



Figure 1: (African) migrants hand over the World Cup to France. Source: Mahmoud Al- Rifai (2018)

# Gijsbert Oonk & Gijs van Campenhout

## The Emergence of Hyperdiversity at the World Cup Football, 1930-2022

Professor Jean Monnet Chair: Migration, Citizenship and Identity  
 PhD Candidate Global History

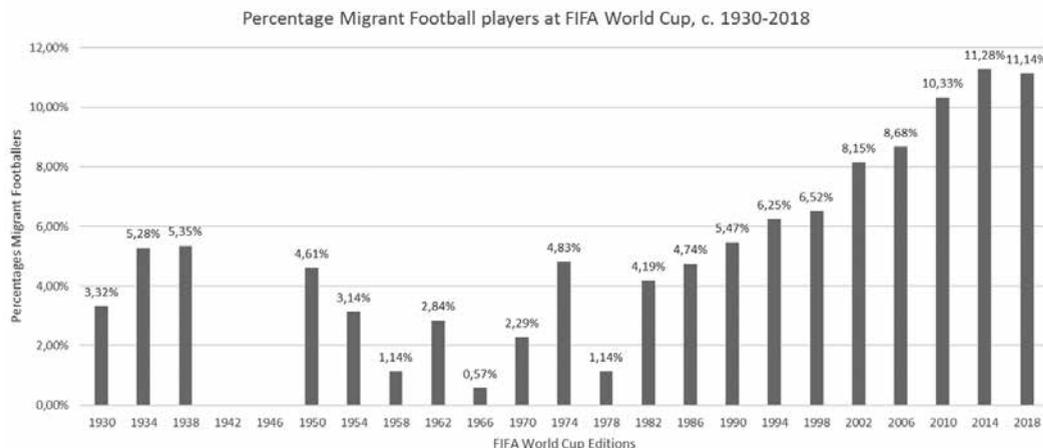


Table 1: Percentage of migrant football players at the FIFA World Cup, 1930 – 2018. Source: Gijs van Campenhout.

[In absolute numbers: 631 out of the 10,143 football players are migrant footballers]

The FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games are championships between countries. Through their national sports teams, countries own unique national identities are represented and expressed. The athletes are a country's pride and joy as they are the (temporary) embodiment of a state and its citizens. Competing in the name of the nation, wearing the national team jersey, and singing the national anthem (often accompanied with symbolic hand gestures), is widely considered to be an honour. National football teams and Olympic delegations, however, become more and more characterised by hyperdiversity as, paradoxically, these teams increasingly include athletes who simultaneously have genuine links with other nations.

At the 2018 FIFA World Cup, 200 of the 736 footballers (i.e. over 25%) were, on paper, eligible to represent more than one national team. The national team of Morocco is an extreme example of this trend as only six (!) of the 23 players in their squad were born and raised in the country they represented. The Moroccan team was essentially a European team with players born in countries such as France, the Netherlands, Spain and Belgium. The cultural diversity within the Moroccan national team led to a diversity of spoken languages during training sessions and matches with Arabic, Berber, French and Dutch being the most frequently spoken languages among players. Because three-quarters of the Moroccan footballers were not born in the country they represented, Morocco's French coach, Hervé Renard, shouted his

commands in two languages: French and English.

The emergence of migrant football players in national teams is nothing new, and indeed has a long history (see Table 1). Already at the first World Cup in 1930, the national team of the United States included five players who were born in Scotland and one born in England. Moreover, the 1934 Italian national team became world champion with the help of four Argentina-born footballers and one native of Brazil. All of these South Americans were eligible to represent Italy because of their Italian descent. Interestingly, it was Benito Mussolini himself who supported the selection of these migrant players by publicly emphasising their blood connection with the Italian nation.

The FIFA World Cups between 1950 and 1990 can be characterized as a period of relative regularity as the volume of migrant footballers fluctuated between 1% and 5% throughout these editions. A notable exception is 1966 where there was an all-time low of migrant players. This is due to the fact that traditional migrant countries like the USA and Australia did not qualify. Moreover, although Portugal played with four players from Mozambique, they were considered Portuguese at the time due to former colonial ruling. Two French players happened to be born in Argentina, representing 0.57% of the total number of selected players.

These fluctuations in numbers mainly depend on the national football teams that qualify for the World Cup as some national football federations have been more reliant on migrant footballers than others. For example, because the national teams of the United States, Australia and Switzerland – countries who traditionally select a high number of migrant footballers – failed to qualify for the 1954 and 1978 World Cups, the number of migrant footballers at these editions remained low. Since the mid-1990s, however, the percentage of migrant footballers has increased for each FIFA World Cup. Processes of globalisation such as post-colonial and labour migration, and the professionalisation and commercialisation of international football, reflect the increase of migrant players at the FIFA World Cup.

In 2022, for the first time in its history, the tournament will be played in November and December, instead of June/July, when Qatar hosts the FIFA World Cup. As this country lacks a football culture and history, it does not have a talented pool of footballers. Therefore, the Qatari Football Federation has been running a large-scale football program, with the Aspire Academy as the best known example, aimed at naturalising young talented African football players. Like Portugal did with Brazilian-born players Deco and Pepe in the mid-2000s, these African youngsters live and train in Qatar for over five years, after which they become eligible to play in the national team of Qatar if

they have acquired Qatari citizenship. Because of this program, it is possible that the national team of Qatar will mainly comprise players of African descent. However, the roots of these players will remain invisible on paper as the naturalised Qatari players will likely play under their adopted Muslim names. Although not all national teams were nationally homogenous from the beginning of this international competition, homogeneity has been the norm throughout the twentieth century. Due to globalisation and commercialisation, this has changed since the 1990s. The only country that has never selected a migrant football player throughout its World Cup history is Brazil. As hyperdiversity in national teams becomes the norm, the coming World Cups will be won by migrants.

#### Further reading

Besnier, Niko, Susan Brownell and Thomas F. Carter. *The Anthropology of Sport Bodies, Borders, Biopolitics*. Oakland, 2017.

Campenhout, Gijs van, Jacco van Sterkenburg and Gijsbert Oonk. "Who Counts as a Migrant Footballer? A Critical Reflection and Alternative Approach to Migrant Football Players in National Teams at the FIFA World Cup, c. 1930-2014." *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. (2018) Forthcoming.

Taylor, Matthew. "Global players? football, migration and globalization, c. 1930-2000." *Historical Social Research* 31,1 (2006): 7-30.