first man to reach 900 in official matches for club and country. That phrase names a rule without stating it. A reader who wants to check a headline has to find the table behind it, and then ask who keeps the table.

Some kicks never enter any table. Under Law 10, a penalty shoot-out is not part of the match, because it begins after the final whistle. The RSSSF's list shows the shoot-outs in his Portugal games only as footnotes, and eight of the 233 games on its list ended that way. On June 8, 2025, in the Nations League final in Munich, Portugal and Spain drew, 2 to 2, and Portugal won the shoot-out, 5 to 3. His goal in the 61st minute counts in his total. The kicks that decided the game do not. The same rule applied in the 2008 Champions League final in Moscow, where Ronaldo headed United in front in the 26th minute. It ended 1 to 1, and United won on penalties, 6 to 5.

Even one body can give two numbers. UEFA's own articles, updated through July 2026, credit Ronaldo with 140 Champions League goals in 183 games. UEFA's all-time scorers table lists 141 as of November 2026, and so did an NBC Sports list published on October 21, 2026, which says it leaves out qualifying rounds. UEFA's article does mention one qualifying goal, against Debrecen in 2005, but nothing printed says that goal is the gap. The table does not label its column, so a reader cannot tell which rule it follows. The Champions League also changed in 2024-25 to a league phase of 36 clubs playing eight games each. Ronaldo joined Al Nassr in 2023, so all his goals came under the old format.

National-team numbers drift in the same way. UEFA's page of September 27, 2026, gives Ronaldo 146 goals in 234 games for Portugal and calls both figures records. The RSSSF list, updated on October 7, gives 146 goals in 233 games and ends with the World Cup game against Spain on July 6. The missing game is Portugal's 1 to 0 win over Wales in the Nations League on September 24, 2026, in which he played and did not score. The record he passed shows how a total can shift even after a career is over. Ali Daei's mark, set with Iran, was first reported as 109 goals, and the RSSSF now lists 108 in 148 games. Ronaldo scored his 108th and 109th goals on June 23, 2021, and his 110th on September 1. So whether he equaled the record in June and passed it in September, or passed it in June, depends on the number used for Daei.

The structure of the competitions shapes the total, too. By our arithmetic from the RSSSF table, 82 of his 146 goals for Portugal came in qualifiers for the World Cup and the European Championship, in 96 games, or about 0.85 a game. In 27 World Cup games he scored 11, or

about 0.41 a game. A qualifying group sends a team against every other team in its group, while a World Cup groups it with teams that have already qualified, so, by our reading, the opposition is chosen in different ways. A rate therefore says as much about the opponents as about the player. UEFA, counting the European Championship, lists 14 goals in the finals and 55 including qualifiers.

ESPN's 1,343 games are appearances, not minutes. A game can be short: on August 21, 2026, ESPN wrote, he came off the bench against Al Riyadh and scored after 20 minutes. ESPN lists 0.73 goals per game, but analysts often use figures per 90 minutes, as FourFourTwo did in 2017 when it measured his dribbles and shots that way. Minutes matter for age research as well. A 2025 study of players at one Brazilian club analysed only performances in which a player finished the whole game. Its authors say that this ensures only starters enter the analysis, which reduces one kind of bias but also leaves out every substitute. A veteran who is rested or brought on late may look different in the data than one who starts.

What does that age research say? The study used sensors worn in 351 official games of one Brazilian first-division club, from 2020 to 2024, and covered 98 players aged 18 to 39. Its clustering analysis put the peak of speed at about 25.7 years, of endurance at about 24.8 and of explosive actions at about 26. The group over 32 had only 11 players. They showed declines in high-intensity and explosive actions, while measures such as total distance stayed relatively stable. The authors suggest that older players can offset lost burst by adjusting position and using experience. It is one club and one sensor system. A curve fitted to a group does not automatically apply to any one person, and the study does not include Ronaldo, who was born in 1985.

How unusual is a career of about 24 years? A 2025 study of 4,117 English footballers, with records from 1992 to 2023, measured career length as the time between a first and a last professional match. Outfield players averaged 11.6 years, and those who reached the Premier League and played internationally averaged 14.8. In 2019, UEFA.com asked him how he stays at his best, and he answered, "It's the preparation – my work ethic." In 2024 he said that only he and those around him know how hard it is to work every day. These are testimony from one man. A single case cannot separate preparation from changes of role, and no study here measured his training.

Back to the header in the 49th minute. ESPN's tracker for October 29, 2026, added three more goals that night, a hat trick in a 5 to 3 win over Al Kholood, in the 66th, 72nd and 81st minutes. They became goals 983, 984 and 985 in its count, and the 67th hat trick of his career. If goal 982 were an own goal, the same count would read 984 by our arithmetic, and the next goal would be number 985 instead of 986. The league has credited it to Ronaldo, and Opta has not. ESPN's number follows the league. Through October 29, 2026, the difference between the two counts is that one header.

Questions

1. What does Law 10 say about a goal, according to the book?

A. A goal is credited to the player who touched the ball last

B. A goal counts when the whole ball crosses the line, and the law says nothing about who gets the credit

C. A goal only counts if a data company confirms it

2. What does the book conclude from UEFA listing both 140 and 141 for Ronaldo's Champions League goals?

A. A number can depend on a counting rule that is not printed beside it

B. One of the two numbers must be a typing error

C. Qualifying goals were removed from the record in 2024

3. In this book, what does credited mean in 'credited the goal to Ronaldo'?

A. Paid him for the goal

B. Copied the goal from another game

C. Officially gave him the goal

4. What does the book say happens to a penalty shoot-out under Law 10?

A. It adds goals to a player's career total

B. It begins after the final whistle and is not part of the match

C. It is played before extra time

5. Why does the book say a goals-per-game rate says as much about the opponents as about the player?

A. Qualifying groups and World Cup groups choose the opposition in different ways

B. Goalkeepers change every year

C. Rates are kept only for friendlies

6. What would ESPN's count read if goal 982 were an own goal?

A. 983

B. 984

C. 985

Words to know

credited: given the goal
qualifiers: entry games
friendlies: practice games
endurance: staying power
footnotes: notes below

Answer key: Who Counts Ronaldo's Goals?

1. B. A goal counts when the whole ball crosses the line, and the law says nothing about who gets the credit
2. A. A number can depend on a counting rule that is not printed beside it
3. C. Officially gave him the goal
4. B. It begins after the final whistle and is not part of the match
5. A. Qualifying groups and World Cup groups choose the opposition in different ways
6. B. 984