



4 July 2014 - On the surface, a football World Cup, like the one actually being played in Brazil, is one of the most visible expressions of nationalism one can think of, with the obligatory flag waving and the national anthem being sung.

But if one takes a closer look, there is a festival of migrants hiding behind the omnipresent national symbols. The flag waving spectators are as a matter of fact quite often cheering players, who are for various reasons unlikely to know, or even to like, the national anthem. Many teams include players of foreign origin, be it ethnic African players in the French, English and Italian teams, Poles in the German team or muslim Albanians in the Swiss team, wearing a jersey with a Christian cross on the left side of the chest.

Switzerland makes an excellent example. As a country it can already boast of three ethnic groups of German, French and Italian speakers, and in addition to that original national cocktail, seven of the starting eleven players in their first World Cup match have non-Swiss parents. Two are of Kosovo-Albanian origin, and then there are players of Albanian, Turkish, Spanish/Chilean, Croatian and Ivory Coast origins.

England's colonial past has contributed to the presence of four black players in the starting line-up of their first World Cup match, which they lost due to a goal scored by a forward of Ghanese origin.

### **“Impure blood“**

One can only speculate what the five players of African and mixed race, who started France's World Cup campaign this time, think about singing the words of the French national anthem on “spilling the enemies' “impure blood“. These players are, however, not the only ones of foreign origin; one has Spanish roots and another Algerian. Karim Benzema has Kabyle roots from

Algeria, similar to the French star of the 1998 World Cup, Zinedine Zidane. Both have opted to not sing “La Marseillaise” with the national team before kick-off.



“No one cares if I don’t sing the anthem, if I score three goals”, Benzema said in a TV interview before the first World Cup match. Actually he scored two and forced an own goal in the match!

The German team had four players of foreign origin in their starting line up in their first World Cup match against Portugal of Turkish, Tunisian, Norwegian and Ghanese origin. On the bench there were also two players of Polish origin, and one of Albanian.

“It is wonderful to see a German team including so many immigrants or their descendants”, writes Icelandic blogger Egill Helgason. “Germany was the country of origin of the most atrocious genocidal political policies of the 20th century, nazism and communism....But the current German team challenges old and new hatreds and its promoters .“

### **A grandmother in Dublin, Pristina or Reykjavik**

Increasingly, national coaches are taking a creative look at the concept of nationality. When the English World Cup 1966 winner Jackie Charlton was appointed coach of the Irish national team, he became apt at discovering Irish ancestry of players who had sometimes been totally ignorant of their connections to the “Emerald isle” until they were selected to wear the green jersey. “Everyone has a grandmother in Dublin“, was Charlton’s slogan.



Many players at the World Cup have been confronted with a dilemma on which country to play for. Few, however, like Adnan Januzaj of Manchester United in England have been eligible to play for at least 4 national teams. Januzaj, is born in Belgium to Kosovo-Albanian refugee parents. For unusual and complicated reasons he is eligible to play for Belgium, Turkey, Serbia, Albania and eventually England and Kosovo. He eventually chose Belgium and is now present at the World Cup in Brazil.

Hundreds of thousands of Europeans have migrated to the Americas in the last few hundred years, and there remain strong links across the Atlantic. Some Argentinian players have opted

for Spanish (Alfredo di Stefano) or Italian citizenship, while Brazilians have preferred the Portuguese (Deco), Spanish (Marcos Senna) or even the Italian (current player Thiago Motta) and Croatian teams (Eduardo).

### Few players play for local clubs

Up to 1,000 Brazilians migrate to Europe every year in search for greener pastures. They are not alone. In fact, most of the star players at the current World Cup do not make their living in their home countries. Lionel Messi of Argentina and Cristiano Ronaldo of Portugal compete for the title of the world's best footballer, and both exercise their trade in Spain.

Only one player who started Argentina's first match in the World Cup currently plays for an Argentinian team, and not a single player of their opponents in that match, Bosnia-Herzegovina, plays for a local club. The same applies to countries such as Brazil, with only one of the first eleven, playing for a club in the home country, and just three in the case of France. However, all the English players who started their match against Italy play for local clubs and all but two of the Italian players. But these are the exceptions to the migration rule.

### UN at the World Cup

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, a football enthusiast since his youth, attended the opening game of the World Cup in São Paulo.

"This shared passion is a great demonstration of how sport can unite people around shared values: teamwork, fair play and mutual respect", the Secretary-General said.

Many [UN agencies](#) have used the World Cup to promote their campaigns, notably ILO (International Labour Organization) which has launched the high profile campaign "[Red Card to Child](#)

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Others use football analogies during the World Cup to get their message across, like pointing out on 17 June, the [World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought](#), that that every minute the equivalent of [32 football fields](#) are lost to desertification.

Read more stories of migrants from our newsletter [here](#).