

# Origins and destinations of football expatriates (2020-2024)

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## Introduction

This report examines from a spatial perspective the presence of expatriate players in professional leagues. Expatriates are defined as footballers playing in an association other than the one in which they grew up, which they left after recruitment by a club abroad. This definition allows the study to focus on players who have migrated for footballing reasons, regardless of their sporting nationality or the passports held.

The analysis covers 135 leagues around the world, including 83 from UEFA member associations, with May 1st as the reference date for both 2024 and 2020, the year chosen to present data on migration trends. Expatriates currently account for 24.3% of club squad members, with a maximum of 29.3% in the European leagues surveyed and minimums of 11.7% and 12.5% in South America and Africa respectively.

In terms of trends, the number of expatriates in the 135 leagues analysed has risen by 19.2% since 2020, from 12,841 to a new record of 15,310. In absolute terms, the biggest increase was observed in Europe (+1,713 expatriates), while in relative terms the sharpest rise was recorded in South America (+41.9%). Historically reluctant to employ foreign players, South American clubs have now also started to bring in more footballers from abroad.

Figure1: study sample, per confederation (May 2024)

		Associations	Leagues	Teams	Players
	AFC	17	20	285	7,984
	CAF	3	4	62	1,948
	CONCACAF	8	10	154	4,444
	CONMEBOL	10	18	373	10,874
	UEFA	50	83	1,335	37,705
	Total	88	135	2,209	62,955










		Expatriates	%	per club	Age
	AFC	1,624	20.3%	5.7/club	29.4 yrs
	CAF	244	12.5%	3.9/club	26.7 yrs
	CONCACAF	1,128	25.4%	7.3/club	27.8 yrs
	CONMEBOL	1,267	11.7%	3.4/club	28.8 yrs
	UEFA	11,047	29.3%	8.3/club	26.1 yrs
	Total	15,310	24.3%	6.9/club	26.8 yrs

Figure 2: evolution in the number of expatriates (2020-2024)

		2020	2024	Evolution	(%)
	AFC	1,309	1,624	+315	+24.1%
	CAF	285	244	-41	-14.4%
	CONCACAF	1,020	1,128	+108	+10.6%
	CONMEBOL	893	1,267	+374	+41.9%
	UEFA	9,334	11,047	+1,713	+18.4%
	Total	12,841	15,310	+2,469	+19.2%

## Origins

Three countries stand out as the main exporters of footballers: five-time world champions Brazil (1,338 players), as well as the last two FIFA World Cup winners, France (1,091) and Argentina (995). Players who grew up in these countries represent up to 22.4% of the expatriates in the 135 leagues studied, reflecting unrivalled expertise in developing top-level footballers and well-established international transfer networks.

With 946 players, France provides the largest contingent of expatriates to clubs in the 83 European leagues surveyed, ahead of Brazil and England. Argentina tops the list for South American teams (518 players), followed by Uruguay and Colombia. The latter country is ahead of Argentina as the main exporter to North and Central America (154 footballers), while Brazil crushes the competition in Asia (410 players).

Figure 3: main expatriate origins (2024)

### (a) Number of expatriates





















1		Brazil	1,338
2		France	1,091
3		Argentina	995
4		England	586
5		Germany	468
6		Spain	451
7		Colombia	433
8		Nigeria	421
9		Croatia	392
.		Serbia	392
11		The Netherlands	367
12		Portugal	363
13		Uruguay	347
14		Ghana	339
15		Belgium	294
16		Denmark	269
17		Sweden	265
18		Senegal	250
19		Ivory Coast	230
20		Ukraine	204

### (b) Main expatriate origins, per confederation

UEFA leagues	1		France	946
	2		Brazil	809
	3		England	494
	4		Germany	415
	5		Nigeria	366
	6		Croatia	365
	7		Spain	342
	8		Serbia	333
	9		The Netherlands	324
	10		Argentina	310
CONMEBOL leagues	1		Argentina	518
	2		Uruguay	202
	3		Colombia	154
	4		Paraguay	103
	5		Venezuela	46
	6		Ecuador	44
	7		Brazil	42
	8		Chile	33
	9		Panama	28
	10		Spain	12
CONCACAF leagues	1		Colombia	154
	2		Argentina	128
	3		Brazil	73
	4		Uruguay	67
	5		Mexico	52
	6		USA	35
	.		France	35
	.		England	35
	9		Panama	32
	10		Canada	29
AFC leagues	1		Brazil	410
	2		France	84
	3		Spain	68
	4		Japan	60
	5		England	53
	6		Korea Republic	52
	7		Serbia	51
	8		Portugal	46
	9		The Netherlands	38
	.		Australia	38

The winners of the last two FIFA World Cup editions are also the nations whose number of nationals abroad has increased the most between 2020 and 2024: France (+273 expatriates) and Argentina (+220). Over the last five years, the number of expatriate footballers has also increased by more than 100 also for England (+141), Denmark (+111) and Nigeria (+103). Serbia, on the other hand, has seen the biggest decrease (-46).

Figure 4: highest growth in the number of expatriates, by origin (2020-2024)

		2020	2024	Evolution	(%)
1	 France	818	1,091	+273	+25%
2	 Argentina	775	995	+220	+22%
3	 England	445	586	+141	+24%
4	 Denmark	158	269	+111	+41%
5	 Nigeria	318	421	+103	+24%
6	 Sweden	167	265	+98	+37%
7	 Ghana	246	339	+93	+27%
8	 Brazil	1,252	1,338	+86	+6%
9	 Colombia	351	433	+82	+19%
.	 Japan	113	195	+82	+42%
11	 Ivory Coast	153	230	+77	+33%
12	 Germany	395	468	+73	+16%
13	 Belgium	222	294	+72	+24%
14	 Netherlands	307	367	+60	+16%
15	 Norway	104	161	+57	+35%
16	 Portugal	307	363	+56	+15%
17	 USA	134	188	+54	+29%
18	 Mali	68	114	+46	+40%
19	 Italy	120	165	+45	+27%
20	 Senegal	209	250	+41	+16%

## Destinations

While the international mobility of footballers is still influenced by factors of geo-history, new migratory routes are emerging in a context of globalisation.

With regard to **Brazilian expatriates**, Portugal remains the main destination, but their presence there has declined since 2020 (-34), as it has in another traditional import country, Italy (-24). On the other hand, the number of Brazilians has increased in less usual destinations, such as South Korea (+26) and the United States (+18).

Luxembourg is the top destination for **French expatriates** (132 players). Luxembourg is also the country where the number of French expatriates has increased the most over the last five years (+54), ahead of another neighbouring country, Switzerland (+30). Clubs from a more distant association have also stepped up their recruitment in France: Bulgaria (+27). In all three cases, the migration involved players who were not able to find a place in France's top teams. England is the only country among the top ten French players' destinations where their presence has fallen.

While Chile is the leading destination for **Argentina's expatriates** (136), Peru is the association where their number has increased the most since 2020 (+43). More and more Argentines are also moving to Brazil (+32) and Uruguay (+24), while there has been a significant decline in Mexico (-24). Among the main countries of destination of Argentina's expatriates, a decrease was also recorded for Spain. In all other cases, the trend is upwards.

Figure 5: evolution in the number of Brazilian expatriates since 2020, main destinations in 2024











		In 2024	Since 2020	
1	 Portugal	204	-34	-14%
2	 Japan	74	+11	+17%
3	 Korea Republic	48	+26	+118%
4	 Malta	45	+5	+13%
5	 USA	44	+18	+69%
6	 UAE	43	+1	+2%
7	 Italy	40	-24	-38%
8	 Hong Kong	39	+8	+26%
9	 England	36	+12	+50%
10	 Indonesia	35	+10	+40%

Figure 6: evolution in the number of French expatriates since 2020, main destinations in 2024

		In 2024	Since 2020	
1	 Luxembourg	132	+54	+69%
2	 Italy	89	+27	+44%
3	 Belgium	75	+5	+7%
4	 England	68	-24	-26%
5	 Spain	67	+13	+24%
6	 Turkey	66	+7	+12%
7	 Switzerland	62	+30	+94%
8	 Germany	59	+17	+40%
9	 Bulgaria	41	+27	+193%
10	 USA	33	+8	+32%

Figure 7: evolution in the number of Argentine expatriates since 2020, main destinations in 2024

		In 2024	Since 2020	
1	 Chile	136	+24	+21%
2	 Peru	77	+43	+126%
3	 Ecuador	69	+19	+38%
4	 Italy	61	+8	+15%
5	 Spain	55	-5	-8%
.	 Brazil	55	+32	+139%
7	 Uruguay	46	+24	+109%
8	 Paraguay	45	+14	+45%
9	 Mexico	42	-24	-36%
10	 USA	40	+10	+33%

The biggest increases in the number of players from one origin to one destination since 2020 reflect the growing migration of players from more to less developed footballing countries: the French to Luxembourg, the Argentines to Peru, the Croats to Bosnia, the English to Scotland and the Germans to Austria. This phenomenon largely explains the general increase in the presence of expatriate players in clubs.

Figure 8: highest increases from one origin to one destination (2020-2024)

				2024	Since 2020
1		FRA	>		LUX 132 +54 
2		ARG	>		PER 77 +43 
3		CRO	>		BIH 66 +36 
4		ENG	>		SCO 150 +34 
5		GER	>		AUT 62 +33 
6		ARG	>		BRA 55 +32 
7		FRA	>		SUI 62 +30 
.		ITA	>		CZE 35 +30 
9		FRA	>		ITA 89 +27 
.		FRA	>		BUL 41 +27 
11		BRA	>		KOR 48 +26 
12		IRL	>		ENG 100 +25 
13		ARG	>		CHI 136 +24 
.		ARG	>		URU 46 +24 
15		ESP	>		POR 37 +23 
16		SWE	>		DEN 37 +20 
17		ARG	>		ECU 69 +19 
.		ARG	>		COL 35 +19 
19		BRA	>		USA 44 +18 
.		ENG	>		IRL 38 +18 

## Conclusion

Clubs around the world are calling on expatriate footballers more than ever. A new record for the 135 leagues studied was set in 2024. Since 2020, the number of expatriate players has risen by almost 20%. By continent, the biggest relative increase was recorded in South America (+42%), where the proportion of expatriates in squads exceeded the 10% threshold for the first time, followed by Asia (24%), where the percentage passed the 20% mark.

Our analysis shows that importing players who have grown up abroad is a phenomenon that now concerns a greater number of clubs and leagues around the world. Player mobility is increasingly taking place through transnational transfer networks, not just for the most talented footballers, but also for players at lower levels of professional football.

Three countries stand out as the main exporters of players: Brazil, France and Argentina. While Brazilians remain the most represented abroad, over the last five years, their numbers have grown much less (+86 expatriates) than those of the last two world champions: France (+273) and Argentina (+220). The biggest increases for players from the other main confederations were recorded for Nigerians (+103 expatriates), Japanese (+82) and Americans (+54).