

2018 FIFA World Cup™: profile of qualified teams

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1. Introduction

The thirtieth Monthly Report of the CIES Football Observatory analyses the profile of the 32 teams that have qualified for the final phase of the 2018 FIFA World Cup™. The study covers the thematic of age, height, country of birth and employer association of players fielded by each squad during the qualifying matches¹.

The report highlights the important differences in team composition. This diversity is one of the key qualities of sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup™. Within the context of globalisation that is often seen as having a homogenising effect, the FIFA World Cup™ refreshes our thirst for the specificities of nations on different levels.

The study also shows the strong concentration of players from squads qualified in clubs of the most competitive leagues. Though this deprives many championships of their best players, this process works in favour of competitive balance insofar as a majority of nations have well trained and experienced players available to them.

¹ For Russia, we have taken into account the official matches played between July 2016 and November 2017.

2. Age

Players from qualified teams were, on average, 27.4 years old when the matches were played. As a comparison, this value is about 25 years of age for the players of 31 top division European championships. This gap reflects the tendency for managers to privilege the selection of experienced players that have already proven themselves at the highest level.

The Panamanian squad fielded the oldest players overall (29.4 years of age), followed by Costa Rica (29.0 years of age) and Iceland (29.0 years of age). At the opposite end of the scale, Nigeria (24.9 years of age), Germany (25.7 years of age) and England (25.9 years of age) fielded the youngest players. By Confederation, the average age varies between 26.5 years of age for qualified CAF teams and 28.6 years of age for those of the CONCACAF.

Figure 1: average age, qualified teams

PAN	29.4	COL	27.3
ISL	29.0	MAR	27.2
CRC	29.0	PER	27.0
URU	28.7	BEL	27.0
KSA	28.7	EGY	27.0
ARG	28.4	AUS	26.9
RUS	28.1	TUN	26.8
ESP	28.0	SUI	26.6
POL	28.0	KOR	26.5
BRA	27.8	IRN	26.5
POR	27.7	FRA	26.4
SRB	27.7	SEN	26.4
JPN	27.5	DEN	26.1
CRO	27.5	ENG	25.9
SWE	27.4	GER	25.7
MEX	27.4	NGA	24.9

Figure 2: average age, qualified teams by Confederation

CONCACAF	28.6
CONMEBOL	27.8
AFC	27.2
UEFA	27.2
CAF	26.5
Total	27.4

3. Height

On average, the height of players employed by qualified squads is 181.7cm. This value is slightly lower than that observed in 31 European top division championships (182.1cm). Spain is the only European country among the seven nations having fielded players with an average height of less than 180cm. At the opposite end, the six nations with the tallest players are UEFA members. It is nevertheless important to make clear that there is no correlation between height and success.

As with age, the differences in height between the associations qualified for the 2018 FIFA World Cup™ are quite significant. At one extreme, Serbia fielded players with an average height of 185.6cm. At the other, players in the Saudi Arabian squad are only 176.2cm in height. The gap between Confederations are also important: from 183.2cm for UEFA nations qualified to 179.6cm for those from the CONMEBOL.

Figure 3: average height (cm), qualified teams

 SRB	185.6	 CRC	181.6
 SWE	185.2	 AUS	181.3
 ISL	185.0	 NGA	181.2
 DEN	185.0	 PAN	181.1
 CRO	184.9	 POR	180.5
 RUS	184.3	 FRA	180.5
 TUN	184.0	 BRA	180.4
 GER	183.8	 COL	180.2
 BEL	183.8	 EGY	180.1
 SEN	183.7	 URU	179.8
 SUI	183.5	 MEX	179.5
 IRN	183.4	 ESP	179.5
 POL	183.1	 ARG	179.4
 MAR	182.4	 PER	178.3
 KOR	182.2	 JPN	178.1
 ENG	182.1	 KSA	176.2

Figure 4: average height (cm), qualified teams by Confederation

 UEFA	183.2
 CAF	182.3
 CONCACAF	180.6
 AFC	180.4
 CONMEBOL	179.6
Total	181.7

4. Country of birth

The intensification of mobility on a global level leads to a mixing of populations from all corners of the planet. The accessibility of football to all levels of society is such that migrants often find it a favoured means for expression. At the request of African associations having significant diasporas, the FIFA have progressively allowed dual nationals to represent more easily a second country over the course of their career.

Out of the 1,032 players having participated in the qualifiers for the 31 teams qualified and the 40 Russian players taken into account, 98 were born outside of the association represented (9.1%). The maximum percentage was measured for Morocco (61.5%), while seven countries did not field any player born outside their national borders. According to Confederation, the values vary between 28.7% for CAF selections qualified and 2.1% for those of the AFC.

Figure 5: % of players born abroad, qualified teams



Figure 6: % of players born abroad, qualified teams by Confederation



5. Association of employment

As a global activity, football itself generates numerous international mobilities. More and more footballers play in clubs situated outside of the association represented. The percentage of players in foreign teams at the time of writing was 64.6%. It varies between 100% for players from Croatia, Sweden and Iceland and 0% for the players from Saudi Arabia and England. By Confederation, the values range between 78.7% for CONMEBOL and 47.6% for the AFC.

Figure 7: % of players in foreign clubs, qualified teams

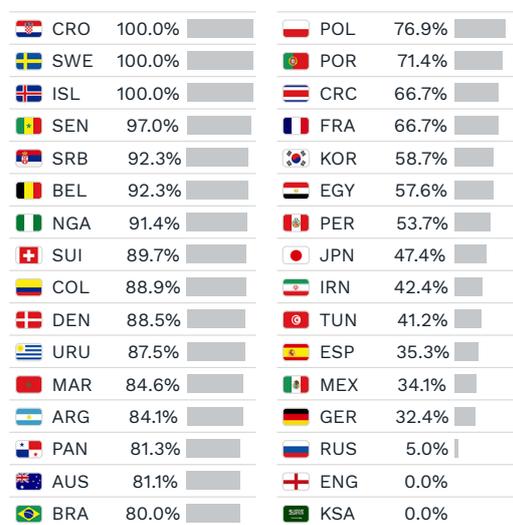
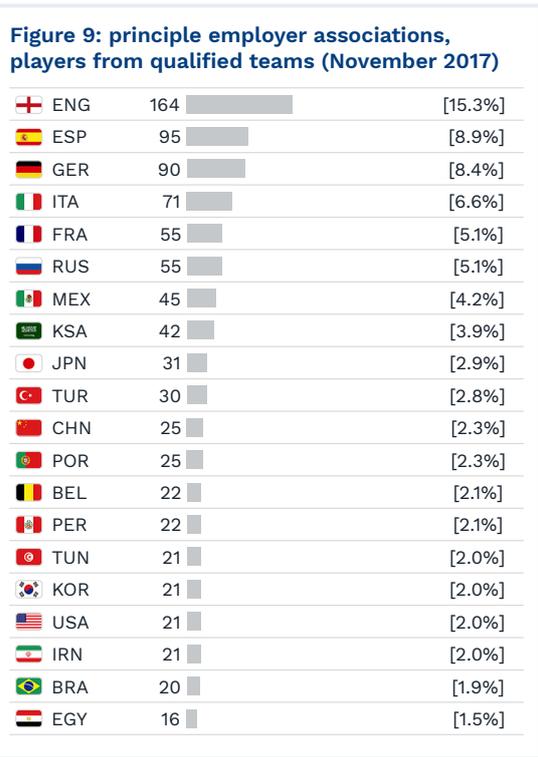


Figure 8: % of players in foreign clubs, qualified teams by Confederation



The concentration of talents and resources in professional football translates into a strong over representation of footballers playing in the wealthiest leagues and countries. In November 2017, about half of the players who took part in the qualifiers for the squads that will be present in Russia play in six countries, including 15.3% in England (164 players). In total, 57 associations are represented among employer clubs.



6. Conclusion

This analysis helps us to understand the economic geography of football worldwide. Thanks to its comparative approach, such a study also allows us to situate each nation studied in the international context. The comparison comes into its own also at the level of Confederations. The differences observed show the diversity of such a sporting event as the FIFA World Cup™. The enlargement to 48 teams with a good distribution of those qualified between continents can only reinforce this process.

It is clearly possible to go deeper into the analysis, in particular to determine the key criteria of success with regard to results of previous editions. Among the determining factors is notably the fact of having a significant number of footballers regularly playing in the most competitive leagues and clubs. The history of the FIFA World Cup™, however, teaches us that other factors come into play and that surprises are often the order of the day.