

Returning Citizens. Diaspora and the Global Circulation of Human Capital in Sport

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Abstract

This paper examines how nation-states strategically mobilise their diasporas to enhance national human capital (NHC) through sport, focusing on the intersection between citizenship, nationality, and the push toward global competition. Drawing on theories of skilled citizenship and hypercitizenship, it argues that the flexibilisation of citizenship – once conceived as unique and immutable – has evolved from an essentialist to an aggregative logic, oriented toward talent acquisition. Football provides the ideal field for observing these transformations, as national federations increasingly rely on diaspora scouting and naturalisation to strengthen their teams. Through four case studies (Albania, Indonesia, Morocco, and Poland) the paper highlights the diversity of strategies, revealing how diaspora mobilisation reflects broader shifts in global governance and national identity. The analysis underscores both the opportunities and tensions emerging from the strategic circulation of talent in the age of global competition.

Keywords: national human capital; diaspora; dual citizenship; globalization

Sommario. *Cittadini di ritorno. La diaspora e la circolazione globale del capitale umano nello sport*

Questo articolo esamina come gli Stati nazionali mobilitano strategicamente le loro diaspore per migliorare il capitale umano nazionale (NHC) attraverso lo sport, concentrandosi sull'intersezione tra cittadinanza, nazionalità e spinta verso la competizione globale. Attingendo alle teorie della cittadinanza qualificata e dell'ipercittadinanza, sostiene che la flessibilizzazione della cittadinanza, un tempo concepita come unica e immutabile, si è evoluta da una logica essenzialista a una logica aggregativa, orientata all'acquisizione di talenti. Il calcio offre il campo ideale per osservare queste trasformazioni, poiché le federazioni nazionali fanno sempre più affidamento sullo scouting e sulla naturalizzazione dei soggetti della diaspora per rafforzare le loro squadre. Attraverso quattro casi di studio (Albania, Indonesia, Marocco e Polonia), l'articolo evidenzia la diversità delle strategie, rivelando come la mobilitazione della diaspora rifletta cambiamenti più ampi nella governance globale e nell'identità nazionale. L'analisi sottolinea sia le opportunità che le tensioni che emergono dalla circolazione strategica dei talenti nell'era della concorrenza globale.

Parole chiave: capitale umano nazionale; diaspora; doppia cittadinanza; globalizzazione

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1. Introduction

The international competition for individual talent has become a common strategy among nation-states. Strengthening national human capital (NHC) enhances their capacity to compete globally. In this context, national governments are increasingly adopting strategic and flexible policies that seek to balance two central dimensions of membership and belonging: citizenship and nationality.

This political and cultural shift has led to the destigmatisation of dual and multiple

citizenships and has fostered more positive attitudes toward acquiring new citizenships (and new citizens). Sport was among the earliest arenas in which nationality change was legitimised as a strategy for enhancing NHC.

To examine this phenomenon in depth, this paper focuses on diasporas as latent assets that nation-states and their inner sporting systems can strategically mobilise.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first section discusses current theories on the dynamics of citizenship flexibilisation; the second examines the growing tendency of national sport federations to select foreign-born athletes eligible for national squads; the third explores diasporas as strategic reservoirs of talent to be leveraged by national federations; the fourth analyses specific cases from the world of football; and the final section offers concluding remarks and perspectives for future development.

2. Citizenship and nationality in an era of competition for human capital

The relationship between citizenship and nationality has undergone significant changes in recent times¹. The cultural shift brought about by globalisation coincided with a broader acceptance of dual and multiple citizenships. Until the late 1980s, nationality and citizenship were conceived as forming an almost irreversible structure grounded in the idea of uniqueness (Brubaker, 1992; Koslowski, 2003). As several authors vividly observe, dual citizenship was once perceived as «an anomaly, at best, or an abomination, at worst» (Spiro, 2010, p. 111), or even «an abhorrence of the natural order – the equivalent of bigamy» (Faist and Gerdes, 2008). A telling indicator of this rigidity was that acquiring a new citizenship almost invariably required relinquishing the previous one. Since then, however, attitudes have shifted toward greater openness to dual and multiple citizenships.

Within this theoretical framework, scholars in the social sciences have examined the

¹ It is useful to briefly clarify the distinction between nationality and citizenship, which serve as key reference points for this discussion. Nationality denotes the set of cultural, historical, emotional, and often genealogical ties that bind an individual to a community that perceives itself as such. Citizenship, by contrast, refers to the formal status conferred by a nation-state, comprising a codified set of rights, duties, freedoms, and responsibilities.

transformation of the citizenship-nationality nexus. This perspective conceives globalised citizenship as a layered identity, in which national and supranational belongings overlap (Schattle, 2009). Scholars such as Linklater (1998) and Archibugi (2008) have advanced a cosmopolitan approach aligned with broader trends in international governance. Within the same line of thought, Delanty (2000) proposes decoupling citizenship from nationality, situating the individual as a bearer of universal rights independent of national regimes.

Although criticised for abstraction, elitism, and Eurocentrism (Heater, 2000; Merkle, 2024), the cosmopolitan perspective remains valuable for rethinking the nation-state's role and its ability to renegotiate its position within global political processes. Nation-states have regained legitimacy not only through nationalist revivals in response to globalisation (Greenfeld, 2011) but also through recognition that globalisation itself is largely implemented by them (Barrow, 2005). This renewed centrality helps explain the shift from an essentialist to an integrative conception of citizenship and nationality. This shift emerges when ascriptive criteria of membership – traditionally governed by *ius sanguinis* and *ius soli* – are pushed into the background in favour of more inclusive principles aimed at enhancing national human capital (NHC) (Russo, 2012).

One of the main arguments of this article is that the growing acceptance of dual and multiple citizenships reflects the strategic need to expand national human capital (NHC). The mobilisation of human talent has become a key dimension of competition among nation-states (Facchini and Lodigiani, 2014; Sumption, 2025). Supranational institutions such as the European Union have followed the same logic with the Blue Card scheme (von Weizsäcker, 2006), whose structure and outcomes have attracted criticism similar to that directed at national talent-attraction policies.

The principle of skilled migration is often justified by the notion of an open market of opportunities enabling individuals to realise their full potential (Salt, 1997). Within this framework, we can talk about a sort of “3W dynamic” (win-win-win) can be used to describe the mutual benefits of talent migration². The three actors involved are: the migrant, who offers

² It is worth clarifying that the notion of the “3W dynamic” was formulated in the context of this paper and therefore does not yet find direct correspondence in the existing theoretical literature.

their skills abroad and gains both income and professional development – advantages that may, in part, flow back to their country of origin; the host country, which acquires and rewards talent, generating transfers of knowledge and resources; and the sending country, which benefits from remittances and from the reinvestment of skills through returning or remotely engaged professionals.

Used here descriptively rather than normatively, this 3W perspective contrasts with brain-drain narratives by emphasising reciprocity and shared gains. It draws on scholarship that highlights: the human-capital benefits of return migration (Värpina *et al.*, 2023); the concept of brain circulation, through which diasporas and return programmes enhance national soft power (Shin and Caywood, 2025); the view of overseas experience as a positive externality for countries of origin (Kurokawa and Kusakabe, 2025); and, finally, the transformation of brain drain into brain banking (Agrawal, McHale and Oettl, 2011).

These approaches help to counterbalance interpretations that frame skilled migration not as circulation but as a new front of post-colonial exploitation, with the Global North benefiting at the expense of the Global South.

As a global phenomenon, brain drain demands analysis in all its complexity, encompassing specific circuits defined by both the types of skills demanded and the communication channels linking sending and receiving countries (Docquier and Rapoport, 2011). This issue belongs to a broader reflection on the legacy of colonial power structures, oscillating between attempts to dismantle and to reproduce mechanisms of control and dependence (Raghuram, 2009).

For the purposes of this study, we shall confine ourselves to the aspects most relevant for connecting this theoretical framework to the field of sport: the generalised openness to dual and multiple citizenships, and the growing importance of diasporas in building competitive NHC within international sport. These will be addressed in the following section.

3. The asymmetrical relationship between citizenship and nationality in international sport

As a cultural product of modernity, sport has developed a structure that intersects with

another hallmark of the modern era: the nation-state. From the nation-state, sport derives its territorial articulation – particularly evident in its hierarchical centre-periphery relations and, more broadly, mirrors the pattern of international relations between state entities. What concerns us here is the structuring (both through the institutionalisation of sport and within the collective imagination) of a conception of sport rooted in national identities and their interrelations. It is a vision in which the relationship between nationality and citizenship acquires particular significance and which, for much of the twentieth century, retained an essentialist character. For much of modern sporting history, national teams were expected to consist almost exclusively of native athletes. Studies on athlete mobility between national teams – acknowledging its intensification within the broader context of globalisation – have moved beyond simplified interpretations to provide greater analytical depth. Research on multiple editions of the Olympic Games shows that many migration routes leading athletes to change national affiliation were already established (Jansen and Engbersen, 2017). The authors note that recent flows have diversified and are no longer limited to former colonial routes.

Other sport-specific studies confirm that the use of foreign-born athletes is a long-standing phenomenon and introduce analytical tools such as “migration corridors” (van Campenhout and van Sterkenburg, 2019). These authors propose a typology distinguishing three main types: colonial, geographic proximity, and guest-worker corridors.

Within this field, football represents a particularly fertile case study – not only because it is the most globalised and commercialised sport, but also because it has most actively regulated nationality changes (Russo, 2023b). Data from FIFA World Cups (1930-2018) show that the selection of foreign-born players dates back to the earliest tournaments but has increased sharply since the 1990s, extending beyond pre-globalisation routes (van Campenhout, van Sterkenburg and Oonk, 2019).

The picture that emerges from the theoretical framework outlined above – as well as from much of the relevant literature (Giulianotti and Robertson 2009; Holmes and Storey, 2011; Jansen, Oonk and Engbersen, 2018; Oonk, 2022) – converges in identifying what we have described as an aggregative dynamic in the management of the relationship between

nationality and citizenship in sport, further strengthened by the widespread acceptance of dual or multiple citizenship. These readings also underscore the renewed strength of the nation-state and of national belonging, which, far from undermining their survival, globalisation has become a factor in their regeneration. Sport constitutes a particularly clear arena in which these dynamics are visible, and the increasing propensity of national teams to select foreign-born (and later naturalised) athletes marks a decisive step in this direction (Storey, 2024). To complete the picture, it is useful to clarify several conceptual elements that define the specific dynamics of sport and can be extended to the broader debate on citizenship and nationality in a globalised context. A key aspect concerns the criteria used by sports organisations to identify and select talent. Traditionally, two main mechanisms were employed, to which a third has recently been added. The first, talent development (TD), involves identifying and nurturing young athletes through youth academies and club training systems. The second, talent recruitment (TR), consists of acquiring already-developed athletes through market transactions. The third, talent scouting (TS), entails systematically monitoring the global market to identify promising players and build a database for future selection.

A final theoretical perspective to consider is that of hypercitizenship, a framework which, in the context of globalisation, places the concept of citizenship at the heart of personal operational competence, consisting of the ability to navigate different legal systems, transnational networks and opportunities distributed beyond the borders of individual nation states (Pitasi and Angrisani, 2016; Pitasi, 2021).

4. Diaspora as an Asset for Enhancing National Human Capital: The Case of Football

The choice of football as the main field for analysing nationality changes and the role of diasporas as talent reservoirs has already been partly discussed. Before examining how these dynamics operate in the world's most globalised sport, two further elements justify football as the privileged observatory for this study (Russo, 2023a; 2023b). These elements move in opposite directions in FIFA's management of citizenship and nationality. On one

hand, FIFA has sought to curb “nationality shopping” (the clearest expression of skilled citizenship) which had led some governments to naturalise players through ad hoc measures. On the other, it has gradually opened the door for players to change national affiliation during their careers, even after representing another national team, usually their country of birth. Together, these opposing tendencies illustrate FIFA’s dual stance on nationality changes: restrictive toward talent recruitment (TR), but increasingly supportive of talent scouting (TS). The 2004 (FIFA, 2004) and 2007 (FIFA, 2007) reforms discouraged nationality shopping, while the rule allowing players under 21 with ethno-cultural ties to switch affiliation created new incentives for federations to mobilise their diasporas as reservoirs of national human capital. These dynamics frame the cases analysed in the next section, where TR, TS, and diaspora mobilisation intersect most visibly. A further reason for focusing on football is the introduction, in early 2025, of the FIFA Change of Association Platform (FCAP) – a dedicated tool for monitoring changes in players’ national affiliations (FIFA, 2025). Beyond signalling the particular importance that FIFA attaches to this issue, the FCAP provides a comprehensive overview of the extraordinary scale of the phenomenon. From the start of the calendar year (January 2025) to the time of writing (end of September 2025), 99 male and female players have changed national affiliation. With very few exceptions, these changes have occurred within diasporic networks. This figure confirms the centrality of diasporas as reservoirs of national human capital, showing that most nationality changes are not random events but rather the outcome of systematic talent scouting and recruitment strategies. The most striking insight emerging from these data is that the practice of changing nationality now primarily benefits countries in the Global South rather than those in the Global North³. Theoretical and empirical analyses of the international circulation of sporting talent (and of nationality change in particular) have long emphasised the risk of muscle drain (Andreff, 2005; Connor and Griffin, 2009; Adjaye, 2010; Nafzinger, 2016), reinforcing the notion of a neo-colonial dynamic of talent extraction. Yet the data from the FCAP for the first nine months of 2025 (a pattern that earlier years would likely confirm)

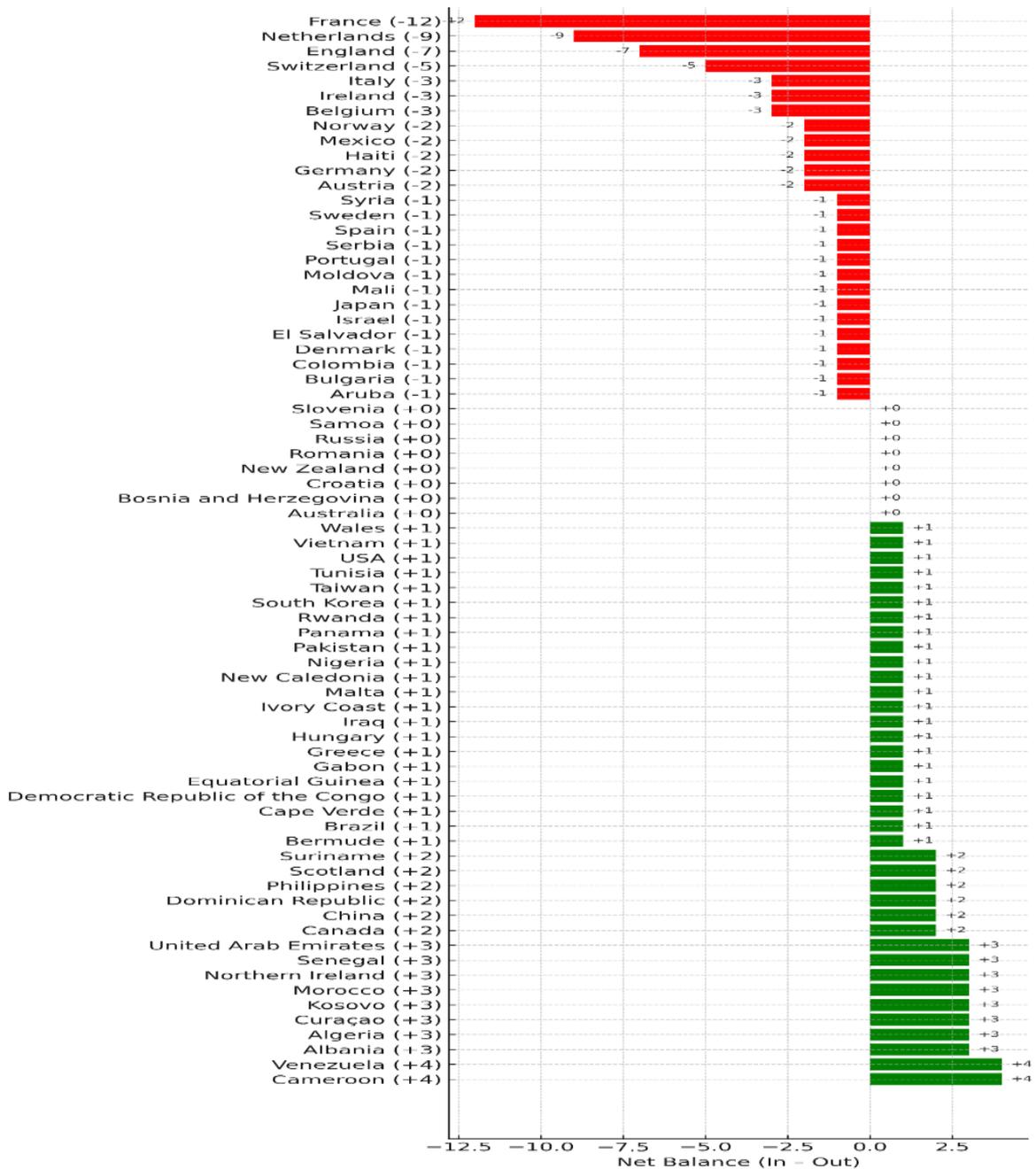
³ We use the terms “Global North” and “Global South” to indicate, in simplified form, the divide between more and less developed countries and its impact on migration patterns.

point in the opposite direction: it is the Global South that is now extracting talent, largely at the expense of the Global North (Table 1).

Cameroon +4 (4-0)	Venezuela +4 (5-1)	Albania +3 (3-0)
Algeria +3 (3-0)	Curaçao +3 (3-0)	Kosovo +3 (5-2)
Morocco +3 (3-0)	Northern Ireland +3 (3-0)	Senegal +3 (3-0)
United Arab Emirates +3 (3-0)	Canada +2 (3-1)	China +2 (2-0)
Dominican Republic +2 (2-0)	Philippines +2 (2-0)	Scotland +2 (2-0)
Suriname +2 (2-0)	Bermude +1 (1-0)	Brazil +1 (1-0)
Cape Verde +1 (1-0)	Democratic Republic of the Congo +1 (1-0)	Equatorial Guinea +1 (1-0)
Gabon +1 (1-0)	Greece +1 (2-1)	Hungary +1 (1-0)
Iraq +1 (1-0)	Ivory Coast +1 (1-0)	Malta +1 (1-0)
New Caledonia +1 (1-0)	Nigeria +1 (1-0)	Pakistan +1 (1-0)
Panama +1 (1-0)	Rwanda +1 (1-0)	South Korea +1 (1-0)
Taiwan +1 (1-0)	Tunisia +1 (1-0)	USA +1 (3-2)
Vietnam +1 (1-0)	Wales +1 (1-0)	Australia +0 (3-3)
Bosnia and Herzegovina +0 (1-1)	Croatia +0 (2-2)	New Zealand +0 (1-1)
Romania +0 (1-1)	Russia +0 (2-2)	Samoa +0 (1-1)
Slovenia +0 (1-1)	Aruba -1 (0-1)	Bulgaria -1 (0-1)
Colombia -1 (0-1)	Denmark -1 (0-1)	El Salvador -1 (0-1)
Israel -1 (0-1)	Japan -1 (0-1)	Mali -1 (0-1)
Moldova -1 (1-2)	Portugal -1 (1-2)	Serbia -1 (0-1)
Spain -1 (2-3)	Sweden -1 (1-2)	Syria -1 (0-1)
Austria -2 (0-2)	Germany -2 (0-2)	Haiti -2 (0-2)
Mexico -2 (0-2)	Norway -2 (1-3)	Belgium -3 (1-4)
Ireland -3 (0-3)	Italy -3 (0-3)	Switzerland -5 (1-6)
England -7 (0-7)	Netherlands -9 (0-9)	France -12 (0-12)

Table 1 - Net balance of nationality changes (January–September 2025) – Net balance of nationality changes by country, calculated as the difference between players acquired (“In”) and players lost (“Out”). Data sourced from the FIFA Change of Association Platform (FCAP), last accessed September 27, 2025. Our elaboration, table elaborated with the help of AI.

The data and their implications are most effectively conveyed through a graphical representation, in which the classification order is reversed—placing the sending countries at the top and the host countries at the bottom (see Graph 1).



Graph 1 – Net balance of nationality changes January–September 2025. Our elaboration, graph generated with the help of AI.

The overall data reveal a range of implications when disaggregated to identify the specific migration corridors that are activated at different times (van Campenhout and van Sterkenburg, 2019). In the case of France (Table 2), the twelve footballers (eight men and four women) who have chosen to represent another national team are predominantly linked

to the colonial migration corridor – three to Algeria, three to Cameroon, one each to Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco, Gabon, and Senegal – with the exception of two cases that fall within the guest-worker corridor (Portugal and Rwanda).

Name	Gender	New National Team	Migration Corridor
Inès Belloumou	Female	Algeria	Colonial
Yanis Sellami	Male	Algeria	Colonial
Luca Zinedine Zidane	Male	Algeria	Colonial
Nathan N'Goumou Minpole	Male	Cameroon	Colonial
Mathilde Cécile Adèle Kack	Female	Cameroon	Colonial
Jessy Danielle Roux	Female	Cameroon	Colonial
Alban-Marc Lafont	Male	Côte d'Ivoire	Colonial
Pascal George Noah Lemina	Male	Gabon	Colonial
Yahis Ahmed Erraddaf	Male	Morocco	Colonial
Alice Marques	Female	Portugal	Guest-worker
Aly-Enzo Hamon	Male	Rwanda	Guest-worker
Yehvann Djbril Victor Diouf	Male	Senegal	Colonial
Total: 12 players	Total: 8 male, 4 female	Total: 8 nationalities	Total: 10 colonial, 2 guest-worker

Table 2: Players Changing Nationality from France in 2025. N.B.: Yahis Ahmed Erraddaf is a futsal player. Our elaboration, table generated with the help of AI.

The Dutch case shows an even clearer dominance of the colonial migration corridor: two-thirds of the players who changed their sporting nationality in 2025 did so in favour of countries historically connected to the Netherlands through colonial ties, particularly Curaçao, Suriname, and Indonesia. This pattern confirms the continuing centrality of the colonial corridor in structuring Dutch sporting diasporas, while the remaining cases align with the guest-worker corridor, reflecting more recent migration flows.

Name	Gender	New National Team	Migration Corridor
Joline Armani	Female	Cape Verde	Colonial
Tahiti José Girigorio Djorkaef Chong	Male	Curaçao	Colonial
Shurandi Ruggerio Sambo	Male	Curaçao	Colonial
Riechedly Guillermo Bazoer	Male	Curaçao	Colonial
Cristian Pablo Paulino Rosario	Male	Dominican Republic	Guest-worker
Ole Lennard Ten Haar Romenij	Male	Indonesia	Colonial
Julien Mesbahi	Male	Morocco	Guest-worker
Jean Paul Patrick Boetius	Male	Suriname	Colonial
Yannick Cereso Frederik Leliendal	Male	Suriname	Colonial
Total: 9	Total: 8 male, 1 female	Total: 6 nationalities	Total: 6 Colonial, 3 Guest-worker

Table 3 - Players Changing Nationality from the Netherlands, 2025. Our elaboration, table generated with the help of AI.

Among the three main sending countries, England offers an analytically revealing case, as it represents a hybrid configuration of nationality and citizenship. Formally part of the United Kingdom – alongside Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland – England is not a sovereign

state but maintains its own football association. This institutional peculiarity has long facilitated nationality switches among the four British associations (and with a fifth too, the Irish national federation), even before globalisation, making England a valuable case for analysing how such dynamics have evolved in the global era.

Name	Gender	New National Team	Migration Corridor
Alessandra Eliot Hughes	Female	Bermuda	Colonial (British Overseas Territory)
Daniel Namasso Loader	Male	Cameroon	Colonial
Daniel Jebbison	Male	Canada	Colonial
Aaron Wan-Bissaka	Male	DR Congo	Colonial
George David Eric Hirst	Male	Scotland	Internal UK Corridor
Charlotte Rose Wardlaw	Female	Scotland	Internal UK Corridor
Scarlet Hill	Female	Wales	Internal UK Corridor
Total: 7 players	total: 4 male, 3 female	total: 6 nationalities	total: 4 Colonial, 3 Internal UK

Table 4 – List of players born in England who changed national team affiliation in 2025. Our elaboration, table generated with AI help.

Athletes who opt to represent another national team typically follow two distinct pathways. The first is the colonial corridor, which reflects historical ties between former metropolises and their colonies. The second corresponds to what van Campenhout and van Sterkenburg (2019) term the geographic proximity corridor, which, in the British case, can be more precisely described as the internal UK corridor, since it operates within a single state framework encompassing four separate football associations.

Having reviewed the countries with the highest outflows of footballers, we now turn to a final and particularly significant case: Switzerland. The country's long-standing immigration tradition has shaped its sporting landscape, producing national teams largely composed of immigrants or their descendants. The broad acceptance of dual citizenship, together with FIFA's more flexible rules on eligibility, has turned Swiss football into a mosaic of diasporas increasingly targeted by the federations of sending countries. Here, the dominant migration corridor is the guest-worker one, with a single exception: Stefan Gatenmann, born in Denmark and naturalised through his Swiss grandfather. His case, which lies outside the three corridors identified by van Campenhout and van Sterkenburg (2019), points to a possible fourth type – an ancestry-based corridor – capturing eligibility derived from descent.

Name	Gender	New National Team	Migration corridor
Stefan Gatenmann	Male	Switzerland (former: Denmark)	Ancestry-based naturalization
Ermann Kospo	Male	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Guest-worker
Yang Mingyang	Male	China	Guest-worker
Kevin Krasniqi	Male	Kosovo	Guest-worker
Leon Frokaj	Male	Kosovo	Guest-worker
Leon Avdullahu	Male	Kosovo	Guest-worker
Randy Abogo Schneider	Male	Philippines	Guest-worker
Total: 7	Total: 7 Male	Total: 5 nationalities	Total: 6 Guest-worker, 1 Ancestry-based

Table 5 – Nationality changes involving Switzerland in 2025. Our elaboration, table generated with AI help.

Analysis of key national cases yields two main insights. First, if the concept of muscle drain is to be retained, it can no longer describe a one-way flow benefiting the Global North. The direction has largely reversed: countries of the Global South now draw on their diasporas to recruit players trained in better-resourced systems, reflecting a redistributive effect of NHC shaped by globalisation. Second, diaspora-based recruitment channels have diversified, linked variously to colonial legacies, labour migration, geographic proximity, and increasingly, descent. Taken together, these dynamics show that diaspora mobilisation has become a structural feature of international sport – a trend likely to intensify.

5. Diaspora as a strategic asset: scouting and mobilising talent

The final section of this essay offers a concise review of four of the most significant case studies of NHC expansion implemented by national football federations through systematic scouting of their diasporas. These four cases were selected not only because they represent three distinct geopolitical regions – Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Southeast Asia – but also because they illustrate different approaches to using talent scouting (TS) as a tool for identifying and recruiting players. The countries considered, presented here in alphabetical order, are Albania, Indonesia, Morocco, and Poland.

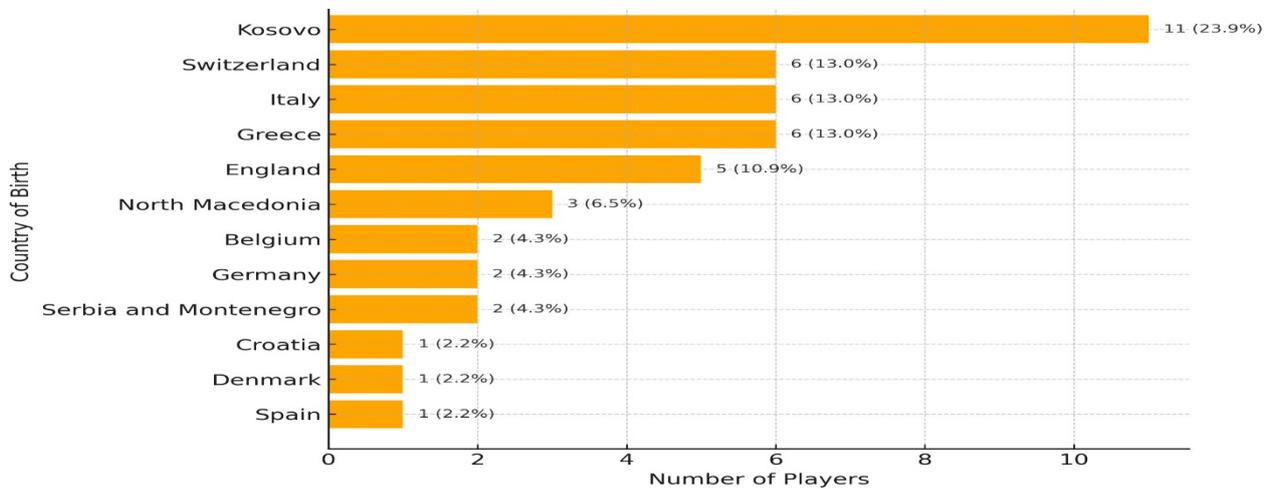
Albania – In the most recent edition of the European Football Championship (2024), the Albanian national team fielded the highest number of foreign-born players: 18 out of the 26 players selected. This is a remarkable figure – made even more striking when compared with the two teams tied for second place in this ranking, Croatia and Turkey, which each registered only 8 foreign-born players out of 26. The fact that Albania entered the final stage of a major tournament with a squad composed of three-quarters foreign-born players is emblematic of the policy pursued by the Albanian Football Federation (FSHF), which, since the late 2010s, has made diaspora scouting a central pillar of its talent acquisition strategy. Since 2015, the Albanian national team has included 46 players born abroad, (Table 6).

No.	Name	Country	First cap	No.	Name	Country	First cap
1	Naser Aliji	North Macedonia	2015	24	Marash Kumbulla	Italy	2019
2	Berat Djimsiti	Switzerland	2015	25	Taulant Seferi	North Macedonia	2019
3	Arbnor Fejzullahu	Serbia	2015	26	Lindon Selahi	Belgium	2019
4	Frédéric Veseli	Switzerland	2015	27	Armando Broja	England	2020
5	Azdrën Llullaku	Kosovo	2016	28	Ramën Çepele	Italy	2020
6	Milot Rashica	Kosovo	2016	29	Nedim Bajrami	Switzerland	2021
7	Valon Ahmed	North Macedonia	2017	30	Mario Mitaj	Greece	2021
8	Astrit Ajdarević	Kosovo	2017	31	Adrian Bajrami	Switzerland	2022
9	Ivën Balliu	Spain	2017	32	Stivian Janku	Greece	2022
10	Eros Grezda	Kosovo	2017	33	Esat Mala	Kosovo	2022
11	Liridon Latifi	Kosovo	2017	34	Arbnor Muçolli	Denmark	2022
12	Kamer Qaka	Kosovo	2017	35	Ardit Toli	Greece	2022
13	Thomas Strakosha	Greece	2017	36	Jasir Asani	North Macedonia	2023
14	Egzon Binaku	Sweden	2018	37	Mirlind Daku	Kosovo	2023
15	Kastriot Dermaku	Italy	2018	38	Anis Mehmeti	England	2023
16	Enis Gavazaj	Kosovo	2018	39	Arbnor Muja	Kosovo	2023
17	Arđian Ismajli	Serbia and Montenegro	2018	40	Marvin Çuni	Germany	2023
18	Bujar Lika	Kosovo	2018	41	Medon Berisha	Switzerland	2024
19	Enea Mihaj	Greece	2018	42	Arbër Hoxha	Kosovo	2024
20	Emanuele Ndoj	Italy	2018	43	Sebastjan Spahiu	Belgium	2024
21	Herdë Prenga	Croatia	2018	44	Maldini Kacurri	England	2025
22	Ylber Ramadani	Germany	2018	45	Adriën Pajaziti	England	2025
23	Giacomo Vrioni	Italy	2018	46	Cristian Shpendi	Italy	2025

Table 6 – List of naturalised players who have played for the Albanian national team since 2015. Our elaboration, table generated with the help of AI.

The distribution of these 46 footballers by country of birth (Graph 2) reflects the broader migratory dynamics of a nation whose diaspora ranks among the largest worldwide in relative terms. Data from the most recent general census of the Albanian population estimate that, as

of 2019, approximately 1.7 million Albanians were residing abroad – corresponding to 36.3% of the 2.8 million individuals living in Albania (INSTAT, 2020).



Graph 2. Distribution by country of birth of the 46 foreign-born footballers selected during the period 2015–2025 to represent the Albanian national football team. Our elaboration, graph generated with the help of AI.

FCAP data indicate that, in the first nine months of 2025 alone, three additional players from the Albanian diaspora acquired this status: Arman Durmisi (born in Slovenia), Etnik Brruti (born in Kosovo), and Gabriel Ramaj (born in Italy). Returning to the concept of brain banking (Agrawal, McHale and Oettl, 2011) and transposing it into the sporting arena, we may observe a phenomenon of muscle banking, whereby benefits flow back from the diaspora to the homeland. The decision to tap into the diaspora in order to enhance the competitiveness of the Albanian national team is undoubtedly the outcome of a deliberate choice by the national federation. At the same time, it aligns with a broader policy pursued by the central government, aimed at increasing the resources of national human capital (NHC) through a talent-circulation (TC) strategy and the adoption of the principle of skilled citizenship. This policy orientation is clearly reflected in the recent amendments to the Albanian Citizenship Law (Law No. 113/2020). The first paragraph of Article 9, entitled “Special cases of acquisition of Albanian citizenship” reads as follows:

Albanian citizenship may be granted to a foreign citizen over 18 (eighteen) years of age, provided that he or

she does not pose a threat to the public order and national security of the Republic of Albania, as well as in cases where this is in the national interest or in the interest of education, science, art, culture, economy, and sport in the Republic of Albania.⁴

With regard to the actions of the national federation, these have been increasingly professionalised through the adoption of a scientifically grounded method based on an algorithm – an approach that has drawn considerable attention from the international press. Moreover, scouting activities based on the algorithm are complemented by internship programmes organised in countries with significant Albanian emigrant communities, with the aim of identifying players eligible to represent the Albanian national teams. As for migration corridors, the cases of Albanian footballers constitute a combination of the guest-worker corridor and what we propose to term the ancestry-based corridor, which in this context reflects the complex ethno-cultural mosaic of the Balkan region. Finally, the criticisms directed at this programme (summarised here, as in the other sections devoted to individual national cases, in order not to overburden the overall structure of this article) may be grouped under three main headings:

1. allegations of “talent poaching” by the Albanian federation, particularly from countries such as Kosovo, which may lose players on the basis of shared ethno-cultural heritage;
2. concerns about an excessive gap between the technical level of the strengthened national team and that of the domestic league;
3. questions surrounding the loyalty and commitment of diaspora players, an issue that surfaces mainly among supporters, particularly through social media debates.

Indonesia – The Indonesian case offers an additional variation on the theme of diaspora scouting. As in several other Southeast Asian countries since the early 21st century, the recruitment of foreign-born talent has been a widespread practice; however, in recent years this process has noticeably accelerated. Since 2022, the strengthening of both the men’s and women’s national football teams has become an explicit policy objective of the Indonesian

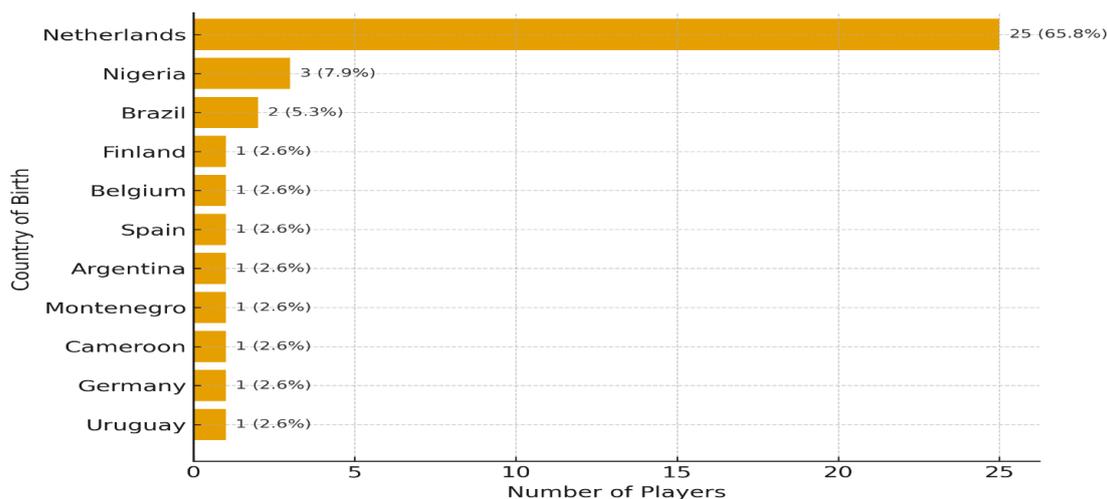
⁴ Republic of Albania The People’s Assembly, Law no. 113/2020 on Citizenship.

government. This development has been closely associated with a singular figure: Erick Thohir. A prominent media mogul in Indonesia, Thohir epitomises the intersection of football and politics. Former president and owner of one of the world's most prestigious football clubs, Internazionale Milano, as well as owner of Persib Solo and president of the Indonesian Football Federation (PSSI), Thohir has, since September 2025, served as Minister of Sport and Youth, following a term as Minister of State-Owned Enterprises. Thanks to this dual and highly influential role, Thohir was able to facilitate the process of granting Indonesian citizenship to footballers identified as strategically important for the national team. Thohir inaugurated an ambitious TS policy, systematically recruiting from the diaspora with a primary focus on Dutch-born players (Table 7).

#	Player	Country	Year
1	Cristian Gonzales	Uruguay	2010
2	Kim Kurniawan	Germany	2010
3	Diego Michiels	Netherlands	2011
4	Greg Nwokolo	Nigeria	2011
5	Victor Igbonefo	Nigeria	2011
6	Jhon van Beukering	Netherlands	2011
7	Tonnie Cusell	Netherlands	2011
8	Stefano Lilipaly	Netherlands	2011
9	Raphael Maitimo	Netherlands	2011
10	Sergio van Dijk	Netherlands	2013
11	Ila Paulin	Cameroon	2015
12	Ezra Walian	Netherlands	2017
13	Ilija Spasojević	Montenegro	2017
14	Beto Gonçalves	Brazil	2018
15	Esteban Vizcarra	Argentina	2018
16	Osas Saha	Nigeria	2018
17	Otávio Dutra	Brazil	2019
18	Marc Klok	Netherlands	2020
19	Jordi Amat	Spain	2022
20	Sandy Walsh	Belgium	2022
21	Shayne Pattynama	Netherlands	2023
22	Rafael Struick	Netherlands	2023
23	Ivar Jenner	Netherlands	2023
24	Justin Hubner	Netherlands	2023
25	Jay Idzes	Netherlands	2023
26	Nathan Tjoe-A-On	Netherlands	2024
27	Ragnar Oratmangoen	Netherlands	2024
28	Thom Haye	Netherlands	2024
29	Maarten Paes	Netherlands	2024
30	Calvin Verdonk	Netherlands	2024
31	Mees Hilgers	Netherlands	2024
32	Eliano Reijnders	Finland	2024
33	Kevin Diks	Netherlands	2024
34	Ole Romeny	Netherlands	2025
35	Dean James	Netherlands	2025
36	Joey Pelupessy	Netherlands	2025
37	Mauro Zijlstra	Netherlands	2025
38	Milliano Jonathans	Netherlands	2025

Table 7. Foreign-born footballers naturalised to play for the Indonesian national team (2010–2025). The table lists each player's name, country of birth, and year of naturalisation. Our elaboration, table generated with the help of AI.

The overwhelming predominance of Dutch players (65.8%) clearly indicates that, within the diaspora corridor mobilised to expand national football NHC, priority has been accorded to the Dutch football school – one of the most advanced in Europe in terms of talent formation (TF). This case thus exemplifies a post-colonial redistribution of talent: a muscle drain that benefits the Global South rather than depleting it (Graph 3).



Graph 3 – Distribution of naturalised footballers who played for Indonesia national team, by country of birth, between 2010 and 2025. Our elaboration, graph generated with the help of AI.

Compared to Albania, in Indonesia the scouting system has only recently completed its implementation phase and is just beginning to operate effectively. Until now, the recruitment of foreign-born athletes has relied on poorly structured channels. This may also help explain the disproportionate reliance on the Dutch channel, in addition to the fact that it is linked to one of the most advanced football schools available. The preferred migration corridor has been the colonial one. As for the criticisms prompted by the recent large-scale reliance on foreign-born athletes, these have focused on three main issues:

1. the perceived loss of national identity, given that in certain matches the Indonesian team fielded eleven foreign-born players;
2. objections from the political sphere (particularly opposition parties) as well as from Indonesian coaches, who fear that the national training system may be undermined;
3. concerns among supporters, some of whom question the sense of belonging displayed by foreign-born players.

Morocco – In addition to its numerical relevance, Morocco stands out as a success story in sporting terms. At the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, the Moroccan national team achieved the best result ever by an African side, reaching the semi-finals and finishing fourth. This success was largely driven by the extensive use of foreign-born players, which placed Morocco at the top of the rankings for both the 2018 and 2022 tournaments (Table 8). By contrast, in the four

World Cups of the 20th century – Mexico 1970, Mexico 1986, USA 1994, and France 1998 – only three foreign-born players appeared for Morocco. The sharp increase in 2018 (17 players) and 2022 (14) marks a decisive shift toward diaspora-based recruitment, a relatively recent but transformative practice for Moroccan football.

2018

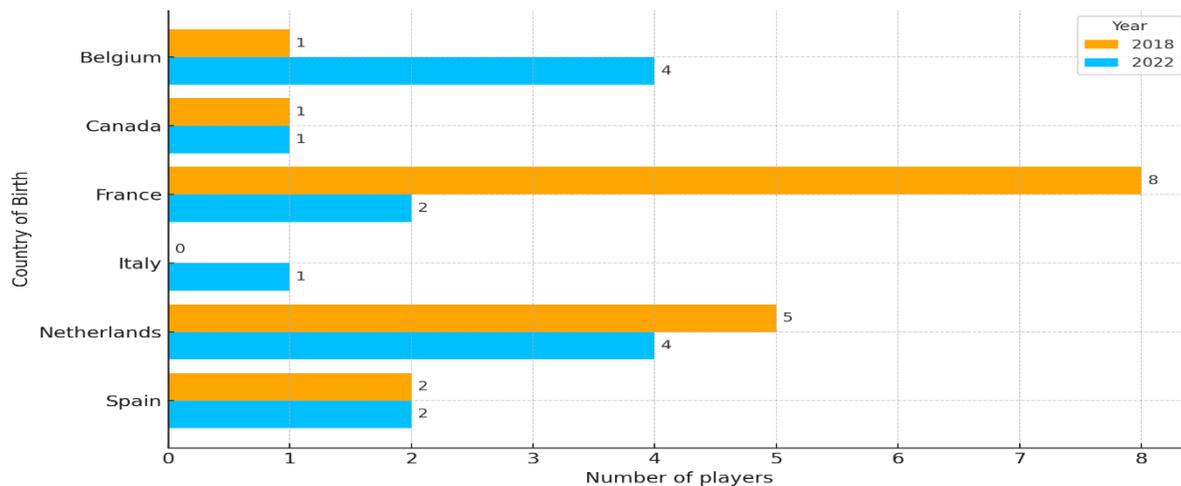
2022

Player	Country of Birth
Mehdi Carcela	Belgium
Yassine Bounou	Canada
Amine Harit	France
Fayçal Fajr	France
Khalid Boutaïb	France
Manuel da Costa	France
Medhi Benatia	France
Romain Saïss	France
Younès Belhanda	France
Youssef Aït Bennasser	France
Hakim Ziyech	Netherlands
Karim El Ahmadi	Netherlands
Mbark Boussoufa	Netherlands
Nordin Amrabat	Netherlands
Sofyan Amrabat	Netherlands
Achraf Hakimi	Spain
Munir Mohamedi	Spain

Player	Country of Birth
Anass Zaroury	Belgium
Bilal El Khannouss	Belgium
Ilias Chair	Belgium
Selim Amallah	Belgium
Yassine Bounou	Canada
Romain Saïss	France
Sofiane Boufal	France
Walid Cheddira	Italy
Hakim Ziyech	Netherlands
Noussair Mazraoui	Netherlands
Sofyan Amrabat	Netherlands
Zakaria Aboukhilal	Netherlands
Achraf Hakimi	Spain
Munir Mohamedi	Spain

Table 8. Foreign-born players included in Morocco’s national team squads for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups. Our elaboration, table generated with the help of AI.

It is worth noting that between 2018 and 2022 the number of French-born players fell to a quarter (from 8 to 2), while the number of Belgian-born players moved in the opposite direction, quadrupling from 1 to 4, and the number of players originating from other European and non-European countries remained stable (Graph 4).



Graph 4. Foreign-born players in Morocco's national football team at the FIFA World Cups of 2018 and 2022, disaggregated by country of birth. Our elaboration, graph generated with the help of AI.

The Moroccan Football Federation (FRMF) has also established a scouting programme. Available information – mainly from journalistic sources – points to a network of agents who travel to countries with significant Moroccan diasporas and report to the FRMF on players of potential national interest. Public reactions have been largely positive, in contrast to the criticisms seen in the Albanian and Indonesian cases and echoed in Poland. This approval stems from Morocco's recent sporting success, which has fostered patriotic pride and reshaped perceptions of foreign-born players. Their inclusion is framed within the rhetoric that “every Moroccan is Moroccan,” consistent with the aggregative logic linking nationality and citizenship discussed earlier. The programme also benefits from full political backing, notably the personal support of King Mohammed VI.

Poland – Among the four cases analysed, Poland presents a distinctive scenario. Unlike Albania, Indonesia, or Morocco, it has long maintained a football school of medium-to-high international competitiveness, as evidenced by its third-place finishes at the 1974 and 1982 FIFA World Cups. This tradition explains the comparatively limited number of foreign-born players integrated into the national team. Yet, despite this modest reliance on diaspora talent, the Polish Football Association (PZPN) has developed the most extensive and institutionalised scouting system among the cases considered. Since the mid-2000s, through the *Gromy dla Polski* (“We Play for Poland”) programme, the PZPN has coordinated a

structured international network for identifying and recruiting players of Polish descent born abroad.

No.	Name	Country of birth	Naturalization matrix	First Cap
1	Emmanuel Olisadebe	Nigeria	Legal (Marriage)	2000
2	Vahan Gevorgyan	Armenia	Legal	2004
3	Roger Guerreiro	Brazil	(Long-term residence)	2008
4	Ludovic Obraniak	France	(Long-term residence)	2009
5	Damien Perquis	France	Ancestry	2011
6	Thiago Cionek	Brazil	Ancestry	2014
7	Taras Romanczuk	Ukraine	Ancestry	2018
8	Matty Cash	England	Ancestry	2021
9	Nicola Zalewski	Italy	Ancestry	2021
10	Maxi Oyedele	England	Ancestry	2024

Table 9. Foreign-born players who have represented the Polish national team (2000–2024), with country of birth, naturalisation matrix, and year of first cap. Our elaboration, table generated with the help of AI.

Between 2000 and 2024, only ten foreign-born players represented the national team. Yet, the case remains analytically relevant because of the PZPN’s work on the diaspora is clearly focused on the grassroots level. A network of regional managers is responsible for monitoring the countries that have experienced the largest flows of Polish emigration. In these countries, regular meetings are organised at which young footballers of Polish origin are tested and entered into a centralised database. These events also serve to reinforce the bond between the diaspora and the homeland. In addition, foreign-born players deemed potentially relevant for Polish national teams are offered career management programmes that make the PZPN resemble, in part, a players’ agency. Finally, members of the diaspora are provided with a form through which they can report promising young players of Polish origin who may be of national interest. As for the role of the Polish government, it intervened promptly when it came to expediting naturalisation procedures for strategically important players. Yet the design and implementation of structured programmes aimed at increasing NHC through diaspora scouting remain the exclusive prerogative of the PZPN, which has institutionalised the most comprehensive model among the cases analysed. Finally, the Polish scouting programme has also attracted criticism, both domestically and internationally. These criticisms may be grouped under three main headings:

1. naturalised players have been accused of not being “sufficiently Polish,” lacking the sense of belonging regarded as essential when wearing the national team jersey;

2. it has been argued that, with few exceptions, naturalised players have not significantly enhanced the competitive quality of the national team;
3. externally, the PZPN has been accused of “talent poaching,” that is, engaging in unfair competition with the federations of other countries.

Taken together, the four case studies illustrate the diversity of strategies adopted by national federations to expand their national human capital through diaspora scouting. Albania represents the most extreme case in quantitative terms, with a national team largely composed of foreign-born players. Indonesia epitomises the role of state-driven naturalisation policies, closely linked to political leadership. Morocco demonstrates how the mobilisation of diaspora talent can be transformed into a unifying narrative when combined with major sporting achievements. Poland, finally, shows that even countries with a historically competitive football tradition have embraced structured diaspora scouting, institutionalising what is arguably the most comprehensive programme among those examined. Viewed in comparative perspective, these cases highlight both the opportunities and the tensions associated with the strategic mobilisation of diasporas as reservoirs of national human capital.

6. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this article is to propose – using the world of sport as an interpretative lens – an analysis of the ongoing transformation in the balance between citizenship and nationality within societies increasingly shaped by the cultural dynamics of globalization. In particular, the paper focuses on the theme of competition aimed at enhancing national human capital (NHC). The international circulation of talent and its subsequent “nationalization” constitute a relatively recent phenomenon in the realm of sport, but they also represent an area where countermeasures have been implemented to prevent market forces from distorting competitive balance and, more importantly, from undermining the conditions of equal citizenship. Within this framework – where the renewed prominence of nation-states aligns with the changing logic of hyper-citizenship – the phenomenon of diaspora emerges as a privileged driver in the application of aggregative strategies for talent acquisition and the

enhancement of NHC. All of this unfolds through a modus operandi centred on talent acquisition – a practice that has reached unprecedented levels in the world of sport, which, in turn, provides particularly effective tools for interpretation. Within this conceptual perimeter, the choice of football as a significant case study has made it possible to illuminate the functioning of acquisition logics and their underlying mechanisms, as well as to reveal a range of models intertwined with distinct historical and social contexts and their specificities. The argument we advance at the conclusion of this article is that the world of sport constitutes a highly productive field for interpreting broader processes of social change. Within this methodological framework, questions of citizenship and national belonging emerge as particularly significant cases: they find clear empirical expressions in the sporting domain, offering valuable insights for understanding more complex systems of membership and identity.

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