

Squad profile of the best performing national A-teams

Drs Raffaele Poli, Loïc Ravenel and Roger Besson

1. Introduction

The first CIES Football Observatory Monthly Report of 2016 analyses the characteristics of players fielded in 2015 by 50 national A-teams from around the world. The national sides have been selected according to their average FIFA ranking throughout 2015. Among them, we find 32 European associations, six from South America, six from Africa, three from Asia and three from North and Central America.

The study first compares national squads from the point of view of the age of players fielded (Chapter 2). It then examines the differences observed in terms of height and weight (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 investigates clubs where footballers were employed when they played their international games. This analysis takes into account both the localisation of the employer clubs (within, or outside of, the country represented) and the level of their league (top division or not). Finally, we study the proportion of players born outside of the country represented (Chapter 5).

The analysis covers 1,785 footballers. In 2015, a team played on average 11 matches and fielded 35.2 players. Mexico was the most active country: 23 matches played and 58 footballers used. At the opposite end of the scale, four European teams played just 7 matches: Albania, Israel, Wales and Croatia. No other country used as few players as Austria's total of 24. In an appendix, we present the data for all of the teams.

The most used footballer in absolute terms was Michael Bradley from the United States. The Toronto FC footballer played 18 matches for a total of 1,669 minutes. The second most fielded player is another member of the United States squad: Gyasi Zardes. The Los Angeles Galaxy footballer celebrated his first cap on the 28th January 2015 and went on to play a total of 19 matches and 1,409 minutes.

2. Age

The average age of players fielded by the 50 national squads studied was 26.6. This value increases to 27.2 if we take into account the average measured on the pitch. At around 27 years of age, players have sufficient experience to exploit their full potential, whilst retaining a physical shape that permits them to maintain sustained efforts.

Important differences were observed according to country. The highest average age on the pitch was measured for Scotland: 29.0 years of age. Despite the experience of players fielded, the Scots did not manage to qualify for the final phase of the European championships. It is no doubt timely to carry out an in-depth analysis to understand the reasons for multiple failures over the past decades.

At the other end of the scale, three African teams fielded the youngest players on average: Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon. However, this result must be analysed carefully

insofar as footballers born in Africa tend to be older than they claim to be. Lying about one's age is a common practice that implies a competitive advantage in youth categories. However, in the long term, this strategy is counterproductive as it does not provide optimum conditions for the full development of talent. This is one of the reasons for which the real potential of African squads remains untapped.

If we exclude African teams, the countries having fielded the youngest players are the Netherlands and England, with an average of 25.6 years of age. In the first case, the bias towards youth has not been a success as the Dutch failed to qualify for Euro 2016. For the English, on the other hand, the results have been more positive. The youthfulness of the players available to Roy Hodgson is the sign of a renaissance with a promising future.

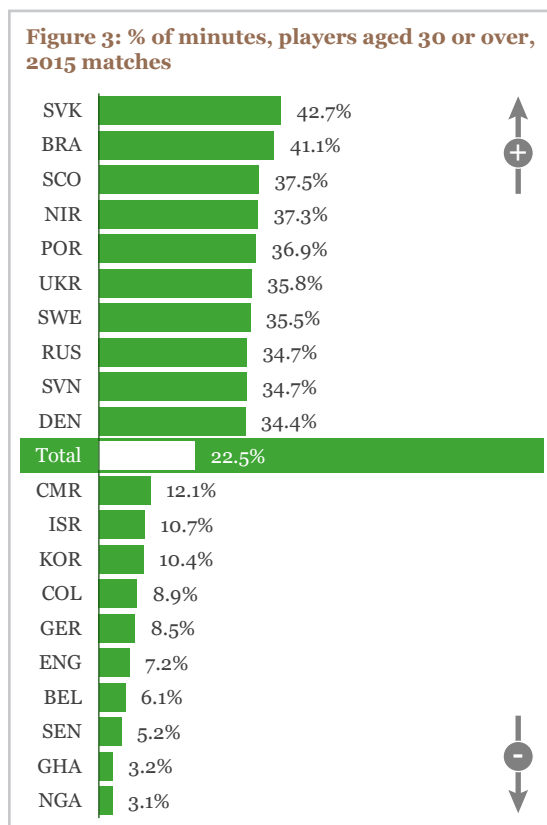
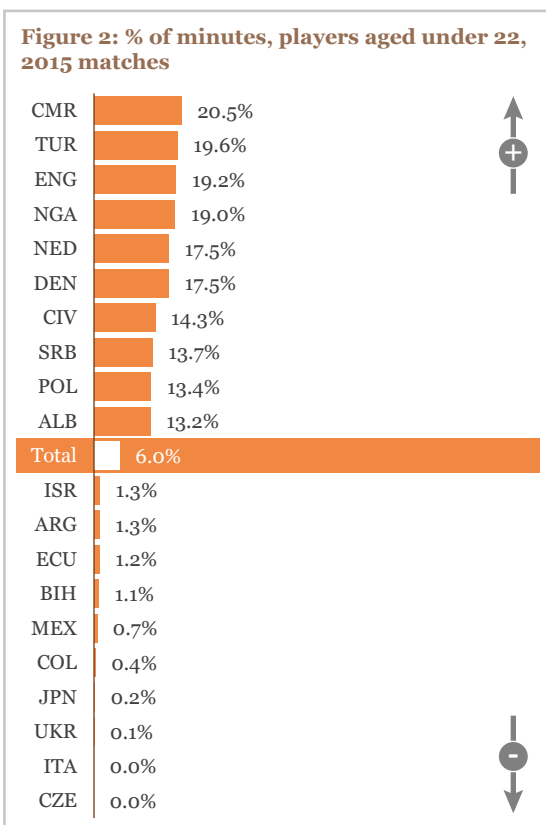
Figure 1: average age on the pitch, 2015 matches

■ Nigeria	24.7	■ USA	27.1	■ Portugal	28.4
■ Ghana	25.1	■ Greece	27.1	■ Italy	28.4
■ Cameroon	25.3	■ France	27.1	■ Sweden	28.4
■ England	25.6	■ Iceland	27.2	■ Slovakia	28.5
■ Netherlands	25.6	■ Spain	27.2	■ Chile	28.5
■ Korea Republic	25.9	■ Austria	27.4	■ Russia	28.7
■ Algeria	25.9	■ Poland	27.4	■ Ukraine	28.7
■ Switzerland	26.0	■ Denmark	27.4	■ Hungary	28.7
■ Germany	26.0	■ Japan	27.4	■ Slovenia	28.7
■ Belgium	26.1	■ Croatia	27.5	■ Scotland	29.0
■ Senegal	26.1	■ Iran	27.5		
■ Turkey	26.3	■ Romania	27.6		
■ Serbia	26.3	■ Czech Republic	27.9		
■ Tunisia	26.3	■ Mexico	28.0		
■ Albania	26.4	■ Argentina	28.0		
■ Wales	26.5	■ Brazil	28.0		
■ Colombia	26.8	■ Uruguay	28.1		
■ Israel	27.0	■ Bosnia-Herzegovina	28.2		
■ Côte d'Ivoire	27.0	■ Northern Ireland	28.2	■ UEFA countries	27.4
■ Costa Rica	27.1	■ Ecuador	28.3	■ Other countries	26.9

In total, footballers under 22 years of age played only 6.0% of minutes. This percentage increases to 32.5% for footballers between 22 and 25 years of age, then to 39.0% for the most represented age category: that of players between 26 and 29 years of age at the time of the match. The remainder of minutes was played by footballers over 30 years of age: 22.5%.

Important differences exist between the national squads studied. Two countries did not use any player under the age of 22: Italy and the Czech Republic. On the other hand, the fielding of young players was very high, around 20% of total minutes, for Cameroon, Turkey, England and Nigeria.

The highest percentages for minutes played by footballers aged 30 or over were measured for Slovakia (42.7%) and Brazil (41.1%). While Ján Kozák and Carlos Dunga have opted for experience, the coaches from Colombia, Belgium, Germany and England have not considered it wise to rely on players over 30. The percentage of minutes played by this category of footballers oscillates between 6 and 9%.



There are more than 22 years of difference between the youngest player fielded in 2015 by the national A-teams surveyed, the Romanian defender Cristian Manea (17.4 years of age), and the oldest one, the goalkeeper Gábor Király (39.6 years of age). The oldest outfield player was the Portuguese defender Ricardo Carvalho. He was 37.4 years of age during the last match played against Denmark in October.

Figure 4: youngest and oldest players at the time of the match, 2015

Name	Country	Date	Age	Name	Country	Date	Age
1. Cristian Manea	ROM	07/02	17.51	1. Gábor Király	HUN	15/11	39.65
2. Enes Ünal	TUR	31/03	17.90	2. Roy Carroll	NIR	13/11	38.15
3. Breel Embolo	SUI	31/03	18.13	3. Gianluigi Buffon	ITA	17/11	37.83
4. Felix Eboa Eboa	CMR	06/06	18.14	4. Ricardo Carvalho	POR	08/10	37.42
5. Kevin Balanta	COL	09/09	18.38	5. Eiður Guðjohnsen	ISL	10/10	37.09
6. Rúben Neves	POR	14/11	18.68	6. Tim Howard	USA	17/11	36.73
7. Saeid Ezatolahi	IRN	11/06	18.70	7. Rafael Márquez	MEX	11/10	36.68
8. Bartosz Kapustka	POL	07/09	18.72	8. Anatoliy Tymoshchuk	UKR	17/11	36.66
9. Rey Manaj	ALB	16/11	18.74	9. Zoltán Gera	HUN	12/11	36.58
10. Ionuț Nedelcearu	ROM	10/02	18.81	10. Vyacheslav Shevchuk	UKR	17/11	36.54

3. Height and weight

The average height of players fielded in 2015 matches by countries analysed is 181.9 cm. Significant differences exist between European national A-teams on the one hand, and South American squads on the other.

Eight out of ten teams who played on average with the tallest footballers are UEFA members. At the other extreme, the six CONMEBOL squads included in the study and Mexico are among the ten shortest national sides.

Spain is the only European country who fielded players with an average height of less than 180cm. By contrast, no CONMEBOL team played with footballers whose average height was over 180cm. The maximum value was measured for Colombia.

Ten centimetres separate the countries with record values in terms of average height on the pitch: Serbia (185.6cm) and Chile (175.6cm). For the Serbs, this physical attribute was not sufficient to qualify for the Euro 2016. Inversely, the short stature of the Chileans did not stop them winning the Copa América.

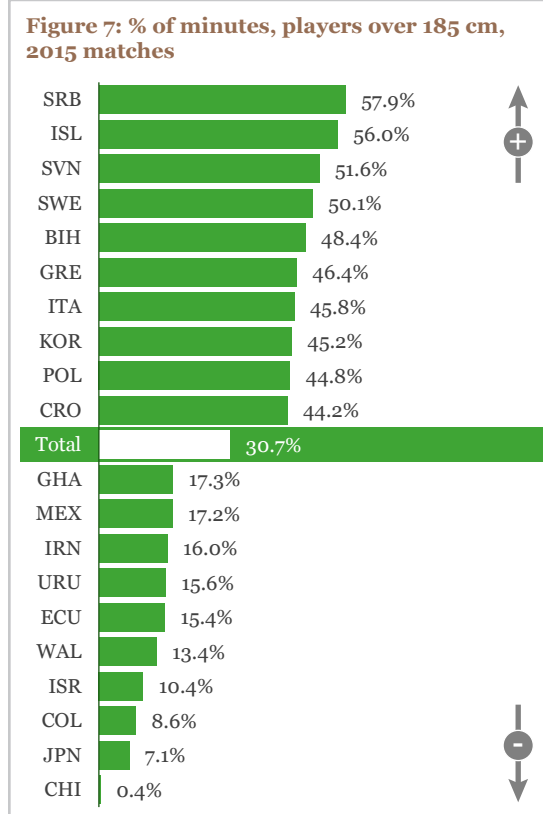
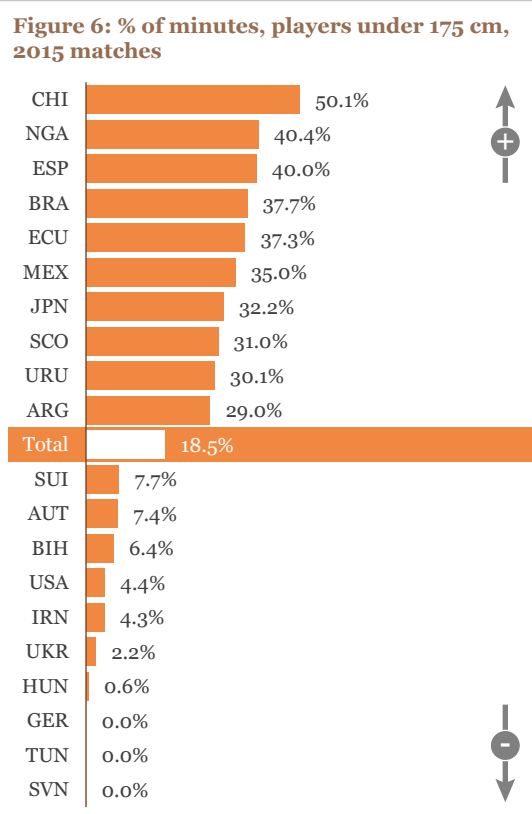
Figure 5: average height on the pitch, 2015 matches

■ Serbia	185.6	■ Korea Republic	182.9	■ Colombia	180.0
■ Slovenia	185.5	■ Russia	182.7	■ Brazil	179.8
■ Sweden	185.5	■ Algeria	182.5	■ Argentina	179.8
■ Bosnia-Herzegovina	185.5	■ Northern Ireland	182.3	■ Uruguay	179.4
■ Hungary	185.4	■ Czech Republic	182.3	■ Mexico	179.3
■ Austria	185.3	■ Albania	182.2	■ Ghana	179.2
■ Iceland	184.8	■ Costa Rica	182.2	■ Spain	179.2
■ Tunisia	184.8	■ Côte d'Ivoire	182.1	■ Japan	178.4
■ Germany	184.7	■ Iran	181.7	■ Ecuador	178.2
■ USA	184.3	■ Turkey	181.7	■ Chile	175.6
■ Greece	184.1	■ England	181.6		
■ Ukraine	184.0	■ Netherlands	181.3		
■ Belgium	183.9	■ France	181.3		
■ Denmark	183.7	■ Cameroon	181.2		
■ Croatia	183.7	■ Romania	181.1		
■ Senegal	183.7	■ Israel	180.7		
■ Italy	183.6	■ Wales	180.7		
■ Poland	183.3	■ Portugal	180.5		
■ Slovakia	183.3	■ Nigeria	180.1	■ UEFA countries	183.0
■ Switzerland	183.2	■ Scotland	180.1	■ Other countries	180.8

Three countries did not field players under 175cm: the German world champions, Tunisia and Slovenia. Inversely, all the teams used at least one player over 185cm. In total, the “short” footballers only played for 18.5% of minutes, while the “tall” ones played for 30.7%.

The percentage of minutes played by footballers over 185cm was less than 10% for Chile, Japan and Colombia. By contrast, this category of footballers played a majority of minutes in the Serbian, Icelandic, Slovenian and Swedish squads.

The Nigerian case is very particular insofar as two distinct player morphotypes co-exist in the national team. Indeed, players under 175cm are as well represented as those over 185cm (about 40% of minutes played in the two cases), while footballers of intermediate height are very thin on the ground (15% of total minutes).



The study of players' weight also brings to light important differences between national squads included in the study. At one extreme, the footballers used by Ecuador had an average weight of just 71.4kg. At the other end, three teams fielded players with an average weight of over 80kg: Sweden, Serbia and Hungary.

Figure 8: heaviest and lightest national squads (kg), 2015 matches

■ Serbia	80.1	■ Albania	76.7	■ Netherlands	74.1
■ Sweden	80.1	■ Iran	76.5	■ Brazil	74.1
■ Hungary	80.0	■ Italy	76.4	■ Spain	74.0
■ Iceland	79.7	■ Colombia	76.2	■ Portugal	73.7
■ Tunisia	79.6	■ Belgium	76.2	■ Ghana	73.5
■ Austria	79.4	■ Turkey	76.1	■ England	73.5
■ Germany	78.9	■ Costa Rica	76.0	■ Chile	72.8
■ Poland	78.7	■ France	75.9	■ Mexico	72.1
■ Greece	78.7	■ Nigeria	75.7	■ Japan	71.9
■ Slovenia	78.6	■ Russia	75.6	■ Ecuador	71.4
■ Switzerland	78.4	■ Ukraine	75.6		
■ Slovakia	78.4	■ Israel	75.5		
■ Bosnia-Herzegovina	78.4	■ Korea Republic	75.3		
■ Cameroon	78.3	■ Romania	75.2		
■ USA	77.9	■ Czech Republic	75.2		
■ Denmark	77.5	■ Algeria	75.0		
■ Côte d'Ivoire	77.0	■ Wales	75.0		
■ Croatia	76.9	■ Northern Ireland	74.6		
■ Argentina	76.9	■ Scotland	74.5	■ UEFA countries	76.8
■ Senegal	76.8	■ Uruguay	74.1	■ Other countries	75.3

4. Employer clubs

The concentration of wealth and talent within clubs of a handful of leagues on a world-wide level explains why the proportion of footballers playing outside of the country represented is very high. On average, 68.9% of minutes played by national teams were done so by footballers playing abroad.

In only 12 cases out of 50, this percentage was lower than 50%. Most of the countries finding themselves in this situation are home to wealthy leagues, either in absolute terms (England, Italy, Germany, Spain) or within their regional area (Ukraine, Turkey, Mexico, Iran, Tunisia).

By contrast, the countries with the highest percentages of minutes played by footballers under contract with foreign clubs when matches were played do not have strong leagues from an economic point of view: Senegal, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Ivory Coast, Albania, Iceland, Serbia, etc. In these countries, only footballers playing abroad have any real chance of being selected.

Figure 9: % of minutes, footballers playing abroad, 2015 matches

■ Bosnia-Herzegovina	100.0	■ Scotland	83.3	■ Mexico	45.0
■ Northern Ireland	100.0	■ Wales	82.9	■ Israel	43.5
■ Senegal	100.0	■ Sweden	79.9	■ Tunisia	43.3
■ Côte d'Ivoire	99.7	■ Poland	77.5	■ Spain	39.3
■ Uruguay	98.6	■ France	77.5	■ Germany	26.6
■ Albania	98.2	■ Brazil	77.0	■ Italy	24.3
■ Iceland	97.7	■ Nigeria	75.8	■ Turkey	18.2
■ Serbia	97.6	■ Denmark	72.6	■ Ukraine	8.0
■ Belgium	96.6	■ Korea Republic	70.8	■ Russia	0.7
■ Slovenia	95.9	■ Costa Rica	69.9	■ England	0.0
■ Cameroon	93.2	■ Greece	67.8		
■ Algeria	92.9	■ USA	63.5		
■ Argentina	91.9	■ Ecuador	61.8		
■ Ghana	91.2	■ Portugal	61.5		
■ Colombia	88.7	■ Netherlands	60.9		
■ Switzerland	88.0	■ Romania	55.9		
■ Croatia	87.3	■ Japan	55.4		
■ Slovakia	86.5	■ Hungary	54.4		
■ Austria	86.4	■ Iran	49.7	■ UEFA countries	65.1
■ Chile	85.1	■ Czech Republic	49.6	■ Other countries	76.5

Generally speaking, it also appears that playing in top division leagues is a practically sine qua non condition to represent one of the top 50 national squads. The percentage of minutes played by footballers under contract with top division clubs is over 90% for both UEFA and non-UEFA member countries.

This percentage is less than 80% only for three United Kingdom squads: Northern Ireland (54.5%), Scotland (62.1%) and Wales (67.1%). A significant proportion of footballers representing these teams play in the second English competition level: the Championship. The latter, however, has nothing to envy over numerous top division leagues, either sportingly or economically.

Figure 10: % of minutes, footballers under contract with top division clubs, 2015 matches

Argentina	100.0	Portugal	98.1	Senegal	89.9
Belgium	100.0	Poland	98.0	Hungary	88.7
Côte d'Ivoire	100.0	Czech Republic	97.7	Ghana	86.7
Croatia	100.0	Tunisia	97.6	Israel	84.3
England	100.0	Slovakia	97.5	Nigeria	83.2
Spain	100.0	Mexico	96.4	Iceland	82.9
France	100.0	Chile	96.3	Cameroon	80.1
Germany	100.0	Japan	96.0	Wales	67.1
Italy	100.0	Austria	95.1	Scotland	62.1
Netherlands	100.0	Uruguay	94.7	Northern Ireland	54.5
Russia	100.0	Ecuador	94.2		
Colombia	99.5	Brazil	94.1		
Romania	99.3	Bosnia-Herzegovina	94.0		
Turkey	99.1	Sweden	93.8		
Greece	99.0	Denmark	92.5		
Serbia	98.8	Albania	91.8		
Switzerland	98.8	USA	91.8		
Algeria	98.7	Korea Republic	91.6		
Slovenia	98.6	Costa Rica	91.1	UEFA countries	93.2
Ukraine	98.2	Iran	90.5	Other countries	93.3

Almost half of minutes (46.4%) played in 2015 by the national A-teams analysed were by footballers employed by teams participating in the big-5 European leagues: the English Premier League, the Spanish Liga, the Italian Seria A, the German Bundesliga and the French Ligue 1. This finding also reflects the high concentration of both wealth and talent at worldwide level.

The percentage of minutes played by footballers in the big-5 leagues was over 80% for seven European nations: England, Germany, Italy, France, Spain, Switzerland and Belgium. These are surely the favorite teams for the Euro 2016 tournament.

Only one country did not field footballers playing in the wealthiest leagues in the world: Iran. On the other end of the scale, England only fielded big-5 league players. All the footballers used by Roy Hodgson were part of Premier League clubs when the matches took place.

Figure 11: % of minutes, footballers employed by big-5 league teams, 2015 matches

■ England	100.0	■ Denmark	53.0	■ Romania	22.5
■ Germany	99.0	■ Poland	52.6	■ Nigeria	22.3
■ Italy	98.3	■ Japan	51.2	■ Ecuador	20.8
■ France	97.3	■ Greece	49.6	■ Turkey	16.7
■ Spain	97.0	■ Netherlands	44.4	■ Iceland	13.4
■ Argentina	85.6	■ Ghana	43.3	■ Hungary	8.4
■ Switzerland	82.0	■ Scotland	41.7	■ Ukraine	5.5
■ Belgium	80.8	■ Uruguay	40.4	■ Israel	1.3
■ Bosnia-Herzegovina	74.7	■ Portugal	39.6	■ Russia	0.7
■ Côte d'Ivoire	71.7	■ Northern Ireland	39.3	■ Iran	0.0
■ Wales	68.2	■ Costa Rica	34.6		
■ Senegal	68.2	■ Cameroon	33.5		
■ Brazil	67.4	■ Slovakia	31.5		
■ Austria	64.9	■ Sweden	31.0		
■ Slovenia	64.9	■ USA	30.4		
■ Chile	63.9	■ Albania	30.3		
■ Serbia	61.5	■ Czech Republic	27.5		
■ Colombia	61.3	■ Korea Republic	27.3		
■ Croatia	61.2	■ Mexico	25.3	■ UEFA countries	50.3
■ Algeria	55.3	■ Tunisia	24.5	■ Other countries	43.5

5. Place of birth

Many of the players fielded in 2015 by the national sides studied were born outside of the country they represent. In total, these footballers represent 11.3% of squads. The number of footballers born abroad varies considerably according to team. Two countries are particularly active in the repatriation of foreign-born players: Algeria and Albania.

In the Algerian case, only 40% of minutes were played by footballers born there. Of the 35 footballers fielded in 2015, 21 were born in France. For Albania, footballers born in the country only played 43.3% of minutes. Out of the 30 players used, 17 were born abroad: seven in Switzerland, seven in Kosovo, one in Norway, one in Germany and one in Macedonia.

Fourteen other countries, whether European, South American, North American or African, fielded at least five players born abroad: Bosnia, Ghana, France, Nigeria, United States, Wales, Switzerland, Greece, Portugal, Scotland, Senegal, Tunisia, Turkey and Chile. In the global era, these examples are likely to become more common in the future.

Figure 12: % of minutes, players born abroad, 2015 matches

Algeria	77.4	Uruguay	8.5	Ecuador	0.8
Albania	63.9	Ukraine	8.0	Denmark	0.7
Switzerland	41.7	Austria	8.0	Brazil	0.0
Portugal	32.8	Slovenia	7.9	Colombia	0.0
Scotland	32.8	Côte d'Ivoire	6.5	Czech Republic	0.0
Senegal	28.4	England	5.9	Iran	0.0
Tunisia	27.8	Netherlands	5.5	Israel	0.0
Turkey	26.4	Slovakia	5.0	Romania	0.0
Bosnia-Herzegovina	23.9	Iceland	5.0	Russia	0.0
Wales	23.4	Belgium	4.7	Serbia	0.0
USA	22.7	Japan	4.1		
Croatia	17.2	Spain	3.6		
Ghana	16.7	Costa Rica	3.1		
Nigeria	14.6	Northern Ireland	2.8		
Greece	14.2	Argentina	2.7		
Chile	13.2	Korea Republic	2.3		
France	12.2	Sweden	1.5		
Hungary	9.6	Poland	1.5		
Italy	9.2	Mexico	1.5	UEFA countries	11.9
Cameroon	8.5	Germany	1.1	Other countries	12.6

Appendix: number of matches and players fielded, 2015

Country	Matches played	Players fielded	Most fielded player	Minutes played
Albania	7	30	E. Berisha	615
Algeria	11	35	C. Medjani	900
Argentina	15	35	S. Romero	1156
Austria	8	24	A. Dragović	720
Belgium	9	28	J. Vertonghen	810
Bosnia-Herzegovina	9	26	A. Begović	810
Brazil	14	37	João Miranda	1193
Cameroon	11	34	A. Chedjou	896
Chile	15	43	M. Isla	1228
Colombia	12	39	D. Ospina	1080
Costa Rica	16	51	C. Borges	1208
Côte d'Ivoire	13	33	S. Die	1001
Croatia	7	27	D. Vida	630
Czech Republic	9	36	V. Procházka	584
Denmark	10	32	S. Kjær	845
Ecuador	12	31	M. Bolaños	1036
England	10	33	J. Hart	766
France	10	35	R. Varane	856
Germany	9	31	J. Hector	754
Ghana	15	52	H. Afful	1044
Greece	9	36	A. Samaris	716
Hungary	9	30	B. Dzsudzsák	775
Iceland	11	41	A. Skúlason	729
Iran	15	35	A. Haghighi	1110
Israel	7	25	O. Marciano	630
Italy	10	36	L. Bonucci	900
Japan	18	46	M. Morishige	1200
Korea Republic	20	45	Sung-Yong Ki	1286
Mexico	23	58	D. Reyes	1350
Netherlands	9	35	D. Blind	777
Nigeria	8	49	A. Musa	544
Northern Ireland	9	28	O. Norwood	731
Poland	9	30	K. Glik	676
Portugal	10	45	Nani	663
Romania	10	42	C. Keserü	682
Russia	10	46	R. Shirokov	747
Scotland	8	29	S. Fletcher	603
Senegal	8	34	K. Mbodji	680
Serbia	8	32	A. Mitrović	663
Slovakia	9	28	T. Hubočan	720
Slovenia	9	30	B. Cesar	720
Spain	9	33	G. Piqué	641
Sweden	12	45	A. Isaksson	795
Switzerland	10	29	X. Shaqiri	737
Tunisia	9	38	S. Ben Youssef	785
Turkey	10	38	O. Tufan	864
Ukraine	10	28	V. Shevchuk	854
Uruguay	12	27	F. Muslera	990
USA	20	49	M. Bradley	1669
Wales	7	26	W. Hennessey	614