Internationalisation and Brazilian national team performance: A temporal extension across the 2006–2026 World Cups

Internacionalización y rendimiento de la selección brasileña: extensión temporal en las Copas del Mundo de 2006–2026

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Abstract

Introduction: The concentration of players in foreign leagues has been associated with the relative decline of the Brazilian national team, although the "abroad" category combines labour markets of unequal competitive strength.
Objective: To re-examine the relationship between the labour geography of selected players and Brazil's performance at the 2006–2026 World Cups by decomposing employment abroad according to league centrality.
Methodology: A longitudinal documentary study was conducted as a temporal extension and critical-case test. Six complete squads and 144 player-edition records were analysed. Players were classified into the Brazilian league, the European Big Five, and other foreign leagues. Proportions, percentage-point differences, the Herfindahl–Hirschman index, and the effective number of markets were calculated. The tournament stage reached represented performance.
Results: Between 2022 and 2026, the Brazilian league's share rose from 11.5% to 26.9%, while employment abroad fell from 88.5% to 73.1%, and the Big Five share declined from 84.6% to 53.8%. Dispersion increased from 3.52 to 5.04 effective markets. Over the same period, Brazil moved from the quarter-finals to the round of 16.
Discussion: Sporting performance worsened despite lower internationalisation and lower centrality, contradicting a monotonic association between employment abroad and decline. The findings also showed that intensity, centrality, and dispersion are distinct dimensions.
Conclusions: The Brazil/abroad dichotomy did not explain the observed trajectory. Labour geography should be treated as a hierarchical composition of destinations, with no causal attribution based on six tournament editions.

Keywords

Football; globalisation; labour market; sport migration; world cup.

Resumen

Introducción: La concentración de jugadores en ligas extranjeras se ha asociado con el declive relativo de la selección brasileña, aunque el término "extranjero" agrupa mercados laborales con niveles de competitividad desiguales.
Objetivo: Reexaminar la relación entre la geografía laboral de los convocados y el rendimiento de Brasil en los mundiales de 2006–2026, desagregando el empleo exterior según la centralidad de la liga.
Metodología: Se realizó un estudio documental longitudinal, como extensión temporal y como prueba de caso crítico. Se analizaron seis plantillas y 144 registros jugador-edición, provenientes de la liga brasileña, la Big Five europea y otras ligas extranjeras. Se calcularon proporciones, diferencias porcentuales, el índice de Herfindahl–Hirschman y el número efectivo de mercados; la fase alcanzada representó el rendimiento.
Resultados: Entre 2022 y 2026, la liga brasileña aumentó del 11,5% al 26,9%, el empleo exterior disminuyó del 88,5% al 73,1% y el Big Five cayó del 84,6% al 53,8%. La dispersión aumentó de 3,52 a 5,04 mercados efectivos. Brasil pasó de cuartos a octavos de final.
Discusión: El rendimiento empeoró con menor internacionalización y centralidad, lo que contradice la asociación monotónica entre el empleo exterior y el declive. Este patrón fue consistente con la evidencia que destaca la calidad del destino. Intensidad, centralidad y dispersión resultaron ser dimensiones distintas.
Conclusiones: La dicotomía Brasil/extranjero no explicó la trayectoria. La geografía laboral debe abordarse como una composición jerárquica de destinos, sin atribuir causalidad a partir de seis ediciones.

Palabras clave

Copa del Mundo; fútbol; globalización; mercado laboral; migración deportiva.

Introduction

International player mobility has become a structural component of professional football. Regulatory liberalisation, the expansion of recruitment networks, and the concentration of revenues in a small number of competitions have shaped an international division of sporting labour in which countries, leagues, and clubs occupy unequal positions (Darby et al., 2007; Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001; Maguire & Stead, 1998; Poli, 2010). In this system, mobility is not reducible to movement between territories. It entails differentiated access to remuneration, infrastructure, competitive intensity, media exposure, and opportunities for career progression.

This structure is simultaneously global and segmented. An analysis of transfers between 2006 and 2022 showed that linguistic, economic, and geographical proximity continue to account for a large share of flows, even when markets connect countries across every continent (Velema, 2025). Network studies have also identified the brokerage role played by clubs in the leading European leagues and the persistence of recruitment circuits organised by levels of prestige and resources (Velema, 2021; Yang et al., 2025). Thus, playing outside the country of origin does not define a single position: migration may represent entry into the competitive core, a lateral move, an intermediate platform, a return, or a move to a market attractive primarily because of remuneration (Velema, 2018).

The relationship between mobility and national-team performance remains contested. Comparative studies have found positive effects when migration is weighted by the quality of the destination club or league, particularly for countries whose domestic competitions offer lower competitive intensity (Berlinschi et al., 2013). In a panel of 243 countries, Lago-Peñas et al. (2019) showed that causality operates in both directions and over different time horizons: strong international results immediately increase players' visibility, whereas potential learning gains associated with migration emerge only in the medium or long term. By contrast, Frick (2009) found no uniform benefit of mobility for international performance. Taken together, this evidence cautions against interpreting the proportion of athletes employed abroad as a contemporaneous and isolated cause of a national team's results.

More recent literature reinforces the need to disaggregate international experience. The competitive contribution of foreign players in the five leading European leagues varies by minutes played, position, and context of use. In contrast, South American players constitute a substantial presence in this core (Zhang & Jiang, 2022). At the same time, experiences of adaptation, belonging, and transnational work are shaped by institutional resources, individual trajectories, and conditions of reception (Agergaard et al., 2023; Dhaliwal et al., 2026; Lally et al., 2022). The category of a 'player abroad' therefore combines substantively different sporting and labour exposures.

Brazil constitutes a particularly informative case. The country combines a successful national-team tradition, a sustained capacity to develop and export players, and an economically significant domestic league. This configuration supported the hypothesis that the early departure of leading talents would contribute to the weakening of clubs and to the national team's relative decline. In a documentary study published before the 2026 World Cup, Pilatti et al. (2026) identified a temporal coincidence between the predominance of selected players employed abroad and Brazil's sequence of eliminations following the 2002 title. The conclusion was cautious regarding causality but retained internationalisation as one component of the problem.

The inference remained limited by a dichotomous measure. The Premier League, Bundesliga, LaLiga, Serie A, and Ligue 1—hereafter the Big Five—were treated in the same category as intermediate or peripheral competitions. Moreover, the number of destinations and hierarchical position were conflated: a squad distributed across many countries may be diverse while remaining weakly embedded in the competitive core. This distinction matters because the destination's relative quality affects the expected relationship between migration and capability accumulation (Berlinschi et al., 2013; Littlewood et al., 2011; Mustafi et al., 2025).

The 2026 World Cup provided a critical case for re-examining the previous proposition. Compared with 2022, Brazil selected more players from the domestic league, fewer from abroad, and a substantially smaller proportion from the Big Five. Despite this partial recentering, the national team was eliminated by Norway in the round of 16, its first exit at that stage since 1990 (Fédération Internationale de Football Association [FIFA], 2026b, 2026c). Within the logic of a crucial case, an observation is informative when

it presents conditions that are especially favourable or unfavourable to the expectation under evaluation (Gerring, 2007). If increasing internationalisation and worsening sporting performance formed a simple, monotonic negative relationship, the marked reversal of the first trend should have been compatible, at a minimum, with stabilisation of the second.

The present study is a temporal and conceptual extension of the analysis by Pilatti et al. (2026), rather than a repetition of its results. Extensions are scientifically useful when they preserve the core of a proposition, introduce a new observation that can alter its expected implications, and specify the construct under examination more precisely (Nosek & Errington, 2020). Here, the Brazil/abroad dichotomy was decomposed into domestic retention, employment in the Big Five, and employment in other foreign leagues, supplemented by measures of market concentration and diversity.

The objective was to re-examine the relationship between the labour geography of selected players and the performance of the Brazilian national team at the 2006–2026 World Cups by decomposing employment abroad according to league centrality. The analytical expectation was that the 2026 edition would make it possible to assess the series' compatibility with a monotonic association between internationalisation and decline and, simultaneously, to determine whether the intensity, centrality, and dispersion of mobility describe the same phenomenon.

Method

Study design and analytical logic

A longitudinal, descriptive-analytical documentary study was conducted and structured as a temporal extension and a critical-case test. Six census cross-sections corresponding to the 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2022, and 2026 World Cups were used. The design was not intended to estimate a causal effect of migration on performance. Its purpose was to determine whether the observation added in 2026 was compatible with the monotonic version of the previously formulated proposition and whether decomposing employment abroad altered the interpretation of the series.

The elementary unit of observation was the player-edition record. The same player was counted again when selected for more than one World Cup because their employment location could change, and the object of analysis was the composition available at each tournament. The substantive unit of comparison was the World Cup edition. This distinction prevented the 144 individual records from being treated as independent observations of performance, which varies only across six tournaments.

Population and sources

The population comprised all players officially selected by Brazil: 23 per edition from 2006 to 2018, and 26 per edition in 2022 and 2026, for a total of 144 player-edition records. There was no sampling, and there were no exclusions. For each edition, the club and competition reported in the official squad record at the start of the tournament were used. Subsequent transfers did not alter classification.

Data for 2006–2022 were re-extracted from the matrices by edition and country of employment, as published by Pilatti et al. (2026), which were constructed from records of FIFA, the Brazilian Football Confederation, and Transfermarkt. Cells were re-entered and subjected to arithmetic reconciliation: the sum by market had to equal squad size; Brazil and abroad had to be complementary categories; and the Big Five and other foreign markets had to reconstruct the total employed abroad. Use of this period as a baseline was made explicit to distinguish reanalysis from the production of new data.

For 2026, names and clubs were obtained from FIFA's official squad list (FIFA, 2026a). The competition in which each club actually participated was verified against records from the respective leagues and clubs. The tournament outcome and elimination match were checked on the official tournament pages (FIFA, 2026b, 2026c). For transnational competitions, the jurisdiction of the competition was recorded rather than merely the club's legal domicile; accordingly, Júlio César's spell with Toronto FC in 2014 was identified as Major League Soccer, a United States/Canada competition.

Variables and classification rules

The main variable was employment location at the start of each World Cup, organised into three mutually exclusive categories. The 'Brazilian league' comprised players affiliated with competitions organised in Brazil. 'Big Five' comprised the top divisions of England, Germany, Spain, Italy, and France exclusively. 'Other foreign leagues' included all competitions outside Brazil that did not belong to the Big Five. The 'abroad' measure corresponded to the sum of the latter two categories. This taxonomy separated the intensity of internationalisation—the percentage employed outside Brazil—from centrality—the percentage employed in the Big Five.

The distribution of players across national or transnational competition markets was used to measure dispersion. For each edition, the Herfindahl–Hirschman index was calculated as $HHI = \Sigma p_i^2$, where p_i denotes the proportion of the squad in market i. Higher values indicate greater concentration. The effective number of markets, 1/HHI, was also calculated; this expresses how many equally represented markets would produce the observed concentration. The raw number of markets was retained as a complementary measure.

Performance was operationalised as the last stage reached: the quarter-finals in 2006, 2010, 2018, and 2022; the semi-finals in 2014; and the round of 16 in 2026. No additional ordering was assigned to teams eliminated at the same stage, nor were rankings, goal difference, or market value used retrospectively. This choice prioritised an indicator that was directly observable and comparable within the tournament while recognising that stages reached in knockout competitions contain substantial variance.

Analysis procedures and checks

Frequencies, proportions, and percentage-point differences were calculated. The primary comparison was defined as 2022 versus 2026 because this change directly updated the expectation derived from the previous study. The 2006–2026 series was used to determine whether the most recent variation represented continuity or a break. Intensity, centrality, and dispersion were analysed separately and then combined in a compositional reading.

No significance tests, correlations, or regressions were applied. There are only six independent units of performance, four of which share the same outcome, and the corpus corresponds to the defined temporal universe rather than to a random sample. Treating player-edition records as independent would artificially inflate the sample size. The use of exact proportions and absolute differences preserved correspondence between the unit of analysis and the level of inference.

Four checks were performed: recalculation of percentages using the edition-specific denominators of 23 and 26; verification of the complementarity of Brazil and abroad; reconstruction of employment abroad as the sum of the Big Five and other leagues; and recalculation of the HHI and effective number of markets from market frequencies. The aggregate data required for reproduction are presented in full in Tables 1–3. Because the study used only publicly available professional records, with no interaction with individuals and no processing of private or sensitive information, it did not involve human participants in the experimental or observational sense.

Results

Squad employment composition

Across the six squads, 103 of the 144 player-edition records (71.5%) were in the Big Five, 23 (16.0%) in the Brazilian league, and 18 (12.5%) in other foreign leagues. Employment abroad was predominant across all editions, ranging from 73.1% in 2026 to 88.5% in 2022. The Big Five share ranged from 53.8% in 2026 to 84.6% in 2022 (Table 1).

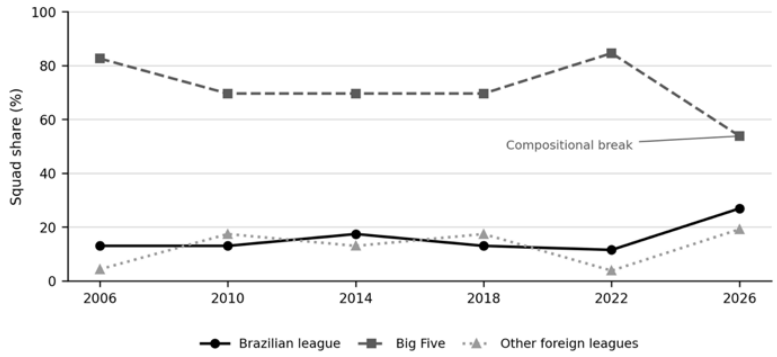
Table 1. Employment location of selected players and stage reached by Brazil, 2006–2026

World Cup	N	Brazilian league	Abroad	Big Five	Other foreign leagues	Stage
2006	23	3 (13.0%)	20 (87.0%)	19 (82.6%)	1 (4.3%)	Quarter-finals
2010	23	3 (13.0%)	20 (87.0%)	16 (69.6%)	4 (17.4%)	Quarter-finals
2014	23	4 (17.4%)	19 (82.6%)	16 (69.6%)	3 (13.0%)	Semi-finals
2018	23	3 (13.0%)	20 (87.0%)	16 (69.6%)	4 (17.4%)	Quarter-finals
2022	26	3 (11.5%)	23 (88.5%)	22 (84.6%)	1 (3.8%)	Quarter-finals
2026	26	7 (26.9%)	19 (73.1%)	14 (53.8%)	5 (19.2%)	Round of 16
Total	144	23 (16.0%)	121 (84.0%)	103 (71.5%)	18 (12.5%)	—

Note: Big Five = top divisions of England, Germany, Spain, Italy, and France. Abroad = Big Five + other foreign leagues. Percentages were calculated using the squad size for each edition as the denominator.

Between 2022 and 2026, the Brazilian league share increased by 15.4 percentage points, from 11.5% to 26.9%. Over the same period, employment abroad decreased by 15.4 percentage points, from 88.5% to 73.1%, and the Big Five's share fell by 30.8 percentage points, from 84.6% to 53.8%. Other foreign leagues increased by 15.4 points, from 3.8% to 19.2%. Figure 1 presents the three trajectories as mutually exclusive components of the squad.

Figure 1. Employment composition of Brazilian players selected for the World Cups, 2006–2026.



Note. The three categories sum to 100% in each edition. Authors' own elaboration based on the data in Table 1

Competition markets

England went from having one Brazilian player called up to the national team in 2006 to 12 in 2022 and eight in 2026. Italy and Spain, which together accounted for 11 players in 2006, had four in 2026. Germany has had no Brazilian players called up to the national team since 2018. The Brazilian league had between three and four players represented from 2006 to 2022, rising to seven in 2026. In this latest edition, Russia and Saudi Arabia each had two players, and Turkey had one (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of selected players by competition market

Competition market	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022	2026
England	1	1	6	6	12	8
Italy	6	8	3	3	3	2
Spain	5	4	3	4	5	2
Brazil	3	3	4	3	3	7
France	3	1	2	3	2	2
Germany	4	2	2	0	0	0
Portugal	1	2	0	0	0	0
Russia	0	0	1	0	0	2
Saudi Arabia	0	0	0	0	0	2
Türkiye	0	1	0	0	0	1
Other	0	1	2	4	1	0
Total	23	23	23	23	26	26

Note: 'Other' comprises Greece (2010); Ukraine and Major League Soccer—United States/Canada (2014); Ukraine and China (2018); and Mexico (2022). For 2006–2022, this is a transparent reanalysis of Pilatti et al. (2026).

Competition markets

The raw number of markets ranged from six to nine. The 2022 squad showed the greatest concentration, with an HHI of 0.284 and 3.52 effective markets, associated with the presence of 12 players in England. In 2026, the HHI decreased to 0.198, and the effective number increased to 5.04. The highest effective number in the series was 6.53 in 2014.

The change from 2022 to 2026 combined a reduction in employment abroad, a reduction in the Big Five share, and increased market diversity. Over the same interval, the stage reached changed from the quarter-finals to the round of 16 (Table 3).

Table 3. Concentration and diversity of competition markets

World Cup	Markets represented	HHI	Effective markets	Big Five
2006	7	0.183	5.45	82.6%
2010	9	0.191	5.24	69.6%
2014	9	0.153	6.53	69.6%
2018	7	0.164	6.08	69.6%
2022	6	0.284	3.52	84.6%

Note: HHI = Herfindahl–Hirschman index. Effective markets = 1/HHI. Higher HHI values indicate greater concentration.

Discussion

The main finding was the incompatibility of the 2026 edition with a simple, monotonic negative association between internationalisation and Brazilian national-team performance. The stage reached worsened as the share of players employed in Brazil increased, the proportion abroad decreased, and representation in the Big Five fell sharply. The new observation does not demonstrate that playing abroad is beneficial or that domestic retention is harmful. It supports a more precise conclusion: the total percentage of selected players abroad cannot, in isolation, serve as a linear explanation of Brazilian performance.

This conclusion changes the interpretation of the series at two levels. Empirically, 2026 broke the coincidence that had supported the previous hypothesis. From 2006 to 2022, the national team accumulated eliminations without employment abroad, returning to 2002 levels; in 2026, however, internationalisation fell by 15.4 percentage points, and the result worsened. Conceptually, the decomposition showed that 'less abroad' did not simply mean 'more Brazil'. The Brazilian league absorbed half of the Big Five's 30.8-point reduction, with the other half attributable to non-core foreign markets. The dichotomous category would conceal this twofold recomposition.

This finding is consistent with the literature that treats destination quality as part of the mechanism. Berlinschi et al. (2013) found a positive relationship between migration and performance when expatriates were weighted by the relative quality of their destination clubs. Lago-Peñas et al. (2019), in turn, demonstrated endogeneity and temporal lag: national teams in strong form increase the visibility of their players, and any developmental benefits of migration take time to emerge. In both cases, a contemporaneous count of players abroad is insufficient. The Brazilian case suggests that the same proportion abroad may combine very different levels of centrality, and that the distribution may become more diversified as it moves away from the competitive core.

The study's theoretical contribution is to propose a vector-based reading of labour geography. Intensity describes the proportion of the squad employed outside the country; centrality indicates the proportion embedded in the Big Five; and dispersion represents the distribution of players across markets. In 2026, the three dimensions moved in different directions: intensity and centrality decreased, whereas dispersion increased. None, therefore, can automatically substitute for the others. This result is consistent with the segmented structure described by Velema (2021, 2025) and with the historical network of increasing mobility and persistent hierarchy identified by Yang et al. (2025).

Diversification should not be interpreted normatively either. A greater number of markets may broaden competitive repertoires, but it may also reflect movement into lateral or downward career positions. Professional players' trajectories rarely follow a single ladder between periphery and core; they include returns, interruptions, and transitions conditioned by reputation, age, and contractual opportunities

(Velema, 2018). Likewise, the migration experience involves social and institutional integration rather than technical exposure alone (Agergaard et al., 2023; Dhaliwal et al., 2026). The HHI describes distribution, not quality.

Centrality in the Big Five also requires caution. The five leagues concentrate resources and international recruitment, but they contain substantial differences between clubs, squad roles, and actual minutes played (Littlewood et al., 2011; Zhang & Jiang, 2022). A selected player who is a regular starter for a club competing in the decisive stages of European competitions is not analytically equivalent to a player used only sporadically in the same league. For this reason, Brazil's decline from 84.6% to 53.8% in the Big Five cannot be converted into an estimated effect on elimination. It is a marker of the national team's human resources reconfiguration.

The extension also permits an explicit reassessment of Pilatti et al. (2026). The structural version of their argument remains plausible: Brazilian football participates in an international division of labour, transfers players on a large scale, and has its development system shaped by external markets. The simple compositional version, however, was not supported by 2026. Competitive decline continued without increasing internationalisation. Thus, the new study does not invalidate the systemic importance of player exports; it restricts the explanatory capacity of the Brazil/abroad opposition and redirects the question towards destination, career stage, playing time, and collective integration.

For sport management, the implication is direct. Selection or development policies should not treat an increase in the number of selected players from Brazilian clubs as an isolated target. Domestic location may indicate the retention of talent on an upward trajectory, the repatriation of an experienced player, the regaining of regular playing time, or a lack of demand in the international core. Likewise, employment abroad may signify development in an elite environment or a move to a less demanding market. More informative management indicators should combine age at first transfer, development club, competition level, minutes played, continuity as a starter, continental participation, and time integrated into the national team.

The same caution applies to the debate on cohesion. The geographical distance between clubs may reduce training windows, but the national team operates with players accustomed to diverse tactical and cultural contexts. The net influence depends on planning, coaching-staff stability, selection frequency, and the capacity to build shared mechanisms of play. The study did not measure these dimensions. The 2026 result, therefore, does not justify attributing the elimination to a league, a group of players, or a specific retention strategy.

The study has limitations. First, the 2006–2022 period was reanalysed from aggregate matrices published by the same authors. However, the source was declared, and all totals were reconciled; the complete player-level database for this period was not reconstructed. Second, six editions provide low temporal resolution and preclude reliable confirmatory tests. Third, clubs and leagues at the start of the tournament do not indicate place of development, prior trajectory, contractual status, or age at migration. Fourth, all selected players received equal weight regardless of minutes played. Fifth, the Big Five serves as a proxy for centrality and ignores internal heterogeneity. Sixth, the stage reached in knockout tournaments is sensitive to the draw, opponents, injuries, and the inherent variance of a small number of matches.

These limitations define a verifiable research agenda. The next step should be to reconstruct the player-level database, weight labour geography by minutes played at the World Cup, and incorporate measures of playing time at the club level. A panel including all participating national teams between 2006 and 2026 would enable the league to separate country, edition, and domestic league strength effects, and to test interactions between employment abroad and destination quality. Such an extension would be necessary before any causal inference can be drawn. In the present study, the role of the Brazilian case was narrower but theoretically relevant: to demonstrate that, once the 2026 observation was added, the dichotomous measure no longer supported a monotonic explanation.

Conclusions

The 2006–2026 series did not support a monotonic relationship whereby poorer performance by the Brazilian national team would be accompanied by greater internationalisation of selected players. In 2026, Brazil had the lowest proportion of players abroad in the period examined, the lowest presence in the Big Five, and the highest domestic share, yet was eliminated in the round of 16. The continuation of the decline, therefore, occurred under an employment configuration different from that observed in 2022.

The update showed that labour geography should be treated as a composition rather than as a single scale. Internationalisation intensity, destination centrality, and market dispersion can move in different directions. The Brazil/abroad opposition loses information precisely where market hierarchy matters most.

The result does not establish causality or recommend maximising retention or export. It reframes the problem: understanding national-team performance requires attention to where players compete, how much they play, what stage of their careers they are in, and how these experiences are integrated into collective work. The 2026 edition did not remove internationalisation as a structural dimension of Brazilian football; it ruled out its use as a self-sufficient linear explanation.

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