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Who Counts as a Migrant Footballer? A Critical Reflection and Alternative Approach to Migrant Football Players on National Teams at the World Cup, 1930–2018

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ABSTRACT

Although there is a common belief that more footballers are representing countries other than their native ones in recent World Cup editions, a historical overview on migrant footballers representing national teams is lacking. To fill this gap, a database consisting of 10,137 football players who participated in the World Cup (1930–2018) was created. To count the number of migrant footballers in national teams over time, we critically reflect on the term migrant and the commonly used foreign-born proxies in mainstream migration research. A foreign-born approach to migrants overlooks historical-geopolitical changes like the redrawing of international boundaries and colonial relationships, and tends to shy away from citizenship complexities, leading to an overestimation of the number of migrant footballers in a database. Therefore, we offer an alternative approach that through historical contextualization with an emphasis on citizenship, results in more accurate data on migrant footballers – contextual-nationality approach. By comparing outcomes, a foreign-born approach seems to indicate an increase in the volume of migrant footballers since the mid-1990s, while the contextual-nationality approach illustrates that the presence of migrant footballers is primarily a reflection of trends in international migration.

KEYWORDS

Migration; citizenship; history; database; international football

At the 2014 (men's) Football World Cup organized by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA),¹ 478 of the 736 players (almost 65%) selected for this tournament lived and worked (played) outside the country of which they wore the national jersey. Furthermore, 85 footballers (nearly 12%) represented a country in which they were not born, the highest number in its history. Moreover, 25 of these 85 foreign-born footballers were natives of France, making it possible to field another French national team next to the actual one in the 2014 World Cup.² Although these numbers can be indicative of an increase in the number of migrant football players

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in national teams, this assumption has hitherto not been empirically tested. Moreover, a historical, numerical overview of this phenomenon is lacking, even at FIFA.³ Previous studies on migrant athletes and their representation of another nation in international sports have pointed towards an increase of the numbers of migrant athletes in absolute terms in recent decades. The first results in (historical) studies on migrant Olympians indicate that migration and nationality switches in international sports are nothing new as these movements can be traced back to the ancient Greeks.⁴ In addition, these migratory movements mainly seem to be a reflection of trends in international migration.⁵

Defining who counts as a migrant footballer and recording them in the static context of a database makes the creation of a historical overview on migrant footballers a difficult task. This is, in particular, a complex task because a single straightforward definition of the term 'migrant' is non-existent and because states use, and historically have used, different criteria to define 'migrants' within their national policies around migration, nationality and naturalization.⁶ Partly, therefore, in studies on international migration, the number of migrants is traditionally counted by a foreign-born proxy, whereby a mismatch between someone's country of birth and country of residence leads to the classification 'migrant'. This way of classifying implicates that someone's place or country of birth is the most reliable variable in estimating migratory numbers. This approach, however, overlooks important migratory complexities related to citizenship and nationality.⁷ In addition, such a foreign-born approach uses the current international boundaries as a reference to an individual's place of birth. This means that, in the context of the history of the World Cup, the current state borders are used in retrospective to define who counts as a migrant football player.⁸

Although a foreign-born approach is a useful way to estimate the number of migrants, solely using someone's place of birth based on the current geopolitical situation to estimate the number migrant footballers is, from a historical perspective, overly simplistic and problematic as it neglects the complexities that come with counting the number of migrant footballers in a database.⁹ Migratory data should be corrected for historical changes in international boundaries, colonial relationships between states and for nationality – especially in relation to bloodline connections – to improve this measurement.¹⁰ The principles of citizenship could be a useful tool for doing this, especially in the context of international football, where having citizenship of the country a footballer represents is mandatory and much data on the personal histories of footballers is quite easily available.¹¹ An alternative approach that focussed on emphasizing citizenship complexities is not only more accurate, but also acknowledges historical contexts and (changing) power relations, and is more flexible towards peoples' (changing) freedom of choice in nationality, for example people with dual or multiple nationality, compared to a foreign-born approach. This 'contextual-nationality approach' offers a different vantage on the subject. Utilizing both approaches to count the number of migrant football players in national teams at the World Cup over time provides (I) insights into changes in the numbers of migrant footballers throughout the history of the World Cup, 1930–2018; (II) illustrates differences in the outcomes between the two approaches; and (III) reveals

the added value of the contextual-nationality approach in counting migrant footballers in comparison to a foreign-born proxy. The crucial differences between the two approaches for historical (sports) research emerge clearly in this process, validating the superiority of the contextual-nationality approach in counting migrants (footballers).

The Wider Context of Football Migration

It could be argued that international migration has increased because of the (relative) openness of national borders and developments in (human) mobility.¹² More people than ever are crossing international boundaries, be it for work or leisure, and staying abroad for various periods of time. However, taken as a percentage of the world's population, the (recorded) number of international migrants have remained fairly stable over the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries: only two to three and half percent of the world's population moves between countries, staying for longer periods of time (for over at least one year) and can, therefore, be categorized as migrants.¹³ What has to be kept in mind is that these statistics are at best estimates of the number of people who migrate across borders. The actual numbers could vary considerably between regions and over time as, for example, many illegal movements remain under the radar. Moreover, perhaps contrary to and because of popular imaginations such as the recent 'refugee crisis', the majority of these international migrants are highly-skilled individuals who, because of their specific skills and rare talents, are globally employable and, therefore, highly mobile.¹⁴ Examples of this elite group of migrants are IT-workers, academics, diplomats, health workers, and professional athletes, in particular football players.

Although Pierre Lanfranchi and Matthew Taylor, who studied the international migration of professional football players in club football from a historical perspective, argued that the movement of football players across the globe is nothing new and that it 'has been fundamentally bound up with the *general* migration patterns',¹⁵ the opening of the global football market in the mid-1990s, especially in Europe, made it (much) easier for football players to professionally play the game wherever they considered the conditions to be a personal best fit.¹⁶ The commercialization and professionalization of association football led to a growing inflow of foreign players into national competitions, in particular to the top European leagues such as the English Premier League, the Spanish LaLiga, the Italian Serie A, the German Bundesliga, and the French Ligue 1.¹⁷ Although the presence of foreign footballers in national leagues was restricted by national governments at first, over time it became widely accepted that football players move internationally in search of work, like other labour migrants.¹⁸ Nowadays, we consider the transfers of football players from one football club to another, whereby national borders are crossed, a normal course of events. It is assumable that, over time, the inflow of foreign footballers in national club competitions has also influenced the composition of national football teams that represent the nation during major events such as the football World Cup.¹⁹ This makes sense, in particular, because footballers who make a living abroad can become eligible for citizenship of a state through working and

residing in a country. Also, a change of nationality may facilitate their economic earning power like any other migrant and/or fulfil their sportive dreams in the international context.²⁰ One of the most controversial examples in this respect has been Brazilian-born striker Diego Costa who, in 2014, opted to represent the national team of Spain instead of his native Brazil. Costa became eligible for the Spanish national team after he acquired Spanish citizenship through naturalization based on his years of residency in the country as he played for different Spanish clubs, predominantly Atlético Madrid.²¹ By officially becoming a Spaniard before the start of the 2014 World Cup, Costa secured his eligibility to compete for ‘La Furia Roja’ (The Red Fury) at that international tournament and to fulfil his dream of playing for Spain at the World Cup.²²

Migratory movements in the context of international football where players need to choose or actually switch nationality in order to represent another national team is, however, a completely different, and perhaps more controversial, phenomenon than that of professional football players who only move internationally between different clubs but stay loyal to the same national team. This difference predominantly stems from the consideration that national football teams are representatives of states and nations, of which its values are embodied by the selected individual football players on the field. Although, as Michael Holmes and David Storey rightfully state, ‘the teams themselves are often treated as relatively undifferentiated collectives, rather than as groups of individuals in their own right’,²³ the presence of foreign(-born) footballers in national teams seems to be somewhat paradoxical, as it could lead to the increasing ‘denationalization’ of the (sporting) nation. Denationalization here refers to the increased diversity of football players in national teams, in terms of nationality and ethnicity, which seems to challenge the spirits of FIFA’s international competitions between, more or less, homogenous (sporting) nations.²⁴

To overcome a (further) denationalization of international football, FIFA decided to monitor the frequency of football players (trying to) change their (sporting) nationality in the early 1960s and, based on these outcomes, introduced the so-called eligibility regulations in 1962.²⁵ At their base, the eligibility regulations oblige football players to officially have citizenship of the country whose national team they desire to represent in international football. In addition to this citizenship amendment, the eligibility regulations stated that footballers are not allowed to switch allegiance after they competed for a national team in an ‘A’ level status match in an official international football contest.²⁶ Even footballers who hold dual or multiple nationality can, therefore, only decide once on which nation they want to represent in international football.²⁷ Although FIFA determines who, when, and under which conditions football players are eligible to play for a national team, they do not control who can acquire citizenship of a state. Therefore, they lag behind national citizenship criteria. National governments are still the only institutions that can legally grant citizenship to individuals. This imbalance between FIFA’s eligibility regulations and countries national policies can lead to inequalities between national teams in terms of the optional pool of footballers from where each national team can choose their representative players.²⁸

In most states, people gain citizenship at birth by one of the two (or a combination) legal principles: *jus soli* – the right of the soil – which grants citizenship on the basis of

a person's birth within a state's territory; or through *jus sanguinis* – the right of blood – which grants citizenship on the basis of descent from an individual's (grand-) parents. The primacy of these principles is grounded in national history and can, therefore vary between nations. For example, where the acquisition of French citizenship is predominantly based on being born on French soil (*jus soli*), German citizenship is mainly acquired through family heritage (*jus sanguinis*).²⁹ However, in most countries people are, nowadays, eligible to acquire citizenship based on either one of these birthright principles.³⁰ There is, in addition, a third principle to acquire citizenship that emerged due to increased global mobility: *jus nexi*. *Jus nexi* refers to the stake-holders principle in which people who have been residing and contributing to the economic and/or social welfare of a state can become, often after a set period of time, eligible to apply for legal citizenship of the state, thereby entering a state's process of naturalization.³¹ After having acquired citizenship of another country, and meeting all other conditions that are stated by FIFA's eligibility regulations, a football player is eligible to represent his or her adopted country in international sports.

Interestingly, in the context of counting migrant footballers, states use and historically have used different criteria within their own territorial borders to define 'migrants' and have institutionalized different practices of naturalization. This means that national views and national policies on migrants, migration and naturalization differ (and have differed) per state, making it hard to compare migratory data cross-nationally and over time.³² For example, South Korea and Japan have been quite strict in providing citizenship to migrants, while countries like the United States, Australia and Canada have (had) more flexible and open policies towards naturalization. Partly therefore, the number of migrants residing in South Korea and Japan is, and historically has been, significantly lower than the share of migrants in so-called 'nations of immigration' like the United States, Australia, and Canada.³³ Such historical differences in national policies are, to a certain degree, reflected in the number of migrant footballers in national teams. Where Japan included at least one foreign-born footballer (who acquired Japanese citizenship through either parental heritage or naturalization) in every national team selection for each of their six World Cup participations,³⁴ Frankfurt-born Cha Du-ri has been the only foreign-born footballer (to this date) to represent South Korea (twice) at the World Cup. The United States, in comparison, has been represented by 48 footballers who were born outside of its borders throughout their World Cup history (all these foreign-born footballers had officially acquired U.S. citizenship before representing the United State at the World Cup). Therefore, clearly defining, conceptualizing and employing critically the term migrant is of utmost importance if we want to explore the (changes in) numbers of migrant footballers in national teams throughout the history of the World Cup.

An Alternative Approach to Counting Migrants

As mentioned previously, solely using someone's place of birth in the current geopolitical context to define who counts as a migrant footballer is, from a historical perspective, overly simplistic. The simplicity of a foreign-born approach lies in the fact that only one variable is used to determine who counts as a migrant. By doing

so, this approach neglects the complexities surrounding migration, including the redrawing of borders over time, the emergence and disappearance of states, and (former) colonial relationships between countries. Interestingly, in these overlooked geopolitical contexts, citizenship can be a useful tool to define and estimate the number of migrants.³⁵ While most studies on international migration consider citizenship to be a key variable in international migration, they tend to shy away from using it in counting migrants because of uncertainties in, or the total absence of, data on peoples' nationality/ies in (historical) population censuses.³⁶ As football can be considered the global sport par excellence, (biographical) data on football players like their birthplace and (parental) nationality/ies are generally well documented, even for older cases.³⁷ It can therefore be argued that international football, and international sports more generally, is a unique prism through which complexities surrounding migration and nationality can be viewed and critically analyzed.³⁸ Through combining these variables, it becomes possible to provide a detailed, comparable, and accurate picture of migrant footballers in national teams throughout the history of the World Cup. A historical contextualization of nationality through the use of territorial boundaries at the time of the World Cup; the influences of colonialism on nationality and citizenship; and by pleading that foreign-born footballers need to be considered nationals when they have a genuine link with the country they represent, will result in more accurate numbers of migrant footballers in a database. This is what we call the contextual-nationality approach.

In a foreign-born approach, a football player who, for example, was born within the current territorial borders of Ukraine before 1991 and represented the national football team of the Soviet Union at the time, is recorded as a migrant player. After all, when taking the current geographical borders as a reference point, he represented another country (Soviet Union) than where he was born (Ukraine).³⁹ However, as the country of Ukraine, and in line with it its national football team, was non-existent at that time, a football player only possessed Soviet citizenship and could, therefore, only play for the national football team of the Soviet Union. Because of this situation, such a player should be considered a 'national' instead of a 'migrant' in the alternative approach.

Similar issues occur with footballers from (former) colonies. These footballers are considered migrants in a foreign-born approach due to their place of birth in the colony. They, however, represented the colonial ruler-state as the territory of the colony felt under another state's sovereignty; a circumstance that means that most people living in colonies only possessed legal citizenship of the ruling country. Moreover, the provision of citizenship to people living in colonies underlined the power of ruler-states over the colonies.⁴⁰ Dutch representative Elisa Hendrik 'Beb' Bakhuis (April 16, 1909, Pekanbaru – July 7, 1982, The Hague), who participated in the 1934 World Cup, provides an excellent example of this. In a foreign-born approach, Bakhuis is classified as a migrant footballer in the Dutch national team, because he was born in the Dutch East Indies – now referred to as the Republic of Indonesia. However, at the time of Bakhuis' birth, the Dutch East Indies were a colony under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In addition, as both of Bakhuis' parents originated from the Netherlands, he was automatically

granted Dutch citizenship upon his birth as citizenship is mainly acquired through *jus sanguinis* in the Netherlands.⁴¹ Due to his Dutch citizenship, Beb Bakhuys is considered a 'national' instead of a 'migrant' in the contextual-nationality approach.

A somewhat similar story can be recorded for the foreign-born footballers in the selection of the 1966 Portuguese team. This team consisted of four football players who originated from Portugal's former colony Mozambique, amongst them the great Eusébio. Although these four footballers are classified as 'migrants' in a foreign-born approach, they are considered 'nationals' in the contextual-nationality approach because these players had no other option but to compete for the national team of the metropole. In the case of Portuguese Mozambique, it was in particular the 'Indigenous People's Rule', introduced by the Portuguese dictator Antonio Salazar, that allowed these four – and others – exceptional Mozambican footballers to acquire an "assimilated" status for culturally "Europeanised" Africans from Portugal's colonial territories.⁴² Because of this status in Portuguese law, and due to the fact that Mozambique like most colonies did not have its own national football team,⁴³ these African footballers were eligible to represent Portugal in international competition.⁴⁴ Even though the Netherlands and Indonesia, and Portugal and Mozambique, are nowadays separate sovereign countries, the representation of these football players for the national football team of the colonial empire made sense at the time.

Like the clear ancestral link of Beb Bakhuys with the Netherlands, many migrant footballers in the foreign-born approach have been selected for their representative team based on (grand-) parental descent. Throughout the history of international football, both national football federations and football players (actively) use and have used the 'right of the blood' to become eligible for a national team. Algeria and the Republic of Ireland are, for example, well-known for selecting foreign-born footballers in their national teams based on the nationality of their (grand-) parent(s). In particular, during the era of coach Jack Charlton (1986–1995), the Republic of Ireland exploited this so-called 'granny rule'. Most famous in this respect is English-born striker Tony Cascarino, who represented the Republic of Ireland on a supposed blood link with the country through his mother's grandfather. He, however, revealed in his autobiography that his mother was adopted and that he, therefore, strictly speaking did not qualify for Ireland due to the lack of a genuine 'blood' connection. After a fierce public debate on his nationality, the Football Association of Ireland declared that Cascarino was always eligible for Ireland as, 'since 1991, any child of a person adopted by an Irish citizen also qualifies for Irish citizenship'.⁴⁵ In addition to Irish nationality, Cascarino was eligible to represent either Scotland or Italy based on his (grand-) parental heritage.⁴⁶ Because descent is, and has been, one of the key principles to acquire citizenship in most (West) European states,⁴⁷ football players who decide to represent the country of their (grand-) parent(s) should be considered 'nationals' instead of 'migrants'.

An alternative approach defines migrant footballers in the context of the international boundaries of states *at the time of the World Cup edition at stake*, thereby accounting for the redrawing of international borders and the emergence and disappearance of states over time. This approach, in addition, acknowledges the

complexities created by colonialism by acknowledging the citizenship regulations of ruler-states.⁴⁸ Moreover, foreign-born players with a blood connection to the nation they represent(ed) are considered nationals instead of migrants, because most countries provide citizenship based on parental heritage next to country of birth,⁴⁹ and the proximity of the blood makes footballers eligible to compete for a country according to the regulations of FIFA.⁵⁰ So, through historical contextualization, many football players that were defined ‘migrant’ in the traditional, foreign-born approach are reclassified as ‘nationals’ in the contextual-nationality approach. Thereby, the result is a more accurate and nuanced picture of the volume of and changes in the numbers of migrant footballers in national teams over time.

Creating the Database

A database was created consisting of (migrant) footballers who participated in the World Cup, c. 1930–2018. The database includes biographical data on football players of the country they were an international for, their date of birth, and their place and country of birth, which are the most important pieces of information for the purposes of this paper. Additionally, information on the nationalities of the father, mother, grand-father(s), and grand-mother(s) are included to determine whether footballers were eligible to acquire citizenship of another country based on descent. If the (grand-) parental heritage of foreign-born players matched the national team they represented, they were labelled ‘nationals’ in the contextual-nationality approach, regardless of the country they represented.⁵¹ In relation to the eligibility of football players, a special note needs to be added on the peculiar situation of the British ‘home nations’ as all the four nations have a representative national football team within FIFA. Because all the people, in this case football players from the United Kingdom, who are born within the political boundaries of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern-Ireland acquire British citizenship upon birth they are, theoretically, eligible to represent any of the mentioned national teams in international football as they meet the basic conditions of FIFA’s regulations. This can become problematic in terms of football players representing nations with which they have little to no connection. Therefore, the four home nations ‘have agreed to a remove [of] the residency clause, and therefore British citizens may only represent one of the four nations if they or their parents or grandparents were born on the relevant territory’.⁵² Furthermore, within the database, the professional football careers of players are taken into account in order to deduct any uncertainties around a football player’s genuine link to the country he represented. This was done because a football player can become eligible for a country’s citizenship, and thereby for its national team, after playing for a club in its national competition for a certain period of time. This was indeed the case with Brazilian-born Diego Costa who opted to represent Spain in international football because of his seven-year spell in the Spanish LaLiga.⁵³

Most biographical data on football players was derived from personal Wikipedia web-pages.⁵⁴ In case a footballer was foreign-born and, therefore, (possibly) a migrant player, the Wikipedia-data was cross-referenced with information from (inter)national newspapers and football magazines. In addition, reliable data on the genealogy of

players was often harder to find as the majority of (grand-) parents are, or were, not (internationally) famous themselves. This type of data is, therefore, only added to the database when a football player was foreign-born or when one of the authors was reasonably confident about a family's migration background.

In total, the database includes 10,137 cases. These cases are not all unique because various footballers have competed at multiple World Cup editions, some players representing more than one national team over time.⁵⁵ Furthermore, in about 5% of the cases, information on the place of birth of football players was missing. In these cases, it was assumed that the national team which the player represented was his country of birth.⁵⁶

A Foreign-Born Approach

Using a foreign-born proxy when counting migrant footballers resulted in 996 migrant football players out of the 10,137 cases. This means that, on average per edition of the World Cup, nearly 10% of the players can be considered a migrant. [Figure 1](#) shows the relative numbers of migrant footballers per World Cup as counted by a foreign-born approach. At first glance, the evolution in the numbers of migrant footballers per edition of the World Cup seems rather random, with clear peaks and troughs between following editions. Looking at segments of the outcomes, and relating the number of migrants in following editions of the World Cup to each other, some interesting observations can be made which create a more nuanced picture of the (changing) presence of migrant footballers in the national teams at the World Cup over time.

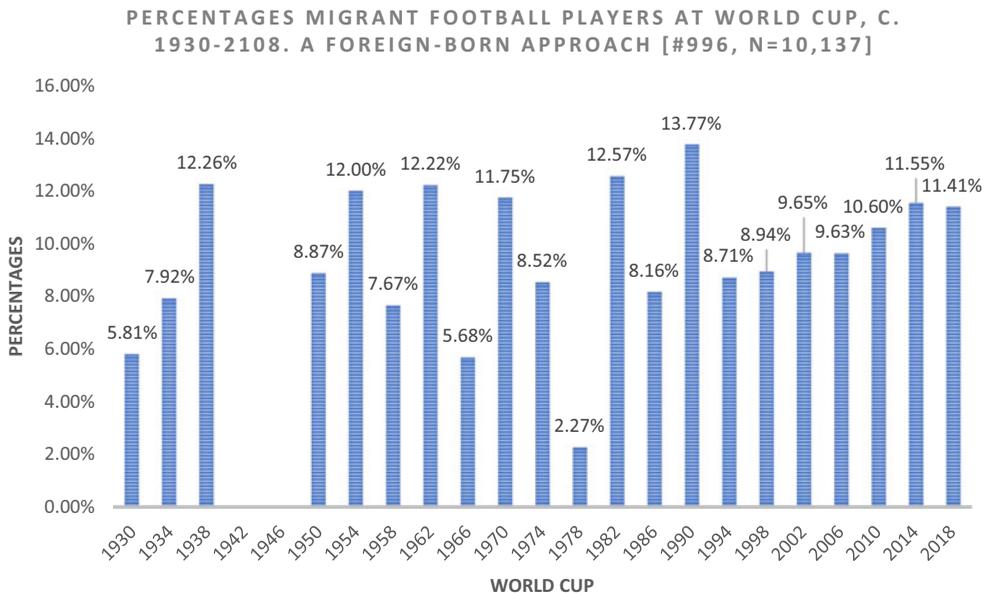


Figure 1. Percentages of a foreign-born approach to counting migrant footballers in national teams at the World Cup, 1930–2018.

It is, for example, interesting to see that within the first eight years of the World Cup (the editions of 1930, 1934, and 1938) the percentage of migrant footballers increases steeply, from 5.5% in 1930 to more than 12% of the selected players in 1938. In particular, the 1938 World Cup stands out as the percentage of migrant football players of that edition even tops the 2014 edition of the World Cup, despite it being widely considered the most migratory one in its history.⁵⁷ This result can be partly explained by the fact that, during these early editions, FIFA did not have any regulations around football players' eligibility for national teams.⁵⁸ It was, therefore, not uncommon for players to represent multiple countries throughout their career, like Raimundo Orsi and Luis Monti did. Both were Argentinean-born football players who, thanks to their Italian roots, could represent both national teams at an edition of the World Cup; they both represented Argentina in 1930 and in 1934, Italy.⁵⁹

In the period after the Second World War and until the 1990s, the number of migrant football players shows large differences between the various editions of the World Cup, thereby leaving no room for a clear trend to appear. These fluctuations in the number of migrant football players can, roughly, be explained by the national teams that qualified for the World Cup.⁶⁰ For example, because the national teams of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia failed to qualify for the 1978 World Cup, the number of migrant footballers at this edition is clearly lower than in the years that any of these national teams qualified. In 1982, these three (former) states did qualify for the World Cup, resulting in almost 13% of the footballers being migrants (Figure 1).⁶¹ As explained before, these dissolved states influence the number of migrant footballers because many of their football players are labelled migrant in a foreign-born approach, while in fact these footballers were born in vanished provinces of former larger empires that no longer exist. This causes a mismatch between their country of birth, according to the current geographical boundaries, and the national team they represented that no longer exists. From the mid-1990s onwards, a steady, increasing trend in the number of migrant footballers seems to appear in this traditional approach.

The Contextual-Nationality Approach

Approaching the data in the alternative way – with the historical contextualization emphasizing citizenship in addition to the place of birth-criterion – leads to 250 cases of migrant football players in all editions of the World Cup. Table 1, which displays the absolute and relative numbers derived from both approaches, illustrates that the average number of migrant footballers drops from roughly 10% in a foreign-born approach to below 3% in the contextual-nationality approach. This means that the number of migrant footballers throughout the history of the World Cup differs with more than two-thirds (over 68%) between the two approaches, illustrating the conceptual contention of the term migrant, and the need of clearly defining and using it in historic and international migration research.⁶²

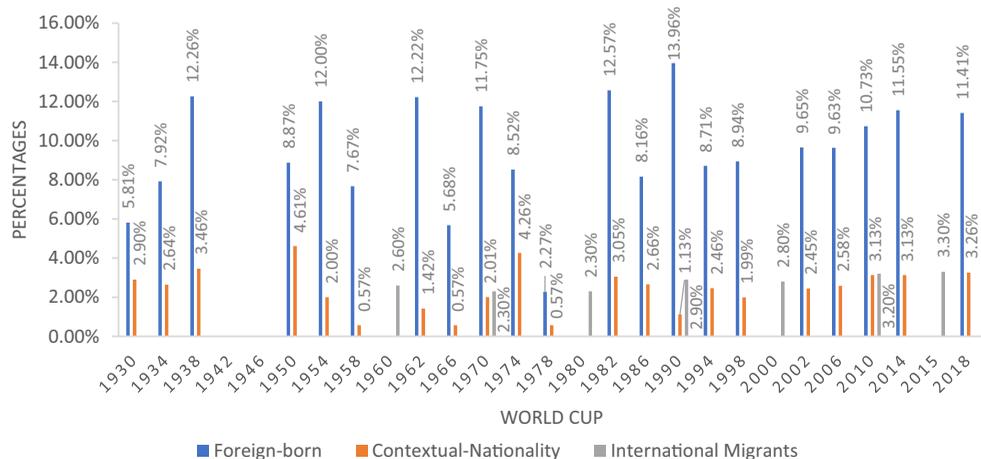
Taking into account the geopolitical changes that have happened over time clearly leads to reduced peaks and troughs in the number of migrant footballers between following World Cup editions, and the numbers are more alike when compared to

Table 1. Number of migrant footballers per World Cup edition according to the two approaches

World Cup edition	No. of football players	No. of migrant players foreign-born	Percentage of migrant players foreign-born	No. of migrant players context-nationality	Percentage of migrant players context-nationality
1930	241	14	5,81	7	2,90
1934	341	27	7,92	9	2,64
1938	318	39	12,26	11	3,46
1942					
1946					
1950	282	25	8,87	13	4,61
1954	350	42	12,00	7	2,00
1958	352	27	7,67	2	0,57
1962	352	43	12,22	5	1,42
1966	352	20	5,68	2	0,57
1970	349	41	11,75	7	2,01
1974	352	30	8,52	15	4,26
1978	352	8	2,27	2	0,57
1982	525	66	12,57	16	3,05
1986	527	43	8,16	14	2,66
1990	530	73	13,77	6	1,13
1994	528	46	8,71	13	2,46
1998	705	63	8,94	14	1,99
2002	736	71	9,65	18	2,45
2006	737	71	9,63	19	2,58
2010	736	78	10,60	23	3,13
2014	736	85	11,55	23	3,13
2018	736	84	11,41	24	3,26
Total number/ Average %	10137	996	9,83	250	2,47

Source: Author's Calculations, 2018

PERCENTAGES MIGRANT FOOTBALL PLAYERS AT THE WORLD CUP, C.1930-2018. FOREIGN-BORN [#996], CONTEXTUAL-NATIONALITY [#250] AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS

**Figure 2.** Outcomes of the two approaches to counting migrant football players in national teams at the World Cup, c. 1930–2018, related to the percentage of international migrants.

general trends in international migration (Figure 2). Again, to a large degree, differences in the volume of migrant footballers between successive World Cups stems, predominantly, from the national teams that were present at the World Cup.⁶³

Furthermore, the selection of migrant footballers in national teams seems, in general, to be closely related to a country's history of migration as some countries *generally* have (and have had) more open policies towards migrants and naturalization than others.⁶⁴ The United States, Australia, and Canada, as mentioned previously, are well-known for their more welcoming policies towards migrants and it is, therefore, (relatively) easy for migrants to naturalize and become a citizen in one of these countries, and thereby becoming eligible to represent their adopted nation in international sports. This is also reflected in the number of migrant footballers in the respective national teams over time. As mentioned previously, nations like Japan and South Korea have stricter regulations regarding naturalization and so they have selected only a handful of foreign-born footballers for their national team throughout their World Cup history.

Looking again at the first three editions of the World Cup (1930, 1934, and 1938), the numbers of migrant footballers are significantly lower when compared to the outcomes of a foreign-born proxy. Although football players were (relatively) free in deciding which country they desired to represent in these early years of the World Cup, it seems that most footballers who were selected for a national team tended to be born in the country or had a blood connection with the nation they represented. With percentages between 3 and 3.5, it seems that only a few players lacked a genuine connection to the country they represented which also classified them as migrants in the contextual-nationality approach (Table 1 and Figure 2). Because the vast majority of football players acquired citizenship of the country they played for based on one of the two main *birthright* principles, the introduction of FIFA's eligibility regulations basically reflected what was already happening in international football. The eligibility regulations, however, gave FIFA more control on the player-selection of national teams and nationality switches of football players.⁶⁵

In the second segment, between the Second World War and the 1990s, the contextual-nationality approach again shows a significantly reduced trend in migrant footballers when compared to the traditional one. The differences between the highs and lows in the number of migrant footballers are however less extreme than within a foreign-born approach; roughly oscillating between the 0.5% and 2%, with only two outliers of just over 4% in the World Cups of 1950 and 1974. In 1950, 7 out of the 19 players of the United States Men's team were players who moved – either alone or with their families – from Europe to the 'promised land', assumably because of the Second World War. The qualification of Australia raised the number migrant footballers at the 1974 World Cup, as 17 out of their 22 players were migrants to the country. The majority of these players came from either England, Scotland, or Yugoslavia. When these numbers are compared to *general* trends in international migration worldwide, the number of migrant footballers seems to be around the same level on average.⁶⁶ From the mid-1990s onwards, the relative number (percentages) of migrant footballers in the contextual-nationality approach can even be considered a (nearly) perfect reflection of the *general* trend in international migration (Figure 2).

Although the absolute number of migrant football players has in both approaches increased, in different degrees, throughout the history of the World Cup, the relative numbers of migrant footballers significantly differs between the two approaches. Where

there is an increase in the relative numbers of foreign-born footballers since the 1990s, the percentage of migrant footballers in the context-nationality approach has remained fairly stable over time and seems to mirror worldwide migratory trends. These differing trends of migrant footballers that emerge from the use of the two approaches to counting migrants are visually shown in [Figure 2](#). To compare these outcomes to the changes in the numbers of migrants worldwide, an overtime trend of the international migrant population is added to this figure.⁶⁷

The Superiority of the Context-Nationality Approach

The context-nationality model, an alternative approach to counting migrant footballers, fills a gap in both mainstream migration research and sports history, and in international football in particular. Through counting the number of migrant footballers in two different ways it has become possible to challenge the common belief that more footballers are representing another country than their native one in recent World Cups. By interpreting the data, a more nuanced image of the development in the numbers of migrant footballers in national teams at the World Cup 1930–2018 is provided and made it possible to compare data on migrant footballers over time in terms of identifying trends and possible outliers.⁶⁸

The two approaches to migrant footballers illustrate that critically engaging with the intricacies of counting and mapping migration is crucial. Different conceptualizations of the term ‘migrant’ produce different outcomes. This indicates that the term migrant is both conceptually and politically disputed in academic literature and in national political policies respectively.⁶⁹ It is, therefore, of utmost importance to clearly define and explain the conceptualization used of the term migrant when studying migration from a historical perspective. The alternative context-based approach to counting the number of migrant footballers produces more accurate estimations than approaches that rely solely on a foreign-born proxy. This alternative approach takes the changing geopolitical contexts, such as international boundaries, colonial relations, and citizenship complexities into account. Moreover, while a foreign-born approach overestimates the number of migrant footballers, the contextual-nationality approach helps us to better understand changing patterns of migration in football and provides more realistic numbers of migrant footballers.⁷⁰ The influence of historical contextualization is also reflected in the discrepancy between the global averages of the two approaches. While the use of a foreign-born proxy results in an average of nearly 10% migrant footballers in national teams over the history of the World Cup (c. 1930–2018), the use of the contextual-nationality approach results in an average of approximately 3%.

The contextual-nationality approach accounts for historical contextualization and citizenship complexities – if this type of information is available. This data should always be taken into account when counting numbers of migrants, both in mainstream migration research, studies in history, and in sport sciences. The historical patterns in the number of migrant footballers in national teams, based on the contextual-nationality approach, seem to reflect *general* migration patterns, to a great extent. This implicates that, historically seen, the presence of migrant footballers

in national teams is nothing new and, thereby, correspond with the migratory movements of players in association football.⁷¹

In the context of these conclusions, it is important to note some limitations to the research, most of which relate to the database in terms of its setup and the quality of the data. These aspects clearly influenced the interpretation of the data, the outcomes of the number of migrant football players in both approaches and, thereby, the comparability *within* each of the two approaches.⁷²

First, the database is (highly) selective as it only includes football players that have made the selection of their respective national teams, and the national teams that were present at one of the World Cups; an event that only takes place once every four years. Because of the qualification process for national teams to enter the World Cup, which has also changed over time from ‘by invitation’ to its current set-up,⁷³ the composition of national teams at the World Cup differs per edition. This is a crucial limitation because the national teams that qualified provide the cases in the database and have, in terms of their national history of migration and citizenship policies, a huge influence on the volume of migrant footballers during the different editions of the World Cup. Furthermore, the data are difficult to compare – particularly to detect a clear trend or to identify outliers in the presence of migrant footballers – due to inconsistencies in relation to which national teams qualify for the tournament. This is particularly the case as no national team other than Brazil has qualified for all editions of the World Cup (1930–2018). This limitation, however, does not influence the comparability *between* the two approaches (which is the main aim of this article) as the context of this comparison remains similar, given that both approaches ‘work with’ the same editions of the World Cup.

Second, the amount and quality of biographical information available on football players differs greatly per national team and over time, and it is not universal in its coverage. There is more detailed data available on high-profile footballers and better performing national teams than on what might be considered outliers in international football, particularly in terms of reliable data on nationalities of the (grand-) parents of representative football players.⁷⁴ In addition, more and more precise data were available on the national teams that participated in the later editions of the World Cup in comparison to the earlier editions. This, obviously, has to do with the increased availability of data on football in general.

Third, it should be taken into account that the number of national teams competing at the World Cup has increased over time, just as the number of

Table 2. Changing number of national football teams and increasing (maximum) number of football players in the selection of national teams at the World Cup, c. 1930-Future

Period	Number of participating national football teams	(Maximum) Number of footballer players in the selection of national teams
1930 - 1938	16 national football teams	22 football players
1942 - 1946	<i>No World Cup: World War II</i>	<i>No World Cup: World War II</i>
1950 - 1978	16 National football teams	22 football players
1982 - 1994	24 National football teams	22 football players
1998 - 2022	32 National football teams	23 football players
2022 - Future	48 National football teams	23 football players

Source: Author's Calculation, 2018

players allowed in the selection of national teams increased from 22 players in the period from 1930 to 1994, to 23 from 1998 onwards (Table 2). This would result in a higher number of players in more recent World Cup editions and, thus, probably also a higher absolute number of migrant footballers over time. For that reason, it is particularly the *relative* (percentage-wise) numbers that are interesting to examine, that is the number of migrant footballers compared to the total number of footballers in each of the events.

Notes

1. Although the popularity of women's football is on an impressive global advance, the FIFA Women's World Cup has intentionally been left out of this research. The reason for this is three folded: (1) the FIFA Women's World Cup lacks a history as the first edition was only held in 1991, (2) issues around migrant footballers in national teams is less present in women's football, and (3) biographical data on the national selections of female footballers is hard to gather, especially in a uniform way.
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3. Courtney D. Hall, 'Fishing for All-Stars in a Time of Global Free Agency: Understanding FIFA Eligibility Rules and the Impact on the U.S. Men's National Team', *Marquette Sports Law Review* 23, no. 1 (2012): 191–209; FIFA, 'FIFA Statutes (April 2016 Edition)', Statutes (Zurich, 2016).
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7. Özden et al., 'Where on Earth Is Everybody?', 17.
8. Richard E. Bilsborrow, Graeme Hugo, Hania Zlotnik, Amarjit S. Oberai, and Graeme Hugo, *International Migration Statistics: Guidelines for Improving Data Collection Systems*

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 17. John Bale and Joseph Maguire, *The Global Sports Arena: Athletic Talent Migration in an Interdependent World* (London: Routledge, 1994); Elliot and Harris, *Football and Migration*.
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 19. Branko Milanovic, 'Globalization and Goals: Does Soccer Show the Way?', *Review of International Political Economy* 12, no. 5 (2005): 829–50; George H. Sage, *Globalizing Sport. How Organizations, Corporations, Media and Politics Are Changing Sports* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 69.
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 23. Holmes and Storey, 'Transferring National Allegiance', 254.
 24. Raffaele Poli, 'The Denationalization of Sport: De-Ethnicization of the Nation and Identity Deterritorialization', *Sports in Society* 10, no. 4 (2007): 646–61; Michael Skey, "'What Nationality He Is Doesn't Matter a Damn!'" International Football, Mediated Identities and Conditional Cosmopolitanism,' *National Identities* 17, no. 3 (2015): 271–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2014.934214>; Holmes and Storey, 'Transferring National Allegiance: Cultural Affinity or Flag of Convenience?'; Alan Bairner, *Sport,*

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25. Hall, 'Fishing for All-Stars'; Yann Hafner, 'Blurred Nationalities: The List of the "23" and the Eligibility Rules at the 2014 World Cup', *International Sports Law Commentaries*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.asser.nl/SportsLaw/Blog/post/blurred-nationalities-the-list-of-the-23-and-the-eligibility-rules-at-the-2014-fifa-world-cup> (accessed November 24, 2017). Before the 1960s, it was not uncommon for football players to represent multiple national teams throughout their career. In 2004, as a reaction on the growing tendency of naturalized foreign-born footballers playing in national teams, FIFA implemented additional rulings that obliged a 'clear connection' between football players and the country they represented. This was done to ensure the balance between the interests involved in international football and to prevent spurious changes in nationality through which national teams would become more like football clubs.
 26. An 'A-status match' in international football is 'a match (either in full or in part) in an official competition of any category or any type of football' as acknowledged by FIFA. See: FIFA, 'FIFA Statutes (April 2016 Edition)', 70.
 27. FIFA, 'FIFA Statutes', 70–72. FIFA does have special regulations for players with dual nationalities who want to change their association. A player may only request such a change at FIFA once. The Players' Status Committee decides on the request.
 28. Gerard-René De Groot, 'Sporting Nationality. Remarks on the Relationship Between the General Legal Nationality of a Person and His "Sporting Nationality"', *The International Sports Law Journal* 1, no. 2 (2006): 3–9; Holmes and Storey, 'Transferring National Allegiance'; Hall, 'Fishing for All-Stars'; Hywel Iorwerth, Alun Hardman, and Carwyn Rhys Jones, 'Nation, State and Identity in International Sport', *National Identities* 16, no. 4 (2014): 327–47.
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 32. Dumont and Lemaitre, 'Counting Immigrants and Expatriates', 6; Parsons et al., *Quantifying International Migration*, 5; Özden et al., 'Where on Earth Is Everybody?', 17.
 33. James F. Hollifield, Philip L. Martin, and Pia M. Orrenius, *Controlling Immigration: A Global Perspective* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 5.
 34. Brazilian-born Wagner Lopes competed for Japan at the World Cup in 1998; naturalized Brazilian Alex represented Japan in 2002 and 2006; Marcus Tulio Tanaka (Brazil) played for Japan in 2010; and in 2014, New Yorker Götoku Sakai was selected for the Japanese national team.
 35. Dumont and Lemaitre, 'Counting Immigrants and Expatriates', 6; Özden et al., 'Where on Earth Is Everybody?', 17.
 36. Parsons et al., *Quantifying International Migration*; Özden et al., 'Where on Earth Is Everybody?'. Only since the population censuses of 2,000 data on both peoples' places of birth and citizenship have become available for about half of the world's countries.
 37. Taylor, 'Global Players?', 8.
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40. Erik Bleich, 'The Legacies of History? Colonization and Immigrant Integration in Britain and France', *Theory and Society* 34, no. 2 (2005): 171–95.
41. Matty Verkammen, 'Beb Bakhuyts, van volksheld tot paria', *Krant, Trouw*, May 3, 1999, <https://www.trouw.nl/home/beb-bakhuyts-van-volksheld-tot-paria~a422c6ed/> (accessed October 11, 2017); buitenzorg, 'De Indische jaren van Beb Bakhuyts', *Verhalen over Nederlands-Indië, Javapost*, June 11, 2016, <https://javapost.nl/2016/06/11/de-indische-jaren-van-beb-bakhuyts/> (accessed October 11, 2017).
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43. The national football team of Mozambique was founded in 1976, a year after the country's independence from Portugal in June 1975.
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49. Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien*; Shachar, *The Birthright Lottery*; Joppke, *Citizenship and Immigration*.
50. Hall, 'Fishing for All-Stars'; FIFA, 'FIFA Statutes', 70–2.
51. This is done because it is (nearly) impossible to track down all regulations around citizenship for each country that participated at the World Cup and to place these (changing) regulations within their historical and geopolitical contexts.
52. Iorwerth, Hardman, and Jones, 'Nation, State and Identity', 331 (brackets by authors).
53. Pete Jensen, 'Diego Costa's Decision to Jump Ship from Brazil to Spain Has Backfired... but Where Did It All Go Wrong for the Chelsea Striker?', *Daily Mail Online*, May 18, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-3596719/Diego-Costa-s-decision-jump-ship-Brazil-Spain-backfired-did-wrong-Chelsea-striker.html> (accessed November 24, 2017).
54. Although the reliability of the information on Wikipedia-pages can be questioned, this sources were used because the data we needed were fairly straightforward and not readily accessible at other, perhaps more trustworthy, online football databases like www.transfermarkt.co.uk or www.footballdatabase.eu. In addition, the historical biographical data needed on football players was not available from some commercial players in global sports data. Conversations about the use of Wikipedia as the source of biographical data on football players were had with Dr. Raffaele Poli from the CIES Football Observatory and Robin van Helden from GraceNote Global Sports Data.
55. Holmes and Storey, 'Transferring National Allegiance', 255; Hall, 'Fishing for All-Stars', 194.
56. Dumont and Lemaître, 'Counting Immigrants and Expatriates', 7; Özden et al., 'Where on Earth Is Everybody?', 14.
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foreign-born proxy, the percentage of migrant footballers in the 2014 edition is also topped by the World Cup editions of 1954, 1962, 1970, 1982, and 1990.

58. Hall, 'Fishing for All-Stars', 194–5.
59. John Foot, *Calcio: A History of Italian Football* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006); Mark Doidge, *Football Italia: Italian Football in an Age of Globalization* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).
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61. New Zealand also qualified for the 1982 World Cup, and showed up with 11 foreign-born players of which most were born in England.
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63. The presences or absence of specific national teams at World Cups does not influence the comparability between the two approaches used as their outcomes are based on the same data.
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67. Migration Policy Institute, 'International Migrant Population'.
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74. Özden et al., 'Where on Earth Is Everybody?', 13.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Data Availability Statement

To ensure the sustainable archiving and public accessibility of the data on which we have based this paper, we submitted the dataset to the open source research data repository 'Harvard Dataverse'. The data can be accessed via (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/TE9KWG>.

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