

## Strategic analysis of a professional league: Switzerland as a case study

Drs Raffaele Poli, Loïc Ravenel and Roger Besson

### 1. Introduction

The studies carried out since 2005 by the CIES Football Observatory are not only geared towards the general public, but are also useful to actors in the game. The 23rd Monthly Report illustrates an approach that allows a professional football league to analyse on an objective basis its international positioning and influence in a positive way the strategic choices of the clubs that compose it.

The example chosen is that of the Swiss Football League. This choice is a result of the trust, built up over a number of years, that this institution has shown towards us. This trust has led to the commissioning of several studies and research reports. These documents are available freely online in both French and German on the [Swiss Football League website](#).

The growing wealth inequality in European football<sup>1</sup> puts the medium sized championships like the Swiss Super League under strong pressure to remain interesting and competitive. In this context, the only solution resides in the ability of clubs to use their available resources to the best of their advantage on both a commercial and sporting level. This report focuses on the latter aspect.

---

<sup>1</sup> About this, see notably the [UEFA European Club Footballing Landscape](#).

## 2. Player training

In football's highly competitive environment, a country like Switzerland can only enjoy long term success if the national association, the league and professional clubs pool their resources. The main objective is to train in an optimum fashion the talents readily at hand. Without sufficient means to sign the very top footballers from abroad, the promotion of local players is of critical strategic importance.

Since 2009, the percentage of players in the Swiss Super League who have been for at least three seasons between 15 and 21 years of age in their employer club has always been above 20%. This percentage reached its maximum in 2013 (29.6%) and fell steadily thereafter. On the 1st October 2016, club-trained players made up only 21.5% of Super League squads.

Within the context of a general decrease, the percentage of club-trained players in the Swiss top division remains above the average observed at the level of 31 championships of UEFA member associations. However, the decline observed in Switzerland is not encouraging. From a perspective that looks to the future, one would hope that this percentage would increase. If this turns out not to be the case, the aim would at least be not to let the figure go lower than a fifth of squad members.

**Figure 1: % of club-trained players in squads, Swiss Super League versus Europe (2009-2016)**



Between the 1st July and the 31st December 2016, club-trained players took part in 17.4% of minutes in the Swiss Super League as opposed to 16.1% at European level. The percentage varies widely according to club: from 30.8% for Lausanne to less than 10% for Basel and Vaduz. From a strategic perspective, it would be worthwhile to further investigate so as to better understand the underlying reason for these disparities.

**Figure 2: % of minutes for club-trained players, Swiss Super League (01.07.2016-31.12.2016)**

1. FC Lausanne-Sport	30.8%
2. BSC Young Boys	27.5%
3. FC Sion	26.7%
4. FC Luzern	21.7%
5. FC Thun	16.6%
6. Grasshopper Club Zürich	16.1%
7. FC St. Gallen	12.9%
8. FC Lugano	10.5%
9. FC Basel 1893	8.0%
10. FC Vaduz	3.3%

The analysis of the clubs having trained the most Swiss Super League players is also interesting from a strategic point of view. Young Boys is the most prolific training club. The team from Bern employs eleven footballers from their academy. Eleven other players from Young Boys training centre are active in other Super League clubs.

**Figure 3: training clubs of Swiss Super League players (October 2016)**

	In	Out	Tot
1. BSC Young Boys	11	11	22
2. FC Basel 1893	1	14	15
3. Grasshopper Club Zürich	5	7	12
4. FC Lausanne-Sport	8	3	11
5. FC Sion	9	1	10
6. FC Luzern	6	4	10
7. FC Thun	6	3	9
8. FC St. Gallen	2	5	7
9. Neuchâtel Xamax FCS	-	5	5
10. FC Zürich	-	4	4
11. FC Winterthur	-	4	4
12. FC Lugano	3	1	4
13. Servette FC	-	4	4
14. FC Aarau	-	3	3
15. FC Concordia Basel	-	3	3

[In]: in the club, [Out]: in other clubs, [Tot]: total

Basel is ranked second. Although they trained fifteen Swiss Super League players, only one actually plays for them. Having been a driving force in Swiss football over the past fifteen years, Basel seems to have lost confidence in its youth academy players in favour of more seasoned footballers, often imported from abroad. If this trend continues, this situation will deprive Swiss footballers of one of their principle spotlights.

### 3. Youth employment

Between 2009 and 2016, the average age of Swiss Super League players is situated consistently between 25 and 26 years of age. The highest value was measured in 2014. Thereafter, the age dropped while remaining slightly above the values recorded for the first years of the period studied. In comparison with Europe, the Swiss top division remains relatively young.

**Figure 4: average age of squads, Swiss Super League versus Europe (2009-2016)**



Important differences in terms of age exist between Swiss Super League clubs. At one extreme, Lausanne has fielded squads with an average age of 24.0 years. At the other, the average age of line-ups fielded by Lucerne was 28.3 years. Basel has also opted for experience (27.1 years). In the latter club, U21 footballers only played 2% of championship minutes between the 1st July and the 31st December 2016.

From a perspective centred on the reinforcement of its stepping stone status for young players, the Swiss professional league must ensure that all top division clubs provide young talents with sufficient match time. In

the Swiss context, where player training is well established, this would be beneficial not only from a financial point of view due to eventual transfer fees, but also on a sporting level for both clubs and national teams.

**Figure 5: average age on the pitch and % of minutes for U21, Swiss Super League (01.07.2016-31.12.2016)**

	Age	≤21 (%)
FC Lausanne-Sport	24.0	23.7%
FC Lugano	25.1	10.2%
Grasshopper Club Zürich	25.4	21.6%
FC St. Gallen	25.5	22.2%
FC Thun	25.9	6.1%
FC Sion	26.0	32.6%
BSC Young Boys	26.1	14.3%
FC Basel 1893	27.1	2.0%
FC Vaduz	27.1	5.6%
FC Luzern	28.4	13.6%

<sup>1</sup> Age at matches

There will surely be future members of national teams among the U21 players most fielded during the first half of the Swiss Super League 2016/17 season. If time spent on the pitch is a reflection of their particular qualities, the blossoming of these footballers will be due in no small part to their club's managers and trainers. The role of the latter is indeed often decisive in giving young players a chance to fully develop their potential.

**Figure 6: most fielded U21 players, Swiss Super League (01.07.2016-31.12.2016)**

	Pos <sup>1</sup>	Orig <sup>2</sup>	Min
1. Anton Mitryushkin (Sion)	GK	RUS	1620
2. Silvan Hefti (St. Gallen)	FB	SUI	1440
3. Olivier Custodio (Lausanne)	DM	SUI	1274
4. Samuele Campo (Lausanne)	AM	SUI	1231
5. Jan Bamert (GC)	CB	SUI	1198
6. Nicolas Lüchinger <sup>3</sup> (Sion)	FB	SUI	1165
7. Vincent Sierrro (Sion)	DM	SUI	1098
8. Chadrac Akolo (Sion)	FW	SUI	1066
9. Lucas Andersen <sup>3</sup> (GC)	AM	DEN	1064
10. Sandro Lauper (Thun)	DM	SUI	921
11. Denis Zakaria (YB)	DM	SUI	885
12. Roy Gelmi (St. Gallen)	CB	SUI	847
13. Gianluca Gaudino (St. Gallen)	DM	GER	828
14. Cédric Itten (Luzern)	FW	SUI	804
15. Alban Ajeti (St. Gallen)	FW	SUI	755
16. Nemanja Antonov (GC)	FB	SRB	749
17. Rodrigo Aguirre <sup>3</sup> (Lugano)	FW	URU	748
18. Jordan Lotomba (Lausanne)	AM	SUI	734
19. Grégory Karlen (Sion)	FW	SUI	723
20. Domen Črnigoj (Lugano)	AM	SVN	703

<sup>1</sup> Pos : position : [GK] goalkeeper, [CB] centre back, [FB] full back, [DM] defensive midfielder, [AM] attacking midfielder, [FW] forward.  
<sup>2</sup> Orig : country of origin  
<sup>3</sup> Players having celebrated their 22th birthday during the semester

Apart from individual talent, the environment into which footballers integrate themselves plays a key role in their success. This context must be as much favourable as possible. It is up to all of the actors present in a given territory to put into place an environment that nurtures talents. Within this framework, professional leagues can and must demonstrate their leadership in order to positively influence the situation.

#### 4. Player export

The healthy state of football in a country like Switzerland is also measured by the presence of home grown players competing in the top foreign championships. From this point of view, the present analysis shows that Switzerland has no reason to feel inferior to the most competitive football nations. With 48 players present in October 2016 in the five major European leagues, Switzerland is the fifth biggest exporter. This is quite a feat given the size of the country (around 8 million inhabitants).

**Figure 7: principal origins of expatriate footballers in the big-5 European leagues (1st October 2016)**

	Nb	/Pop <sup>1</sup>
1. France	116	1.8
2. Brazil	114	0.5
3. Argentina	97	2.2
4. Spain	66	1.4
5. Switzerland	48	5.8
. Belgium	48	4.2
7. Serbia	39	4.4
8. Netherlands	38	2.2
9. Portugal	36	3.5
10. Croatia	33	7.8
11. Senegal	27	1.8
12. Uruguay	26	7.6
. Sweden	26	2.7
. Germany	26	0.3
15. Poland	25	0.6
16. Austria	24	2.8
17. Colombia	19	0.4
. Denmark	19	3.4
19. Italy	18	0.3
20. Ivory Coast	17	0.7

<sup>1</sup> Number of players compared to the population, per one million inhabitant (source: UNO 2015)

The strong Swiss presence in the top European championships reflects the excellence of the training system set up in the country, as well as the stepping stone role played by the Swiss Super League. In order for this to continue, it is important that all the clubs offer quality training and always aim at further improving it. All teams must also recognize the strategic importance of giving local talents their chance to shine.

On average, Swiss footballers playing in top division European leagues having migrated abroad during their career did so for the first time at the age of 21 years. This is quite a low value compared internationally. Indeed, many local talents leave their home country before having celebrated their 18th birthday and having started to play in the Swiss professional leagues.

The early international transfer of footballers who have not completed their full training is a considerable problem for Swiss clubs. It both entails a loss of players who have the potential to improve the level of professional national leagues and deprive clubs of income. Indeed, training compensations received for young talents are much lower than transfer fees paid for players who already have professional experience.

**Figure 8: average age of the first departure abroad, by origin**

Bulgaria	24.1	
Spain	24.0	
Ukraine	23.8	
Romania	23.7	
Italy	23.5	
Belarus	23.2	
Czech Republic	23.1	
England	22.9	
The Netherlands	22.9	
Poland	22.9	
Greece	22.8	
Portugal	22.6	
Norway	22.5	
Denmark	22.5	
France	22.4	
Slovakia	22.3	
Germany	22.2	
Serbia	22.1	
Sweden	21.9	
Slovenia	21.9	
<b>Total</b>	<b>21.8</b>	
Croatia	21.8	
Brazil	21.8	
Finland	21.6	
Argentina	21.6	
<b>Switzerland</b>	<b>21.0</b>	
Austria	20.8	
Hungary	20.6	
Belgium	19.8	
Bosnia Herzegovina	19.8	
Nigeria	18.9	
Ghana	18.3	

Players of 31 European top division leagues, October 2016

## 5. Conclusion

Each professional league is called upon to play a key role on different levels. In collaboration with the national association and its member clubs, it must encourage efforts to improve the training of young footballers. Similar to what has been implemented for quite some time in Switzerland, the existence of financial mechanisms to protect and reward training is particularly important. These mechanisms must help to persuade as many clubs as possible to focus on talent development.

A professional league must also ensure that the most appropriate human resources are present in the youth academies of member clubs. The occupation of privileged positions by people without the necessary skills has a negative impact on the primary objective of offering talents the best environment for developing their potential. The quality of players does indeed highly depend on that of their trainers. Bearing this perspective in mind, no effort must be spared on the training of coaches.

There is also a temptation for professional leagues to keep their distance from the playing field by concentrating on an administrative role. However, the desire to improve the situation over the long term involves frequent visits and travel to clubs. From the sporting point of view, in the Swiss case and beyond, the main focus should be to convince all of the clubs to promote the best talents in youth academies by giving them match time in the first team. Without this, all efforts are in vain.

In those countries most affected by premature departures abroad, the professional league is also called upon to effectively combat the phenomenon of the transfer of minors from both an educational and a regulation perspective. In order to do this, a strong will within football's governing bodies on an international

level is indispensable. It is also necessary to increase awareness among the public opinion on the perverse effects of exaggerated speculation that young talents are faced with.

In the current context of economic polarisation, the good health of the vast majority of clubs and leagues on a worldwide level will depend on their ability to join forces in their own interests. From the sporting point of view, importance must be placed on improving the protection of the work of training, and, more generally, to increase the level of solidarity in the transfer system<sup>2</sup>.

---

2 About this, see notably the book entitled **Slow Foot** (in French), the conclusion of the CIES Football Observatory **Monthly Report n°3** [Transfer expenditure and results] and that of the article **Third-party entitlement to shares of transfer fees: problems and solutions**.