
From Local Fields to Global Arenas: South Africa's Football Journey

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Football is a popular sport worldwide, with leagues that differ competitively. This has led to a culture where top-rated footballers converge to participate in top European leagues such as the English Premier League (EPL) of England, La Liga (Spain), Bundesliga (Germany), Ligue 1 (France), and Serie A (Italy). Among the footballers currently competing in these leagues, Africans are well-represented, though the number of players from South Africa remains relatively low. This paper focuses on the factors that contribute to the successful transition of African footballers from local to European leagues, with a particular emphasis on participation in the English Premier League. By examining the football landscapes in Senegal, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, this research aims to identify the key elements that facilitate impactful international transfers. Common themes in this investigation are early migration or birth in foreign countries, visa constraints linked to league regulations, and the absence of well-established developmental academies. Individuals of African descent with dual citizenship and a European upbringing tend to have stronger footballing foundations due to early exposure to higher-quality training, enhancing their prospects of playing professionally in highly competitive leagues. The study finds that the developmental framework in South African football could be the cause of obstruction of skill progression and reducing players' competitiveness upon international transfers, specifically for those who transfer after reaching physical maturity.

Keywords: South African Football, International Transfers, Player Development, International Competitiveness.

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1 Introduction

South Africa's sporting history is deeply influenced by apartheid, which led to the country's exclusion from international sports (1). The post-apartheid era saw significant milestones, such as the 1996 African Cup of Nations (AFCON) - a biennial African football competition run by CAF (refer to figure 1) which consists of the 24 top African teams, victory by South Africa. This historically is the country's highest Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) - ranking, at 16th place worldwide, which contributed to the increased demand for South African footballers in European leagues (members of the UEFA Confederation) (2). The most prominent leagues are the EPL, La Liga, Bundesliga, Ligue 1 and Serie A. Footballers like Lucas Radebe and Benni McCarthy carved out sustainable careers in Europe, specifically the EPL, during this period. However, since 2010, international transfers of South African players have significantly declined. This research investigates the factors behind this shift, asking why South Africa, once a promising contributor to Europe's top leagues, now struggles to produce players of similar calibre.

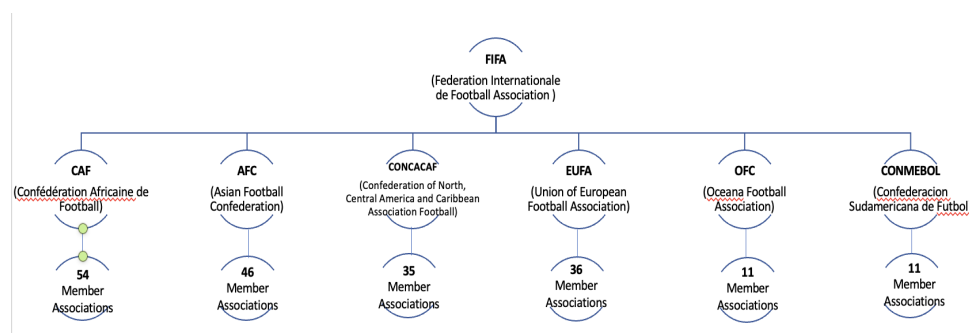


Fig. 1: A representation of FIFA which is the global governing body of football and the confederations consists of six regions. Each region consists of member associations which represent each country (3).

While over 200 African players compete in Europe's top five leagues, South African representation remains low (4). By comparing the football development landscapes of Senegal, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, this paper explores how factors such as early migration, dual citizenship, and the absence of effective developmental academies impact the international succession of African players. The leagues boast high numbers of African nationals, with well decorated players such as Mohamed Salah, an Egyptian footballer who plays for Liverpool Football Club (EPL), and Bukayo Saka who plays for Arsenal FC (EPL) and has dual citizenship as his parents moved to England from Nigeria as economic migrants before his birth (5). The continent can be seen as a great contributor of skilled footballers in countries such as France, which can also be observed in the national team representatives. In the 2020 FIFA World Cup, the French national team had approximately 13 footballers who are of African descent (6). Additionally, there are footballers who participate in these leagues that have dual citizenship and represent their African roots on the national platform instead of their European residences such as Kalidou Koulibaly who was born in France but represents Senegal on the international stage (7).

According to SportsBrief in 2023, Senegal was the country with the most footballers abroad with a total of 51, followed by Ivory Coast at 35, Morocco at 29, Nigeria at 28, Mali at 28 and Ghana at 27 (8). These findings, which are prevalent in other African nations, appear to be less effective in South Africa, resulting in fewer successful international transfers.

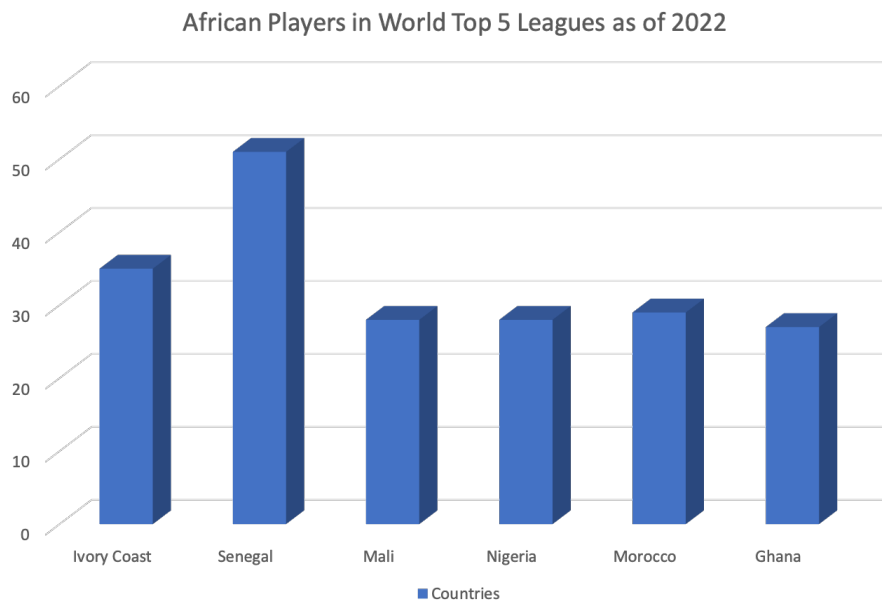


Fig. 2: Data derived from Sports Brief displaying the number of Africans participating in the top 5 European leagues.

According to Transfermarket, these are the number of foreigners from the selected countries that have made a debut in the EPL between the 2020/21 to 2024/25 football seasons. This graph is a representation of players from the selected countries and how many

have

transferred:

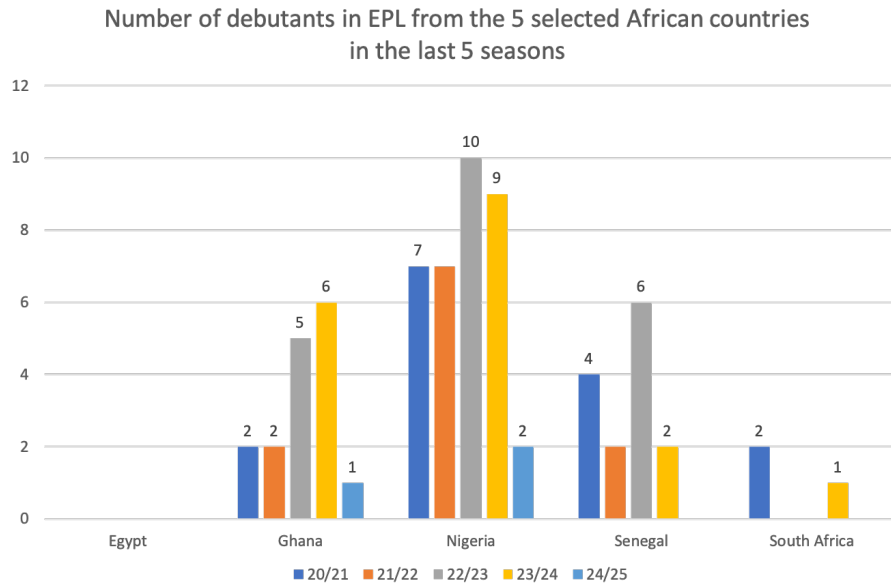


Fig. 3: A representation of debutants in the EPL by footballers who are of African descent. Data derived from Transfermarkt (9).

This research seeks to explore the decline in South African footballers transitioning to top European leagues, examining what factors—beyond individual skill—are impeding the success of such transfers. By analyzing various constraints and opportunities faced by African footballers, we aim to identify the systemic issues affecting South Africa's representation in elite international leagues.

1 Methodology

To complete this study, we examine Ghana, Senegal, Egypt, and Nigeria and their participation in European leagues, specifically in the English Premier League. We have selected five players from each country. In the following sections, we will explore what factors contribute to the success of African footballers and how they manage to reach the top leagues. These findings are compared to the South African context to identify opportunities for replication.

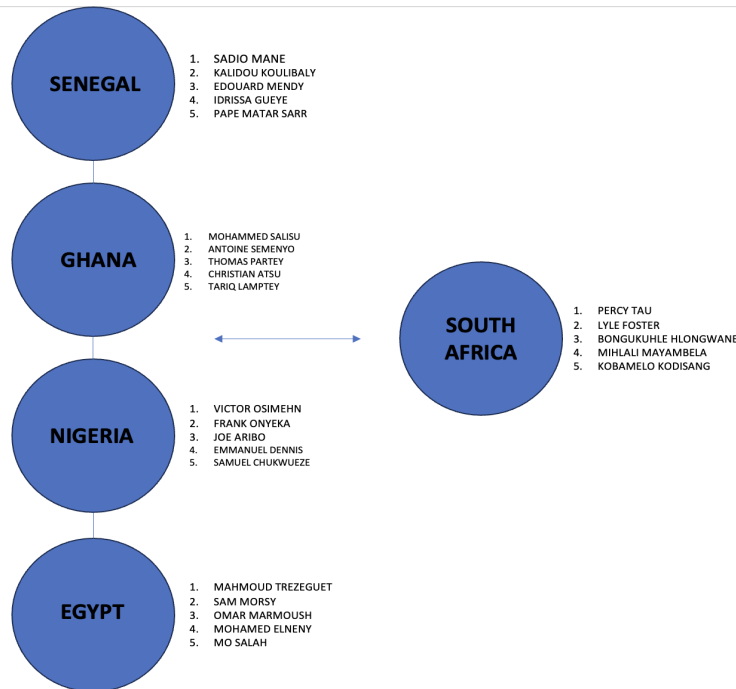


Fig. 4: The footballers from the five different countries selected to compare areas of improvement for South Africa.

2 Analysing Footballers from Africa in the European Leagues

Several key factors were consistently identified that contributed positively to the careers of African footballers, while certain areas were found lacking in comparative countries.

2.1 Comparing Football Academies, Club Development Programs, Local Tournaments, and Training Clinics

Most South African footballers identified for international transfers have followed similar paths. For instance, Lyle Foster was scouted from a local tournament in his hometown and later played in Orlando Pirates' (South Africa) development structure before being promoted to the first team. After a successful career in various international leagues, he was signed by EFL club Burnley (10). Similarly, Percy Tau was discovered and monitored in local tournaments before being recruited by Mamelodi Sundowns (South Africa) where he played for the reserve team. After years of development at the club, being loaned out for further exposure and playing for national youth teams, he was later transferred to an English club - Brighton Hove & Albion, after excelling upon his return to the Mamelodi Sundowns first team (11).

South Africa has few dedicated football academies that focus on both development and formal education. Moreover, there are limited academies with international affiliations.

One of the most prominent is the Transnet School of Excellence, which has produced some of the country's most skilled players, such as Steven Pienaar, Bernard Parker, Daine Klate, and Bryce Moon. Three of these players went on to have international careers (12). Another strong example is the SuperSport United Football Club Development Academy, the only professional club with a well-established academy focusing on both formal education and football development (13). Graduates like Kamohelo Mokotjo and Kermit Erasmus have had international careers, the former playing in the EPL for 3 seasons (14). SuperSport United's success may lie in its strong relationships with international clubs, allowing for successful transfers for the youth and effective youth development strategies.

A similar institution is the Right to Dream Academy, which was founded in Ghana and now has branches in Egypt, Denmark, and internationally. Its football club affiliates include FC TUT Football Club and FC Nordsjælland (15). One notable graduate is Mohammed Kudus. Nigerian footballer Frank Onyeka, a product of FC Ebodei (a Danish football academy based in Nigeria) benefited from a talent exchange that paved the way for his international career (16). The African Talent Football Academy based in Ghana, has produced players like Mohammed Salisu, who played in the EPL for three seasons, and Isaac Amoah who plays in Spain's second division for SD Tarazona in the 2023/24 season (17).

European clubs and leagues have heavily invested in talent development across regions, including Africa, by establishing full-time football academies. Of our selected countries included in this case study, some of the representation is as follows:

Egypt	Ghana	Nigeria	Senegal	South Africa
Barcelona FC 2006 - 2023	Juventus FC Established: 2023	Juventus FC Established: 2018	Paris Saint-Germain FC Established: 2021	RCD Espanyol de Barcelona FC Established: 2022
Liverpool FC Established: 2021		Barcelona FC Established: 2017		Liverpool FC 2014 - 2016
RCD Espanyol de Barcelona FC Established: N/A				

Fig. 5: A representation of football academies established in African countries by clubs from European leagues. Created using data from (18), (19), (20) and (21), (22), (23), (24), (25), (26), (27), (28), (29 and (30).

Previously, South Africa had minimal sustained engagements with prominent international clubs. Instead, the country saw more seasonal clinics, training camps, and competitions rather than permanent development solutions. For instance, La Liga hosts training camps in three provinces, namely Gauteng, Cape Town and Kwa Zulu-Natal, for youth in South Africa (31)(32). Juventus FC (Italy) also has a seasonal training camp that runs for approximately 5 days located in Johannesburg (33). Liverpool FC attempted to run three academies in South Africa, but they were closed just two years after opening due to mismanagement as reported by IOL online in 2016.

On the other hand, international clubs have successfully run sustainable academies in other African countries. For example, FC Barcelona (Spain) has an existing academy in Nigeria while Liverpool FC also operates in Egypt. Although FC Barcelona had presence in Egypt for 17 years, the club eventually ended its operations in 2023. Senegal hosts a significant presence of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) of Italy, with three long-standing academies,

providing higher chances for international transfers. It could be that academies are not fully established in South Africa due to the country's strong economic football status compared to its African counterparts.

Currently, partnerships between football clubs and universities are forming to facilitate knowledge and talent exchange. For instance, Mamelodi Sundowns and TUKS Sport (University of Pretoria) entered into a partnership in 2021 (34). This collaboration ensures access to institutional facilities, football technical training, and introduces academic research and development benefits, strategic knowledge, and football expertise. A similar partnership exists between Stellenbosch University and the Stellenbosch FC, which was formed in 2018 and will last until 2029. Their goal is to provide a platform for aspiring footballers in a community with a strong sports culture (35).

It can be argued that local football tournaments serve as a significant recruitment channel for clubs. This means that clubs often use these events to find raw talent, where unqualified but passionate coaches, who volunteer their time outside of full-time jobs, help develop equally passionate youth players. Although this may not be the strongest foundation for building basic skills, it increases the likelihood of a football career. In many cases, South African footballers establish their professional careers locally and recreationally before being scouted by international clubs, often through national team duty, such as the COSAFA Cup (tournament for Southern African teams hosted by the Council of Southern Africa Football Association or "COSAFA") or junior national teams. The strategic process of scouting and player transfers is not well-established, and international relations need to be better structured and prioritized in an industry that is global, profitable, and long-lasting.

2.2 Worldwide Agents

FIFA has introduced a rule requiring all agents worldwide to be licensed by October 2023 (36). This means that unless an agent is recognized by FIFA, they will not be able to represent or facilitate any player or club to club transfers. This regulation allows FIFA to once again oversee club-to-club transactions, reduce fraud at grassroots levels, and ultimately protect the integrity of the game. This isn't the first time such regulation has been in place. It was first introduced in 1991 but was deregulated in 2015, allowing anyone—including family members, club officials, or established agents—to act as intermediaries.

With the reintroduction of agent regulations, it is now more difficult to enter the profession. Prospective agents must pass an exam, pay licence and annual fees, and complete continuous courses to maintain eligibility (37). This will likely result in a smaller pool of agents, based on the stringent requirements which bear financial requirements which many possibly cannot meet based on their economic status, creating opportunities to build strong relationships with both local and international clubs and establish a reliable network of agents capable of successfully completing transfers worldwide. With the reimplementation of this rule, no one person can represent footballers as an intermediary - who is a natural person that represents the interest of either one party, which may lead to less eligible agents in the country. This may cause Clubs and agents/ agencies to implement

scouting strategies that are more rigorous to identify talent. Another drawback is the limitations to the members of the public who want to pursue a career as an agent - it is costly to be eligible as an agent in some regions with weaker currencies, arguably the very same countries where talented footballers reside.

2.2.1 Regulated Transfer Platforms

TransferRoom, launched in 2016, is a global platform designed to address the lack of transparency and access to credible market information between clubs and player representatives (38). The platform allows agents and clubs to see the level of interest in players and facilitates direct, reliable communication for potential transfers. It also streamlines the vetting process and ensures transactions adhere to FIFA regulations.

This platform offers South African and African footballers a chance to connect with credible organizations, promoting inclusion and reducing the barriers players may face. However, the platform's affiliation fee, charged in pounds, could be a drawback for those from regions with weaker currencies or limited access to affiliates using such platforms.

2.3 Family Emigration

There are a number of families that have migrated overseas for different reasons, some of those individuals play in European leagues today. An example of this is Tariq Lamptey, whose parents emigrated from Ghana to England before he was born. Lamptey's football journey began at the grassroots level before he joined Larkspur Rovers (39). Similarly, Egyptian footballer Sam Morsy, born in England, represents Egypt on the international stage (40). Countries like the United Kingdom and France, which have some of the highest immigration rates globally (41), feature a significant number of footballers of African descent on their national teams. Notable players include Eberechi Eze of England born to Nigerian parents (42), William Saliba of France born to parents of Lebanese and Cameroonian descent (43), and Bukayo Saka of England born to parents of Nigerian descent (44) —all of whom spent most or all of their lives in their adopted countries, benefiting from advanced football development systems.

2.3.1 Participation at the International Level

Footballers with dual citizenship, either by birth or through their parents' nationality, ultimately have the option to choose which country to represent at international level. This decision may depend on their individual skill set and the talent pool in each respective country, which influences their chances of being selected for national teams. It is speculated that the FIFA World Cup often highlights the ability for players to switch national allegiances and represent their respective native roots or to fulfil their dream of participating in this prestigious tournament (45).

Overall, African footballers who receive grassroots training in the European system tend to have a higher success rate in representing top clubs globally and playing for the most competitive national teams at international competitions.

2.4 Visa Restrictions

The EPL has stringent requirements for overseas players. As of the June 2023 football transfer window, some of these restrictions were eased, allowing Premier League and Championship teams to sign up to four foreign nationals, while League One and League Two teams are allowed to sign two. Before this regulation was revised, gaining entry into the EPL was quite challenging for South African players. Eligibility requirements include proof of affordability to reside in the UK, a proven track record of skills through adequate club appearances, international representation of foreign clubs, and the FIFA world ranking of the player's home country (including the number of matches played in the national team) (46).

Lyle Foster, who was transferred to Burnley FC in the EPL as of January 2023, is an example of a South African player who overcame these barriers. His international career began after playing for Orlando Pirates in South Africa, followed by stints at AS Monaco (Monaco), Cercle Brugge, KVC Westerlo (Belgium), and Vitoria Guimarães (Portugal). Foster's strong international resume may have helped him meet the EPL's requirements, despite South Africa's lower FIFA ranking.

A well-known example of visa hurdles is Percy Tau, who, despite having a successful career in South Africa, faced visa challenges when he was signed by Brighton & Hove Albion of the EPL in 2018. Due to eligibility issues, he was loaned to three other clubs and only made six appearances for Brighton in the 2020/21 season. His inability to acclimatise to the club's environment, train and develop with the team may have contributed to his performance, ultimately shortening his tenure in England.

South African football was highly regarded internationally after the country's 1996 AFCON victory, and players like Lucas Radebe and Benni McCarthy enjoyed successful international careers, particularly in the UEFA Champions League. As mentioned in Section 1, South Africa's FIFA ranking peaked at 16th in 1996, and the national team remained in the top forty for the next eight years. However, in recent years, the country's football quality has declined, which is reflected in the lower FIFA rankings.

For South African footballers, accessing the English Premier League remains challenging, even for those regarded as the best in the country, although performance is relative when compared to footballers across the globe.

3 Monitoring & Recruitment: Existing Methods

3.1 South African Football Landscape Background

The South African Football Association (SAFA) is the governing body for South African football and the Premier Soccer League (PSL) is an affiliate of SAFA and an administrator of professional football in the country (47). There are four professional to semi-professional men's divisions: the Betway Premiership, Diski Challenge (the PSL reserve league), and the Motsepe Foundation Championship (National First Division) which each feature sixteen teams. The fourth league and those that proceed, the SAFA Second Division also known as the ABC Motsepe League, is divided into nine regions representative of each province, with sixteen teams per region which totals to 144 clubs (48). These are administered by SAFA.

The lower leagues consist of over 2,000 local teams, which are registered countrywide and divided by regions to ensure better regulation of the competition. These teams compete for promotion to abovementioned higher leagues as shown in Figure 5 (49).

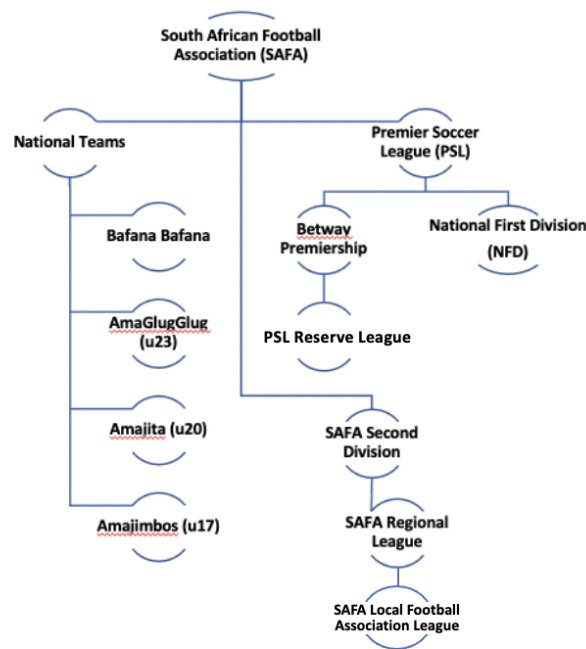


Fig. 6: An organogram representing the structure of organized football in South Africa.

These lower leagues are often utilized by scouts and agents as part of the existing player monitoring system. Additional recruitment channels include organized school tournaments and university leagues, the most notable being University Sports South Africa (USSA) and Varsity Sports, which organize non-professional competitions across various sports disciplines at South African universities. Sports academy schools, like the Rosina Sedibane Modiba Sports School, focus on developing future athletes by combining academic and athletic training. Other local football tournaments, often initiated by community patrons,

may gain exposure through social media or word-of-mouth and sometimes expand to become corporate sponsored national competitions, while still focusing on players from underdeveloped areas.

Football in South Africa enjoys widespread community support, with numerous recreational opportunities for play. As a result, recruiters have many avenues to find talent in professional, semi-professional, and recreational football. However, due to the lack of cost-effective scouting methods, many recruiters rely on attending live matches, which may even take place concurrently when multiple players are being scouted.

3.2 Player Coding In Lower Football Divisions

Scouting methods in South Africa can employ a coding process for talent identification. Scouts attend multiple home and away fixtures to analyze footballers, categorizing them by name (alphabetically), position, or by assigning numbers based on the area from which each player resides (50). This method requires a great deal of patience, strong memory, and the ability to meticulously record potential talents, either through computer programs or traditional handwritten notebooks.

While this method is thorough and allows scouts to assess players in different environments and game scenarios, it also has significant drawbacks. The process can become less effective if it does not yield successful results, especially considering the travel time, costs, and the time required for constructing detailed player coding. Another disadvantage is the risk of losing track of players who may miss games due to injury, personal challenges, or the inability of a team to advance in competitions.

3.3 Recruitment In Professional Structures

Many professional football clubs in South Africa conduct open trials for prospects from across the country, often targeting specific age groups within their development structures. The trial process is typically narrowed down to the best performers, offering equal opportunities for all hopefuls. In developed and professional clubs, GPS tracking systems are preferred for evaluating and monitoring player progress. This data helps coaches and management make informed decisions on whether a player's talent warrants investment at the highest level.

Platforms like Hudl InStat are used to track players from top-tier clubs, offering detailed analytics on aspects such as successful crosses, key passes, errors leading to goals, aerial duels, dribbles, and positional data throughout the season (51). Such advanced metrics provide an accurate depiction of a footballer's abilities and influence decisions on player transfers between clubs.

According to Steenbok (2019), GPS systems are widely used in professional structures for match analysis and during training sessions. However, economic limitations in some regions hinder the scouting process at the grassroots level, where such technology is often unavailable. As a result, scouts in under-resourced areas revert to time-consuming traditional methods. Another challenge in South African recruitment is the emphasis on older, more physically developed players, while younger talent often lacks the necessary time and effort for proper development (52).

Scouts, football management agencies, and coaches from professional structures face several challenges when trying to streamline talent identification, especially in isolated communities. These challenges include identifying local tournaments, managing travel and accommodation costs, and ensuring legitimate opportunities for aspiring footballers. Financial barriers also prevent many young players from travelling to different provinces for trials, leaving them vulnerable to scams from illegitimate football academies and trials. Simplifying the recruitment process could mitigate these challenges and help improve player identification.

European methods of recruitment and talent development are highly advanced, often allowing young players to make professional appearances at a very young age.

4 Conclusion and Future Research

With the slight relaxation of international player requirements in the English Premier League (EPL), there has been some progression in South African football transfers, as demonstrated by Lyle Foster. However, the development structures in South African football could be the reason for underdeveloped players. The strategies and methods currently in place may not sufficiently accelerate skill development, which hampers players' ability to compete on an equal level when transferring to international clubs, especially those past their prime years of physical development as we have seen with Percy Tau. Players with dual citizenship, particularly those raised and developed in Europe, have higher chances of playing professionally due to the stronger footballing foundations available in countries where top-tier football is played. Outside of South Africa, several African countries are highly regarded for scouting opportunities, where international academies have been established or partnerships with international affiliates have fostered skills development, coaching education, and player transfers. Unfortunately, such international collaborations are less common in South Africa as they are seasonal and do not offer consistent learning and training. This may not contribute impactfully and positively long term as the talent pool will be staggered according to each region. As FIFA becomes stringent with the network of agents and limiting the ability to orchestrate transfers, it may allow for stronger affiliations between clubs and agents, making it simpler for athletes in different regions to break into different leagues. This could be a drawback for talented intermediaries who operate at a smaller scale who also play a role in talent identification in more isolated and rural areas. It can be valuable to look into the effects of the socio-economic environment and how it contributes to effective development for future research. Overall, South African footballers face setbacks predominantly through lack of strong talent development and scouting together with strong affiliations with clubs abroad. Countries such as Senegal and Nigeria see a number of footballers sustaining careers in European leagues, with their opportunities stemming from emigration and talent identification through academies.

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