

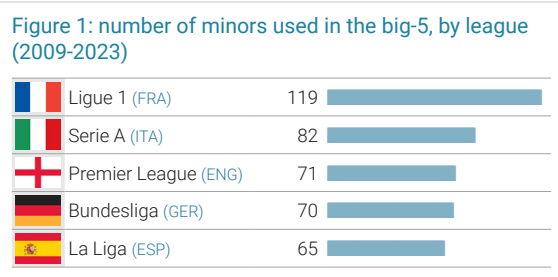
Younger than ever ? The use of minors in the European big-5 (2009-2023)

Drs Raffaele Poli, Loic Ravenel and Roger Besson

1. Introduction

The present report studies the fielding of minor footballers, under 18 years of age, in matches of the five major European leagues played over the 15-year-period between the 1st January 2009 until the 31st December 2023. The analysis covers the differences observed between leagues, the evolution over time, as well as the characteristics of the players concerned.

In total, no less than 402 footballers played before to turn 18 in big-5 league matches over the period analysed. Five footballers even played as minors in two leagues of the big-5. With 119 underage players fielded, the French Ligue 1 is the leader in this domain, which reflects both its status as a stepping stone for the other big-5 championships and the excellence of the French training system.



2. Evolution

From a historical point of view, no noticeable change in the use of minors by big-5 league clubs was observed over the first ten years studied, with annual values situated around 30.

A first increase was recorded between 2019 and 2021, with an average of 36.7 minors fielded, as opposed to 30.1 during the previous decade. An even more important increase was recorded over the past two years, with no less than 61 minors fielded in 2022 and 49 in 2023.

Badly affected by the health crisis of 2020 and 2021, clubs from the major European leagues relied more than ever on underage players. The introduction of the possibility to substitute up to five players per match is also a determining factor.

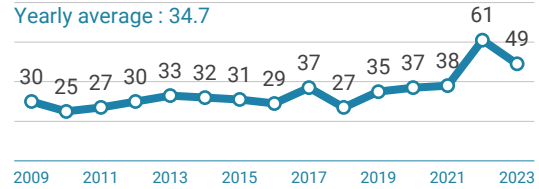
A record use was observed in 2022 in all of the championships studied except the Italian Serie A. However, 2023 was marked by a return to more modest levels, with the exception of the French Ligue 1, where the number of minors used has continued to rise.

Almost half of the players used in the big-5 in 2023 were employed by French Ligue 1 clubs. Being heavily dependent on transfer market incomes, French top division teams are more than ever inclined to rapidly throw their best players into the arena of professional football. This strategy permits French talents to garner attention from the biggest European clubs and allows owner clubs maximising transfer profits.

Figure 2: number of minors used in the big-5, per year

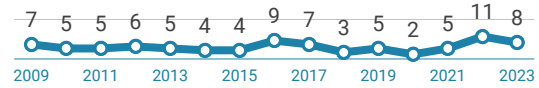
(a) Total big-5 league

Yearly average : 34.7



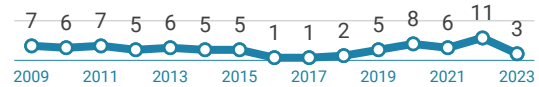
(b) Premier League (ENG)

Yearly average : 5.7



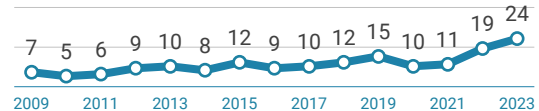
(c) La Liga (ESP)

Yearly average : 6.9



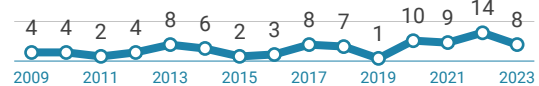
(d) Ligue 1 (FRA)

Yearly average : 11.1



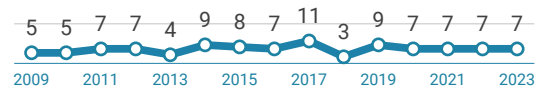
(e) Bundesliga (GER)

Yearly average : 6.0



(f) Serie A (ITA)

Yearly average : 5.2

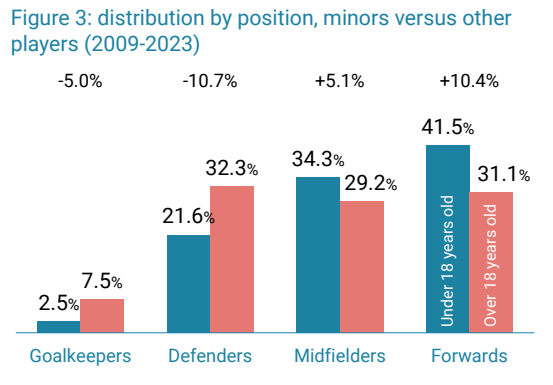


3. Player characteristics

The distribution by position of the 402 minors used by big-5 league clubs between 2009 and 2023 shows an over-representation of midfielders (34.3% of the total as opposed to 29.2% among players aged 18 or over) and forwards (41.5% compared to 31.1%). Conversely, an under-representation was observed for goalkeepers (2.5% as opposed to 7.5%) and defenders (21.6% compared to 32.3%), the latter positions remaining primarily reserved for more experienced players.

With regard to the origins of players fielded as minors, the vast majority (335 out of 402, 83.3%) are from the country of the employment club. Although the transfer of minors is common practice, as shown by [this study](#) undertaken in collaboration with FIFA and the ECA, it is rare that footballers migrating at an early age play for the first team of their recruiting club, and this is even less the case before the age of 18.

For 52.3% of players fielded as minors in the top five European leagues between 2009 and 2023 who subsequently played for other teams (168 out of 321), the initial club within the big-5 also constitutes their career's best team. This finding indicates that early exposure to major championships is no guarantee of long-term success.



4. Conclusion

This report shows a recent increase in the number of players fielded before their 18th birthday in the big-5 European leagues. This phenomenon has become especially apparent in 2022, the first post-pandemic year, also in connection with the possibility for clubs to make up to five changes per match. Although below the record measured in 2022 (61 minors), the number of underage players fielded in the big-5 in 2023 (49) remained clearly above the yearly average observed during the fifteen years analysed (34.7).

The use of underage players is becoming commonplace above all in the French Ligue 1, which accounts for its role as a stepping stone to the other leagues of the big-5, a status reinforced by the financial difficulties linked to the pandemic and the bankruptcy of Mediapro, the short-lived principal holder of the domestic broadcasting rights. The ample pool of young talents developed in France is also part of the explanation.

While the early experience in big-5 league matches is an excellent showcase for players, the study shows that it is not necessarily a guarantee for success. Indeed, only 47.7% of footballers fielded in the big-5 as minors between 2009 and 2023 who subsequently played in other teams have experienced upward career paths which led them to at least one club of a better sporting level than their debut one. This shows that caution is required when assessing the true potential of players launched very early into professional football.

See the list of 402 minors used in big-5 leagues between 2009 and 2023 in [Weekly Post 449](#).