

The Political Economy of Athlete Migration: Analyzing Talent Flows and Labor Policies in Global Football Leagues

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Abstract

This paper analyses the political economy of athlete migration, particularly as it plays out in the football labor markets of world leagues. How are flows of talent produced, commodified, transferred, and tracked? We examine how the football market is globalizing and what the political economy of that process looks like, including what processes are being reproduced and contested. The paper argues that football is one of the most globalized of labor markets, with many thousands of players moving in search of better wages and visibility, better training facilities, and ultimately better career paths in an increasingly globalized labor market. These movements are not 'neutral'; they are structured by unequal economic relations between exporting regions, such as Africa and South America, and importing leagues, particularly Europe and parts of Asia. This paper adopts a hybrid methodology, combining qualitative analysis of interviews and secondary sources identifying global player flows (FIFA transfer data tracked by CIES and others), review of CIES Football Observatory outputs, policy documents, and comparative case studies of football labor markets in the English Premier League and Spain's La Liga. It finds that European leagues attract a disproportionate share of international football labor due to their vast revenues and media markets, as well as the glacial pace of their own institutional labor market policies. Meanwhile, classic 'labor' policies: the Bosman ruling, non-EU quotas, visa access, and systems for collecting training compensation significantly shape who is able to move, in what manner they may move, and who reaps economic rewards for these movements. Overall, the paper concludes that football migration reflects broader patterns involved in processes of globalization; that opportunity and exploitation co-exist, and states and clubs in the labor market can either mitigate harm and inequality, or exacerbate the inequalities between clubs and players of different regions.

I. Introduction

Football is marketed as “the world’s game.” It is, though, also one of the world’s most globalized workplaces. Players are not just athletic talents; they are workers whose conditions depend on movement across national borders, inter-league systems, different legal regimes, and unequal economic terrains. The economy of contemporary football means a gifted Senegalese, Brazilian, Argentine, Ghanaian, Nigerian, Colombian, or Uruguayan teenager might view Europe as not just a sporting sod but as an economic promissory note. The continent’s mega-clubs, especially those located in rich core states like England, Spain, Germany, Italy, France, Portugal, Belgium, and the Netherlands, sit spatially and functionally at the heart of football’s capital. They suck in talent from everywhere else in the world because, again, they create for players the ability to earn more money, gain more exposure, secure better amenities, and participate in the most premier competitions of all, in particular the UEFA Champions League.

The magnitude of football ‘migration’ has increased since globalization. FIFA’s global transfer database collects thousands of records player movements from country to country every year in international transfer movements of professional, amateur, men’s, and women’s football. In 2025, FIFA announced a “historic” high in total, international transfers. The football labor market is ever-more mobile and transnational, reflecting the overall ongoing ‘commercialization’ of football, and also related to the development of scouting networks, ‘the commodification of data’ and ‘the centrality of global broadcasting revenues.’ Thus, clubs do not just look ‘locally’ or even ‘nationally’ for talent, but rather globally for the existence of undervalued expertise.

There is strong literature on the dominant and poverty-creating flow of the “(talent) drain”—those leaving developing footballing regions and populations, often African and South American countries, for the more lucrative sands of football towns like Paris and London. Football as a field of labor migration has other conceptual links within this line. Thus, while African, South American, East European footballers have become distinctly part of an exploitative migration process... in theory, elements like ‘training compensation and solidarity payments’ should allow the locomotion of players to be better balanced by recognizing clubs in poor commons that develop them. Yet shocks and frictions remain. Complicated, sharp greed marks this as reality. Stories by aging players often reveal the ignorant and naive circumstances they came from, often developed by the small

clubs they did at least brush; clubs then leave with no paper trail. The theory sometimes lends an arm, but mostly leaves the tiny club hunching over "Fuck FIFA" spitting on the ground when bigger clubs shop them lifelike specimens of their chosen currency. There is a gap now, then, to push a pair of semi-sneakers into a study of the geographies or geoeconomics of player mobility, perceived as more of a process at the apex of labor policy and political economy of borders. The popularity of a map may vary from one research project to another; some map talent flows through tedious analysis of the patterns, other research scrutinizes football policy in circulation, but fewer imbue the how and where's and whys of economic relations and relationships with labor policy and guidelines to produce player mobility, and varieties thereof in scientific papers. What my contributions come to, then, is, how do labor policy and the world's capital flows of economic gross cut the vein of player flows in international leagues. In portion heads, a position outside of one's sporting and though placing all in your course above windsocks. To analyse football migration in a vein less like one-disc, as a problem or solution; thesis ram; but more as a question prophetic of the labor market and global bans.

II. Literature Review

Research on football migration indicates that the movement of players is influenced by both social and economic factors. Players have motivation to migrate, economically, due to better wages, stronger contracts, better training facilities, and greater opportunity for international recognition than they would (or could) receive in their own country. Therefore, for many players who come from lower-income systems in terms of soccer, migration is a sensible career strategy since it provides financial support to family members, raises their status in the world of soccer, and allows for access to markets that place more value on their skills than those that exist in the local league.

In addition to the economic driving forces behind migration, there are also social reasons. Young players often aspire to play in Europe because they frequently watch European soccer, primarily through television, streaming, and social media. Popular soccer leagues such as the Premier League, La Liga, Serie A, Bundesliga, and Ligue 1 all represent a market for players that is not solely about soccer; rather, they are global cultural phenomena. The visibility of these leagues fuels dreams of moving abroad and ultimately succeeding. As a result, migration through the sport of soccer differs from other types of migrant labor in that it blends economic need with social status.

The CIES Football Observatory has found that there are numerous expatriate and foreign players across different professional soccer leagues around the world. This data shows that labor is very mobile in soccer; however, it is not equally represented across the globe. Soccer leagues in Europe typically attract the majority of international talent, and, likewise, many of the countries within South America and Africa contribute a major part of the international supply of talent. Historically, many players have emigrated from Brazil, Argentina, Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire. The international transfer system has established this via a pattern of center-periphery in which wealthier footballing economies bring in talent while less wealthy footballing economies send talent out.

The foundation for this process is labor law. The Bosman ruling of 1995 changed the landscape of European professional football by providing EU players that have allowed a player who had an expired contract with a club to move freely from that club to another club without the need of paying a transfer fee. In addition, the ruling created many opportunities for players through eliminating nationality quotas regarding the number of EU players a club may have on its roster. This ruling led to an increase in mobility and bargaining power for players in Europe, but it did not create the same amount of opportunities for all players. While EU players had an increased ability to find a new club, players from outside the EU remained subject to strict visa requirements, squad quota regulations and the need to obtain a work permit.

The migration of players is also affected by FIFA transfer regulations which are part of the international transfer system. The FIFA transfer regulations govern all aspects of the employment relationship between a club and a player, including: registration of players; stability of contracts; payment of training compensation; payment of solidarity contributions; and the movement of minors. Training compensation and solidarity mechanisms help to redistribute a portion of the money generated from a player's transfer fee to the club that developed that player prior to that player moving to the club that is paying the large transfer fee in Europe. The importance of redistribution in football cannot be overstated, particularly when the player has been developed and trained by a club in Ghana, Senegal, Brazil or Argentina before generating a large transfer fee in Europe. Without redistribution rules, developing football clubs have little or no financial benefit from the global value created by the player.

On the other hand, the literature also demonstrates that the regulation of player migration creates some level of inequity. For example, if a strict visa system exists, then players from nations with a lower global ranking or players from nations with a less visible or "less known" domestic football league may find it difficult to take advantage of elite professional football opportunities. In addition, due to non-EU quotas, football players from Africa, Asia and Latin America may not have as many opportunities to play in Europe. Wealthier professional football clubs are often able to use their legal expertise, scouting network and the established "feeder club" system

to find a way to circumvent the limits imposed by regulation. Thus, while the objective of labour policy is to regulate player migration, it has a significant impact on which players are deemed to be valuable, eligible and mobile.

International migration of football players can tell us a great deal about the economic inequalities and opportunities present within the global labour market, as can be seen by the following examples of individual players who have migrated. The career of Kylian Mbappé is a great example. His move from AS Monaco to Paris Saint-Germain and then on to Real Madrid illustrates how European football's elite clubs use their wealth, prestige and contracts to attract the best footballing talent to Europe. The fact that he was able to move to Real Madrid on a free transfer in 2024 after leaving PSG further highlights the 'post Bosman' era in which players whose contracts have expired can become more mobile, value-based bargaining can occur more often and players can evaluate clubs both in terms of money, sporting ambitions and the extent to which they have global profiles. A second prominent example is Sadio Mané. His career path from Senegal to Metz, Red Bull Salzburg, Southampton, Liverpool, Bayern Munich, and today Al-Nassr exemplifies the long-standing Africa-to-Europe player migration trend, demonstrating how players from developing footballing regions migrate to play in more well-funded footballing leagues to increase their wages, quality of playing facilities and level of exposure. Finally, Neymar's migration from Santos to Barcelona and then from Barça to PSG is another example of player migration from South America to Europe, particularly because Neymar was transferred for huge fees to clubs throughout both transfers; thus, demonstrating how huge transfer fees played a significant role in creating or limiting opportunities for players entering the worldwide football economy. The examples of all three players further illustrate that athlete migration is not only dictated by the sporting abilities of each player; rather, the labor laws of each respective country, club wealth, eligibility for employment (citizenship), contractual rights and the unequal access to the global football marketplace play an equally or more important role.

III. Methodology

This paper has a qualitative research design but will use also available secondarily collected quantitative data. The quantitative aspects will come from FIFA transfer statistics, the CIES Football Observatory's reports, and researchers' documentation, including laws and policies, as well as the rules pertaining to each league. The intent of this study is not to create new statistical models but rather to provide new interpretations of pre-existing data using a political economy approach.

The study will employ three primary research methods: 1) Secondary analysis of historical international soccer player transfer trends, focusing specifically on the total number of players transferred across international leagues and the foreign player distribution within leagues. While FIFA provides excellent data for use in assessing international transfers, the CIES Football Observatory is extremely beneficial in providing data about the nationality and distribution of expatriate players and how players migrate to different leagues.

2) Comparative policy analysis. This research will focus on comparing the labor mobility policies of the English Premier League and La Liga in Spain. The English Premier League will be analyzed in connection to the post-Brexit work permit system in which players from outside the European Union (EU) must meet specific criteria for Governing Body Endorsement through a points-based system that evaluates players based on several different criteria, including international caps, league quality, club success, and minutes played. Conversely, La Liga employs restrictions on the number of Non-EU (foreign) players that clubs can register or use during matchdays, placing them in a strong position to retain both international talent and prestige. This comparative analysis of labor policy implementation within two major leagues of soccer illustrates specifically how employment policies shape how teams recruit players.

3) Case study methodology. The Premier League is selected due to being the wealthiest professional football league globally, providing clubs the ability to purchase players from nearly any region of the globe. La Liga is included in this study due to its combination of being a prestigious football league with strict compliance regarding nationality restrictions in regards to player registration. The two cases evaluated here will demonstrate how the two variables, economic power and legal structure, interact with one another.

This research will consider contemporary football economic issues dating from the period following the Bosman ruling to 2025 with a primary focus on recent player transfer data. The time period is relevant to the research due to several impending changes, including globalization of scouting, the commercialization of broadcasting, and changes to English Premier League soccer following the UK leaving the EU due to Brexit, and ongoing disputes regarding FIFA's transfer regulations.

IV. Results

The first major takeaway is increasing amounts of football migration on a global scale; FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) transfer data illustrates that international movement of players is reaching unprecedented levels; this indicates that football has now developed into an immensely trans-nationalised labor

market. The connections and relationships of players, clubs, agents, academies, and leagues through a global transfer network show that migration has become a normal part of any footballer's career.

The second key finding is Europe remains the dominant destination for quality talent. Worldwide, football is played in many different locations but the most concentrated capital in football still exists within Europe (leagues). Particularly the English Premier League, due to its extensive broadcasting rights, sponsorship arrangements, global fan base and considerable revenue generated at the club level, has more resources available to pay salaries and transfer fees than the majority of competing clubs. Accordingly, English clubs possess a significant degree of purchasing power within the global labor market.

The third finding is that many talent-exporting regions do not derive equal benefits from the movement of players. For example, South America and Africa produce significant quantities of high-calibre players, but domestic leagues in those regions generally do not earn as much money as leagues in Europe. When a player migrates from his or her region, local clubs may benefit from transfer fees paid to them, however, they also lose the player's skills on the pitch and the ability to draw interest and support to their respective leagues. In certain cases, the migration of players supports the development of academies and local clubs through revenue generated from the transfer of players; while in other cases, migration creates dependency, whereby poorer football systems become raw material producers for wealthier football systems.

The fourth finding is labor market policies lose control over player mobility. The Bosman ruling increased the freedom of movement of all players within the EU and expanded the balance of power between players and clubs. For non-EU players, restrictions are still very prevalent. In the Premier League, the GBE system (Governing Body Endorsement) systematically ranks each player looking to be recruited from outside the UK based upon predetermined international competition criteria and club level performance criteria; therefore, players already competing in strong leagues or with successful national teams will be favored over any other player from a lower-level socio-economic country, regardless of their abilities.

In La Liga, restrictions on the recruitment of players from outside the EU have a significant impact on club recruitment strategies. Clubs not only evaluate a player's skills but also their passport status before deciding to recruit a player. This policy creates incentives for clubs to favor the recruitment of players who have EU nationality, dual nationality, or are eligible for a work permit due to an association agreement. This also explains why many players from South America attempt to attain European nationality through ancestral connections and/or naturalization, which increases the fiscal advantage for them within the football industry.

Fifth, and finally, there is an understanding that policies and regulations can be implemented to both protect and exclude. Often times, a justification for work permits and quotas on foreign workers is that they protect the employment of domestic workers and maintain competitive balance; however, in practice, they also limit foreign workers, particularly those from less developed areas of the world, due to the constraints imposed upon them. Likewise, it is common for regulations related to transfers to have the purpose of providing stability in contractual arrangements and compensating training clubs; however, they can also limit a player's ability to make a decision to leave his or her current club as a result of an inability to comply with the regulations.

V. Discussion

Football migration is indicative of the larger global political economy and the large disparities within the labor markets between richer and poorer parts of the world. The movement of players to where substantial capital, visibility, and opportunity exist is similar to the way in which workers from poorer to wealthier parts of the world follow the same patterns. Elite and established clubs within wealthier leagues, through global recruitment practices, can acquire talent that exists within and is produced by less wealthy systems of play. Football migration is also unique in that all of the player's attributes (e.g., nationality, age, and market value) are intertwined with his ability to achieve success in a destination market. Examples of how a player's nationality can affect his marketability include how a player's passport can impede his employing capacity; his country of origin can affect how much attention or how little attention a scout will devote to him; his age can dictate how much money he may be traded for, if at all; and where he has played will dictate how many work-permit points he will have earned. Thus, football employment is not simply unregulated employment; it is also filtered through various policies and institutions.

As illustrated by the Premier League's GBE system, globalization and regulation co-exist within the labour migration of football. English clubs are able to purchase international talent; however, the GBE regulations on how many foreign players can be entered into their rosters are stricter. As a result of this, the Premier League operates through a selective form of globalization; the market is opened to international talent; however, only to the players who have satisfied the government standards, otherwise, they will be unable to play. The same model applies to both established elite players and players from leagues that are stronger in quality to that of late-developing players and more insignificant footballing countries.

As illustrated in the case of La Liga, foreign player eligibility rules are largely responsible for many of the team-building practices within the league. Specifically, non-EU foreigner quotas have led to clubs making

citizenship a primary component; therefore, players with EU passports will likely be considered to be easier to obtain versus players who do not hold such, even though both players may have equally developed skills. Thus, migration as it relates to the movement of football players must be viewed not simply from their overall skill, but also from their legal identity status.

The primary issue regarding the political economy of football migration is whether migration leads development and economic growth of receiving or sending countries or simply creates dependency. Some may argue that migration creates income for multiple stakeholders, including: players, player's families, academies and local clubs; further, for each player that has achieved international success, the greater the motivation to invest in developing players in that country. Transfer fees and solidarity payments will generate sizeable income as well. Others may argue that if the best players migrate at an early age to the more productive football markets, then domestic leagues may have little opportunity to develop their market; therefore, the likelihood of supporting local teams will decline; and finally local football systems will evolve into talent pipelines versus strong independent markets.

Fair labor practices are also an important factor to consider. Some elite football players have significant bargaining power, post-Bosman. However, the majority of migrant footballers are not elite and/or do not have that same level of power, and many lower-tier migrant footballers have experienced tremendous uncertainty concerning the legal nature of their contracts, lack of legal support, cultural isolation, and dependence on their agent. There are higher levels of uncertainty associated with young players who migrate to other countries and have not received significant institutional support. Therefore, when analysing football migration, it is important to not simply focus on the highly publicized high-profile players transfer; and also consider the welfare of the vast majority of players who struggle to succeed within an uncertain labor market.

VI. Conclusion

Through this paper, it has been shown that the political economy is the best way to understand the migration of athletes in the global football market. The flow of talent is not random; its flow is influenced by many factors including: money, laws, citizenship, institutional power and global inequality.

European leagues, and in particular the Premier League and La Liga, tend to pull a significant amount of foreign-born players into their respective leagues because of their powerful roles within the global football economy. On the other hand, the Bosman ruling, GBE work permit rules, Non-EU quota regulations, and FIFA transfer regulation policies shape how players are able to migrate and who benefits from that migration.

The research question asked how labor policy and global economic inequality impacts the flow of talent in international football leagues. The finding is that economic inequality provides the incentive for migration, while Labor Policy establishes the framework for migration. Players from Africa and South America tend to migrate to European football leagues because of the availability of greater economic opportunities and career advancement. However, this ability to migrate is dependent on legislative and institutional rules that define provided to provide mobility for these players.

The broader implications of these findings suggest, then, that globalization of football will both empower players and give them an opportunity to change their lives, while at the same time reinforcing the hierarchies between rich and poor football systems. Additional research must look at where training compensation and solidarity payments do actually end up in grassroots clubs, how young migrant footballers experience exploitation, and whether or not collective bargaining can lead to a more equitable global governance of football. An ethical football labor market should ensure player mobility and provide tangible benefits for development to countries that produce talents.

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