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## FOOTBALL AND PLAYER MIGRATION: A GEO-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a geo-historical analysis of the international mobility of football players. It focuses on the situation observed in Europe during the last 25 years. Although this paper does not claim to have any great theoretical ambitions, it has been influenced by works carried out by Bale / Maguire (1994), Maderer *et al.* (2014), Lanfranchi / Taylor (2015). The studies of these authors are based on the concepts of migration, mobility and sport illustrating their importance to understand sport dynamics today and their link with the history. For Maderer *et al.* (2014), after the Bosman ruling in 1995, the cultural diversity of professional football teams in Europe has increased considerably. Recruiting players regardless of their nationality allows football clubs to make use of a global talent pool and to combine the specific strengths of individuals with different cultural backgrounds. With the international mobility in football teams, as argued by Giulianotti / Robertson (2009), quoted in Bergh / Ohlander (2018: 254), football should also be regarded as contributing significantly to globalisation processes. For Taylor (2007), the concept of globalization is an active ingredient in most analyses of player migration.

It is important to observe that the geo-historical data we present in this article have not only the role to propose tools that can be used for the purposes of pure scientific knowledge related to geo-historical issues, but above all to demonstrate their application value in support of educational programming and sociological and sociolinguistics studies. Referring to sociology of sport we can mention the works of McGovern (200), Giulianotti (2008) as well as the one of Ravenel / Poli (2015) and Ravenel / Poli / Besson (2018). Among the numerous scholars who use geographical data to propose sociolinguistics analysis, we recall for instance Siebetcheu's sociolinguistics of football studies which consider geo-statistical data as part of methodological framework to interpret the link between multilingualism, migration and football (cfr. Siebetcheu 2016; 2017; his chapter in this volume). Our data are frequently used either by football teams or by mainstream and alternative media to describe statistical dynamics in football teams in their various facets. Actually, football and migration issues emerged as a key debating point for newspaper, radio and television journalists (Taylor 2006: 7).

All the data presented comes from the research work of the CIES Football Observatory. This group within the International Center for Sports Studies notably specialises since 2005 in the demographic study of the labour market in football. All the data are carefully elaborated from the crosschecking of several sources according to a fine methodology. The data gathering was carried out by combining the information from different electronic databases, from websites of federations and official websites of clubs. The details for each player include different criterions (age, height, position played, whether they have played at least one match for an "A" national team, as well as the country in which they started playing football) (Besson *et al.* 2008; Poli *et al.* 2018). In this work we will focus on this last criterion because it allows us to identify "expatriate" footballers, playing outside of their native country, which they left following recruitment by a foreign club. This allows us to produce robust statistics which are fully comparable both temporally (evolution) and spatially (per country). More information is available online on the CIES Football Observatory website at [football-observatory.com](http://football-observatory.com), notably in the items "Reports" and "Posts". The website also includes an Atlas of Migration allowing users to highlight the main destination countries per expatriate origin.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. EXPATRIATE PLAYERS IN FOOTBALL CLUBS

Since its professionalization, football implied the migration of coaches and players (Lanfranchi / Taylor 2001). With respect to the latter, however, legal constraints were rapidly introduced to hinder their international mobility. Quotas were implemented across countries to limit the number of foreign players that clubs could employ. As

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1 Cfr. <https://football-observatory.com/IMG/sites/atlasmigr/>.

noted above, on the 15<sup>th</sup> December 1995, the European Court of Justice ruled on the “Bosman” case. Quotas for communitarian players in European Union countries were abolished. Transfer indemnities for footballers out of contract were also forbidden. This gave players more room for mobility both within and across national borders.

Since 1995, the proportion of expatriate footballers in squads increased steadily. The notion defines players who grew up in a different association from that of their employer club and who left their first association following recruitment by a club overseas. This definition allows us to only take into account players who migrated for football-related reasons. Just before the Bosman ruling, the percentage of expatriates in clubs from the five major European championships was 20.7%. Ten years later, this percentage was already up to 38.8%. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2015, reached 46.3%. This strong upward trend clearly illustrates the internationalisation of the European football players’ labour market. Focusing his research on English football league (1946-1995), that is before the Bosman ruling, McGovern (2002) presents a case study of a labour market where globalization could reasonably be expected. In finding that the market is characterized by a process of internationalization, McGovern (2002)’s study shows how this process is influenced by a range of economic, social and political factors that have distinctly national or British origins. More specifically, the study argues that two decades ago the expansion in overseas recruitment was shaped by the risk averse way in which employers deal with that which makes labour unique as a commodity: its variability and plasticity. Consequently, McGovern (2002) concluded that English clubs tended to draw heavily on those foreign sources that most resemble local sources in terms of climate, culture, language and style of football (for example, Scotland, Ireland, Australia and northern Europe, especially Scandinavia).

Date	Percentage
1995	20.7%
2005	38.8%
2015	46.3%

**Tab. 1** *Percentage of expatriate players, big-5 leagues (1995-2015).*

The relative presence of expatriate players among squad members also increased in the 31 top division European leagues surveyed. It went up from 34.7% in 2009 to a new record high of 39.7% on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2017. Since 2015, the internationalisation process accelerated: on average +1.1% per year compared to about +0.5% between 2009 and 2015.

Date	Percentage
2009	34.7%
2010	35.8%
2011	35.5%
2012	36.3%
2013	36.9%
2014	36.8%
2015	37.5%
2016	38.6%
2017	39.7%

**Tab. 2** *Percentage of expatriate players, 31 European top divisions (2009-2017).*

The percentage of players who already moved abroad during their career also highlights the strong internationalisation trend in the football players' labour market. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1995, about one quarter of big-5 league footballers had already migrated for football-related reasons during their career. This proportion progressively increased to reach 54.3% on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2015.

Data	Percentage
1995	24.9%
2005	41.9%
2015	54.3%

**Tab. 3** *Percentage of players having migrated during career, big-5 leagues (1995-2015).*

Henceforth, a majority of players in the 31 top division European leagues surveyed also experienced international migration during their football career. This percentage increased every year since 2009. It went up from 46.4% on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2009 to 54.6% eight years later. This is a further clear indication of the growing transnational structure of the footballers' labour market.

Data	Percentage
2009	46.4%
2010	47.8%
2011	47.9%
2012	49.0%
2013	49.6%
2014	50.3%

2015	51.2%
2016	52.7%
2017	54.6%

**Tab. 4** *Percentage of players having migrated during career, 31 European top divisions (2009-2017).*

The internationalisation of football players' careers has gone hand in hand with the decrease in the average age of the first transfer to a foreign team. At big-5 league player level, this value went down from 23.04 years in 1995 to 21.52 ten years later. A further decrease took place during the following decade. Nowadays, a player from the five major European championships has on average migrated 21.05 years of age.

Data	Percentage Age
1995	23.04
2005	21.52
2015	21.05

**Tab. 5** *Average age of first international migration, big-5 leagues (1995-2015).*

The same trend of earlier migration was observed since 2009 at the level of 31 top division European leagues. During the nine years studied, the average age of first international migration went down from 22.2 to 21.7 years. This finding confirms the strength of changes observed in the European labour market for footballers.

Data	Percentage Age
2009	22.20
2010	22.13
2011	22.05
2012	21.94
2013	21.81
2014	21.74
2015	21.71
2016	21.77
2017	21.70

**Tab. 6** *Average age of first international migration, 31 European top divisions (2009-2017).*

The decrease in the average age of first international migration is related to the increase of the number and percentage of footballers moving abroad before the year of their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. In 1995, only 0.56 players per big-5 league team experienced international migration as minors (10% of all migrant players). Twenty years later,

there were almost four times more players in this case in point (14% of all football migrants).

Date	Percentage Number
1995	0.56
2005	1.39
2015	2.01

**Tab. 7** *Number of players who migrated as minors per club, big-5 leagues (1995-2015).*

The amount of players who migrated as minors per club also increased in the 31 European top divisions analysed. From 0.94 on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2009, the average number per team went up to a record high of 1.38 in 2017. In 2009, players who moved abroad before to turn 18 represented 8.2% of all players who already experienced international migration during their career. This percentage reached 9.9% in 2017.

Date	Percentage Number
2009	0.94
2010	1.01
2011	1.05
2012	1.16
2013	1.26
2014	1.28
2015	1.27
2016	1.32
2017	1.38

**Tab. 8** *Number of players who migrated as minors per club, 31 European top divisions (2009-2017).*

### 3. ORIGINS OF EXPATRIATE PLAYERS

Today, expatriate footballers are present in all professional leagues worldwide. In May 2019, they represent 21.4% of players active in the 147 leagues from 98 national associations studied. Brazil is clearly at the top of the rankings for countries exporting footballers. In total, 1,330 players having grown up in Brazil play in the 147 leagues covered in this report. Brazilians are present in 85 associations out of 98. This reflects the unique role played by Brazil in supplying professional footballers worldwide.

With over 800 expatriates, France and Argentina also stand out from the crowd as exporting nations. Overall, almost a quarter of expatriates are from Brazil, France or Argentina (22.5%). The principle exporters from other continents are Nigeria for

Africa (10th place, 361 expatriates), the United-States for North America (25th, 145), Japan for Asia (30th, 128) and Australia for Oceania (35th, 101).

Countries	Players	Countries	Players	Countries	Players
Brazil	1330	Colombia	382	Belgium	217
France	867	Croatia	374	Senegal	203
Argentina	820	Nigeria	361	Ivory Coast	202
Serbia	458	Uruguay	325	Ukraine	196
England	431	Ghana	286	Slovakia	176
Spain	427	Portugal	279	Cameroon	170
Germany	394	Netherland	277	Sweden	160

**Tab. 9** *Top 21 most represented origins among expatriates.*

If we equate the number of expatriates to the population resident in the country of origin, Iceland is at the top of the rankings. There is one Icelandic footballer abroad for every 5,458 inhabitants of the island. Uruguay is third place behind Montenegro and ahead of five other nations of ex-Yugoslavia (Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Macedonia). Only countries with at least 50 expatriates have been included in this analysis.

Countries	Inhabitants per expatriate	Expatriates	Countries	Inhabitants per expatriate	Expatriates
Iceland	5.458	59	Ireland	33.504	135
Montenegro	7.221	86	Denmark	35.968	155
Uruguay	10.409	325	Portugal	37.986	279
Croatia	11.561	374	Scotland	49.028	108
Serbia	20.954	458	Paraguay	49.052	134
Slovenia	23.432	88	Argentina	49.670	820
Bosnia Herzegovina	24.297	158	Belgium	50.724	217
Macedonia	28.432	74	Jamaica	52.981	52
Northern Ireland	30.183	60	Norway	53.739	92
Slovakia	30.909	176			

**Tab. 10** *Number of inhabitants per expatriate, by association of origin.*

#### 4. PRINCIPLE DESTINATIONS OF EXPATRIATE PLAYERS

Two European countries are the biggest importers of footballers: England (728 players, 139 of which are citizens of other UK nations) and Italy (636). In third place is an emerging force on the world football stage: the United States (575 players). You have to go down to 11th place to find the second non-European country: Mexico (289 imported players).

Countries	Players	Countries	Players	Countries	Players
England	728	France	330	Slovakia	200
Italy	636	Greece	304	Romania	194
United States of America	575	Mexico	289	Austria	187
Spain	516	Netherlands	271	Slovenia	184
Portugal	508	Scotland	250	Chile	179
Turkey	455	Poland	232	Czech Republic	170
Germany	379	Cyprus	210	Hungary	168

**Tab. 11** *Top 21 principle importing countries, number of expatriates.*

In relative terms, the strongest presence of expatriates by club and by league was recorded in the Cypriot top division with an average of 17.5 expatriates per team. Major League Soccer in the United States and Canada is the only non-European competition in the top twenty of this ranking. As for Belgium, it is the only country to be represented by two leagues: First Division A and First Division B.

Leagues	Exp/club	% Exp
1.Division_Cyprus	17,5	63,1
Serie A_Italy	16,1	54,5
Primeira Liga_Portugal	16,0	59,3
Süper Lig_Turkish	15,7	55,7
First Division A_Belgium	15,4	57,4
Premier League_England	15,2	59,1
Premiership_Scotland	14,6	52,9
Super League_Greece	13,2	47,5
Bundesliga_Germany	13,1	48,2
Premier League_Armenia	12,7	44,9

**Tab. 12** *Greatest number of expatriates per club, by league.*



The South American championships are over-represented among those whose clubs employ, on average, the least number of players imported from abroad. There are almost no expatriates in the Brazilian Serie B and C. Only six championships from UEFA member countries figure in the top twenty of the rankings.

Leagues	Exp/club	% Exp
Serie D_Brazil	0,1	0,5
Serie C_Brazil	0,6	1,8
Segunda División_Uruguay	0,8	4,6
Serie B_Brazil	0,8	2,5
Prim B Nacional_Argentina	0,8	2,9
Persha Liga_Ucraina	0,8	3,3
Premier League_Jamaica	0,8	2,4
Primera B_Colombia	0,9	3,0
Premier League_Ghana	0,9	3,8
1.Division_Belarus	1,1	5,5

**Tab. 13** *Least number of expatriates per club, by league.*

## 5. TRANSFER NETWORKS

As can be seen from table 14, the main migratory routes in football are linked either to linguistic and historical reasons (Brazil-Portugal; Argentina-Spain) or to linguistic and geographical reasons (Argentina-Chile; England-Wales; Croatia-Slovenia; Ireland-England; France-Luxembourg, etc.). For this reason, Taylor (2006) observes that

the movement of footballers from country to country and continent to continent is thus much more than the product of the current economic and power relations of world football. It reflects a complex set of linkages between specific countries, or sets of countries – linkages that often have deep social, cultural and historical roots (Taylor 2006: 7).

The most frequented migratory route originates from Brazil and ends in Portugal (261 players). The migration of Argentinians to Chili (116 players) is the second principle axis. Two migratory channels departing from England also involve many footballers: the first ends up in Scotland (113 players), while the second leads to Wales (92 players).

Migratory routes	Players	Migratory routes	Players	Migratory routes	Players
Brazil-Portugal	261	Ireland-England	72	France-Spain	59
Argentina-Chile	116	Brazil-Japan	69	Slovakia-Czech Rep.	57
England-Wales	92	Argentina-Spain	66	Belgium-Netherlands	57
Argentina-Mexico	87	France-Luxembourg	65	France-Italy	56
France-England	87	Brazil-Italy	65	Austria-Germany	50
Croatia-Slovenia	80	France-Turkey	63	Uruguay-Argentina	49
Germany-Turkey	74	Argentina-Italy	62	Spain-England	47

**Tab. 14** Principle worldwide migratory routes.

The Brazilians constitute the only truly global force in the footballers’ labour market. Though Portugal remains by far the privileged destination (261 players), many Brazilians are to be found in other European countries (Italy, Spain, Ukraine, Turkey, Greece, etc.), in Asia (Japan, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, South Korea, Thailand, etc.) and in the Americas (principally the United States and Mexico).



**Fig. 1** Principle migratory routes for Brazilians.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The international mobility of footballers has risen steadily over the years. Expatriates represent about a fifth of the total number of active players in the leagues analysed. This percentage increases to 26% at the level of the championships from UEFA member countries, almost 40% by taking only into account top divisions and 50% for the five major European leagues only. During last year, the number of expatriates has increased for each of the three principle exporting countries: Brazil (+64 players, +4.8%), France (+37 players, +4.3%) and Argentina (+57, +7.0%). Alone, these countries export almost a quarter of footballers (22.5%). The number of Spaniards abroad has also strongly increased (+61, +14.3%). This is the second biggest increase in absolute terms after that of the Brazilians. England and Italy are the chief importing countries of footballers. The professional clubs of these countries employ 728 and 636 expatriate footballers respectively. Without taking into account the 139 citizens of the other UK nations present in England, it is in Italy where we find the greatest number of players imported from abroad.

The internationalisation and globalisation of the labour market for footballers will most probably continue to grow in the following years. As McGovern (2002), globalization is an inexorable free market process that fundamentally changes the nature of economic competition. This occurs alongside the attempt by the majority of clubs to generate profits through the transfer of players. But the radical notions of labour market globalization are fundamentally flawed since they fail to account for the ways in which labour market behaviour is socially embedded (McGovern 2002). Within this framework, footballers tend to be considered as commodities. However, the consideration of human aspects like the cultural and linguistic adaptability is more than ever important to allow players to settle well and fully develop their potential. These aspects surely deserve more attention by professional teams worldwide. Based on the above, our study show that «at the heart of the argument are two basic contentions: first, that football migration is nothing new, but has a long and complicated history; and second, that it should non be isolated from general migratory trends and patterns» (Taylor 2006: 7).

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