

Demo-economic analysis of player transfers (2014-2023)

Drs Raffaele Poli, Loïc Ravenel and Roger Besson

1. Introduction

This Monthly Report analyses the financial flows of football transfers on a global scale during the decade between 2014 and 2023. It presents the evolution of transfer fees incurred by clubs, their breakdown according to the age and position of the players concerned or the geographical area of recruiting teams, as well as the economic balance sheets of transfer operations, at both league and club level.

The figures published include fixed transfer fees, any add-ons regardless of whether they have actually been paid, as well as sums paid in the context of paying loans. Amounts negotiated for loans with an obligation to buy are included in the breakdown for the year of the transfer. Within the limits of available information, the data on beneficiaries considers sell-on fees negotiated by previous clubs.

2. Investments worldwide

The year 2023 was a record-breaking one. For the first time in history, worldwide investment in transfer indemnities exceeded the €10 billion mark. While the transfer period is not yet over in all associations, spending has already reached €12.4 billion, a sum that is 33% higher than that recorded in 2022 (+35% not including add-ons) and 24% higher than the previous record set in 2019 (+20% without add-ons).

Almost three-quarters of the investments were for transfers between clubs in different associations. This rate was only around two-thirds in the period between 2014 and 2022, reflecting a dual trend: an increase in the relative share of international transfers among paying fee transactions (around 63% in 2023 compared with 58% between 2014 and 2022) and an increase in the gap between the median level of indemnities (ratio of 1.52 between international and domestic transfers in 2023 versus 1.33 during the 2014-2022 period).

In a context short on transparency, these figures represent estimates that are as close as possible to reality. They are based on official data published by FIFA TMS for international transfers and the CIES Football Observatory's own research. The sums of paid transfers for which no figures have been published have been extrapolated using a property statistical model estimating the value of professional football players.

This chapter includes a correction that has been applied to the amounts for national transfers on the basis of an annual ratio calculated by comparing the FIFA TMS figures with those collected by the CIES Football Observatory on an international scale (on average 1.08 over the entire period, with a reduction in the differences over the years). For 2023, the correction is based on the ratio measured in 2022, i.e. 1.06.

Figure 1: transfer indemnities incurred by clubs, with add-ons (2014-2023), € billion

	Internationals	Nationals	Total
2014	2.94	1.55	4.49
2015	3.71	2.16	5.86
2016	4.25	2.57	6.82
2017	5.51	3.53	9.04
2018	5.61	2.69	8.30
2019	6.46	3.51	9.98
2020	5.02	2.47	7.49
2021	4.11	1.85	5.95
2022	6.20	3.12	9.32
2023	8.95	3.47	12.42

The hierarchy of transfer fees by national associations shows the key role played by England in the global market for footballers. Over the last decade, English clubs have committed no less than €25.36 billion: 32% of global investment and 2.3 times more than teams from the second most active country, Italy. The latter is the only association in the top ten whose clubs have invested almost as much nationally as internationally.

Despite the sharp fall in investments from 2018 and especially since 2020, China remains the non-European association whose clubs have invested the most on transfer indemnities over the last decade, ahead of Saudi Arabia, a country that has seen the opposite trend to China, Mexico, where the proportion of sums invested nationally is also considerable, Brazil and the United States, where football is constantly growing.

Figure 2: transfer indemnities incurred by clubs, per association (2014-2023), € billion

			% national
	England	25.36	37.3%
	Italy	11.26	49.3%
	Spain	8.67	29.4%
	Germany	7.59	35.1%
	France	7.31	31.6%
	China PR	2.24	28.9%
	Portugal	1.71	21.4%
	Saudi Arabia	1.58	5.7%
	Russia	1.57	25.8%
	The Netherlands	1.37	21.6%
	Belgium	1.34	21.8%
	Mexico	1.33	40.6%
	Turkey	1.24	19.8%
	Brazil	1.19	35.9%
	USA	0.94	5.9%
	Argentina	0.68	48.3%
	Qatar	0.41	3.7%
	Wales	0.40	0.1%
	Greece	0.34	8.6%
	United Arab Emirates	0.33	9.1%

English clubs also invested by far the most on the transfer market in 2023: 32% of the total and 3.5 times more than teams from the second most active association, France. In absolute terms, two countries stand out in terms of the increase in spending between 2022 and 2023: England (+€1,314 million) and Saudi Arabia (+€902 million). In relative terms, however, Saudi Arabia stands out clearly, reflecting the plan to make the Saudi Pro League one of the most competitive leagues in the world.

Figure 3: transfer indemnities incurred by clubs, per association (2023), € Million

	2023	Since 2022	
England	4,693	+1,314	+39%
France	1,338	+486	+57%
Italy	1,061	-129	-11%
Germany	1,029	+247	+32%
Saudi Arabia	970	+902	+1,310%
Spain	724	-101	-12%
The Netherlands	328	+88	+37%
Portugal	267	+27	+11%
Brazil	226	+60	+36%
Turkey	223	+65	+41%
USA	194	+0	+0%
Mexico	196	+50	+35%
Belgium	186	+3	+1%
Russia	134	-58	-30%
Qatar	130	+121	+1,232%
Argentina	117	+35	+43%
Denmark	71	+12	+20%
Scotland	60	-1	-2%
Switzerland	59	+23	+63%
Austria	57	-4	-6%

3. Breakdown of investments

Clubs are increasingly prone to spend transfer fees on young players. The proportion of money invested in footballers aged 21 or under has risen from 23.6% in the period between 2014 and the last transfer window before the pandemic to 26.9% after the health crisis, with a peak of 29.6% in 2023. The percentage of investment for players aged between 22 and 25 has also increased (+3.3%), while that for footballers aged between 26 and 29 has fallen sharply (-7.0%).

The analysis by position shows that forwards are still the players for whom clubs invest the most. However, a fall in the relative share of sums committed for footballers in this position was observed after the health crisis (-3.7%), to the benefit of defenders (+1.2% for centre-backs and +0.3% for full-backs) and midfielders (+2.1%). This finding shows a greater inclusion of all positions in the trading of players.

The study of the evolution of the sums invested according to the geographical zone of recruiting clubs reveals that the health crisis went hand in hand with the reinforcement of the domination of English Premier League clubs: from 25.3% of global spending until the pandemic to 34.2% afterwards. Most of this increase has come at the expense of the other leagues in Europe's big five (-9.7%).

Figure 4: transfer indemnities incurred by club, per age range (2014-winter 2020 vs summer 2020-2023)

	[2014 - Winter 2020]	[Summer 2020 - 2023]	Evolution
21 years or less	23.6%	26.9%	+3.3%
22-25 years	43.6%	46.9%	+3.3%
26-29 years	27.4%	20.4%	-7.0%
30 year or more	5.4%	5.8%	+0.4%

Figure 5: transfer indemnities incurred by club, per position (2014-winter 2020 vs summer 2020-2023)

	[2014 - Winter 2020]	[Summer 2020 - 2023]	Evolution
Goalkeepers	3.5%	3.6%	+0.1%
Centre backs	14.3%	15.5%	+1.2%
Full backs	9.9%	10.2%	+0.3%
Midfielders	19.0%	21.1%	+2.1%
Forwards	53.3%	49.6%	-3.7%

Figure 6: transfer indemnities incurred by club, per zone (2014-winter 2020 vs summer 2020-2023)

	[2014 - Winter 2020]	[Summer 2020 - 2023]	Evolution
Premier League	25.3%	34.2%	+8.9%
Other big-5 leagues	45.9%	36.2%	-9.7%
Other European leagues	16.6%	18.6%	+2.0%
Outside Europe	12.2%	11.0%	-1.2%

4. Net transfer spending per league

The analysis of the net spending by league for transfers carried out over the last decade once again reveals the importance of the English top flight in the global football market. Premier League clubs have the most negative balance sheets, with investments in excess of €20 billion, only half of which is offset by revenues, resulting in a net deficit of more than €10 billion. This is a negative balance that is out of all proportion to that measured for any other league.

In contrast to the English Premier League, the Portuguese Primeira Liga has the best net balance on transfer deals concluded over the last decade: +€2.2 billion. Although this balance needs to be put into perspective, given that commissions paid to agents are not included in the calculations, it does reflect the ability of teams in Portugal to generate transfer revenues. The Brazilian Serie A is the second league whose clubs have made the highest net transfer profit over the last ten years, just ahead of the Dutch Eredivisie.

England's second tier heads the rankings in terms of balance sheets for 2023 transfers only, with a profit of +€348 million. This balance is due in particular to high-paying transfers of players from clubs recently relegated from the Premier League. The Championship is ahead of Portugal's top flight (+298M) and Italy's Serie A (+€227M), where clubs are increasingly dependent on transfer revenues. At the other end of the scale is the Premier League (-€2.20 billion), ahead of Saudi Arabia (-€861 million).

Figure 7: most negative net transfer spending, per league (2014-2023), € billion

	Investment	Receipt	Balance
Premier League (ENG)	21.48	10.37	-11.11
Super League (CHN)	1.93	0.60	-1.33
Saudi Pro League (KSA)	1.45	0.13	-1.32
Serie A (ITA)	9.95	8.83	-1.12
LaLiga (ESP)	7.84	6.92	-0.92
Bundesliga (GER)	6.66	6.12	-0.54
MLS (USA)	0.95	0.56	-0.39
Qatar Stars League (QAT)	0.37	0.05	-0.32
Premier League (RUS)	1.44	1.14	-0.30
Liga MX (MEX)	1.23	0.92	-0.31

Figure 8: most positive net transfer spending, per league (2014-2023), € billion

	Investment	Receipt	Balance
Primeira Liga (POR)	1.58	3.81	+2.23
Brasileirão (BRA)	1.08	2.61	+1.53
Eredivisie (NED)	1.26	2.67	+1.41
Championship (ENG/2)	2.33	3.53	+1.20
Primera División (ARG)	0.63	1.75	+1.12
Pro League (BEL)	1.20	2.01	+0.81
Ligue 2 (FRA/2)	0.18	0.89	+0.71
Bundesliga (AUT)	0.27	0.85	+0.58
Prva HNL (CRO)	0.12	0.64	+0.52
LaLiga 2 (ESP/2)	0.20	0.70	+0.50

Figure 9: most positive net transfer spending, per league (2023), € Million

	Investment	Receipt	Balance
Championship (ENG/2)	296	644	+348
Primeira Liga (POR)	249	547	+298
Serie A (ITA)	934	1161	+227
Primera División (ARG)	108	328	+220
Bundesliga (GER)	941	1157	+216
Brasileirão (BRA)	211	424	+213
Eredivisie (NED)	305	516	+211
Pro League (BEL)	173	337	+164
Premier Liha (UKR)	19	163	+144
Superliga (DEN)	67	195	+128

5. Net transfer spending per club

With €2.64 billion invested over the last decade, including more than a billion since its takeover by an American consortium just before the 2022 summer transfer window, Chelsea FC is the club that has committed the most money in transfer fees. Despite having invested "only" €1.96 billion, Manchester United has by far the most negative balance (-€1.40 billion), ahead of Chelsea (-€1.03 billion) and Paris St-Germain (-€1.01 billion). For 2023 alone, the biggest deficits were made by Chelsea (-€557 million), Al-Hilal (-€341M) and Arsenal (-€217M).

Figure 10: most negative net transfer spending, per club (2014-2023), € Million

	Investment	Receipt	Balance
Manchester United (ENG)	1'959	563	-1'396
Chelsea FC (ENG)	2'637	1'604	-1'033
Paris St-Germain (FRA)	1'761	751	-1'010
Arsenal FC (ENG)	1'380	509	-871
Manchester City (ENG)	1'953	1'097	-856
Newcastle United (ENG)	1'016	345	-671
FC Barcelona (ESP)	1'779	1'116	-663
Tottenham Hotspur (ENG)	1'264	655	-609
Milan AC (ITA)	979	434	-545
West Ham United (ENG)	1'009	482	-527
Aston Villa (ENG)	865	383	-482
Liverpool FC (ENG)	1'355	894	-461
Juventus FC (ITA)	1'583	1'134	-449
Al-Hilal SFC (KSA)	456	20	-436
Everton FC (ENG)	1'028	636	-392
Crystal Palace (ENG)	519	143	-376
Bournemouth AFC (ENG)	575	231	-344
Bayern München (GER)	1'043	700	-343
Real Madrid (ESP)	1'279	954	-325
Nottingham Forest (ENG)	486	176	-310

Figure 11: most negative net transfer spending, per club (2023), € Million

	Investment	Receipt	Balance
Chelsea FC (ENG)	907	350	-557
Al-Hilal SFC (KSA)	363	1	-362
Arsenal FC (ENG)	315	98	-217
Bournemouth AFC (ENG)	219	3	-216
Paris St-Germain (FRA)	411	195	-216
Real Madrid (ESP)	231	17	-214
Newcastle United (ENG)	257	48	-209
Al-Ahli SFC (KSA)	202	0	-202
Liverpool FC (ENG)	238	67	-171
Al-Nassr FC (KSA)	164	0	-164
Manchester United (ENG)	228	78	-150
Tottenham Hotspur (ENG)	284	134	-150
Burnley FC (ENG)	143	1	-142
Nottingham Forest (ENG)	179	65	-114
Al-Ittihad Club (KSA)	76	1	-75
Aston Villa (ENG)	140	65	-75
Olympique Marseille (FRA)	122	56	-66
Crystal Palace (ENG)	65	1	-64
Leeds United (ENG)	103	47	-56
Milan AC (ITA)	137	82	-55

Three Portuguese clubs feature in the top six of teams with the highest net transfer profits over the last ten years: Benfica (clearly first, +€764 million), Sporting CP (fifth, +€376 M) and Porto (sixth, +€352 M), while Ajax, Monaco and RB Salzburg complete the top five. For 2023 only, the top three are Villarreal (+€129 million), Benfica (+€114 M) and Stade Rennais (+€103 M).

Figure 12: most positive net transfer spending, per club (2014-2023), € Million

	Investment	Receipt	Balance
SL Benfica (POR)	564	1,328	+764
AFC Ajax (NED)	593	1,027	+434
RB Salzburg (AUT)	202	623	+421
AS Monaco (FRA)	972	1,374	+402
Sporting CP (POR)	368	744	+376
FC Porto (POR)	433	785	+352
LOSC Lille (FRA)	375	724	+349
Olympique Lyonnais (FRA)	520	856	+336
PSV Eindhoven (NED)	236	499	+263
Dinamo Zagreb (CRO)	78	329	+251
Atalanta BC (ITA)	528	755	+227
SC Braga (POR)	96	318	+222
Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR)	149	357	+208
Udinese Calcio (ITA)	247	442	+195
AZ Alkmaar (NED)	84	274	+190
Athletico Paranaense (BRA)	37	221	+184
River Plate (ARG)	131	309	+178
RSC Anderlecht (BEL)	202	372	+170
São Paulo FC (BRA)	97	265	+168
Grêmio Porto Alegre (BRA)	47	212	+165

Figure 13: most positive net transfer spending, per club (2023), € Million

	Investment	Receipt	Balance
Villarreal CF (ESP)	16	145	+129
SL Benfica (POR)	106	220	+114
Stade Rennais (FRA)	68	171	+103
PSV Eindhoven (NED)	57	155	+98
Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR)	15	113	+98
AS Roma (ITA)	17	112	+95
Atalanta BC (ITA)	81	174	+93
Brighton & Hove (ENG)	128	217	+89
SE Palmeiras (BRA)	10	94	+84
Southampton FC (ENG)	103	184	+81
Olympique Lyonnais (FRA)	83	157	+74
Everton FC (ENG)	56	129	+73
Athletico Paranaense (BRA)	6	78	+72
Atlético Madrid (ESP)	18	88	+70
Eintracht Frankfurt (GER)	78	149	+71
Dinamo Zagreb (CRO)	9	72	+63
Borussia Dortmund (GER)	81	136	+55
RB Leipzig (GER)	154	207	+53
Sporting CP (POR)	71	121	+50
RB Salzburg (AUT)	39	89	+50

6. Conclusion

Following on from the increase recorded in 2022, after two years of consecutive decreases in the context of the health crisis, 2023 marked a new turning point in the money invested by clubs on the transfer market. Boosted in particular by the economic growth of the English Premier League and investment from American and Saudi funds, the transfer market reached historically high levels: €12.42 billion compared with €9.98 billion in the previous record year of 2019.

The trends observed in connection with the pandemic were confirmed and even reinforced in 2023, with relatively more money invested by Premier League clubs (34% of the total since summer 2020 compared with 25% previously) and on players aged 25 or under (74% compared with 67% previously). The latter trend reflects the fact that a growing number of clubs are incorporating the realisation of capital gains on transfers into their business model, including in previously dominant leagues such as the Spanish Liga and the Italian Serie A.

The football transfer market is becoming increasingly structured around a small number of "buying" clubs, led by the English Premier League, and a much larger number of "selling" ones. The latter are targeting their recruitment at up-and-coming players, who they are likely to quickly transfer if they perform well, in a highly speculative environment involving ever-increasing and intense player mobility on a global scale.