

The last step before the big-5 ? Analysis of stepping-stone clubs and countries

Drs Raffaele Poli, Loïc Ravenel and Roger Besson

1. Introduction

The 54th Monthly Report of the CIES Football Observatory analyses the career trajectories of players who were present in the clubs of the five major European leagues in March 2020 before the temporary halt of competitions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample is made up of footballers having played domestic league matches since January 2020 or during each of the two preceding seasons.

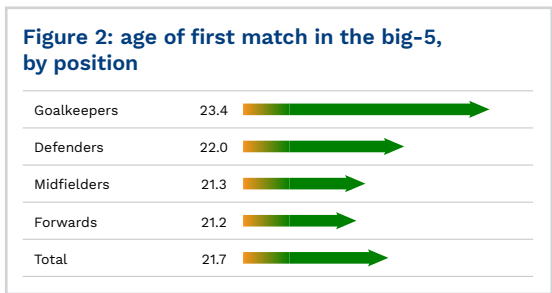
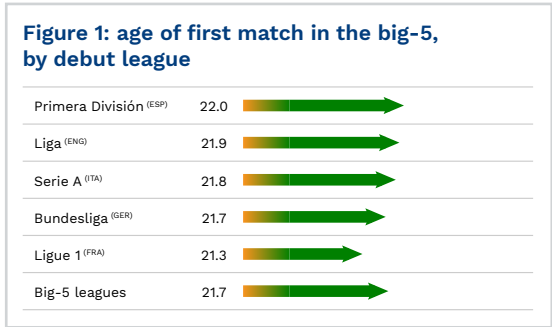
The analysis focuses on the last club where the footballers played before making their debut in the big-5 European leagues: the English Premier League, the Spanish Liga, the Italian Serie A, the German Bundesliga and the French Ligue 1. This study allows us to identify clubs and countries that act as a stepping-stone for players to access the world's wealthiest and most competitive championships.

2. Starting age

A first useful analysis involves the age at the time of the first match in one of the five major European leagues. On average, the footballers taken into account had their big-5 league debut at 21.7 years of age. This value varies between 21.3 years of age for footballers having played their first match in the French Ligue 1 and 22.0 for those having started in the Spanish Liga.

Talents get their chances earlier in the French top division than in any other league of the big-5. The reason for this is linked to the economic model that dominates Ligue 1, which is to showcase young players with a view to making profits by transferring them to even wealthier championships, in particular the English Premier League. The excellence of the French training system also explains this finding.

The position of footballers also influences the age of the career debut in one of the five major European leagues. At one extreme, goalkeepers must wait until 23.4 years of age to play their first match in the big-5. At the other, forwards make their debut at just 21.2 years of age. Defenders are the outfield players who must wait the longest, until 22.0 years of age, to get their first chance to play.



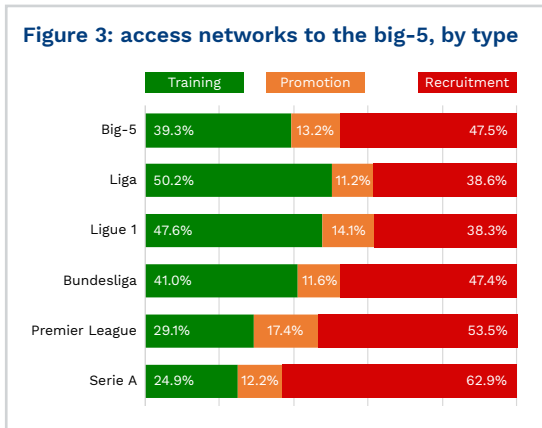
3. Previous club

A second pertinent analysis consists of identifying the last club where the footballers played before starting in one of the five major European leagues. In this regard, we have distinguished three categories: players from youth or reserve teams of the debut club [training], those recruited from other clubs [recruitment] and those having reached the big-5 through the promotion of their employer team [promotion].

Globally, almost half of the players joined the five major European leagues after having been recruited from a team outside of the big-5. This proportion varies between 63% for players having made their debut in the Italian Serie A and 38% for those having played their first match in the big-5 in the French Ligue 1 or the Spanish Liga.

These differences reflect as a negative those observed at the level of the proportion of players from the youth academies of the teams concerned. In clubs where recruiting is important, training is less so. Thus, half of the players having started in the Liga came directly from the youth sections of the clubs. This proportion is also high in Ligue 1 (47.6%), relatively high in the Bundesliga (41.0%), while it is low in the Premier League (29.1%) and the Serie A (24.9%).

Important differences according to the league of debut in the big-5 also exist from the point of view of players signed outside of national borders among those having been subject to recruitment from other clubs. At one extreme, almost three quarters of players having made their debut in the German Bundesliga were recruited from foreign clubs, as opposed to 63% at big-5 league level. The low proportion measured in the English Premier League (51.2%) is mainly explained by the considerable number of players having made their debut in this competition after a period on loan in lower division clubs of the country.



4. Stepping-stone clubs

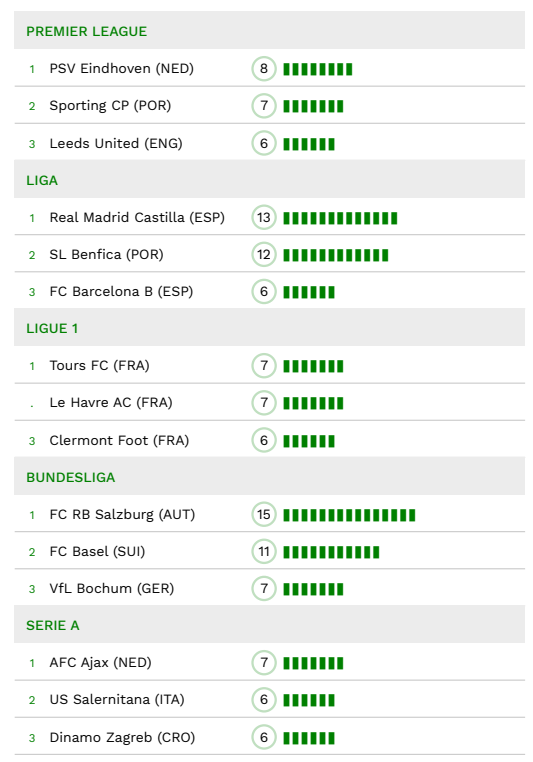
The principal teams where the big-5 league clubs recruited the players present in their squads in March 2020 are regulars of European Cups. With 22 footballers having played there their last match before making the big-5 league debut, Ajax is at the top of the list. Benfica and RB Salzburg complete the podium. The Real Madrid and Barcelona B-teams also constitute excellent stepping-stones to the big-5, especially towards other Liga clubs.

The principal recruiting clubs vary widely according to the league of debut in the big-5. The German Bundesliga teams are particularly fond of helping themselves to players from major clubs of neighbouring countries: RB Salzburg and FC Basel in particular. The recruitment of French Ligue 1 clubs is more oriented towards lower division national teams such as Tours, Le Havre and Clermont Foot.

Figure 5: principal recruiting clubs for big-5 league teams



Figure 6: principal recruiting clubs, by debut league



6. Conclusion

The 54th Monthly Report of the CIES Football Observatory shows that a considerable proportion of big-5 league players gain access to these competitions from one of the countries concerned. This happens either from reserve or youth teams of the debut club (39.3% of players), by recruitment from a lower division club in the country (17.8%) or by promotion of the employer team (13.2%).

Thus, only around three out of ten players gain access to one of the five major European leagues from a foreign club. The main stepping-stone countries are the Netherlands (75 footballers present in the big-5 in March 2020 played their last match there before making their debut in one of the major championships), Portugal (74) and Belgium (71). Brazil (60) and Argentina (45) are the only two extra-European countries where big-5 league clubs recruit large numbers of players.

The analysis shows that despite the internationalisation and globalisation of the footballers' labour market, access to the big-5 leagues continues via a relatively limited number of competitions and countries. Although 83 national origins were represented in the big-5 in March 2020, the number of countries from where these players were recruited was only 56.

This statistic reflects the channelling of migratory flows towards championships whose sporting level, though lower than that of the big-5, is sufficiently elevated to allow players to develop their potential and render themselves attractive to clubs in the major European leagues. These championships play a stepping-stone role for the careers of the most talented footballers who transit through them.