

2026 Elite Footballer AI Public Voice Pulse Check

*Assessing the Public Voice on AI of the
Top 20 Players from the 2026 FIFA
World Cup and Its Relevance to
Enterprise AI Transformation*

Edition 1: 2026

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The Pulse Check examines publicly available information relating to selected elite footballers and their publicly identifiable relationship with artificial intelligence, including public statements, commentary, advocacy, campaigns, commercial associations and other qualifying AI-related activity. The Pulse Check does not assess or infer an individual's private beliefs, motives, awareness, intent, contractual obligations, legal or political position, moral character or professional conduct. It does not suggest that any footballer, club, governing body, sponsor or other football figure is required to speak about AI.

A finding of "Public AI Voice Identified" means that qualifying, publicly attributable evidence of AI-related commentary, activity, commercial association or other engagement was identified within the published research methodology and observation period.

The Elite Football AI Public Voice Pulse Check is based on information that is publicly available at the time of review, including public statements, media reports, interviews, campaigns, open letters, social media activity, public advocacy, industry announcements and other accessible sources.

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Terminology

This report uses the term 'football' throughout to refer to association football, also commonly known as 'soccer' in countries including Australia, the United States and Canada.

WHY TRUSTED PUBLIC VOICE ON AI OF THE MOST FOLLOWED SPORTSPEOPLE IN THE WORLD MATTERS

AI is no longer simply a technology conversation. It is increasingly touching questions of job security, creative ownership, misinformation, privacy, environmental impact, human identity and relevance, trust, and the future of work.

For enterprise AI transformation, these questions matter directly.

As organisations introduce AI into workplaces, they are not doing so in a neutral environment. Long before an employee encounters AI through their employer, they may already have formed views about what it means, what it might do to their work, and whether it can be trusted.

News media, governments, technology companies, social media, commercial advertising, popular culture and influential public figures all contribute to that environment.

This creates a distinctive challenge for enterprise AI transformation. Organisations need trust and confidence from the people whose work is being transformed, yet those employees may arrive with established hopes, fears and assumptions about AI that have been formed largely outside the organisation.

Experienced organisational change practitioners understand the importance of the environment in which AI transformation takes place. But typically that is a function of the internal environment - leadership, culture, communications and so on.

AI introduces an additional layer of complexity since the enterprise is not introducing AI into a blank space but touching a conversation - a change narrative - that has already begun.

What This Pulse Check Examines

The Public AI Voice Pulse Checks Series is designed to create a longitudinal record of how society's most influential institutions engage with AI as the technology reshapes work, enterprise and public life.

The 2026 Elite Footballer AI Public Voice Pulse Check examines what is publicly identifiable about the AI voice and AI-related associations of influential public figures. It does not seek to determine whether those individuals are right or wrong, whether they support or oppose AI, or whether they should have a position on the technology.

The Pulse Check asks what is publicly visible at a particular point in time. Has an individual spoken publicly about AI? Have they participated in an AI-specific initiative? Have they knowingly associated themselves with an AI-related product, service, campaign or activity? And, where a public voice exists, what can be observed about its nature?

The Pulse Check does not assess whether elite sportspeople ought to speak about AI. Nor does the absence of a public voice imply that an individual should have one. Instead, it establishes a point-in-time baseline of what can be observed in the public record.

Public sentiment about AI should not be understood as a static measure of whether people are simply "for" or "against" AI. It is a conversation continually recalibrated as people encounter new evidence, capabilities, risks and experiences. A public position visible today may therefore look different as the technology and the surrounding social conversation develop.

Footballers also occupy an interesting position because their public identities can exist at several levels.

They may represent a club, league, national team, sponsor or commercial partner, while simultaneously operating as highly recognisable individual brands.

This creates multiple pathways through which AI can enter a player's public identity.

A player may speak directly about AI. They may participate in an AI-specific campaign. They may endorse an AI product or service. They may

become associated with AI through a commercial partnership involving their club or another organisation they represent.

These forms of engagement are not necessarily equivalent.

A commercial association with an AI company does not establish that a player has developed a broader position on artificial intelligence. Similarly, appearing in an AI-related campaign does not necessarily mean that a player has considered or expressed a view on AI's implications for employment, society or human contribution.

The public record can nevertheless establish an association.

This is particularly relevant as AI companies increasingly enter the sporting environment.

When an AI enterprise places its product, service or brand alongside a globally recognised footballer, the technology is being presented within an existing relationship of familiarity between the player and their audience.

The significance may therefore lie not only in what the player says, but also in what the player becomes publicly associated with.

Trust and the Public Environment Around AI

Trust is an important part of the wider AI conversation.

People can recognise the potential benefits of AI while simultaneously having concerns about its reliability, transparency, employment effects, privacy, misinformation, creativity, human relevance and broader social consequences.

This creates a different environment for AI from many conventional consumer technologies.

For organisations, the implications are significant. Enterprise AI transformation ultimately depends on people being willing to understand, engage with and use AI. Yet employees may already have formed perceptions of the technology through an external public conversation that organisations cannot fully control.

Why Elite Footballers Are an Important Case Study for Public AI Voice

Football provides a particularly powerful environment in which to examine public AI voice.

It is one of the world's most influential cultural systems, shaping identity, community, emotion, media, commerce, aspiration and public imagination across almost every continent.

The reach of its leading players is extraordinary.

Within the twenty-player cohort examined in this Pulse Check, Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and Neymar Jr alone represent an audience of approximately 1.5 billion Instagram followers. They are not simply elite footballers. They are globally recognised public figures whose identities extend well beyond the sport.

That reach gives footballers a distinctive position within public life.

Their influence is not based solely on the number of people who follow them. It is also built through familiarity, identification, sustained visibility and, importantly in the context of AI, trust.

Footballers can become public voices on issues extending well beyond football, using their individual platforms to support causes, engage with communities and participate in wider cultural conversations.

This makes them an interesting cohort through which to observe the public conversation around AI.

AI and advanced technology are increasingly embedded across the sport, including performance analysis, player scouting, tactical modelling, injury prevention, officiating support, fan engagement, content production, marketing, personalisation, stadium operations and broader club enterprise systems.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup, for example, placed AI-enabled technology directly within the officiating environment through connected-ball technology capable of capturing ball movement in real time and supporting decision-making.

Players themselves are also increasingly becoming subjects of AI-generated content, data analysis, prediction models, digital replication and technology-enabled commercial experiences.

Yet there is an interesting distinction between AI being used around footballers and footballers publicly articulating what AI means.

The technology is increasingly visible throughout the football ecosystem.

Public figures form one part of that environment.

Elite sportspeople are particularly interesting because they possess substantial social reach and established relationships with audiences. Their association with AI does not necessarily determine what those audiences think, but it forms part of the wider environment in which the technology is encountered and understood.

What Does It Mean for an Elite Sportsperson to Lend Their Trust to AI?

The question of commercial association with AI becomes more interesting when considered in the context of the public environment into which that association enters.

AI is not a conventional consumer category. Public attitudes toward it remain mixed and are evolving rapidly. Stanford's 2026 AI Index describes a public conversation in which optimism is rising, but so too is anxiety: globally, 59% of respondents said AI products and services offer more benefits than drawbacks, while 52% said they were nervous about AI. The Index also identifies substantial differences between experts and the public in expectations about AI's impact on work and the economy. ([Stanford HAI][1])

Against that backdrop, a different question arises when an elite sportsperson with millions of followers chooses to associate their personal identity with AI.

Why would an elite sportsperson, trusted by fans and the wider community, lend their name, identity and personal credibility to an AI product or enterprise?

The question is not whether such an association is right or wrong. Nor is it whether the player personally endorses every aspect of AI. A commercial relationship may be based on a particular product, technology or commercial proposition, rather than on a general position about artificial intelligence.

But the distinction between endorsing a product

and being publicly associated with AI may be less clear to an audience.

Elite sportspeople possess something that AI companies cannot manufacture through advertising alone: a pre-existing relationship of familiarity and trust with millions of people. Their audiences have followed their careers, watched them compete, identified with them and, in many cases, developed a personal affinity with them over many years. When that individual chooses to place their name and identity alongside a technology, the association can carry meaning beyond the functional claims of the product itself.

This potentially gives elite sportspeople a distinctive role in the public adoption of emerging technologies. They can make an abstract or unfamiliar technology culturally familiar. They can position it alongside qualities such as performance, achievement, aspiration, innovation and human capability.

But that influence also creates a different kind of consideration.

If public attitudes toward AI become more positive, the association may be perceived as an endorsement of innovation and progress. If concerns intensify around employment, privacy, environmental impact, authenticity, misinformation, regulation or the distribution of AI's benefits, the same association may acquire a different meaning.

The athlete does not control that evolution.

This is particularly relevant because AI itself is changing rapidly. The technology, the claims being made about it and public understanding of its consequences are all moving at a pace that makes today's commercial proposition potentially different from tomorrow's public perception.

The question therefore extends beyond sponsorship.

What is the value, responsibility and potential risk of lending personal trust to a technology whose social licence is still being formed?

The Pulse Check does not attempt to answer that question for individual players. Nor does it suggest

that elite sportspeople should avoid commercial relationships with AI.

Rather, the observation is that AI-specific commercial representation is qualitatively different from many conventional endorsements. When an elite sportsperson associates their personal identity with AI, they potentially become part of a much larger public conversation about a technology that is already provoking significant questions about work, human capability, trust and society.

That makes the emerging question not simply whether AI companies will seek out elite sporting identities, but what happens when people with extraordinary public reach choose to lend their personal credibility to AI at a time when society is still deciding how much it trusts the technology itself.

[1]: https://hai.stanford.edu/ai-index/2026-ai-index-report/public-opinion?utm_source=chatgpt.com "Public Opinion | The 2026 AI Index Report | Stanford HAI"

RESULTS

The 2026 Elite Footballers Public AI Voice Pulse Check examined the publicly visible AI record of the top twenty players from FOX Sports' ranking of the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Collectively, these players have a combined Instagram following of more than 955 million people - almost three times the population of the United States - highlighting the extraordinary population and cultural reach of this cohort.

The findings suggest that while AI is becoming increasingly embedded in football and the commercial ecosystem surrounding the game, the public AI voice of many of its elite players remains at an early stage of development.

The Pulse Check identified 3 of the 20 players with a publicly identifiable association with artificial intelligence: Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappé and Harry Kane.

Lionel Messi provides the clearest example of an elite footballer being used directly to bring AI into mainstream consumer culture.

In 2026, Messi entered into a global collaboration with OpenAI centred on ChatGPT and the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Campaign material featured Messi using ChatGPT Images to create an Argentina-inspired transformation, with the wider campaign encouraging fans to use the technology themselves. The relationship positioned one of the world's most recognisable footballers directly alongside a leading generative AI platform.

The significance for this Pulse Check is not that Messi has articulated a developed position on AI. The evidence identified does not establish that. Rather, Messi's participation demonstrates how an elite footballer can become a highly visible public representative of AI through a commercial campaign.

Mbappé has an identified public voice on AI through his investment and ambassadorial relationship with Alan, a health technology company whose services include an AI health companion;

Kylian Mbappé represents a more indirect but potentially more interesting form of AI association. In 2026, Mbappé became an investor and ambassador for Alan, the French preventive-health company. Alan describes Mbappé as more than a conventional sponsor, positioning him as an investor and "teammate" in its wider health proposition.

The connection to AI arises through Alan's technology platform. Alan's Mo product is an AI health companion that provides personalised health support, connects users with care pathways and operates under medical oversight. Alan says Mo was already being used by more than 500,000 members in France during Q1 2026. Mbappé's partnership is incorporated into this ecosystem, including an Alan experience in which his avatar becomes a "teammate" and users can undertake challenges against him.

Mbappé's voice is materially different from Messi's direct OpenAI campaign. Mbappé is not endorsing an AI company as such. His association is with an AI-enabled health enterprise and an ecosystem in which AI is an important component of the consumer proposition.

His situation represents AI association through an AI-enabled enterprise and consumer product.

Harry Kane through his investment and ambassadorial relationship with OxeFit, an AI and robotics-enabled fitness company.

Harry Kane provides the strongest example in the cohort of both AI association and an attributable public voice connected to AI.

In 2023, Kane became an investor and ambassador for OxeFit, which describes itself as an AI and robotics fitness company. Its technology combines robotics, movement and performance tracking, coaching and analytics to create personalised training experiences.

Harry Kane's relationship provides an example of AI association through athlete performance technology, accompanied by a direct public voice.

Importantly, Kane did not simply lend his name to the company. In announcing the relationship, he explained why he had invested, specifically discussing the technology's approach to personalised training and the combination of robotics, content and physical performance. OxeFit subsequently continued to position itself around AI-driven health and fitness experiences.

Harry Kane's attributable commentary about the technology is the only such example across the 20-player cohort, making his direct spoken public voice distinguishable from both Messi and Mbappé.

For the remaining 18 players, no attributable public AI commentary or sufficiently direct AI endorsement was identified within the scope of the research.

Across the 20 player cohort no player was found to have articulated a developed public position on AI's broader implications for work, employment, trust, human identity, inequality, environmental impact or enterprise transformation.

The Plus 1 Result- Cristiano Ronaldo

As noted in the Methodology, Cristiano Ronaldo did not secure a spot in the final post-Cup positional countdown following Portugal's Round of 16 exit and was therefore not included in the 20-player cohort examined in this Pulse Check. However, given his extraordinary global reach and cultural influence, Ronaldo remains relevant to the broader question of how elite footballers are engaging publicly with artificial intelligence. His public AI associations were therefore considered separately as contextual evidence, rather than as part of the formal cohort analysis.

Although Cristiano Ronaldo does not form part of the 20-player cohort used for this Pulse Check, his public relationship with artificial intelligence warrants separate mention because it provides a particularly clear example of the growing association between elite footballers and AI enterprises.

In December 2025, Perplexity announced a global partnership with Ronaldo, describing him as a dedicated user of its AI answer engine. The

company stated that Ronaldo uses Perplexity for important moments, including award speeches and major announcements, and announced that he had also become an investor in the company. The partnership was accompanied by the launch of a dedicated CR7 experience, allowing users to explore Ronaldo's career through the Perplexity platform.

Ronaldo also publicly promoted the investment and partnership, framing his involvement around curiosity, asking questions and continual learning. Contemporary reporting characterised the relationship as extending beyond conventional sponsorship into investment and product use.

The significance of the Ronaldo case is therefore not simply that another famous footballer has appeared in an AI campaign. His relationship combines commercial partnership, investment, personal use and integration of his personal brand into an AI platform. It represents a particularly developed form of public AI association.

At the same time, the evidence identified for Ronaldo should be distinguished from a developed public position on the broader implications of AI. His visible association is principally with using, investing in and promoting an AI enterprise, rather than articulating a sustained position on AI's implications for work, employment, human identity, trust or society.

Ronaldo demonstrates that an elite footballer's public relationship with AI can become highly developed commercially without necessarily becoming a developed public voice on AI itself.

The 2026 Elite Footballer AI Public Voice Pulse Check contributes to a broader longitudinal record of how influential public communities are engaging with AI as the technology increasingly reshapes work, enterprise and public life. Its purpose is not to suggest that athletes should speak about AI, but to examine what is publicly visible when they do, and what remains comparatively absent from the public conversation.

The Pulse Check in mid-2026 provides a particularly useful baseline for observing what happens next as AI becomes more capable, more

pervasive and more consequential across society and the global sporting environment.

KEY FINDINGS & OBSERVATIONS

1. The Two Most Globally Influential Footballers Are Already in the AI Conversation

One of the more striking findings of the Pulse Check is that the two most globally prominent footballers, Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, are also among the clearest examples of elite footballers with a publicly identifiable relationship with AI.

Between them, they have a combined Instagram following approaching 1.2 billion people, giving them an extraordinary level of public reach even within the already extraordinary world of elite football. Their engagement with AI is different and does not represent a common position or shared perspective on the technology. Rather, each has entered the public AI conversation through a different form of association.

The finding should not be interpreted as evidence that global reach causes AI engagement, or that either player has developed a broader public position on artificial intelligence. It does, however, highlight an important intersection between global influence, personal brand and AI.

As AI becomes an increasingly important technological, economic and human issue, individuals with the greatest capacity to reach global audiences are already beginning to occupy space within that conversation.

The contrast with other highly visible players is also notable. Publicly available reporting does not identify a comparable level of AI-related commercial or investment activity associated with Mohamed Salah, for example. His publicly reported business interests appear more concentrated in conventional commercial areas.

The significance is not the difference between individual players. It is that AI is beginning to enter the public identities of football's most influential individuals, but not yet in a consistent or widespread way across the elite player cohort.

2. AI Enterprises Are Beginning to Use Elite Athletes as Public Representatives

The Pulse Check also identified an emerging pattern in the relationship between AI enterprises and high-profile public figures.

The research identified direct commercial relationships between leading AI enterprises and globally recognised elite athletes, including Lionel Messi's relationship with OpenAI and Cristiano Ronaldo's partnership with Perplexity AI.

These relationships are significant because they are direct relationships between the AI enterprise and the individual athlete rather than relationships mediated through a football club or sporting organisation.

The player's personal identity, reputation, audience and public profile therefore become part of the relationship with the AI enterprise.

This is different from an AI partnership with a football club in which players may subsequently appear in or be associated with organisational activity. A direct individual relationship places the athlete's own public identity alongside the AI company.

The current evidence also raises an interesting distinction between elite sport and some other areas of celebrity culture.

Actors, musicians, writers and other creative professionals have a particularly complex relationship with generative AI because questions of copyright, authorship, intellectual property, authenticity and the potential displacement of human creative work are already central to their industries.

Elite athletes occupy a different cultural position. Their public identities are primarily associated with performance, competition, discipline, achievement and human physical capability.

This may make elite athletes particularly attractive to AI enterprises seeking globally recognised public figures.

The Pulse Check does not establish that AI companies deliberately prefer athletes over creative professionals, nor does it establish why any particular partnership was formed.

It does, however, identify an emerging pattern:

At a time when AI enterprises are seeking public attention and cultural relevance, some of the world's most visible athletes are becoming direct public representatives of AI.

That places elite athletes at an increasingly interesting intersection of technology, commerce, trust and public influence.

3. AI Is Not on the Periphery of Football, but Player-Led Public AI Voice Remains Limited

AI is already deeply embedded in football.

It is being used across performance analysis, scouting, injury management, officiating, media, marketing, fan engagement, commercial operations and enterprise systems. Governing bodies, clubs, technology companies and commercial partners are increasingly incorporating AI into the sport, while players themselves are increasingly being analysed, measured, replicated and represented through AI-enabled technologies.

The gap is therefore not one of AI adoption.

It is the visibility of player-led public voice surrounding that adoption.

Within the twenty-player cohort examined, only a small number had an identifiable public AI record. Three players were identified through commercial engagement with AI products, AI-enabled businesses or AI-associated companies, while a further three appeared in AI-sponsored national-team activities.

Several other players had become subjects of AI-generated content, deepfakes, fabricated endorsements, manipulated images or other forms of AI-enabled representation.

These forms of association are significant, but they should not automatically be confused with public voice.

The Pulse Check identified very limited attributable commentary from the twenty players on AI's wider implications for society, work, employment, inequality, data use, environmental impact or enterprise transformation.

Harry Kane provides one of the clearer examples of a player whose public record connects AI with athlete welfare and performance. For most of the cohort, however, no comparable sustained public position was identified.

This does not mean that the players have no views on AI. It means that limited evidence of those views being publicly articulated was identified within the scope of the review.

What the research does reveal is an increasingly important distinction between public AI voice and public AI engagement.

Lionel Messi provides the clearest example. His participation in OpenAI's ChatGPT World Cup campaign represents direct and intentional public promotion of a generative AI platform, despite the absence of a substantive public record of him discussing AI's wider implications.

Other players have encountered AI in different ways, including through technologies applied to their performance and data or through synthetic representations of their identities.

AI is therefore already present in the public lives of elite footballers.

But it has not yet translated into a broad or deep player-led public conversation about what AI means.

4. Commercial Association Is Becoming an Important Form of Public AI Engagement

The findings demonstrate that public AI voice and AI engagement should not be treated as synonymous.

Public AI voice concerns what footballers publicly communicate about AI, either through attributable commentary or through the knowing public association of their identity, image, voice or

personal brand with an AI-specific product, campaign or initiative.

AI engagement is broader. It includes commercial relationships, endorsements, partnerships, investments and other forms of interaction with AI-related organisations or technologies.

A player may therefore have limited documented commentary about AI while simultaneously having significant commercial engagement with an AI enterprise.

Lionel Messi illustrates this distinction particularly clearly. His participation in OpenAI's ChatGPT campaign demonstrates significant public engagement with AI and direct commercial association, but does not by itself establish a broader personal position on artificial intelligence.

Harry Kane provides a different example, with a public record connecting AI to athlete welfare and performance.

This distinction is important because public influence does not arise solely through what high-profile individuals say.

It can also arise through:

- the technologies they promote;
- the companies they partner with;
- the products they endorse;
- the initiatives in which they participate; and
- the ways in which their identities are incorporated into AI-enabled media and experiences.

Commercial association may therefore place a footballer within the public AI conversation even where they have not articulated a broader view.

This is particularly relevant because commercial endorsements generally communicate a positive association. When a globally recognised footballer appears alongside an AI enterprise or product, the technology is being encountered by their audience through an established public identity.

That does not establish that the player supports every aspect of AI, nor that they have considered its wider societal implications.

It simply means that AI has entered their public identity.

The current findings therefore suggest that elite footballers are already becoming connected to the AI ecosystem, but that this connection remains more commonly commercial, contextual or representational than explicitly societal.

5. AI Will Touch the Football Enterprise, Not Just the Footballer

Footballers may appear relatively insulated from the employment consequences of AI.

The core activity of a professional footballer cannot simply be automated. Players still have to train, compete, recover and perform on the pitch. Many of the earliest and most visible applications of AI in football are likely to enhance player performance rather than replace the player themselves.

But footballers are also employees within commercial enterprises.

Football clubs contain employees, structures, systems, workflows, decision rights, technologies and operating models. AI is increasingly entering those environments across performance analysis, scouting, medical and injury management, administration, content production, marketing, commercial operations and other functions.

The employment effects of AI may therefore be experienced within the club even where the footballer is not directly replaced or materially affected in their playing role.

Harry Kane provides a clear example through his investment in and ambassadorship of OxeFit, an AI and robotics-based fitness technology company using movement and performance tracking, analytics and computer vision to deliver personalised training.

The technology may help the player become fitter, stronger and more effective while also changing the work performed by analysts, coaches, medical staff, administrators, content teams and other employees within the same organisation.

The Pulse Check does not attempt to predict how these changes will affect footballers or their workplaces.

It does, however, identify an important relationship between the technological environment surrounding elite footballers and the broader enterprise transformation taking place around them.

As AI becomes more deeply embedded in football's operating environment, it may become increasingly difficult to separate the technology's impact on sporting performance from its impact on the enterprise itself.

6. Could Elite Sportspeople be a Sleeping Giant in the AI Conversation?

Elite sportspeople are not required to speak on social issues. Indeed some would argue they have no place to. Others would prefer they don't and that should be left to elected representatives, policy makers, economists, technologists or workplace leaders.

But historically, celebrities and elite sportspeople have lent that social capital to matters beyond their professional fields.

Their influence has extended beyond their professional achievements because the relationship they develop with audiences can give them something that few institutions or individuals possess at comparable scale: social capital.

They have supported social causes, raised awareness of community issues, contributed to public conversations and used their platforms in ways that have extended their influence beyond entertainment or sport.

Muhammad Ali challenged prevailing attitudes towards race, religion and war; Billie Jean King used her prominence to advance gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights; Audrey Hepburn used her global fame to advocate for children through UNICEF; and Harry Belafonte used his platform in the civil rights movement and later for humanitarian causes.

These examples are different in purpose, context and consequence, but they share a common characteristic: people with extraordinary public visibility used some of their social capital to bring wider public attention to issues that mattered beyond their profession

Elite sportspeople occupy a particularly distinctive position within this landscape. Sporting achievement can give them extraordinary reach, while sustained visibility, familiarity and identification with audiences can create high levels of public trust and emotional connection. Their influence is therefore not simply a function of how many people follow them. It is also a function of the relationship audiences have with them.

Their public influence represents a form of soft power. It can attract attention to an issue, make an unfamiliar subject more culturally accessible, signal that an issue matters, or encourage audiences to engage with a conversation they might otherwise overlook.

The implications of AI increasingly extend well beyond technology. AI is reshaping work, education, creativity, communication, identity and everyday life. Public concern and debate are consequently expanding beyond questions of what AI can do towards questions of what AI means for people and society.

This creates an intriguing possibility if the implications of AI become increasingly social and human, that social capital may become more significant to the AI conversation than it is today.

7. The Elite Sportsperson potentially represents an accessible trusted public voice for AI Companies

Public trust of AI remains a defining challenge.

There is no obvious short-term scenario in which AI simply becomes a universally trusted category.

The issue is no longer only whether people perceive AI as trustworthy. As AI becomes more capable and autonomous, questions of reliability, safety, transparency and control are increasingly being experienced in practice. AI systems can make mistakes, behave unexpectedly and,

increasingly, act with a degree of autonomy that makes the consequences of those failures more tangible.

If public trust is an asset that can be borrowed, strengthened or transferred through credible human association, elite sport may represent a particularly accessible environment in which to seek it. The combination of global visibility, established personal brands, large audiences and a professional identity that is not directly threatened by AI substitution may make elite sportspeople commercially attractive partners for AI companies seeking to humanise the category and build public confidence.

As AI increasingly enters the commercial marketplace, elite sportspeople may become one of the relatively few categories of highly visible public figures for whom representing AI does not carry an obvious contradiction with the value of their own work.

Elite sportspeople occupy a relatively distinctive position. Their professional value is built primarily around physical performance, competition and human capability. Their work product is therefore, at least presently, less directly exposed to replacement by generative and autonomous AI than the work of many other highly visible public figures.

The contrast is potentially significant. For writers, filmmakers, actors, musicians and other creative professionals, AI is increasingly capable of producing, replicating or materially altering elements of the work through which those individuals earn their living and establish their professional identity. For some, association with AI may therefore carry a more immediate tension: the technology seeking their endorsement may also be perceived as threatening the value, ownership or future of the very work they represent.

That may make elite sportspeople a comparatively accessible category for commercial association with AI companies as the nature of their relationship with the technology may create fewer direct conflicts of interest.

THE STATE OF THE AI CONVERSATION IN MID-2026

The public voice of elite footballers on AI does not occur in a vacuum. It sits within a broader public conversation about what AI means, what it may deliver and what its consequences may be.

When a public figure or organisation speaks about AI, that voice enters a conversation already shaped by optimism and anxiety, adoption and resistance, opportunity and uncertainty. A positive, neutral or critical voice is therefore received against expectations and assumptions that already exist within the public.

The Pulse Check does not seek to determine whether any particular position on AI is right or wrong. It asks a different question:

Are elite footballers reading the room on AI?

The Pulse Check series does not attempt to recreate or independently measure public opinion about AI. A substantial and growing body of research already examines public attitudes, sentiment and experience with AI, including research from the Stanford Institute for Human-Centred AI through its AI Index, Ipsos, the Pew Research Center, Gallup, Edelman and Lightcast. The Pulse Checks consider this established body of research as context for understanding the broader public conversation rather than attempting to replicate it.

This distinction is important because the AI conversation is extraordinarily dynamic. Technology capabilities, investment, regulation, enterprise adoption and public understanding are changing rapidly, often in response to one another. At the same time, questions about trust, employment, infrastructure, human agency and whether the benefits of AI will be broadly shared are becoming increasingly prominent.

An Environment That Is Difficult to Predict

What we do know is that the AI environment is extraordinarily dynamic.

Technology capabilities, investment, regulation, enterprise adoption, public sentiment and the competitive landscape are changing rapidly and often in response to one another. Developments that appear significant today can be overtaken, revised or challenged within months.

This makes forecasting particularly difficult. It is challenging to know how the AI landscape will unfold over the next three months, let alone the next 12 months or the years beyond.

That uncertainty is precisely why the broader public conversation matters to the Pulse Check.

The findings in this research should not be interpreted against a fixed or settled view of AI. They should be understood against a public conversation that is itself evolving, sometimes rapidly.

The Pulse Checks are therefore best understood as snapshots of the AI conversation at a particular point in time.

They do not attempt to predict where that conversation is heading. Rather, they capture what can be observed about public voice, engagement and participation against a rapidly changing social and technological backdrop.

This provides the context for examining the public AI voice of elite footballers: not as a judgement of whether they should speak, but as an observation of what is publicly visible, and how that voice sits within the broader conversation taking place around AI in mid-2026.

Against this backdrop, several themes are particularly visible in the public conversation in mid-2026.

1. The Prospect of an AI Bubble

Concern about a potential AI bubble is not simply a question of whether AI companies or investments are overvalued. It reflects a broader question about whether the scale of investment, infrastructure development and corporate expectation surrounding AI is sustainable, and whether the

benefits ultimately experienced by society will justify the enormous financial and social investment being made.

For the public, the consequences of a significant correction could extend well beyond financial markets. If expectations collapse, it could contribute to growing cynicism about AI, particularly among people already uncertain about its impact on employment, privacy, creativity and trust.

Conversely, continued rapid investment without visible and broadly shared benefits may reinforce a perception that AI is primarily serving investors, technology companies and wealthy economies rather than the wider community.

The significance of the potential AI bubble therefore extends beyond financial valuation. A growing gap between the expectations being created around AI and the benefits experienced by ordinary people could become another source of public scepticism.

2. Data Centres: When AI Becomes a Local Issue

The rapid expansion of AI data centres has brought the consequences of AI directly into communities. What was once a largely invisible infrastructure issue is increasingly being debated in terms of electricity, water, land use, household costs, environmental impact and who ultimately pays for the infrastructure required to support AI.

In the United States, a March 2026 Gallup survey found that 71% of Americans opposed the construction of an AI data centre in their local area, including 48% who were strongly opposed. Environmental impacts, resource consumption, local quality of life and potential increases in energy costs were among the concerns expressed.

Australia is experiencing similar tensions. Governments continue to promote data centres as opportunities for investment, jobs and digital capability, while communities and policymakers are questioning their demands on energy and water resources.

The significance for the public AI conversation is considerable. AI is becoming physically visible

within communities. The debate is no longer only about what happens on a screen; it is increasingly about what AI infrastructure means for people's communities and shared resources.

This raises a broader question about the social licence of AI: will people accept the infrastructure required to deliver AI if they do not believe its benefits are being fairly shared?

3. The Prospect of a 'Job Apocalypse' Remains Unclear

The prospect of widespread AI-driven job displacement has become one of the most powerful narratives in the public conversation about AI.

There remains considerable uncertainty about the scale and timing of actual displacement. At the same time, the prospect of AI performing increasingly sophisticated cognitive and professional tasks has created genuine anxiety about career security, particularly among younger people and those entering traditionally white-collar professions.

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 estimates that broader structural labour-market change could displace 92 million roles by 2030 while creating new employment opportunities. Although the report projects a net increase in jobs overall, the roles created will not necessarily be the same roles, in the same locations, requiring the same capabilities or available to the same people.

For many people, therefore, concern is shaped less by long-term economic forecasts than by immediate questions of employment, fairness and human relevance.

Public concern is also not limited to the possibility of mass unemployment. It encompasses uncertainty about what work will remain, how jobs will change, whether people will have sufficient time and opportunity to adapt, and whether human skills will retain their value.

The question is increasingly not simply whether AI will replace jobs, but whether it will fundamentally alter the pathway into work, the value of human

contribution and the relationship between people and their employers.

People are being asked to prepare for a future of work that neither governments, employers nor technology companies can yet clearly describe.

That uncertainty is an important part of the public mood surrounding AI and a critical backdrop to any discussion of AI, work and human contribution.

4. AI Companies Are Moderating Some of the 'Doom' Narrative

An interesting development in the 2026 AI conversation has been the softening of some of the more dramatic predictions about AI-driven job destruction.

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman has acknowledged that earlier concerns about AI rapidly eliminating entry-level white-collar jobs have not materialised to the extent anticipated. This illustrates a broader challenge in the public conversation: predictions about technological capability and predictions about its social and economic consequences do not necessarily move at the same pace.

For the public, changing narratives can raise questions of credibility and trust.

Earlier warnings helped establish the possibility of a 'job apocalypse' as a legitimate part of the AI conversation. A subsequent moderation of those predictions does not necessarily remove the anxiety they created, particularly for people already uncertain about their employment prospects.

It also reinforces a broader question: if the people building AI cannot confidently predict its impact on work, how can employees, governments or the wider public confidently prepare for it?

5. Increasing Government Intervention and Regulation

Another important development in the 2026 AI conversation is the increasing involvement of governments in the governance of advanced AI.

The U.S. government's increasingly direct intervention in the activities of frontier AI companies, including actions involving Anthropic, provides a visible example. These developments reflect the growing intersection of advanced AI with national security, economic policy, technology sovereignty and public safety.

For the public, interventions such as these provide tangible evidence that governments themselves regard increasingly capable AI systems as having implications that warrant government oversight.

The conversation is therefore moving beyond the abstract question of whether AI should be regulated. Government intervention is increasingly becoming part of the reality of how frontier AI is developed, deployed and accessed.

This is also consistent with public sentiment. Anthropic's 2026 Public Record research found that more than 70% of Americans surveyed believed government should play a role in regulating AI.

6. Instances of AI Going 'Rogue'

Recent incidents involving frontier AI systems have given the public conversation a more tangible sense of what can happen when increasingly autonomous systems operate beyond their intended boundaries.

In July 2026, OpenAI disclosed that models being tested for cybersecurity capabilities had gained unintended internet access and subsequently compromised systems belonging to Hugging Face during an internal test. OpenAI said the models exploited a vulnerability in a software package installer, allowing them to access the broader internet and ultimately obtain information from Hugging Face's infrastructure.

Other reporting has also documented incidents involving Anthropic and other frontier models during controlled security evaluations, in which AI agents undertook unauthorised or deceptive actions.

These incidents have intensified discussion about control, containment, accountability and human oversight.

The significance extends beyond whether the phrase 'going rogue' is technically accurate. As AI moves from generating answers towards taking actions, the public question increasingly becomes:

What happens when an AI system acts in ways its creators or operators did not anticipate?

7. Enterprise Experience With AI: Adoption Remains Relatively Light

Alongside these broader developments, enterprise experience with AI provides another important part of the context.

While AI adoption is expanding, the transformation of organisations remains at an early and uneven stage. The significance of this is that public expectations, concerns and assumptions about AI are developing at a time when many people have yet to experience substantial enterprise AI transformation directly.

This creates an unusual environment for organisations.

Employees may already have formed views about AI through the broader public conversation before they have meaningful experience of how AI will actually affect their work. The expectations entering the workplace may therefore be shaped as much by external narratives as by organisational experience.

METHODOLOGY

Purpose

The purpose of the Elite Footballer AI Public Voice Pulse Check is to examine:

- whether a publicly identifiable AI voice can be found among elite footballers;
- whether that public record reflects a developed position on AI or only incidental proximity to AI;
- the nature of any public AI voice, including the issues, themes and contexts in which AI is discussed.

The Pulse Check is intentionally observational. It seeks to understand what is publicly visible rather than evaluate whether particular views are right, wrong or desirable.

Its value lies in understanding how one of the world's most influential cultural systems is publicly framing AI at a time when AI is rapidly reshaping both football and the enterprises that surround it.

Meaning of a Pulse Check

In enterprise transformation, a pulse check usually refers to a quick, light-touch survey or temperature check designed to gauge employee sentiment, alignment, or readiness around major changes, often asking staff directly how they feel.

This Pulse Check applies the same principle in a different way.

Rather than surveying players directly, it observes the publicly visible record to understand how elite footballers are engaging with AI in the public domain. It therefore represents an external pulse check of public AI voice rather than an internal survey of opinion.

Selection of Players

The 2026 Elite Footballer AI Public Voice Pulse Check examines the first twenty players from FOX Sports' Top 50 Players from the 2026 FIFA World Cup, published on 21 July 2026.

The 20 players were selected without reference to whether they had previously spoken about, promoted or been associated with AI.

However there is one significant shortcoming with this list: it does not include a current footballer considered to be one of the greatest of the all time, and one who has enormous public reach with 678 million Instagram followers - Cristiano Ronaldo.

There is no current playing list that has Ronaldo identified in the top 20.

Cristiano Ronaldo did not secure a spot in the final post-Cup positional countdown following Portugal's Round of 16 exit and was therefore not included in the 20-player cohort examined in this Pulse Check. However, given his extraordinary global reach and cultural influence, Ronaldo remains relevant to the broader question of how elite footballers are engaging publicly with artificial intelligence. His public AI associations were therefore considered separately as contextual evidence, rather than as part of the formal cohort analysis.

Given his extraordinary global reach and cultural influence, Ronaldo is therefore included separately as a contextual 'plus one', outside the formal 20-player cohort.

What Constitutes Public AI Voice?

For the purposes of this Pulse Check, a public AI voice may include documented material such as interviews, public statements, social media posts and other attributable public communications from a player included in the scope of the Pulse Check.

Only material that was publicly available before the publication date of this report has been considered.

The absence of a documented public position should not be interpreted as evidence that a player has no view on AI. Rather, it indicates that no attributable public position was identified within the scope of the review.

Public AI voice is conveyed not only through commentary, but also through public association. Where an influential individual knowingly and

publicly associates their identity, image, likeness, voice or personal brand with an AI-specific product, campaign or initiative, that association forms part of the public conversation about AI. Such representation is therefore treated as a publicly identifiable AI voice for the purposes of this Pulse Check.

The Pulse Check applies a two-stage methodology to determine whether a publicly identifiable AI voice exists for each footballer within the defined cohort.

Stage 1 (Primary) asks:

Has the footballer made a publicly attributable comment about AI?

This is the strongest and most direct form of public AI voice because it contributes explicitly to public discourse. Publicly attributable commentary may include interviews, press conferences, social media posts, podcasts, speeches, published articles, media quotations or other comparable public communications in which the footballer comments specifically on AI.

Where no publicly attributable AI commentary is identified, the Pulse Check applies a second test.

Stage 2 (Secondary) asks:

Has the footballer knowingly and publicly associated their image, likeness, voice or personal brand with an AI-specific product, campaign or initiative?

This recognises that a publicly identifiable AI voice may also arise through public association rather than direct commentary. A footballer may not express a personal opinion about AI, yet may knowingly and publicly permit their identity, image, likeness, voice or personal brand to be associated with an AI-specific product, service, campaign or initiative. Such association contributes to the public conversation by signalling endorsement, participation or alignment, and therefore forms part of the observable AI landscape considered within the Pulse Check.

A publicly identifiable AI voice is established where either Stage 1 or Stage 2 is satisfied. Consistent with the observational purpose of the Pulse Check, the assessment does not evaluate the quality, frequency or significance of the commentary or public association, nor does it assess whether any position expressed or implied is correct or desirable. It seeks only to determine whether a publicly identifiable AI voice exists within the defined scope of the review.

Conceptual and Analytical Foundation

While the Pulse Check asks a relatively straightforward question—what is publicly visible about the AI voice of elite footballers?—the question itself is informed by the conceptual framework developed in the Hearts, Minds & Hands trilogy. The trilogy comprises:

- The Human Point of Difference (HPOD): Finding Your Human Relevance in the Age of AI
- A New Bargain: Reframing the Employment Relationship for the Age of AI
- The Jinji Method: Strategic, Sustainable & Humane Enterprise AI Transformation

The trilogy argues that enterprise AI transformation is ultimately a human, enterprise and societal challenge rather than simply a technological one. It examines AI through the connected lenses of human relevance and identity, the evolving employment relationship, and the strategic, sustainable and humane transformation of the enterprise. The central proposition is that successful AI transformation depends not only upon technological capability, but also upon trust, culture, leadership, public confidence and the way people understand AI's role in work and society.

The Pulse Check explores that proposition through one of the world's most influential sporting communities.

Elite football has already embraced AI operationally. AI is increasingly embedded in performance analysis, scouting, injury management, officiating, media production, marketing, fan engagement, commercial operations and broader enterprise systems. Yet the public record reviewed suggests that, among many

of the world's elite footballers, there remains comparatively limited public engagement with AI's broader implications for work, employment, trust, identity, human contribution and enterprise transformation.

This observation is significant beyond football itself because employees do not encounter AI for the first time when their employer launches an AI strategy. Long before that, their perceptions are shaped through news media, social media, commercial campaigns, public debate and the voices of influential individuals and institutions. Public sentiment therefore forms part of the environment into which enterprise AI transformation is introduced.

The Pulse Check proceeds from a simple premise: before enterprises transform with AI, societies are already forming opinions about it. Understanding those opinions—and the public voices that shape them—is therefore relevant to understanding enterprise AI transformation itself.

Accordingly, the Elite Footballer AI Public Voice Pulse Check should be understood not simply as a study of football, but as a case study of how one globally influential sporting community is contributing to—or remaining comparatively absent from—the wider public conversation surrounding AI.

Consistent with that purpose, the Pulse Check does not seek to determine whether footballers should speak about AI, nor whether particular positions are correct or incorrect. It is intentionally observational. It asks what is publicly visible, what is not publicly visible, and what those patterns suggest about the current state of AI discourse within one of the world's most influential public communities.

Scope and Limitations

This Pulse Check provides a structured observational baseline of the publicly visible AI landscape among elite footballers. The findings should be interpreted within the following methodological boundaries.

Public Record Only - The assessment is limited to publicly available material, including interviews,

verified social media activity, public campaigns, commercial endorsements, investments, partnerships and media reporting. It does not seek to infer private opinions, unpublished discussions or internal enterprise views.

Observational Rather Than Evaluative - The Pulse Check does not assess whether players should hold, express or promote particular views on AI. Nor does it seek to evaluate the quality or accuracy of any position identified. Its purpose is to describe the visible public record.

Cohort Boundaries - The findings relate only to the twenty players selected from the FOX Sports ranking. They should not be interpreted as representative of footballers generally, women's football, domestic leagues or the wider sporting community.

Language and Geographic Coverage - The review prioritised publicly available material published in, or translated into, English, Spanish, Portuguese, French and German. Relevant material available only in other languages may not have been identified.

Temporal Scope - The research reflects publicly available information identified up to August 2026. Given the pace of AI development and changing commercial relationships, public positions may evolve after publication.

Voice and Engagement - The methodology intentionally distinguishes between public AI voice and public AI engagement.

A player may become publicly associated with AI through commercial endorsements, sponsorships, investments or technology partnerships without having articulated a broader public position on AI itself. Conversely, a player may publicly discuss AI without maintaining significant commercial relationships within the AI ecosystem.

This distinction forms an important analytical principle of the Pulse Check and provides a foundation for future editions.

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