

Decolonizing Football: From Geopolitics to the Playing Field

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When analyzing the global power structures of international policy or institutional peace frameworks, we often find that dominant governance models are top-down, Eurocentric, and inherently fractured. Even today, they remain tightly bound to the interests of elite administrations that carry the legacies of colonial times. But what happens when the Global Majority doesn't wait for an invitation to the table? What happens when they rewrite the rules on one of the world's biggest stages?

Global football is not insulated from history, nor geopolitics. Its governing bodies, along with mainstream Western media, operate as elite, top-down institutions that frequently gatekeep the sport through colonial biases, swiftly shifting the narrative the moment traditional hierarchies are threatened. But the game itself isn't owned by any country or anyone in particular; it exists in the global social fabric, and on the pitch, football is a powerful tool for decolonizing and reclaiming space.

This year's World Cup was the largest in history, hosting 48 nations, but it was also one of the most politicized. Serious concerns regarding human rights violations have been raised both inside and beyond the stadiums, particularly given the current political landscape of the United States (the main host country) and along its borders with the other two co-hosts (Mexico and Canada) (Human Rights Watch, 2026). Moreover, the US is currently engaged in military conflict and diplomatic disputes with other participant nations, and worldwide geopolitical unrest is at its highest level in 50 years, according to the latest Global Peace Index by the Institute for Economics and Peace (2026a).

In many ways, this year's tournament broke a few historical precedents and exposed the deep-seated double standards of the 'football elite,' both on and off the field. We want to show how the tournament and the game itself carry colonial-era legacies and biases, and how teams from the Global Majority, particularly from the African continent, are actively challenging the imposed hierarchies of global football.

90% of African Teams Qualified From the Group Stage

For the first time in history, 9 out of 10 African national teams competing in the World Cup made it to the Round of 32 (Algeria, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Morocco, Senegal, and South Africa) (Confédération Africaine de Football, 2026). Even if eliminated afterwards, they did not make it easy for their opponents and directly challenged the lingering stigma and prejudice surrounding non-European teams.

When English striker Harry Kane said after the match against Ghana that they could have won very easily “against these types of nations just looking for a 0-0,” he wasn't just commenting on his team's performance or how that game served as good practice for them. It might be easy to dismiss what he said as something muttered in the heat of the moment, but his words are emblematic of deep-seated, often unconscious biases that Western nations can hold toward certain countries, and carry significant historical weight. It echoes a painful legacy of colonialism, of a world system built on exploitation that persists.

In fact, many of the countries currently in the spotlight during the World Cup are typically ignored and intentionally overlooked by mainstream media, despite providing the backbone of our global economy. Workers in “these nations” across the African continent and South America (like Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, the DRC, Ecuador, and Colombia) endure grueling conditions and low wages to produce the world's everyday essentials. And on top of economic exploitation, these same regions are bearing the worst consequences of a global climate crisis they did almost nothing to create.

Though football shines a light on matters of political economy, we should not wait for a major sporting event to acknowledge and uphold the dignity of people from all nations. Once the stadium spotlights fade and the cameras leave, indifference appears while systemic inequalities

persist. Therefore, it is precisely in this aftermath that we must leverage the subversive power of sport. As Brazilian journalist Jamil Chade put it, he “cannot renounce the utopias of football,” for it acts as a magnifying glass for these global fractures, and conscious cheering becomes a form of insurrection that may even yield answers to these problems.

The Double Standards of World Cup Narratives

The timing of The Athletic’s piece (Brown, 2026) was incredibly telling. Penalty shootouts have been a dramatic though accepted part of World Cup knockout football for half a century. Yet, the moment the traditional hierarchy is disrupted – specifically with Germany losing to Paraguay (4–3 on pens) and the Netherlands being knocked out by Morocco (3–2 on pens) in the Round of 32 – the system is suddenly framed as a “problem” that needs solving.

When European heavyweights win on penalties, it is usually praised as a triumph of mental fortitude, elite preparation, and “holding their nerve.” But when “underdogs” use tactical discipline to force extra time and win a shootout, the narrative shifts to penalties being a “lottery,” an unfair way to exit a tournament, or something that biases the game against the better team.

The very labeling of teams like Paraguay or Morocco as “smaller” speaks directly back to the subconscious bias highlighted in Harry Kane’s reflection. Morocco didn’t just stumble into a win; they fought back from a 72nd-minute Cody Gakpo goal, equalized through Issa Diop in stoppage time, hit the crossbar, and relied on Yassine Bounou, one of the best tournament goalkeepers in the world, who saved two penalties. Paraguay put on a defensive masterclass to nullify Germany’s star-studded attack, and their goalkeeper, Orlando Gill, made two massive saves.

Calling for “alternatives” immediately after these matches implies that the traditional powers are somehow entitled to advance based on possession stats or historical status, rather than on what actually happens on the pitch. It protects the status quo by trying to change the rules of the game the moment the elite stop winning by them.

Is the World Ready for an African Nation to Win the World Cup?

The idea that the world isn't ready for an African champion, while the reigning powers of world football rely so heavily on the African diaspora, exposes a deep paradox in modern international football.

“I am German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose,” is a famous statement by Mesut Özil when he quit the German national team in 2018. Born in Germany to Turkish parents, he helped Germany win the 2014 World Cup, but after a bad World Cup and a political controversy, he felt he was only viewed as an outsider when the team failed. Acceptance is conditional for Arab, African, and South American players. When they win a match for a European nation or club, they are celebrated as symbols of European excellence. But the moment these same players make a mistake, the narrative instantly shifts, often accompanied by vicious xenophobia.

In Europe, more specifically, this hypocritical standard is deeply embedded in political discourse and systematically used to deny athletes their very identity. Right before the semi-final between France and Spain in the 2026 World Cup, former Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy wrote a column praising the French team's talent but casually declaring that they “do not have any French players” (Jones, 2026). It reveals the exclusionary worldview of the European conservative establishment, in which national identity is seen through an ethnocentric lens, and strengthens the anti-immigration movement at the legislative level across the continent. Notably, during the tournament in the U.S., the European Union Parliament approved a controversial new law designed to accelerate the deportation of foreigners by establishing “return hubs” (offshore deportation centers outside the bloc) and permitting invasive home searches – a legislative victory that right-wing members celebrated on the parliament floor with chants of “send them back” (Kassam, 2026).

This conditional acceptance and the politicization of immigrant athletes is not exclusive to Europe. U.S. top striker Folain Balogun, born in Brooklyn to Nigerian parents and raised in England, was considered eligible to play for the national team as a result of the 14th Amendment's birthright citizenship (Garrison, 2026). So, when he faced a suspension after receiving a red card in the knockout stages, Trump intervened aggressively to overturn the ban, treating the player as a vital asset to American athletic glory. However, this “celebration” and

political intervention happened simultaneously with the administration's legal push to dismantle birthright citizenship completely. This highlights a wrathful universal truth in modern sports: the identities of immigrant and minority athletes are claimed, protected and celebrated when they are winning, even while the legal and social systems under those same flags actively seek to exclude them.

Moreover, these colonial legacies are deeply rooted within the political discourse and social structures of South America. Following France's 1-0 victory over Paraguay in the Round of 16, French players dismissively commented that they could also "play dirty," a discriminatory critique often levied by European teams against non-Eurocentric styles of football to brand them as inherently undisciplined or unrefined. However, prejudice is present on both sides; Paraguayan Senator Celeste Amarilla made a racist tirade online targeting French captain Kylian Mbappé (Nair, 2026). She dismissed him as a "colonized Cameroonian" merely "trying to pass himself off as French," exposing a worldview still shaped by colonial-era hierarchies of race and belonging.

These accounts underscore that the weaponization of race and nationality is a global symptom of structural prejudice, where an elite athlete's heritage and playing style are twisted into tools of resentment and used to invalidate their triumphs on the pitch.

Perhaps the real question should be whether the football industry and the media are ready to stop treating "these nations" as a mere resource, and start respecting them as equal powerhouses on the world stage.

Decolonizing Football: A Case in History

Looking at the game and the tournament through a decolonial lens reveals that the football pitch is not insulated from history and global politics, but rather a mirror of them, directly contradicting the persistent myth of the apoliticism of sport.

When we speak of decolonizing football, we must invoke scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2012) reminder that *decolonization is not a metaphor*. It is not a trendy academic buzzword for "diversity" or "inclusion" within existing power structures, nor is it an empty

gesture to temporarily reconcile Western guilt. Rather, it is a project of actual emancipation and sovereignty.

We see this in the historical precedent of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) football team of 1958. During Algeria's war of independence from French rule, elite Algerian players secretly fled their French league clubs overnight to form a "rebel" national team. Never recognized by FIFA and ignored (or condemned) by Western media, this team toured around the globe to play over 80 matches (Silverstein, 2026).. They used football as a diplomatic tool to internationalize a colonial conflict and advocate for true national sovereignty, forcing the international community to recognize the Algerian liberation struggle (France Culture, 2026).

Historically, sports were exported to the colonies to civilize, assimilate, and physically mold colonial subjects into the auxiliary labor and military forces of empire¹. Today, this has evolved into a highly sophisticated global system of athletic extraction. For decades, European clubs and national federations have drawn raw athletic talent from the Global Majority to fuel their multi-billion-dollar domestic leagues. However, a quiet rebellion is taking place.

In this year's World Cup, the number of foreign-born players is staggering: Of the nearly 1,250 players in total, 293 were born in a country other than the one they represent (Zanlorenssi, 2026). One of the main continents of origin is Africa (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026b). Take the French National Team as an example: two-thirds of the squad have African roots. In fact, France exports more players to the World Cup than it keeps: Over 75 French-born players represented other nations at this tournament, with the vast majority choosing to honor their heritage by playing for African nations like Algeria, DR Congo, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire.

In a way, this growing number of elite diaspora athletes is exercising decolonial agency. But Western media and European federations often diminish that through a patronizing narrative

¹ Framed within a nascent eugenics movement, ideologues like the Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, championed physical education to counter what they saw as the biological degeneration of the French "race" ravaged by "social plagues" of decadence and alcoholism. Such concerns over social hygiene were likewise projected onto the colonies where military officers and schoolteachers exported gymnastics training both to prepare French soldiers for the rigors of colonial life and to "civilize" and "masculinize" indigenous recruits into the auxiliary troops necessary for further imperial conquest (euphemized as "pacification"). Coubertin, among others, championed colonial sport as an "instrument of acculturation" to convert and assimilate indigenous populations and strengthen the national unity of Greater France (SILVERSTEIN, 2026).

that diaspora players only choose to represent their ancestral nations because they “weren't good enough” to make the cut for elite European squads (Morocco World News, 2026).

The case of Ayyoub Bouaddi ahead of the 2026 World Cup completely shatters this narrative. At just 18 years old, he was regarded as one of the crown jewels of the French developmental system. A rising star at Lille, a regular in the French youth setups, and the captain of the French Under-21 national team, his path to the French senior team was virtually guaranteed. But in May 2026, just weeks before the World Cup kicked off, Bouaddi completed an official FIFA eligibility switch to represent Morocco. The reaction from the French coaching staff was highly revealing, as the assistant coach Guy Stéphan dismissively remarked, “He is a pure product of the French youth system... he made a choice” (Bueno, 2026).

To the European football elite, players of the diaspora are still viewed as “products” manufactured by Western machinery. But Bouaddi’s decision can (or should) be interpreted an act of sovereignty, of personal choice and independence, for “the opportunity to represent the country with which one identifies – because of physical characteristics, beliefs, customs, etc. – is invaluable” (Bueno, 2026).

Concluding Remarks

Decolonization is not a metaphor and it requires structural change. To dismantle the colonial-era biases that gatekeep football, the global community must act through three main pathways. First, the pipeline where the Global Majority acts merely as a “resource farm” for European academies must be dismantled, which requires direct, non-exploitative investment into domestic leagues in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in order to retain and allow local talent and institutions to thrive. Second, FIFA and regional bodies must shift away from top-down, Eurocentric administrative dominance, decentralizing decision-making and revenue distribution, giving equal voting weight and genuine leadership opportunities to Global Majority federations. Third, media outlets must consciously retire racialized linguistic tropes while journalists from the Global Majority must be elevated to cover international tournaments, breaking the Western monopoly on football narratives.

Ultimately, by applying a critical framework, we can expose the direct links between football media and broader decolonization work and study. When we analyze exactly when a narrative is pushed and who benefits from it, we reveal a very clear double standard in how traditional powerhouses and Western media react to defeat. Challenging narratives, actively confronting double standards and restructuring the game's material foundations would push the beautiful game toward real equality.

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