

Global analysis of player loans

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1. Introduction

The temporary transfer of players is a practice much in vogue in professional football. It is used, notably, to allow the development of young players who do not yet have sufficient playing experience or a good enough sporting level to play in their owner club. But to what extent are young players concerned? And more generally, what is the percentage of players on loan? What are the differences according to leagues and positions played? Which clubs loan the most players?

The 83rd edition of the CIES Football Observatory Monthly Report answers these questions through the analysis of the characteristics of players present on the 1st March 2023 in the first team squads of 1,254 teams in 75 leagues from 57 associations worldwide. Out of the 33,482 footballers surveyed, 3,178 are to be found in a team that employs them on a loan basis, which accounts for a general average of 9.5%.

Figure 1: study sample

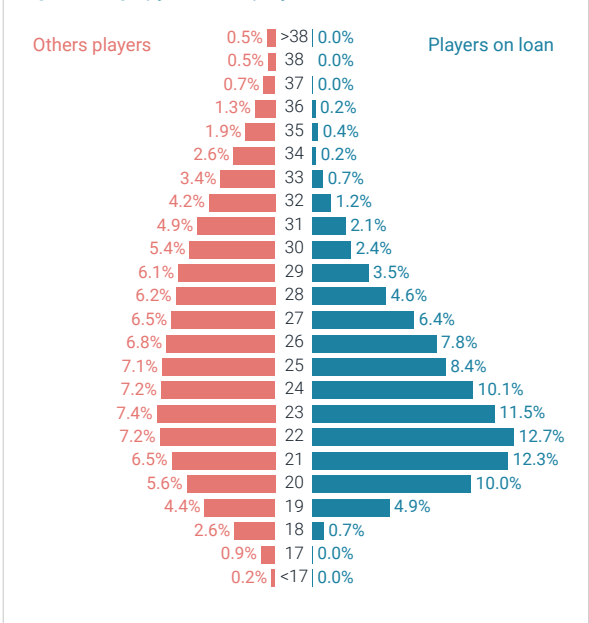
Number of associations	57 associations
Number of leagues	75 leagues
Number of clubs	1'254 clubs
Number of players	33'482 players
Number of players on loan	3'178 loaned
% of players on loan	9.5 %

2. Age of players on loan

Players on loan are on average younger than footballers belonging to employer teams: 24.41 years of age for the former as opposed to 26.54 for the latter. The most represented age group of players on loan is 22 years of age. Loans, however, by no means just involve footballers at the start of their career. Indeed, only 27.9% of the total number of players on loan are 21 years of age or under, while almost half (47.9%) are 24 or over.

The considerable percentage of relatively experienced players among those on loan indicates that this strategy is not uniquely used with the aim of developing the potential of young players. The recourse to loans satisfies several other objectives of clubs: making room in squads, relaunching unused players irrespective of their age, limiting the sporting and financial risks linked to permanent transfers, acquiring reinforcements without transfer indemnities by just paying the players' salary, and often even just a part of it, or none at all.

Figure 2: age pyramid of players on loan



3. Percentage of players on loan

Contrary to what one might have thought, the percentage of players on loan is higher for players aged between 22 and 25 (13.4%) than among footballers aged 21 or under (12.7%). After having signed their first professional contract and having become part of the first team squad of their owner club, many players do not find their place and are loaned out to other teams, which is often a prelude to a permanent departure.

The percentage of players on loan varies considerably according to league, which reflects different national traditions in the frequency of the recourse to this type of strategy. The greatest percentages were observed in the two highest levels of Italian competitions: the Serie A (19.0%) and the Serie B (22.8%). Indeed, loaning out players is a veritable institution in the Peninsula. The proportion of players on loan is also high in the Spanish second division, as well as in the third and fourth English divisions.

The presence at the top of the rankings of several lower level championships of associations with well-established leagues indicates the tendency of the most developed clubs to offer contracts to more players than they actually need, by relying on less competitive teams to nurture their development. This strategy is also widespread within clubs of the Argentinean top division, which is made up of a large number of participants (28 clubs).

Figure 3: percentage of players on loan, by age group

21 years and under	12.7%
22-25 years	13.4%
26-29 years	8.4%
30 years and over	2.9%

Figure 4: percentage of players on loan, by league

ITA/2	22.8%	NED/2	8.5%
ITA	19.0%	PAR	8.2%
ESP/2	19.0%	CRC	8.0%
ENG/4	17.8%	CHI	7.9%
ENG/3	17.3%	MEX	7.9%
TUR	17.1%	DEN	7.9%
SCO/2	17.0%	GER	7.7%
ARG	16.9%	UAE	7.2%
ENG/2	16.4%	COL	6.9%
BRA/2	15.5%	AZE	6.6%
POR	15.4%	GRE	6.6%
CZE	14.8%	HUN	6.6%
TUR/2	13.9%	BUL	6.6%
NED	13.7%	POL	6.5%
SCO	13.3%	GER/3	6.3%
ISR	13.0%	KSA	6.2%
BEL	12.9%	SRB	5.9%
BRA	12.7%	ENG	5.9%
EGY	11.8%	ECU	5.3%
GER/2	11.4%	PER	5.2%
POR/2	11.3%	ROM	5.1%
ESP	11.2%	MAR	4.7%
FRA	11.2%	FIN	4.2%
FRA/2	11.0%	KAZ	3.8%
CRO	10.7%	SWE	3.6%
POL/2	10.6%	RSA	3.4%
SUI/2	10.6%	AUS	2.9%
JPN/2	10.6%	JPN	2.9%
ARG/2	10.6%	SWE/2	2.6%
SVK	10.5%	USA	2.4%
AUT	10.3%	VEN	1.8%
CYP	10.2%	NOR	1.8%
SUI	10.1%	KOR	1.7%
SVN	9.6%	BLR	1.6%
THA	9.6%	QAT	1.2%
UKR	9.1%	BOL	0.9%
URU	9.0%	CHN	0.4%
RUS	8.7%		

The record high in the percentage of players on loan was measured for Buenos Aires's Barracas Central (50.0%). The proportion measured for the current leaders of the Italian Serie B, Frosinone, is also very high (48,3%). The central Italian team has temporarily taken on numerous players belonging to teams from the Serie A. This strategy has both advantages, such as having players at its disposal that would otherwise be inaccessible, and disadvantages, such as the constant rotation of squads.

The players loaned out most are forwards. On the 1st March, 13.1% of the latter were playing in their team on a temporary basis. Goalkeepers are at the other end of the scale (6.2%). These differences reflect those observed at age level for the sample studied, forwards being the youngest players in squads (26,0 years of age on average), while goalkeepers the oldest (27,1 years of age).

Figure 5: percentage of players on loan, by club

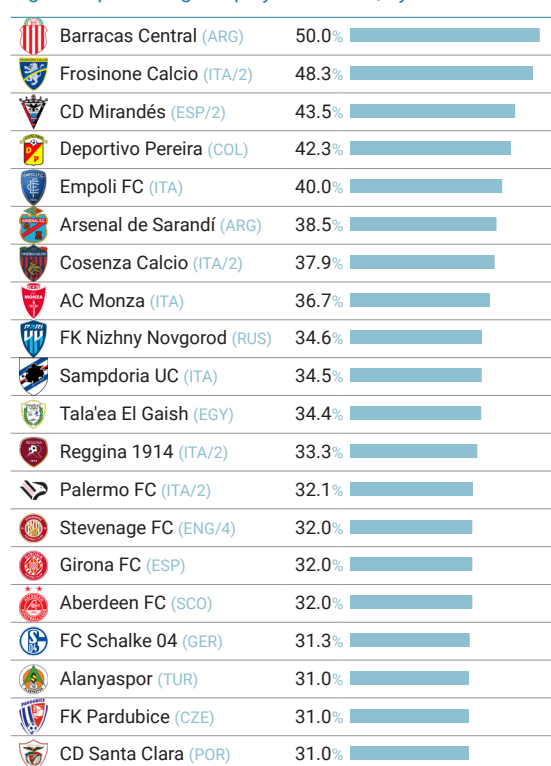
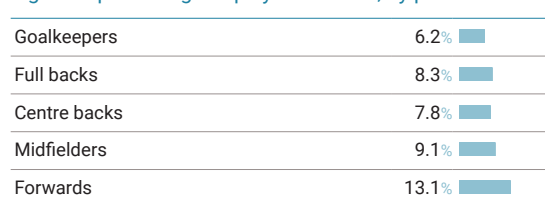


Figure 6: percentage of players on loan, by position



4. Loaning clubs

Numerous big-5 league teams figure among the clubs loaning out the most players present on the 1st March in the 75 leagues analysed. Arsenal tops the list with 25 footballers loaned out, followed by the Italians of Atalanta. Five English clubs are in the top ten places, which reflects the economic strength of the Premier League. Indeed, the English teams have sufficient means at their disposal to take on numerous talents, who are then often loaned out.

The recent limits placed on international loans for players over 21 years of age by the FIFA specifically target the wealthiest clubs and aim at preventing them from hoarding too many players. While the limits introduced can effectively function as a deterrent, many of the clubs who are particularly active in loaning out players now turn towards a strategy of multi-ownership. The latter consists of taking over other clubs, usually abroad, where they can place footballers without having to loan them out.

Figure 7: principle owner clubs of players on loan, 75 leagues

	Arsenal FC (ENG)	25 players	<div></div>
	Atalanta BC (ITA)	24 players	<div></div>
	CA Talleres (ARG)	21 players	<div></div>
	Brighton & Hove (ENG)	21 players	<div></div>
	Internazionale (ITA)	21 players	<div></div>
	Manchester City (ENG)	20 players	<div></div>
	Juventus FC (ITA)	20 players	<div></div>
	Dynamo Kyiv (UKR)	20 players	<div></div>
	Chelsea FC (ENG)	19 players	<div></div>
	Wolverhampton FC (ENG)	18 players	<div></div>
	Sparta Praha (CZE)	16 players	<div></div>
	Fulham FC (ENG)	16 players	<div></div>
	Olympiacos FC (GRE)	16 players	<div></div>
	Dinamo Zagreb (CRO)	15 players	<div></div>
	Slavia Praha (CZE)	15 players	<div></div>
	Leeds United (ENG)	15 players	<div></div>
	Manchester United (ENG)	15 players	<div></div>
	Atlético Madrid (ESP)	15 players	<div></div>
	Hellas Verona (ITA)	15 players	<div></div>
	Gaziantep FK (TUR)	15 players	<div></div>
	Al-Ahly SC (EGY)	14 players	<div></div>
	Aston Villa (ENG)	14 players	<div></div>
	Maccabi Tel Aviv (ISR)	14 players	<div></div>
	Sampdoria UC (ITA)	14 players	<div></div>
	Club Guaraní (PAR)	14 players	<div></div>
	Crvena Zvezda (SRB)	14 players	<div></div>

A significant statistical correlation exists between the clubs' sporting level (measured according to the CIES Football Observatory's coefficient) and the number of players they loan out. The more competitive the club, the more it tends to loan out players to other teams. The competitiveness of clubs itself being correlated to economic strength, this finding shows the tendency of the wealthier clubs to control more players than they can include in their squads. The strategy of multi-ownership mentioned above only reinforces this process despite FI-FA's reglementary efforts.

In 63.5% of cases, the clubs where players are loaned have a lower sporting level to the owner clubs. In 20.9% of instances, the level is equivalent, while players on loan to more competitive teams only account for 15.5% of total loans. This result confirms that loans principally serve the interests of the wealthiest clubs, by allowing them to control the career of more players than they could have in their squad and develop.

Figure 8: clubs' sporting level and average number of players loaned out











Level	Clubs	Loaned per club
Level 1 [≥ 1.00]	42 clubs	9.83 players 
Level 2 [0.75-1.00]	114 clubs	6.68 players 
Level 3 [0.50-0.75]	356 clubs	2.76 players 
Level 4 [0.25-0.50]	615 clubs	1.21 players 
Level 5 [< 0.25]	130 clubs	0.54 players 

Figure 9: sporting gap between owner club and club of loan

To much lower sporting level	17.1%	
To lower sporting level	46.4%	
To equivalent sporting level	20.9%	
To higher sporting level	14.1%	
To much higher sporting level	1.4%	

5. Conclusion

Around one-tenth of players active in clubs of the 75 leagues worldwide surveyed are on loan (9.5%). This percentage is above average for forwards (13.1%), as well as in the case of the Italian Serie A (19.0%) and Serie B (22.8%) teams. In the Peninsula, the recourse to loans, sometimes with purchase obligations subject to team results or player performances, is the most widespread in the world.

Players on loan are, on average, younger than the footballers belonging to employer clubs: 24.41 years of age for the former as opposed to 26.54 for the latter. However, loans do not just involve players at the start of their career. Indeed, only 27.9% of the total number of footballers on loan are 21 years of age or younger, while almost half (47.9%) are 24 years of age or older.

The loan strategy is thus not only used by clubs with the objective of allowing young players to develop their potential, but also contains several others: making room in squads, relaunching players who are already relatively experienced, limiting the sporting and economic risks associated with permanent transfer, signing reinforcements with no transfer fees, by paying just the player's salary, sometimes just a part of it, or none at all.

Overall, 63.5% of the footballers on loan play for a club whose sporting level is lower than that of their owner team. The more competitive a club, the more it tends to loan players to other teams. There are numerous big-5 league clubs among those who loan out the most players. With 25 players on loan to teams in the 75 leagues surveyed, Arsenal is at the top of the rankings. Five English clubs are in the top ten places, which shows the economic clout of the Premier League.

The recent FIFA's limitations on the possibility to loan abroad players over 21 years of age aims specifically to stop the wealthiest clubs from signing an excessive number of footballers within the framework of a hoarding tactics. Though this rule can serve as a deterrent, many wealthy clubs have recourse to a multi-ownership strategy, whereby they take over other clubs, usually abroad, where they can place players without having to loan them out.