

Expatriate footballers worldwide: global 2021 study

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1. Introduction

This Monthly Report analyses the presence of expatriate footballers in 145 leagues from 96 national associations worldwide. The sample is made up of players having been fielded or present on the bench in domestic league matches during the current season. In the nine competitions where it has not been possible to find the list of players fielded, their presence in the squad has constituted a criterion for inclusion.

The notion of expatriate defines players having grown up outside of 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 practise of football. Indeed, players of foreign origin having grown up in the association of their employer club are not considered as expatriates.

For the sake of comparison, the changes since 2017 refer to a fixed sample of 138 leagues from 90 national associations. More than half of the leagues studied are from UEFA member associations, where professional football is particularly well rooted. In certain countries, such as England, no less than four levels of competition have been analysed: Premier League, Championship, League One and League Two.

With regard to the other confederations, the study includes all associations that are member of the CONMEBOL, while the coverage is less extensive for the AFC, the CONCACAF, the OFC and the CAF. This is due to the absence of professional football in many of the associations of these confederations, as well as, especially regarding Africa, the difficulty in accessing data on players present in squads.

Figure 1a: study sample (May 2021)

























		Countries	Leagues	Teams
	AFC	21	24	332
	CAF	4	5	84
	CONCACAF	9	11	171
	CONMEBOL	10	18	366
	OFC	1	1	8
	UEFA	51	86	1'438
	Total	96	145	2,399

Figure 1b : expatriates in 145 leagues (May 2021)

		Number	%	Age
	AFC	1,478	16.7%	29.3
	CAF	346	13.3%	27.0
	CONCACAF	1,046	22.7%	27.7
	CONMEBOL	863	8.9%	28.8
	OFC	32	17.2%	28.9
	UEFA	10,323	25.7%	26.4
	Total	14,088	21.3%	27.0

On the 1st of May 2021, despite the pandemic, the number of expatriates increased by 639 in comparison to the same date in 2020: from 13,025 to 13,664. This increase in difficult circumstances confirms that the internationalisation of the footballers' labour market is a well-established process. Expatriates represented 21.3% of players surveyed. This percentage varies between 26.4% in the domestic leagues of UEFA member associations and 8.9% in those of the CONMEBOL.

Figure 2: evolution in the number of expatriates, 138 leagues (2017-2021)

Year	Number		Per team	
2017	12'169		5.47	
2018	12'514		5.64	
2019	13'101		5.87	
2020	13'025		5.82	
2021	13'664		5.94	

2. Principle origins

Brazil is clearly at the top of the rankings for countries exporting footballers. In total, 1,287 players having grown up in Brazil play in the 145 leagues covered in this report for the year 2021. Brazilians are present in 80 associations out of 98. This reflects the unique role played by Brazil in supplying professional footballers worldwide.





















France (946 expatriates) and Argentina (780) also stand out as exporting nations. In total, more than a fifth of expatriate players originate from Brazil, France and Argentina (21.4%). The principle exporters from other continents are Nigeria for Africa (8th place, 394 expatriates), Japan for Asia (27th, 160), the United States for North America (31st, 142) and Australia for Oceania (42th, 88).

Figure 3: most represented origins among expatriates in 145 leagues (May 2021)

1		Brazil	1,287	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>
2		France	946	<div style="width: 73%;"></div>
3		Argentina	780	<div style="width: 60%;"></div>
4		England	494	<div style="width: 38%;"></div>
5		Germany	442	<div style="width: 34%;"></div>
6		Serbia	440	<div style="width: 34%;"></div>
7		Spain	432	<div style="width: 33%;"></div>
8		Nigeria	394	<div style="width: 30%;"></div>
9		Colombia	379	<div style="width: 29%;"></div>
10		Croatia	375	<div style="width: 29%;"></div>
11		The Netherlands	336	<div style="width: 26%;"></div>
12		Ghana	311	<div style="width: 24%;"></div>
13		Portugal	306	<div style="width: 23%;"></div>
14		Uruguay	299	<div style="width: 23%;"></div>
15		Belgium	276	<div style="width: 21%;"></div>
16		Ivory Coast	213	<div style="width: 16%;"></div>
17		Senegal	211	<div style="width: 16%;"></div>
18		Ukraine	202	<div style="width: 15%;"></div>
19		Russia	192	<div style="width: 14%;"></div>
20		Sweden	185	<div style="width: 14%;"></div>
21		Bosnia-Herzegovina	179	<div style="width: 13%;"></div>
22		Denmark	176	<div style="width: 13%;"></div>
23		Austria	167	<div style="width: 12%;"></div>
24		Slovakia	165	<div style="width: 12%;"></div>
25		Japan	160	<div style="width: 12%;"></div>
.		Switzerland	160	<div style="width: 12%;"></div>
27		Cameroon	149	<div style="width: 11%;"></div>
28		Republic of Ireland	148	<div style="width: 11%;"></div>
29		Greece	146	<div style="width: 11%;"></div>
30		USA	142	<div style="width: 11%;"></div>
31		Italy	138	<div style="width: 10%;"></div>
32		Venezuela	124	<div style="width: 9%;"></div>
33		Poland	122	<div style="width: 9%;"></div>
34		Slovenia	119	<div style="width: 9%;"></div>
35		Norway	118	<div style="width: 9%;"></div>
36		Scotland	115	<div style="width: 8%;"></div>
37		Paraguay	112	<div style="width: 8%;"></div>
38		Czech Republic	97	<div style="width: 7%;"></div>
39		Canada	94	<div style="width: 7%;"></div>
40		Mexico	92	<div style="width: 7%;"></div>

If we take the number of expatriates in comparison the population resident in the country of origin, Iceland tops the rankings. There is one expatriate Icelandic footballer for every 5,584 inhabitants of the island. Montenegro is second (one expatriate for every 6,759 inhabitants) ahead of Croatia (10,792), Uruguay (11,889) and Serbia (15,742). Only countries with at least 50 expatriates were included in this analysis.

Figure 4: number of expatriates per inhabitants, 145 leagues (May 2021), by association of origin

1		Iceland	5'585
2		Montenegro	6'759
3		Croatia	10'793
4		Uruguay	11'889
5		Serbia	15'743
6		Slovenia	17'743
7		Bosnia-Herzegovina	18'618
8		North Macedonia	23'865
9		Northern Ireland	31'949
10		Slovakia	33'090
11		Denmark	33'182
12		Republic of Ireland	33'631
13		Portugal	33'647
14		Belgium	41'871
15		Gambia	42'464
16		Wales	45'493
17		Norway	45'690
18		Georgia	47'049
19		Scotland	47'504
20		The Netherlands	52'327

In comparison to 2020, the biggest increase in the number of expatriate players was recorded for France: +124 expatriates. The lack of employment opportunities in the home country relative to the large number of players trained in local academies, as well as the worldwide recognition of the quality of French footballers, even more so following the 2018 World Cup victory, explains this sharp increase that should continue in the years to come. On the contrary, the ratings of Latin Americans is falling.

Figure 5a: highest increases in the number of expatriates over the past year


















	2021	2020	Diff	
 France	938	814	+124	
 Belgium	275	221	+54	
 Germany	440	394	+46	
 Ghana	290	244	+46	
 Nigeria	351	313	+38	
 Ivory Coast	189	151	+38	
 Japan	158	125	+33	
 England	494	465	+29	
 Poland	121	93	+28	
 Netherlands	334	310	+24	

Figure 5a: highest decreases in the number of expatriates over the past year

	2021	2020	Diff	
 Uruguay	298	327	-29	
 Chile	57	74	-17	
 Mexico	92	107	-15	
 Brazil	1'241	1'255	-14	
 Argentina	777	790	-13	
 Libya	13	25	-12	
 Peru	26	38	-12	
 Australia	86	97	-11	
 Paraguay	112	123	-11	
 China	9	19	-10	

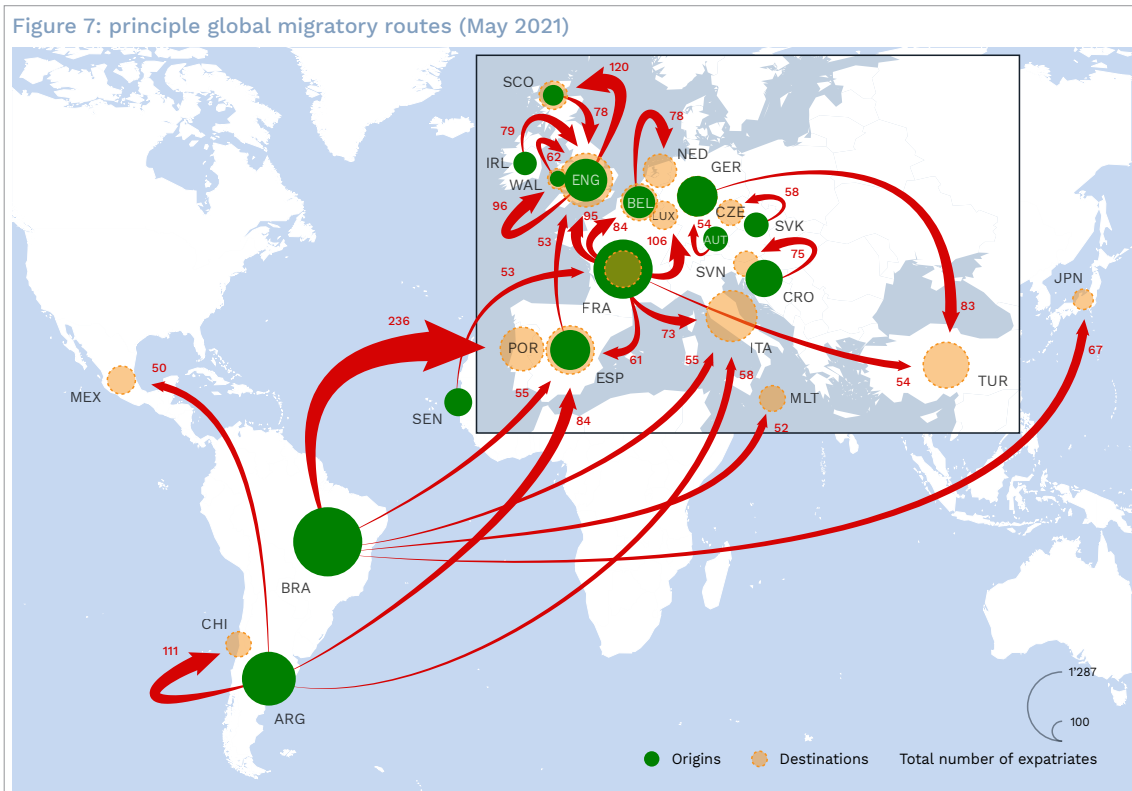
3. Principle destinations and networks

Two European countries are the biggest importers of footballers: England (771 players, of whom 231 citizens from other UK nations) and Italy (695). At fifth place is an emerging force in world football: the United States (531 players imported). The second best-ranked non-European country is only 18th: Mexico (211 imported footballers). In relative terms, the strongest presence of expatriates by club and league was measured in the top Italian division: 18.4 expatriates per team.

Figure 6: principle importing countries (May 2021)

			Number		% of players
1		England	771	<div style="width: 26.4%;"></div>	26.4
2		Italy	695	<div style="width: 22.3%;"></div>	22.3
3		Spain	626	<div style="width: 16.1%;"></div>	16.1
4		Turkey	563	<div style="width: 43.6%;"></div>	43.6
5		USA	531	<div style="width: 41.8%;"></div>	41.8
6		Portugal	511	<div style="width: 49.1%;"></div>	49.1
7		Germany	422	<div style="width: 26.6%;"></div>	26.6
8		Belgium	364	<div style="width: 48.2%;"></div>	48.2
9		France	359	<div style="width: 20.8%;"></div>	20.8
10		Netherlands	297	<div style="width: 26.1%;"></div>	26.1
11		Poland	267	<div style="width: 29.1%;"></div>	29.1
12		Romania	262	<div style="width: 25.6%;"></div>	25.6
13		Cyprus	252	<div style="width: 56.5%;"></div>	56.5
14		Greece	246	<div style="width: 38.1%;"></div>	38.1
15		Croatia	221	<div style="width: 24.7%;"></div>	24.7
16		Scotland	214	<div style="width: 35.8%;"></div>	35.8
17		Luxembourg	213	<div style="width: 52.1%;"></div>	52.1
18		Mexico	211	<div style="width: 19.3%;"></div>	19.3
19		Hungary	208	<div style="width: 21.6%;"></div>	21.6
20		Slovakia	203	<div style="width: 27.7%;"></div>	27.7

The most frequented migratory route leaves from Brazil and arrives in Portugal (236 players). The channel linking England and Scotland is also well-used (120 footballers). The third principle route, and the first that does not involve a European country, is situated in South America. It concerns the migration of Argentinians to Chile (111 players).



4. Conclusion

The international mobility of footballers has increased steadily over the years. Despite the pandemic, the total number of expatriate players in the 138 leagues studied since 2017 went up by 639 during the last year: from 13,025 to 13,664. Expatriates represent about one fifth of the total number of active players in the leagues analysed. This percentage is above a quarter for UEFA member countries.

Though 181 associations have at least one citizen in a professional foreign league, more than a fifth of expatriates originate from three countries: Brazil (1,287), France (946) and Argentina (780). In comparison to 2020, the number of Brazilians (-14) and Argentineans (-13) dropped slightly, while those of the French strongly increased (+124). France is fast becoming a competitor to Brazil in the export market for footballers.

England and Italy stand out as the main importers of footballers. The professional clubs of these countries employ 771 and 695 expatriates respectively. If we do not take into account the 231 players from the other UK nations present in England, Italy is the country where footballers imported from abroad are the most numerous. The strongest expatriate presence per team was recorded in the Italian Serie A: 18.4 per club. On the contrary, Iceland has the highest exporting density: one expatriate footballer for every 5,584 inhabitants.