

Football players' export: 2017-2022

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1. Introduction

The 75th Monthly Report of the CIES Football Observatory analyses the origins of expatriate players in 135 professional leagues worldwide (83 European, 20 Asian, 18 South American, ten North American and four African) for the six-year period between 2017 and 2022. In total, for 2022, the analyses included 2,198 teams.

Between the 1st of May 2017 and the same date in 2022, the number of footballers playing outside of the country where they grew up in and having moved abroad for football-related reasons - the expatriates - has increased by almost 2'000 in teams from the championships covered in this report: from 11,983 to 13,929 (+16%).

On the 1st of May 2022, the teams analysed had, on average, 6.3 expatriates (5.5 in 2017), which accounts for 22.0% of their squads (20.5% in 2017). The highest number and proportion of expatriates were observed in the leagues of UEFA member countries (7.7 per team, 27.3%), while the lowest figures were recorded in the championships of the CONMEBOL associations (2.9 per team, 9.2%).

Between 2017 and 2022, no noteworthy change has been observed in the expatriates' age, which has remained stable around 26.9 years of age. In 2022, the maximum was recorded for Asia (29.3 years of age), where the number of expatriates is limited by comparatively strict quotas and clubs tend to focus on the importation of experienced footballers. This situation is the opposite in Europe.

Since 2017, the proportion of expatriates has dropped slightly in the twenty Asian leagues (-0.6%), the four African championships (-1.1%) and the ten North American ones (-0.3%) studied, while it has increased in South America (+1.2%) and, especially, in Europe (+2.8%), where the percentage of expatriates was already quite high in 2017. This result illustrates the hub role played by Europe in the global football labour market.

Figure 1: study sample (01/05/2022)






	Leagues	Teams
 AFC	20	274
 CAF	4	66
 CONCACAF	10	158
 CONMEBOL	18	377
 UEFA	83	1,323
Total	135	2'198

Figure 2: expatriate presence, by confederation (01/05/2022)











	Number	%	/team	Age
 AFC	1'329	16.7%	4.9	29.3
 CAF	251	12.1%	3.8	27.3
 CONCACAF	1,138	25.1%	7.2	27.4
 CONMEBOL	1'082	9.2%	2.9	28.6
 UEFA	10,129	27.3%	7.7	26.3
Total	13,929	22.0%	6.3	26.9

Figure 3: % of expatriates, by confederation (2017-2022)

	2017	2022	Evol
 AFC	17.3%	16.7%	-0.6%
 CAF	13.2%	12.1%	-1.1%
 CONCACAF	25.4%	25.1%	-0.3%
 CONMEBOL	8.0%	9.2%	+1.2%
 UEFA	24.5%	27.3%	+2.8%
Total	20.5%	22.0%	+1.5%

2. Principle expatriate origins

Brazil is the main exporter of footballers. On the 1st of May 2022, there were 1,219 footballers originating from this country playing abroad in the championships analysed. France (978) is the second main exporter of players, followed by Argentina (815). The percentage of players active abroad within leagues of the same confederation varies greatly between these three origins: 90.0% for the French, 46.1% for the Argentinians and just 3.5% for the Brazilians.

England's fourth place is explained essentially by the strong presence of players having grown up in this country in teams of other United Kingdom associations, as well as in Ireland: about 57% of the total number of English expatriates. Among the twenty principle expatriate origins, the highest concentration of players within the premier destination was recorded for the Belgians (29.6% in the Netherlands), while the lowest was measured for the Nigerians (6.8% in Turkey).

Figure 4: principle origins of expatriates (01/05/2022)

		Number	Assoc*	Main destination (%)**	
	Brazil	1219	81	Portugal	19.0%
	France	978	64	Luxembourg	12.6%
	Argentina	815	71	Chile	15.6%
	England	525	50	Scotland	27.8%
	Germany	441	50	Turkey	18.8%
	Colombia	425	60	Mexico	8.9%
	Spain	409	59	England	9.3%
	Croatia	400	55	Slovenia	25.5%
	Serbia	379	56	Hungary	6.9%
	Netherlands	367	54	England	10.1%
	Uruguay	340	39	Argentina	15.9%
	Nigeria	339	61	Turkey	6.8%
	Portugal	300	50	England	10.3%
	Ghana	293	62	USA	7.9%
	Belgium	267	42	Netherlands	29.6%
	Denmark	215	31	Norway	14.9%
	Côte d'Ivoire	208	46	Belgium	8.7%
	Sweden	205	38	Denmark	14.2%
	Senegal	192	41	France	25.5%
	Ukraine	186	43	Hungary	12.9%

* Number of associations of employment

** Main destination (% expatriates)




Between 2017 and 2022, the highest positive evolution was measured for France, whose number of expatriate footballers has increased from 770 to 978 (+21%). The Netherlands (137, +60%) and Colombia (+124, + 41%) make up the rest of the podium of associations having seen the greatest increase in nationals in foreign clubs. Conversely, the biggest drops were measured for Serbia (-69 expatriates), Romania (-46) and South Korea (-43).

By confederation, between 2017 and 2022, the number of expatriates has only dropped for nationals of AFC member associations (-10 expatriates, -2%). An increase of 10% or more was recorded for all of the other continents, which indicates the global increase of international migration of footballers within a market that pays less and less attention to frontiers.

Figure 5: principle positive evolutions, by association of origin (2017-2022)

	2017	2022	Evolution	(%)
 France	770	978	+208	+27%
 Netherlands	230	367	+137	+60%
 Colombia	301	425	+124	+41%
 Germany	336	441	+105	+31%
 England	421	525	+104	+25%
 Croatia	319	400	+81	+25%
 Ghana	225	293	+68	+30%
 Denmark	150	215	+65	+43%
 Portugal	235	300	+65	+28%
 Nigeria	281	339	+58	+21%

Figure 6: evolution by confederation of origin (2017-2022)

	2017	2022	Evolution	(%)
 AFC	517	507	-10	-2%
 CAF	1'606	1'894	+288	+18%
 CONCACAF	556	625	+69	+12%
 CONMEBOL	2'904	3'248	+344	+12%
 OFC	39	59	+20	+51%
 UEFA	6'361	7'595	+1234	+19%

3. Principle migratory routes

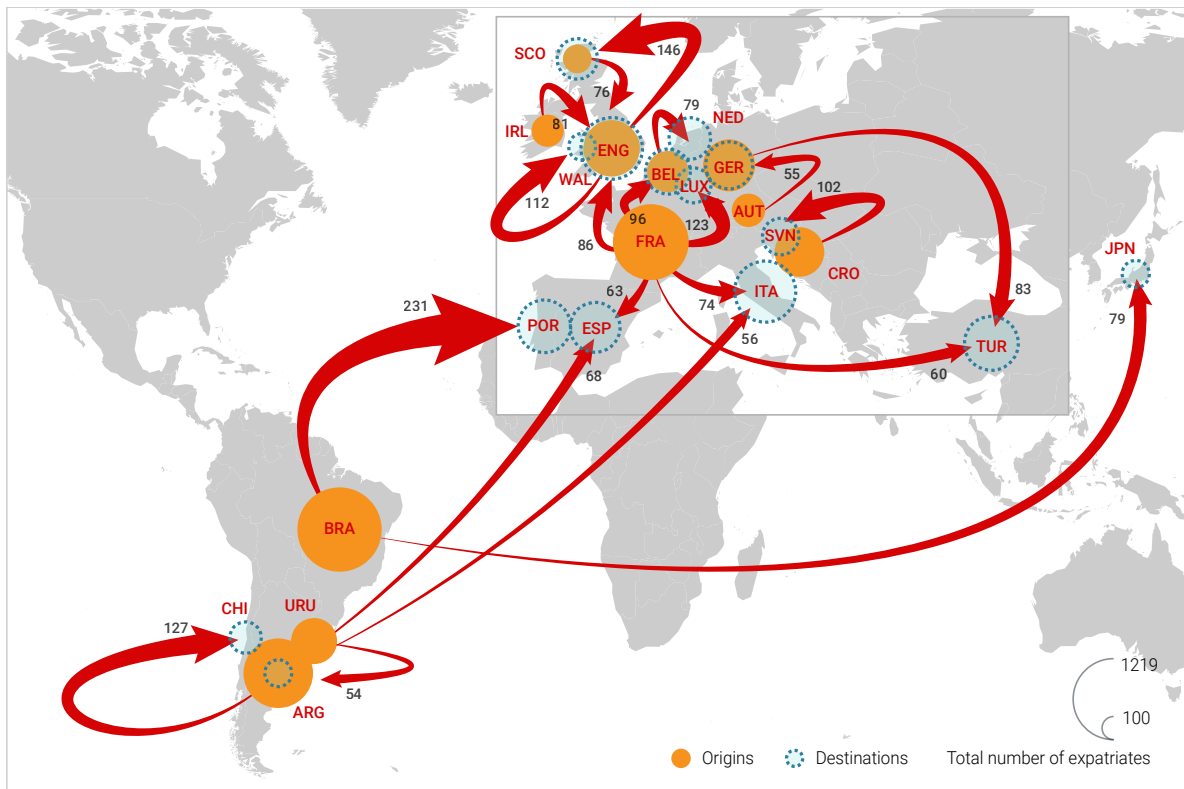
The Brazil-Portugal axis constitutes the principal migratory route for football. On the 1st of May 2022, 231 footballers having grown up in Brazil were playing in the three top Portuguese divisions. The next seven principal migratory axes link neighbouring countries: England and Scotland or Wales, Argentina and Chile, France and Luxembourg, Belgium and England, as well as Croatia and Slovenia.

The importance of the Germany-Turkey axis is accounted for by the return migration of numerous players of Turkish origin having grown up in Germany. Generally speaking, even in a market as globalised as that of professional football, most of the migrations take place between countries that are geographically close.

Figure 7a: principle migratory axes (01/05/2022)

1		Brazil	>		Portugal	231
2		England	>		Scotland	146
3		Argentina	>		Chile	127
4		France	>		Luxembourg	123
5		England	>		Wales	112
6		Croatia	>		Slovenia	102
7		France	>		Belgium	96
8		France	>		England	86
9		Germany	>		Turkey	83
10		Rep. of Ireland	>		England	81
11		Belgium	>		Netherlands	79
.		Brazil	>		Japan	79
13		Scotland	>		England	76
14		France	>		Italy	74
15		Argentina	>		Spain	68
16		France	>		Spain	63
17		France	>		Turkey	60
18		Argentina	>		Italy	56
19		Austria	>		Germany	55
20		Uruguay	>		Argentina	54

Figure 7b: map of the principle migratory axes (01/05/2022)



Among the three main exporting countries, the logic of proximity is particularly visible for France. Indeed, more than half of French footballers abroad play in a nearby country: 13% in Luxembourg, 10% in Belgium, 9% in England, 8% in Italy, 6% in Spain and 5% in Switzerland. Conversely, only a small minority of Brazilian expatriates play nearby to their country of origin, while the Argentinians are in an intermediate situation.

Figure 8: employment associations of French expatriates (01/05/2022)

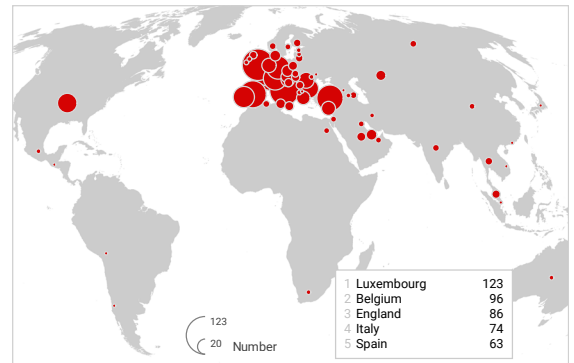


Figure 9: employment associations of Argentinean expatriates (01/05/2022)

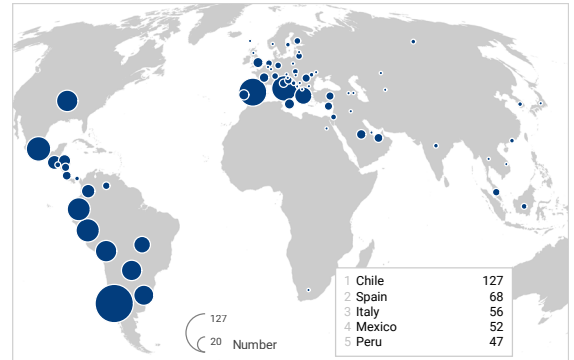
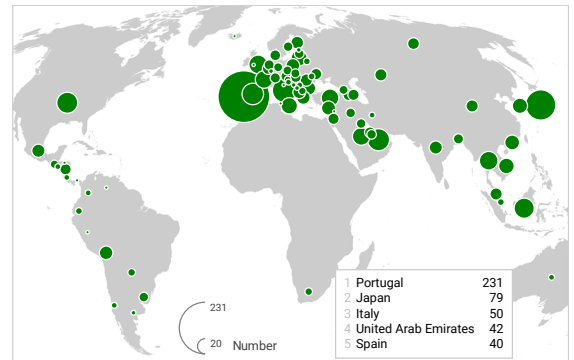


Figure 10: employment associations of Brazilian expatriates (01/05/2022)



4. Conclusion

Since 2017, the number of expatriate players within the teams of the 135 leagues studied has strongly increased. On the 1st of May 2022, 13,929 footballers were playing outside the country in which they grew up: +1,946 players in comparison to the same date in 2017 (+ 16%). Expatriates now represent 22% of the total number of players, with a maximum of 27% in Europe and a minimum of 9% in South America.

The recent decision of the Asian confederation to allow clubs taking part in the Champions League to field, from the 2023/24 season on, six foreign footballers instead of the four permitted up until now, fits in with the current worldwide context of an increase in the presence of expatriates in clubs. This trend is not yet ready to stop.

Brazil remains the principle exporter of footballers. However, after the peak recorded in 2019, the number of Brazilians abroad has fallen for the third consecutive year. Conversely, the foreign presence of nationals from the second biggest exporting country, France, has reached its all-time high in 2022. The gap between Brazilians and French has thus passed from 407 expatriates in 2017 to 241 in 2022. In the not so distant future, France could thus become the number one exporter of footballers.