

# Global study of football expatriates (2017-2023)

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## 1. Introduction

The 85th Monthly Report of the CIES Football Observatory studies the presence of expatriate footballers in 2,200 clubs participating in 135 leagues around the world: 83 from UEFA member associations and 52 from associations belonging to other confederations. In total, we analysed the origin of 62,610 players who were in the first team squad of their employer club on May 1st, including 14,405 expatriates.

Expatriates are defined as footballers playing outside the association where they grew up, which they left after being recruited by a foreign club. This definition makes it possible to isolate sports migration from others, thus highlighting the flows directly linked to the practice of football. Carried out every year since 2017 on the same date and according to the same criteria, the study presents the trends observed both spatially and temporally.

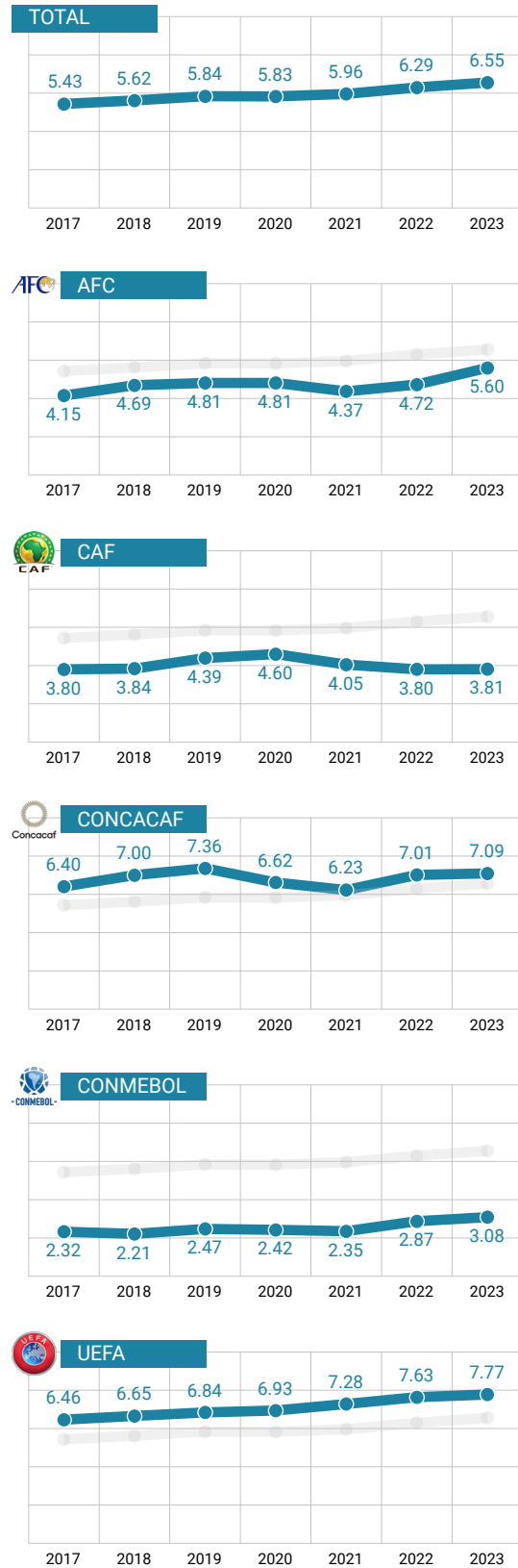
Figure 1: study sample (2023)

|   |          | Leagues | Clubs    | Players |
|---|----------|---------|----------|---------|
|    | AFC      | 20      | 281      | 8,223   |
|    | CAF      | 4       | 64       | 2,019   |
|    | CONCACAF | 10      | 157      | 4,444   |
|    | CONMEBOL | 18      | 368      | 10,562  |
|    | UEFA     | 83      | 1,330    | 37,362  |
|   | Total    | 135     | 2,200    | 62610   |
|   |          | Expats  | Per club | %       |
|   | AFC      | 1,573   | 5.6      | 19.1    |
|  | CAF      | 244     | 3.81     | 12.1    |
|  | CONCACAF | 1,113   | 7.09     | 25.0    |
|  | CONMEBOL | 1,135   | 3.08     | 10.7    |
|  | UEFA     | 10,340  | 7.77     | 27.7    |
|   | Total    | 14,405  | 6.55     | 23.0    |

## 2. Evolution and characteristics

The number of expatriate footballers has increased significantly since the first census in 2017. On average, a club currently employs 6.5 expatriates, up from 5.4 in 2017. This is an increase of around 20%. New records were set in 2023 in all confederations except CAF (only 4 leagues covered), with a maximum value of 7.8 expatriates per club at UEFA level and a minimum of 3.1 in the leagues belonging to CONMEBOL. In the last year, the increase has been particularly significant in Asia.

Figure 2: number of expatriates per club (since 2017)



Expatriates represent the highest proportion of players among forwards (30.2%), with a rate of over 40% among those aged between 27 and 30. In contrast, the expatriate presence is lowest among goalkeepers (14.9%) and especially among those under 23 years of age (6.4%). By age group, the highest proportion of expatriates was among footballers aged between 27 and 30 (30.2%), while the lowest percentage was recorded among under 23-year-old players (13.8%).

The analysis of the distribution of the 14,405 expatriates registered by age and position shows that the largest number play as midfielders (33.9% of all expatriates) and are between 23 and 26 years old (31.8% of the total). Crossing age and position, the highest number of expatriates was recorded for midfielders aged between 23 and 26 years (10.7% of the total), followed by defenders and forwards of the same age group (both 9.5%).

**Figure 3 : % of expatriates in squads per age and position (2023)**

|             | < 23 yrs | 23-26 | 27-30 | > 30 yrs | Total |
|-------------|----------|-------|-------|----------|-------|
| Goalkeepers | 6.4%     | 17.4% | 20.2% | 21.8%    | 14.9% |
| Defenders   | 13.8%    | 25.8% | 28.5% | 25.5%    | 22.6% |
| Midfielders | 13.0%    | 25.3% | 28.3% | 27.6%    | 21.5% |
| Forwards    | 18.6%    | 36.0% | 40.7% | 35.1%    | 30.2% |
| Total       | 13.8%    | 27.1% | 30.2% | 27.6%    | 23.0% |

**Figure 4: distribution of expatriates per age and position (2023)**

|             | < 23 yrs | 23-26 | 27-30 | > 30 yrs | Total  |
|-------------|----------|-------|-------|----------|--------|
| Goalkeepers | 1.1%     | 2.0%  | 1.8%  | 2.2%     | 7.1%   |
| Defenders   | 5.8%     | 9.5%  | 8.5%  | 6.0%     | 29.9%  |
| Midfielders | 7.9%     | 10.7% | 9.0%  | 6.3%     | 33.9%  |
| Forwards    | 6.7%     | 9.5%  | 7.6%  | 5.2%     | 29.1%  |
| Total       | 21.5%    | 31.8% | 26.9% | 19.8%    | 100.0% |

### 3. Origins

In terms of origin, Brazil remains the association with the most players abroad: 1,289 (+5.6% compared to 2022). For the first time, the number of French expatriates is in the thousands (1,033, also +5.6%). An even more marked increase was recorded for the third most represented nation: the new world champions Argentina (905, +10.8%). Two European countries complete the top 5: England (535, +1.7%) and Spain (458, +13.1%).

Along with Brazil and Argentina, two other non-European associations are among the top ten exporting countries: Colombia (sixth, 448 expatriates) and Nigeria (ninth, 385 expatriates). Three other African nations are in the top 20: Ghana (14th), Ivory Coast (17th) and Senegal (19th). Japan is the leading Asian exporter (22nd with 169 expatriates) and the United States leads in Central and North America (23rd, 162 expatriates).

Since 2017, the largest increase in the number of expatriates has been measured for France: +265 players, which corresponds to an increase of more than one third. In percentage terms, the increase was even more spectacular for the second highest association: Colombia (+147 expatriates, +49%). Of the 183 associations represented in 2023, only 59 have seen a decrease since 2017, with a maximum for Serbia (-59 expatriates), followed by Romania (-39) and Cameroon (-30).

Figure 5: main expatriate origins (2023)

|    |  |             | Number of expats | Since 2022 (%) |
|----|--|-------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1  |  | Brazil      | 1,289            | +5.6% ▲        |
| 2  |  | France      | 1,033            | +5.6% ▲        |
| 3  |  | Argentina   | 905              | +10.8% ▲       |
| 4  |  | England     | 535              | +1.7% ▲        |
| 5  |  | Spain       | 458              | +13.1% ▲       |
| 6  |  | Colombia    | 448              | +5.2% ▲        |
| 7  |  | Germany     | 446              | +1.4% ▲        |
| 8  |  | Croatia     | 407              | +1.5% ▲        |
| 9  |  | Nigeria     | 385              | +13.6% ▲       |
| 10 |  | Serbia      | 380              | 0.0% =         |
| 11 |  | Netherlands | 346              | -5.5% ▼        |
| 12 |  | Portugal    | 339              | +12.6% ▲       |
| 13 |  | Uruguay     | 338              | 0.0% =         |
| 14 |  | Ghana       | 318              | +8.2% ▲        |
| 15 |  | Belgium     | 277              | +3.0% ▲        |
| 16 |  | Sweden      | 239              | +16.6% ▲       |
| 17 |  | Ivory Coast | 227              | +6.6% ▲        |
| 18 |  | Denmark     | 225              | +4.7% ▲        |
| 19 |  | Senegal     | 211              | +9.9% ▲        |
| 20 |  | Ukraine     | 206              | +11.4% ▲       |

Figure 6: main increases per origin (2017-2023)

|    |  |               | Number of expats | Since 2017 (%) |
|----|--|---------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1  |  | France        | +265             | +34.5% ■       |
| 2  |  | Colombia      | +147             | +48.8% ■       |
| 3  |  | Argentina     | +136             | +17.7% ■       |
| 4  |  | Netherlands   | +117             | +51.1% ■       |
| .  |  | England       | +117             | +28.0% ■       |
| 6  |  | Germany       | +112             | +33.5% ■       |
| .  |  | Brazil        | +112             | +9.5% ■        |
| 8  |  | Nigeria       | +105             | +37.5% ■       |
| 9  |  | Portugal      | +103             | +43.6% ■       |
| 10 |  | Spain         | +100             | +27.9% ■       |
| 11 |  | Ghana         | +92              | +40.7% ■       |
| 12 |  | Croatia       | +88              | +27.6% ■       |
| 13 |  | Denmark       | +75              | +50.0% ■       |
| .  |  | Sweden        | +75              | +45.7% ■       |
| 15 |  | Côte d'Ivoire | +65              | +40.1% ■       |
| 16 |  | Belgium       | +64              | +30.0% ■       |
| 17 |  | Japan         | +63              | +59.4% ■       |
| 18 |  | Norway        | +50              | +53.8% ■       |
| .  |  | Austria       | +50              | +44.6% ■       |
| 20 |  | Venezuela     | +46              | +69.7% ■       |

### 4. The Brazilians

With 1,289 players, the number of Brazilian expatriates exceeded for the first time the previous record value registered in 2019. Portugal remains the preferred destination (213 players), followed by four non-European countries: Japan, the United Arab Emirates, South Korea and the United States. Compared to other expatriates, Brazilians playing abroad are more likely to play as forwards and are concentrated in the older age groups.

Figure 7: evolution of Brazilian expatriates (2017-2023)

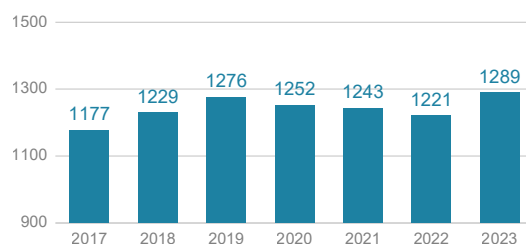


Figure 8: main destinations of Brazilians (2023)

|    |                      | Number of expats |  |
|----|----------------------|------------------|--|
| 1  | Portugal             | 213              |  |
| 2  | Japan                | 79               |  |
| 3  | United Arab Emirates | 49               |  |
| 4  | Korea Republic       | 44               |  |
| .  | USA                  | 44               |  |
| .  | Spain                | 44               |  |
| 7  | England              | 40               |  |
| .  | Italy                | 40               |  |
| 9  | Bulgaria             | 39               |  |
| 10 | Thailand             | 34               |  |

Figure 9 : distribution of Brazilian expatriates by age and position (2023)

|             | < 23 yrs | 23-26   | 27-30   | > 30 yrs | Total   |
|-------------|----------|---------|---------|----------|---------|
| Goalkeepers | -0.4% ○  | -0.7% ○ | -0.3% ○ | -0.3% ○  | -1.6% ○ |
| Defenders   | -1.1% ○  | -0.5% ○ | +1.5% ○ | +1.1% ○  | +1.0% ○ |
| Midfielders | -4.8% ●  | -1.9% ● | +0.1% ○ | -0.4% ○  | -7.0% ● |
| Forwards    | -1.6% ○  | +3.2% ● | +2.4% ● | +3.6% ●  | +7.6% ● |
| Total       | -8.0% ●  | +0.1% ○ | +3.8% ● | +4.1% ●  |         |

## 5. The French

The number of French players abroad increased for the third consecutive year to exceed 1,000 for the first time: 1,033. The largest contingent is in the Luxembourg top flight, and no extra-European country is among the top ten destinations for French expatriates. The latter are mainly concentrated among defenders, while they are under-represented among goalkeepers. Their age distribution is similar to that of expatriates of all origins.

Figure 10: evolution of French expatriates (2017-2023)

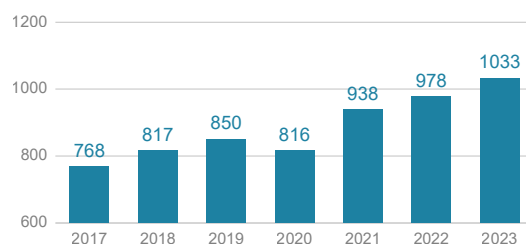


Figure 11: main destinations of French (2023)

|    |             | Number of expats |                                  |
|----|-------------|------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1  | Luxembourg  | 124              | <div style="width: 100%;"></div> |
| 2  | Italy       | 88               | <div style="width: 71%;"></div>  |
| 3  | England     | 76               | <div style="width: 61%;"></div>  |
| 4  | Belgium     | 70               | <div style="width: 56%;"></div>  |
| 5  | Spain       | 63               | <div style="width: 51%;"></div>  |
| 6  | Turkey      | 60               | <div style="width: 48%;"></div>  |
| 7  | Germany     | 53               | <div style="width: 42%;"></div>  |
| 8  | Switzerland | 52               | <div style="width: 41%;"></div>  |
| 9  | Romania     | 40               | <div style="width: 31%;"></div>  |
| 10 | Portugal    | 32               | <div style="width: 25%;"></div>  |

Figure 12: distribution of French expatriates by age and position (2023)

|             | < 23 yrs | 23-26 | 27-30 | > 30 yrs | Total |
|-------------|----------|-------|-------|----------|-------|
| Goalkeepers | -0.9%    | -1.1% | -0.2% | -1.0%    | -3.1% |
| Defenders   | +0.7%    | +1.7% | 0.0%  | +1.4%    | +3.9% |
| Midfielders | -0.6%    | +0.1% | +0.5% | +0.6%    | +0.6% |
| Forwards    | -1.2%    | +0.1% | 0.0%  | -0.2%    | -1.3% |
| Total       | -2.0%    | +0.8% | +0.4% | +0.8%    |       |

## 6. The Argentinesans

The number of Argentinian expatriates also reached a new record in 2023: 905. The main destination is by far Chile, a country that hosts almost twice as many players from Argentina as the second most popular destination, Spain: 138 players as opposed to 70. A comparison of the distribution of Argentina’s expatriates by age and position compared to expatriates of all origins shows that the former are older, with a strong over-representation of those in their 30s.

Figure 13: evolution of Argentinian expatriates (2017-2023)

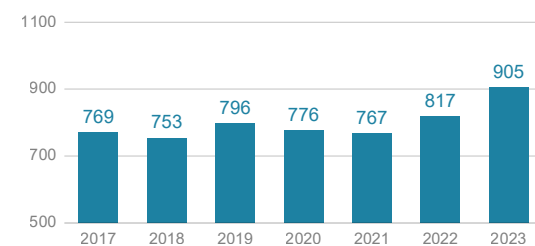


Figure 14: main destinations of Argentinians (2023)

|    |          | Number of expats |  |
|----|----------|------------------|--|
| 1  | Chile    | 138              | <div style="width: 138px; height: 10px; background-color: #00728f;"></div> |
| 2  | Spain    | 70               | <div style="width: 70px; height: 10px; background-color: #00728f;"></div>  |
| 3  | Peru     | 58               | <div style="width: 58px; height: 10px; background-color: #00728f;"></div>  |
| 4  | Mexico   | 56               | <div style="width: 56px; height: 10px; background-color: #00728f;"></div>  |
| 5  | Ecuador  | 54               | <div style="width: 54px; height: 10px; background-color: #00728f;"></div>  |
| 6  | Italy    | 53               | <div style="width: 53px; height: 10px; background-color: #00728f;"></div>  |
| 7  | Bolivia  | 45               | <div style="width: 45px; height: 10px; background-color: #00728f;"></div>  |
| 8  | USA      | 44               | <div style="width: 44px; height: 10px; background-color: #00728f;"></div>  |
| 9  | Uruguay  | 39               | <div style="width: 39px; height: 10px; background-color: #00728f;"></div>  |
| 10 | Paraguay | 38               | <div style="width: 38px; height: 10px; background-color: #00728f;"></div>  |

Figure 15: distribution of Argentinian expatriates by age and position (2023)

|             | < 23 yrs | 23-26   | 27-30   | > 30 yrs | Total   |
|-------------|----------|---------|---------|----------|---------|
| Goalkeepers | -0.9% ○  | -0.7% ○ | -0.4% ○ | +1.1% ○  | -0.8% ○ |
| Defenders   | -3.7% ●  | -1.4% ○ | -0.7% ○ | +2.8% ●  | -3.0% ● |
| Midfielders | -2.6% ●  | -2.3% ● | +2.4% ● | +5.5% ●  | +3.0% ● |
| Forwards    | -4.2% ●  | -2.4% ● | +1.6% ○ | +5.8% ●  | +0.8% ○ |
| Total       | -11.3% ● | -6.8% ● | +2.9% ● | +15.2% ● |         |

## 7. Conclusion

Year after year, professional football generates a greater flow of international players. The presence in clubs of footballers playing outside the association where they grew up, has never been as high as it is now. Since 2017, the number of expatriates per team has increased by around 20% and they now account for almost a quarter of active players in the 135 leagues surveyed.

Brazil remains the main export country (1,289 expatriates), ahead of the last two world champions: France (1,033) and Argentina (905). These three countries account for 22.4% of the total number of expatriates, reflecting their global leadership in the development of top-level footballers. In absolute terms, the largest increase since 2017 was recorded for French expats (+265), ahead of Colombians (+147) and Argentinians (+136).

The upward trend in the number of expatriate footballers is likely to continue over the next few years, both in Europe and beyond. Outside Europe, the growth is driven in particular by the economic development of the MLS in the United States and Canada, as well as by the weakening of foreign players' quotas in Asia and the significant investments made in particular by Saudi Arabia, which has replaced China as the new bridgehead in the continent.