

World football expatriates: global study 2018

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1. Introduction

Football is the global game par excellence. It is practiced and viewed in the vast majority of countries worldwide. Year after year, professional leagues establish themselves in a growing number of territories. The labour market of footballers has been strongly internationalised over the last decades. This Monthly Report analyses the presence of expatriate footballers in the world.

The notion of expatriates defines players having grown up outside the national association of their employer club and having moved abroad for sporting reasons. This definition allows us to isolate migrations directly linked to the practice of football. Indeed, players of foreign origin who grew up in the association of their team of employment are not considered as expatriates.

On the 1st of May 2018, 12,425 expatriate footballers were recorded in the 2,235 teams from the 142 leagues of 93 national associations surveyed. This figure includes first team squad members having been fielded in domestic league matches during the ongoing season. In the 120 competitions where the list of substitutes was available, presence on the bench also constituted a criterion for inclusion.

Expatriates represent 21.2% of players at global level (+1.2% compared to 2017). This is equivalent to about 5.6 footballers per team. The percentage of expatriates varies between 25.4% in the only OFC league surveyed (New Zealand) and 9.6% at CONMEBOL level. Clubs from the UEFA (24.9%) and CONCACAF (22.0%) leagues analysed also regroup a higher percentage of expatriate footballers than those in the AFC (18.6%) and the CAF (11.0%).

As for age, the expatriate footballers surveyed were on average 26.8 years old on the 1st of May 2018. European teams gather the youngest expatriates (26.3 years), while the oldest ones are to be found in Asia (29.0). This gap reflects different status. At AFC level, quotas for foreign players push teams to look at experienced expatriates. In a more liberal context, European teams rather seek young foreign talents to be transferred on to wealthier teams within the framework of transnational value chains.

Figure 1: study sample, by confederation

	Assoc ¹	Leagues	Clubs	Expats	Age ²
AFC	18	20	267	18.6%	29.0
CAF	4	5	75	11.0%	26.6
CONCACAF	10	12	178	22.0%	27.2
CONMEBOL	10	18	331	9.6%	28.3
OFC	1	1	10	25.4%	27.7
UEFA	50	86	1,374	24.9%	26.3
Total	93	142	2,235	21.2%	26.8

¹ Number of national associations

² Average age of expatriates

2. Main origins at worldwide level

On the 1st of May 2018, 178 national associations had at least one representative playing abroad in the leagues surveyed (+2 compared to 2017). Brazil is the most represented country (1,236 expatriates, +42 compared to 2017), followed by France (821, +45) and Argentina (760, -26). The nationals from these three associations make up 22.7% of the total number of expatriates. This percentage increases to 43.4% when taking into account the ten principal exporting countries.

Brazilian expatriates are present in a record number of associations surveyed: 78 out of 93. The Argentineans (65 associations), the French (62) and the Nigerians (60) are also active in more than six out of ten countries. The highest increase in the number of expatriates compared to the 1st of May 2017 was recorded for France: from 776 to 821 players under contract with foreign teams.

Figure 2: most represented expatriate origins

	Expatriates	Since 2017	Main destination	
1	Brazil	1236	+42	Portugal
2	France	821	+45	England
3	Argentina	760	-26	Chile
4	Serbia	465	-3	Bosnia Herzeg.
5	England	413	-19	Scotland
6	Spain	361	-6	England
7	Croatia	346	+21	Slovenia
	Germany	346	+13	Turkey
9	Colombia	327	+29	Mexico
10	Uruguay	324	+24	Argentina
11	Nigeria	306	+8	Norway
12	Portugal	261	+18	England
13	The Netherlands	256	+25	England
14	Ghana	229	-4	USA
15	Belgium	220	+7	The Netherlands
16	Senegal	189	+14	France
17	Ukraine	182	-11	Belarus
18	Ivory Coast	173	+2	France
19	Slovakia	162	-17	Czech Republic
20	Sweden	160	-7	Norway
21	Bosnia Herzegovina	153	-3	Croatia
22	Cameroon	152	-19	France
	Denmark	152	+2	Norway
24	Ireland	147	+7	England
25	Paraguay	144	+12	Argentina
26	Italy	135	=	Malta
27	Switzerland	133	+4	Germany
28	USA	125	+1	Germany
29	Austria	120	+7	Germany
30	Russia	112	-23	Belarus
31	Japan	111	-20	Singapore
	Romania	111	-10	Hungary
33	South Korea	109	+7	Japan
34	Greece	107	+2	Cyprus
35	Slovenia	105	+16	Italy
36	Scotland	103	-3	England
37	Mexico	102	+37	USA
38	Australia	98	+4	England
39	Czech Republic	95	+3	Slovakia
40	Venezuela	87	+20	Spain
41	Poland	86	+1	Italy
42	Montenegro	83	-13	Serbia
43	Canada	78	+12	USA
	Chile	78	-5	Mexico
	Norway	78	-14	Sweden
46	Macedonia	77	+17	Albania
47	Georgia	71	-5	Ukraine
48	Mali	67	+7	France
49	Iceland	58	+4	Sweden
50	Finland	52	-10	Denmark

If we take population into account, the highest rate of expatriates per million of inhabitants was recorded for Iceland (180). This figure is above 100 only for one other association: Montenegro (134). It is also very high for double world champions Uruguay (96) and Croatia (80). Many other former Yugoslavian countries figure high in the table. This finding reflects the outstanding training ability in this area, as well as the existence of well-established international transfer networks.

Figure 3: top rates of expatriates per million of inhabitants (at least 50 expatriates)

	Expatriates	Per million inhabitants
1 Iceland	58	180
2 Montenegro	83	134
3 Uruguay	324	96
4 Croatia	346	80
5 Slovenia	105	51
6 Serbia	465	48
7 Bosnia Herzegovina	153	40
8 Macedonia	77	37
9 Ireland	147	33
10 Slovakia	162	30
11 Northern Ireland	51	28
12 Denmark	152	27
13 Portugal	261	25
14 Paraguay	144	22
15 Belgium	220	20
16 Scotland	103	19
. Argentina	760	19
18 Sweden	160	17
. Switzerland	133	17
20 Georgia	71	16

3. Main origins per region

This chapter analyses the expatriate presence in three world areas: Asia, the Americas and Europe. This allows us to explore the differences in transfer networks according to both origin and destination.

Asia

Brazilians constitute by far the largest contingent of footballers expatriated in Asia (306 players, +14 compared to 2017). They account for almost a quarter of expatriates in the leagues surveyed (24.0%). However, this percentage decreased by 1% compared to May 2017. Only two AFC countries are in the top ten ranking of the most represented nations in Asia: South Korea (76 players, +10) and Japan (46, -12). When it comes to recruiting abroad, Asian clubs tend to favour footballers from other confederations (77.9%).

European footballers are also very well represented in Asian teams. The Spanish are the most present (67, +18), followed by the French (41, -4) and the Serbians (35, +3). African players are quite numerous too, in particular the Nigerians (39 players, +5). This finding reflects the solid integration of Asia in the global footballers' market despite the existence of quotas limiting the presence of foreigners in clubs.

Figure 4: top associations of origin of expatriate players in Asia

	Expatriates	Since 2017	Main destination
1 Brazil	306	+14	Japan
2 South Korea	76	+10	Japan
3 Spain	67	+18	India
4 Japan	46	-12	Singapore
5 France	41	-4	Qatar
6 Nigeria	39	+5	India
7 Argentina	37	+3	China
8 Serbia	35	+3	Uzbekistan
9 The Netherlands	29	+9	Indonesia
10 England	27	+4	India

Americas

While Brazilians are the main workforce on a worldwide level, Argentines play a similar role in the Americas. With 456 players in foreign American countries (-10 compared to 2017), they account for 23.5% of expatriates in this region. Only 105 Brazilians (-16) are expatriated in the Americas. Their number is inferior not only to that of Argentines, but also to that of Colombians (234 players, -17), Uruguayans (216, +2) and Paraguayans (120, +11).

Nine of the ten countries with the highest contingent of expatriates in the Americas are from this geographical zone. This finding shows that the importation of players in the region essentially follows a logic of proximity. English players are the only exception. This is mainly due to their strong presence in the United States (38 expatriates out of the 41 employed in the region as a whole).

Figure 5: top associations of origin of expatriate players in the Americas

	Expatriates	Since 2017	Main destination
1 Argentina	456	-10	Chile
2 Colombia	234	+17	Mexico
3 Uruguay	216	+2	Argentina
4 Paraguay	120	+11	Argentina
5 Brazil	105	-16	Mexico
6 Mexico	68	+24	USA
7 Venezuela	47	+13	USA
8 Chile	42	-3	Mexico
9 England	41	-10	USA
10 Panama	37	-1	USA

Europe

Similar to the Asian context, Brazil is the most represented origin among expatriates under contract with the European clubs surveyed: 824 players. However, the proportion of Brazilians among expatriates is much lower in Europe (9.2%) than in Asia (24.0%). While European clubs have developed extensive recruitment networks (149 different national origins), 65.6% of expatriates still come from other UEFA associations.

France is the second-ranked player exporter country on a European level (727 players, +61 with respect to 2017), followed by Serbia (424, -4), Croatia (327, +27) and England (327, -12). Aside from Brazil, the most represented extra-European origins are Argentina (265 players, -15) and Nigeria (249, +1). All confederations are represented in Europe, which reflects the centrality of this continent in the global economy of professional football.

Figure 6: top associations of origin of expatriate players in Europe

	Expatriates	Since 2017	Main destination
1 Brazil	824	+46	Portugal
2 France	727	+61	England
3 Serbia	424	-4	Bosnia Herzegovina
4 Croatia	327	+27	Slovenia
5 England	327	-12	Scotland
6 Germany	306	+11	Turkey
7 Argentina	265	-15	Spain
8 Spain	259	-28	England
9 Nigeria	249	+1	Norway
10 Portugal	233	+11	England

4. Conclusion

The international path with the most expatriates involved goes from Brazil to Portugal. On the 1st of May 2018, 240 players from Brazil were playing in Portugal at professional adult level. The two other main migratory channels between associations at worldwide level link England to Scotland (110 players), as well as Argentina to Chile (106 players).

Despite regional differences, this report shows that player migration is a well-established reality in global football. The development of professional leagues across the world will most probably imply a further growth in the number and percentage of expatriates. This process will firstly benefit players from traditional football countries, from where a strong proportion of expatriates still originate (43.4% for the ten main exporting nations).

While importing some players from abroad may be useful for nations aiming at developing their football level, their real challenge lies in the ability to improve the standard of training given to local talents. To reach this goal, the setting up of a long-term strategy is a must.

A good collaboration between clubs, professional leagues and national associations is also of crucial importance. In a very competitive context, irrespective of football's level of development, all associations must consider these aspects to be in the position of maintaining or improving their results.

Figure 7: main migratory channels at worldwide level (at least 50 expatriates)

