

(SP) EVOLUTION OF FOREIGN PLAYERS IN PROFESSIONAL BELGIAN FOOTBALL

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Introduction

As was already pointed out by Bale and Maguire in 1994, professional football is currently one of the most globalised sports in the world. Migration for professional sport is definitely not a new phenomenon, but with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Bosman court case, migration of elite football players to Belgium has taken new proportions. For many football players the great demand and the financial prospects were crucial elements to build a career in Western Europe.

The purpose of this study was to analyse the evolution of foreign players (EU- and non-EU citizens without Belgian nationality) in the Belgian first division of football. Data were analysed from playing season 1984-1985 to season 2003-2004.

Methods

The data for this study were obtained from 'Voetbalgids', a newspaper section that appears every year in 'Het Nieuwsblad / De Gentenaar' at the start of the football season and that includes all players and nationalities of the first division. Based on these data, not only the proportion of foreign players was mapped out for the period 1984-1985 to 2005-2006, also trends in diversity of the player population and shifts in countries of origin were studied. The data were analysed in a quantitative, descriptive manner.

Results

The results of the study clearly show that the proportion of foreign players has significantly increased over the last 21 years. Whereas almost 80 % of all players in the first division in 1984-1985 had the Belgian nationality, this group only comprised 54 % of the total player population in 2005-2006. When absolute numbers are observed, a similar trend comes forward. Over the same period of time, from 1984-1985 to 2005-2006, the total number of players in first division increased from 370 to 441. Yet, the absolute number of Belgian players dropped with 19 %.

With regard to the diversity of professional football, vast changes can be observed over the last 21 years. In the season 1984-1985, less than 20 different nationalities were represented in the first and second division. 21 years later, players with 53 different nationalities can be spotted in the same leagues. Especially the proportion of African players has increased over the last 21 years, from less than 5 % of the total player population in first division to 15 % of all players. Also the number of players from Eastern Europe on the Belgian fields has seriously grown. Very few players from Asia, North America or Australia are recruited by the Belgian football clubs in first division.

Discussion

One of the main features of globalisation – although a very complex and multifaceted phenomenon – is often referred to as *ethnoscape*, which can be understood as the increasing mobility of tourists, service workers (including professional athletes), migrants, refugees, or any other persons. The migration of great numbers of football players to Western Europe, including Belgium, can be explained through a number of push and pull factors. The Bosman court case, through which legal obstacles for player mobility were removed, made the recruitment of foreign players more interesting for clubs and led to an increase in the flow of players between clubs from different countries. Many clubs find foreign players, which come from countries where the standard of living has not reached the same level as in Belgium, prepared to play for relatively low wages and therefore economically interesting.

Although the presence of a large contingent of foreign football players in itself is not problematic, we have to be cautious of the dangers that accompany this evolution. Great numbers of foreign players, for instance, are recruited by player agents, attracted by hopes for better life circumstances, but many of them never get a contract with professional clubs and are left to their own devices once they arrive in Belgium. On the other hand, talented youngsters from Belgium should not be pushed back by economic forces, and also get chances for development, so that they can reach their full potential.

References

Bale, J. and Maguire, J. (1994) (eds.) *The global sports arena athletic talent migration in an interdependent world*, Frank Cass, London.

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