

Development paths of 2022 FIFA men's World Cup players

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1. Introduction

This report traces the development paths of players selected for the 2022 FIFA men's World Cup. It analyses the current clubs and leagues of World Cup participants (chapter "Employment"), the clubs and associations where these footballers have been for at least three years between their 15th and 21st birthday (chapter "Training"), as well as the teams and senior leagues where they have played official matches up until they turned 23 (chapter "Development").

The study notably shows the magnitude of the number of clubs involved in the development of the 2022 FIFA World Cup players. Indeed, the latter played official matches at senior level in no less than 763 clubs from the beginning of their career until their 23rd birthday. The same can be said of the leagues in which the footballers played during this time period: 118 in total. The report also reveals the importance of B-teams (i.e. second teams of professional clubs participating in senior leagues at lower domestic levels) in the development of players.

2. Employment

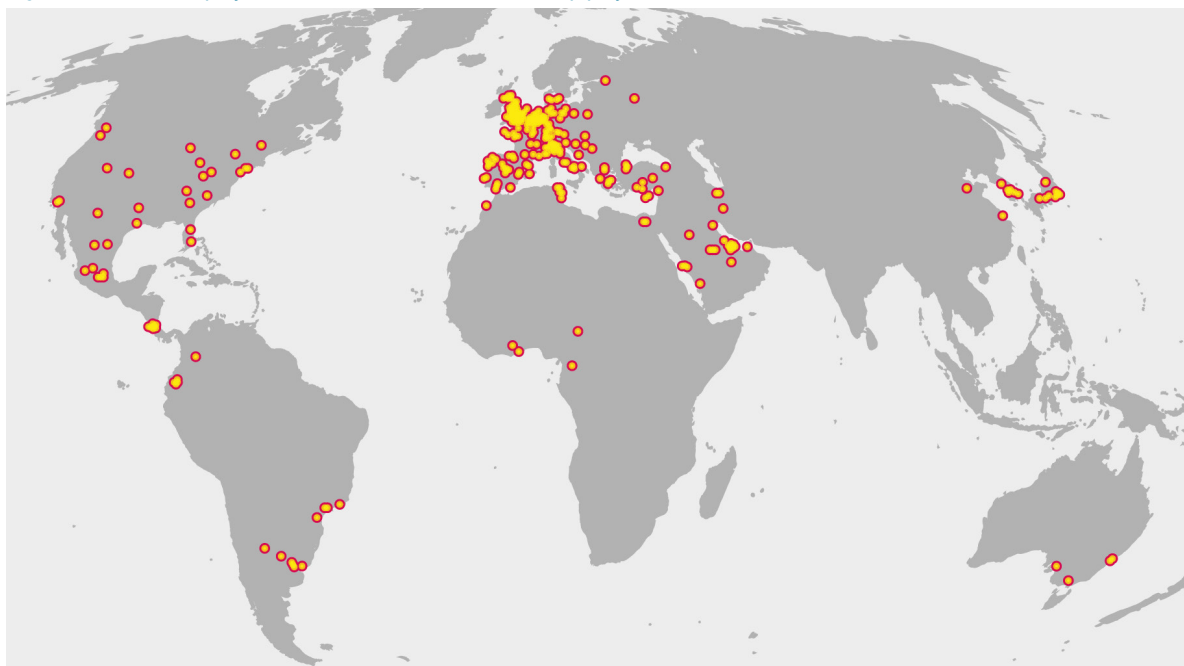
The 830 players selected for the 2022 FIFA men's World Cup are spread across 295 employing clubs. The distribution of players between employer clubs is fairly concentrated, with a maximum of 17 footballers playing for one single team: FC Barcelona. Fifteen other teams employ at least ten FIFA World Cup players. The ten clubs employing the most players account for 16.5% of all footballers selected. This percentage rises to 28.0% when considering the top twenty employers, up to 48.7% when considering the top fifty.

The map of the clubs where the players of the 2022 FIFA World Cup are employed illustrates perfectly the concentration of players in Europe. Only four players representing UEFA's national teams play for clubs outside of the confederation. In contrast, only 17 of the 130 footballers selected by African teams (13.1%) are contracted to clubs in CAF member associations. The vast majority of players from South America (84/104, 80.8%) play outside their home confederation, mainly in Europe, while a minority of footballers representing selections from North and Central America (45.2%) and Asia (36.8%) are in this situation.

Figure 1: principal employer clubs, 2022 FIFA men's World Cup players

		Players	Teams
1	FC Barcelona (ESP)	17	8
2	Manchester City (ENG)	16	9
.	Bayern München (GER)	16	7
4	Al-Sadd SC (QAT)	15	3
5	Manchester United (ENG)	14	8
6	Chelsea FC (ENG)	12	9
.	Atlético Madrid (ESP)	12	7
.	Real Madrid (ESP)	12	7
.	Al-Hilal SFC (KSA)	12	1
10	Tottenham Hotspur (ENG)	11	10
.	Paris St-Germain (FRA)	11	7
.	Juventus FC (ITA)	11	6
.	Borussia Dortmund (GER)	11	6
.	AFC Ajax (NED)	11	4
15	Arsenal FC (ENG)	10	7
.	Sevilla FC (ESP)	10	5
17	Stade Rennais (FRA)	8	7
.	Brighton & Hove (ENG)	8	6
.	Club Brugge (BEL)	8	5
20	Leicester City (ENG)	7	5

Figure 2: clubs of employment of 2022 FIFA men's World Cup players



The distribution of World Cup players is even more concentrated when employment leagues are taken into consideration. While clubs from 55 championships employ at least one FIFA 2022 World Cup participant, teams from the main employment league alone, the English Premier League, account for 16.1% of all those selected. This percentage rises to 50.3% when considering the five main employment leagues. Unsurprisingly, these correspond to the five highest paying domestic competitions in the world: the European big-5 (England, Spain, Italy, France and Germany).

By confederation, 72.5% of the footballers (602 out of 830) selected for the 2022 FIFA men's World Cup play for clubs from UEFA member associations. The second most represented confederation is AFC (114 players, 13.7% of the total), followed by CONCACAF (76, 9.2%), CONMEBOL (21, 2.5%) and CAF (17, 2.1%). Overall, 26 leagues from non-UEFA associations employ FIFA World Cup players, of whom 62.3% in five championships: the MLS, the Saudi Pro League, the Qatari Stars League, the Mexican Liga MX and the Costa Rica's Liga FDP.

Figure 3: principal leagues of employment, 2022 FIFA men's World Cup players

			Players	Teams
1		Premier League (ENG)	134	26
2		La Liga (ESP)	83	23
.		Bundesliga (GER)	77	24
4		Serie A (ITA)	65	21
5		Ligue 1 (FRA)	55	21
6		MLS (USA)	37	12
7		Saudi League (KSA)	33	7
.		Stars League (QAT)	33	6
9		Championship (ENG/2)	26	11
.		Pro League (BEL)	24	12
11		Liga MX (MEX)	23	4
12		Eredivisie (NED)	19	6
.		Primeira Liga (POR)	19	9
.		Süper Lig (TUR)	19	13
15		Liga FPD (CRC)	16	1
16		K League 1 (KOR)	13	1
.		Super League 1 (GRE)	13	10
18		Premiership (SCO)	12	6
19		Super League (SUI)	9	5
.		Persian Gulf League (IRN)	9	1

3. Training

The analysis of training clubs considers teams where players selected for the FIFA 2022 men's World Cup have stayed for at least three years between the seasons of their 15th and 21st birthdays. According to this definition, a footballer may have no training club (4.4% of the players studied), one (91.5% of cases) or even two (4.1% of the total). Although rare, the latter case is notably that of Cristiano Ronaldo, who played four seasons at Sporting CP between the ages of 15 and 18, and three at Manchester United between the ages of 19 and 21.

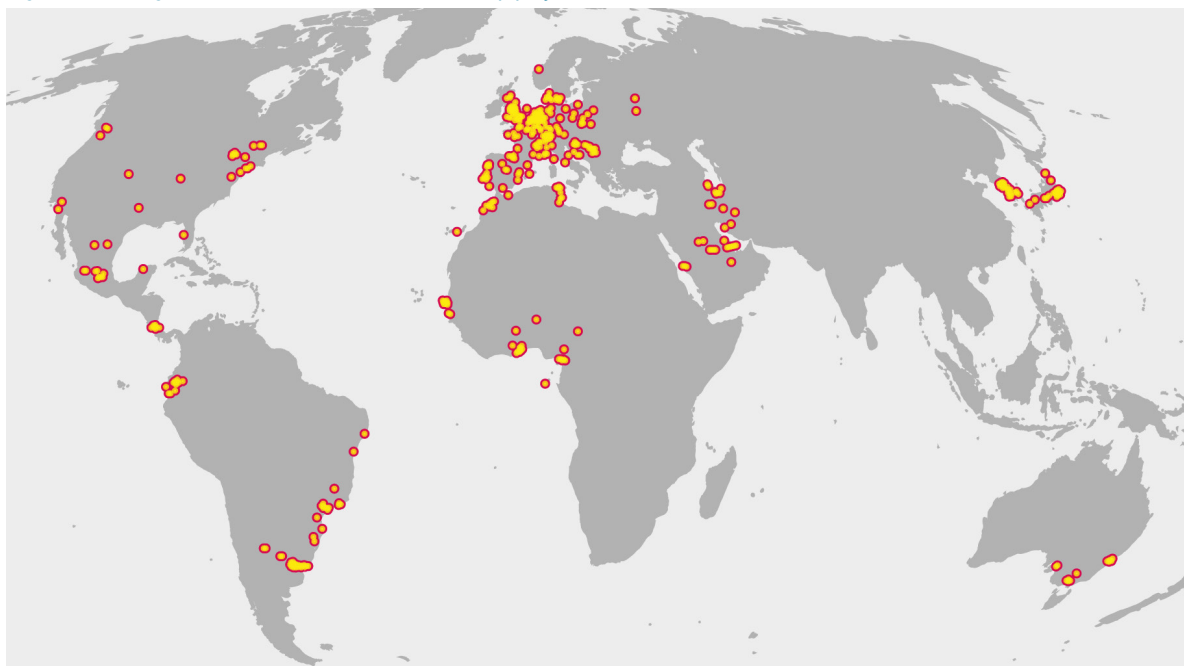
In total, 427 clubs trained the 830 footballers selected for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The greatest number of World Cup participants trained per club was measured for AFC Ajax: 11 players. The concentration of the distribution of footballers at the level of training clubs is less marked than that observed for employer ones. The top ten training clubs trained 9.9% of the players selected for the tournament (16.5% for employment clubs). This percentage is 18.0% for the top twenty training clubs (vs 28.0%) and 34.3% for the top fifty (vs 48.7%).

The 427 clubs where FIFA 2022 World Cup players spent at least three years between the seasons of their 15th and 21st birthdays are primarily in UEFA member associations. The highest number of training clubs was recorded in France (31), closely followed by England (30). This result reflects both the role played by these countries in the development of footballers representing other national teams, as well as the capillarity of training in these associations, where many clubs have programmes that can develop high-level players.

Figure 4: principal training clubs, 2022 FIFA men's World Cup players

		Players	Teams
1	AFC Ajax (NED)	11	5
2	Deportivo Saprissa (CRC)	10	1
3	Al-Sadd SC (QAT)	9	1
4	Sporting CP (POR)	8	2
.	Dinamo Zagreb (CRO)	8	2
.	Independiente del Valle (ECU)	8	1
7	Real Madrid (ESP)	7	3
.	KRC Genk (BEL)	7	2
.	FC Basel (SUI)	7	1
.	River Plate (ARG)	7	2
.	Crvena Zvezda (SRB)	7	1
.	Paris St-Germain (FRA)	7	4
.	SL Benfica (POR)	7	2
.	FC Barcelona (ESP)	7	4
.	Liverpool FC (ENG)	7	4
.	Manchester City (ENG)	7	6
.	FK Partizan (SRB)	7	1
18	Swansea City (ENG)	6	1
.	RSC Anderlecht (BEL)	6	1
.	Peñarol Montevideo (URU)	6	1

Figure 5: training clubs of 2022 FIFA men's World Cup players



The ranking of FIFA's 2022 World Cup players' training clubs takes different forms if we divide the footballers into two categories according to the criterion of age: the half of the oldest players on the one hand, and the half of the youngest ones on the other hand. The cut-off point for both categories is 27.3 years. Independiente del Valle (ECU) is the main training club for the youngest players, while Deportivo Saprissa (CRC) heads the rankings for the most experienced ones.

The concentration of the distribution of footballers at the level of training clubs for half of the oldest FIFA 2022 World Cup players is less marked than that observed for half of the youngest ones. The top ten training clubs trained 12.1% of the oldest players selected (13.3% for the youngest ones). This percentage is 19.6% for the top twenty training clubs (vs 23.0%) and 36.0% for the top fifty (vs 41.9%). The higher training concentration among younger players notably reflects the tendency of associations' dominant clubs to integrate the best domestic and even foreign talents earlier into their youth teams.

Figure 6: principal training clubs, half of the youngest 2022 FIFA men's World Cup players

		Players	Teams
1	 Independiente del Valle (ECU)	8	1
2	 AFC Ajax (NED)	6	3
.	 FK Partizan (SRB)	6	1
4	 SL Benfica (POR)	5	2
.	 FC Barcelona (ESP)	5	3
.	 Liverpool FC (ENG)	5	4
.	 Manchester City (ENG)	5	5
.	 Chelsea FC (ENG)	5	4
.	 FC Porto (POR)	5	1
.	 Valencia CF (ESP)	5	3

Figure 7: principal training clubs, half of the oldest 2022 FIFA men's World Cup players

		Players	Teams
1	 Deportivo Saprissa (CRC)	10	1
2	 Sporting CP (POR)	6	2
3	 AFC Ajax (NED)	5	3
.	 Al-Sadd SC (QAT)	5	1
5	 Dinamo Zagreb (CRO)	4	1
.	 Real Madrid (ESP)	4	1
.	 KRC Genk (BEL)	4	1
.	 FC Basel (SUI)	4	1
.	 Arsenal FC (ENG)	4	4
.	 Al-Hilal SFC (KSA)	4	1

Regarding training national associations, two stand out in terms of the number of footballers selected for the FIFA 2022 World Cup: England (73 players) and France (65 players). The clubs from both associations have not only trained players for the corresponding national selections, but also for other qualified teams: primarily Wales (17 players) and Poland (4) for England; Cameroon (11), Senegal (10) and Tunisia (8) for France.

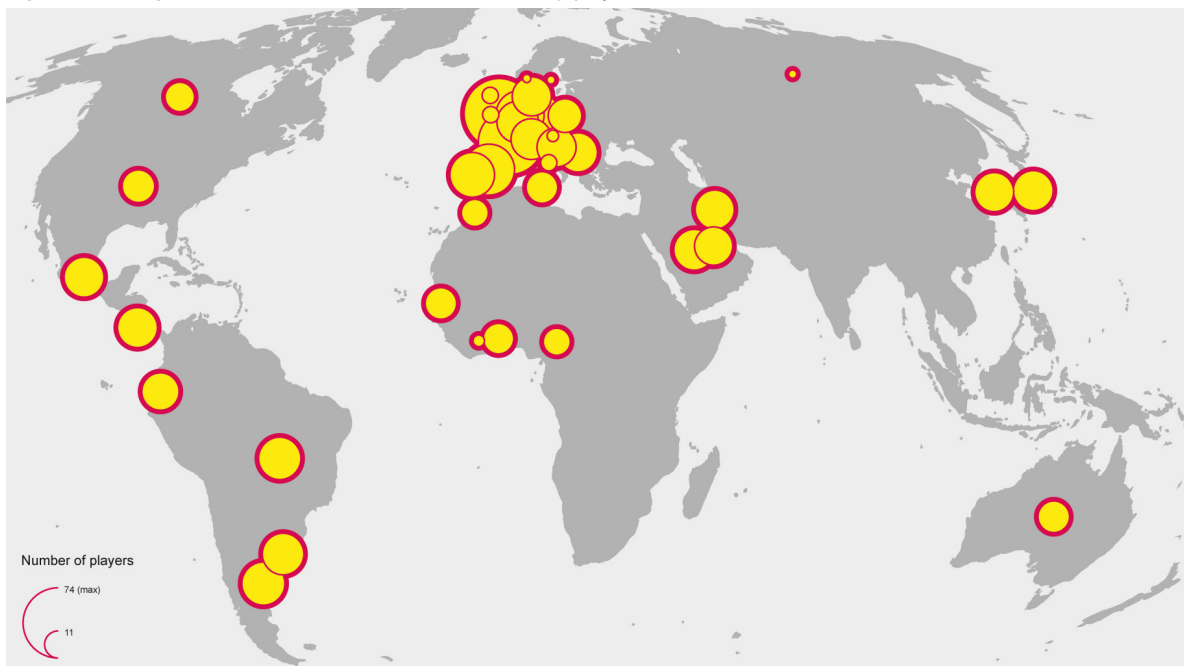
Half of the footballers trained outside the national team represented are migrants' sons having chosen to represent the country of one of their parents. The remaining cases concern players who left the association where they grew up at a very young age as part of a recruitment process by a foreign club. This is notably the case of the Dane Christian Eriksen, who left for the Netherlands at the age of 16.

In total, the footballers of the 2022 FIFA World Cup have played at least three seasons between the ages of 15 and 21 for clubs in 39 national associations: the 32 represented at the tournament and seven others. Of the latter, the countries whose clubs have trained the most 2022 World Cup participants are Scotland and Italy (four players).

Figure 8: principal training associations, 2022 FIFA men's World Cup players

		Players	Teams
1	England	73	19
2	France	65	13
3	Spain	46	13
4	Germany	41	14
5	The Netherlands	36	7
6	Portugal	31	7
7	Argentina	29	5
8	Belgium	28	4
9	Brazil	27	2
10	Uruguay	26	2
.	Saudi Arabia	26	1
.	Japan	26	1
13	Costa Rica	25	2
.	Switzerland	25	1
.	Mexico	25	1
16	Denmark	24	3
.	Ecuador	24	2
.	Qatar	24	1
.	Croatia	24	1
20	Korea Republic	23	1
.	Iran	23	1
.	Serbia	23	1

Figure 9: training association of 2022 FIFA men's World Cup players



4. Development

Between their debut in senior leagues and their 23rd birthday, the 830 players selected for the 2022 FIFA World Cup have played official matches (championships or international cups) for a total of 763 clubs. This result shows the extent of the teams involved in the development of top-level players. It confirms the close interweaving and interdependence between clubs of different sporting and economic levels in the paths that lead players to a successful career.











AFC Ajax is the team where players selected for the 2022 FIFA World Cup have played the most games and minutes at senior level up to the age of 23: 1,962 official games and 147,618 minutes. All the clubs that have contributed most to the development of World Cup players share at least three main characteristics: the expertise in the training of players, the early recruitment of talent, as well as the willingness to give them playing time, whether in the main team or in the B-one.

Environmental aspects at both national and local levels also play a crucial role in the ability to train and develop young players. For example, rules and regulations installed by national associations and professional leagues in favour of talents' training and development, subvention systems, the training of coaches at youth level, etc. Club leaders also play a critical role to optimise player development through the implementation of a clear vision and long-term strategies oriented towards this goal.

All of the ten clubs that have contributed most to the development of players for the 2022 FIFA World Cup have B-teams playing in national senior leagues, mostly below the second tier of competition, but sometimes also within the second domestic tier, as in the case of AFC Ajax. These teams have played a key role in the transition from youth to adult football for many of the future FIFA World Cup participants.

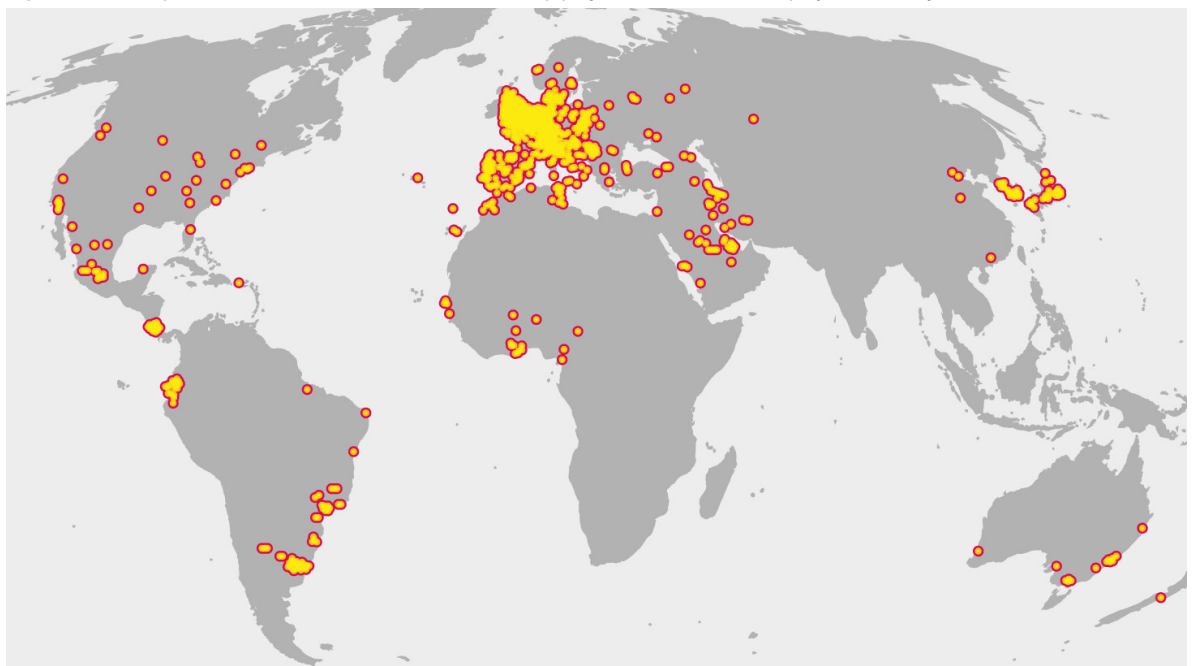
In the case of Real Madrid, for example, 36.6% of the minutes in official matches played at the club before the age of 23 by footballers selected for the FIFA World Cup were played in the second team: Real Madrid Castilla CF. Although less important because of the greater ease of starting in the first team, this proportion is quite high also at AFC Ajax: 17.9%. In total, without even considering games in reserve teams playing in separate leagues such as in the English case, 7.7% of the minutes played by FIFA 2022 World Cup players before turning 23 were in second or third teams.

Figure 10: principal development clubs, official matches played until 23 years

		Games	Minutes	Players	Teams
1	 AFC Ajax (NED)	1'962	147'618	21	12
2	 Real Madrid (ESP)	1'420	89'435	21	9
3	 FC Barcelona (ESP)	1'123	74'703	19	12
4	 Atlético Madrid (ESP)	1'026	72'320	12	9
5	 AS Monaco (FRA)	1'019	72'354	16	8
6	 Borussia Dortmund (GER)	984	63'356	17	10
7	 Bayern München (GER)	976	63'385	12	7
8	 FC Basel (SUI)	909	65'452	11	3
9	 Olympique Marseille (FRA)	864	58'097	14	7
10	 Dinamo Zagreb (CRO)	846	62'692	15	3
11	 SL Benfica (POR)	795	56'767	15	7
12	 Borussia M'gladbach (GER)	789	60'192	12	8
13	 Paris St-Germain (FRA)	785	58'128	13	8
14	 Valencia CF (ESP)	779	48'505	10	6
15	 Club Brugge (BEL)	755	53'721	15	11
16	 FC Porto (POR)	732	53'836	14	5
17	 RB Leipzig (GER)	725	54'820	9	7
18	 RSC Anderlecht (BEL)	712	54'781	8	3
19	 Al-Sadd SC (QAT)	702	48'808	11	1
20	 LOSC Lille (FRA)	668	41'197	9	7





















The map of the 763 clubs where FIFA 2022 World Cup players have played in senior competitions shows again the predominance of Europe. Indeed, the old continent is not only the one with the largest number of participating teams, but its clubs also develop many players for non-European associations, either by recruiting them at a young age from their country of origin, or by integrating into their youth academies the children of immigrants residing locally, subsequently selected by the country of one or both parents.

Figure 11: development clubs of 2022 FIFA men's World Cup players, official matches played until 23 years



In terms of leagues where FIFA 2022 World Cup participants played official matches until the age of 23, without thus considering minutes in national or international cups, the German Bundesliga is at the top of the list. No less than 99 footballers selected for the 2022 World Cup, representing 25 different national teams played Bundesliga matches at the beginning of their career. More World Cup participants played in the English Premier League up until their 23rd birthday (110), but for fewer minutes.

Figure 12: principal development leagues, official matches played until 23 years

			Games	Minutes	Players	Teams
1		Bundesliga (GER)	5'151	363'135	99	25
2		La Liga (ESP)	4'676	311'984	87	23
.		Premier League (ENG)	4'623	326'105	110	26
4		Ligue 1 (FRA)	4'451	318'666	92	21
5		Eredivisie (NED)	3'714	278'023	64	20
6		Pro League (BEL)	3'126	239'195	63	20
.		Championship (ENG/2)	2'914	217'492	67	19
.		Serie A (ITA)	2'674	179'305	63	19
.		Liga MX (MEX)	1'938	147'558	28	5
10		Superliga (DEN)	1'866	136'627	32	8
.		Primeira Liga (POR)	1'855	133'238	53	16
.		HNL (CRO)	1'711	132'501	25	5
.		Primera Federación (ESP/3)	1'648	123'192	52	17
.		MLS (USA)	1'619	119'027	34	9
15		Primera División (CRC)	1'572	110'920	24	1
.		Ekstraklasa (POL)	1'371	95'679	20	2
17		Ligue 2 (FRA/2)	1'340	98'814	36	9
.		Super League (SUI)	1'265	89'664	27	4
19		Liga Pro (ECU)	1'243	90'071	24	3
.		Primera División (ARG)	1'238	89'200	28	4

5. Conclusion

In November 2022, the 830 players of the 2022 FIFA men's World Cup were playing for 295 different clubs, with a maximum of 17 for FC Barcelona. This figure rises to 427 when considering training clubs, where the footballers selected played for at least three years between the seasons of their 15th and 21st birthdays, with a maximum of 11 for AFC Ajax. The level of concentration at employment level is much higher than that measured at training one, reflecting the tendency of dominant teams to bring together players trained by a larger number of clubs.

A greater concentration was also observed at the level of training regarding the half of the youngest footballers compared to the half of the oldest. This result reflects the tendency of the dominant teams to integrate the best national or even foreign talent into their training structures at an earlier stage. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Manchester City, a club that is very active in the international recruitment of young talents, trained footballers selected by five different national teams.

The circle of clubs involved in the career development of 2022 FIFA World Cup footballers is further expanded by considering all the teams where they played official matches in adult leagues until they turned 23: 763. Including the matches played for B-teams of clubs playing in the top division of their association, the percentage of minutes played until the age of 23 below the top domestic league level by the footballers selected is consequent: 26.4%.

This statistic shows the importance of different levels of teams and leagues in the development of footballers, even for players who have succeeded in their career to the point of playing in the most prestigious competition in existence, the FIFA World Cup. This result confirms the importance of taking care of all the sporting and economic levels of the soccer ecosystem to allow players, even the most talented ones, to develop their full potential.