

North African football leagues: Between dominance over Africa and struggle to keep stars

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Introduction

It is no secret that the North African teams have an advance on most their southern counterparts. This advancement is most visible in regards to the performance of these clubs in the continental football tournament. In the last decade, clubs from Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria have been present in every Final of the African Champions League. This dominance is extended to include the CAF Confederation Cup. Since this competition was created in 2004, only five times in the 18 years of its existence a club outside of Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt lifted the cup.

Despite the high profile of the North African clubs and their leagues in Africa, these teams still struggle to keep their stars who flee either to bigger teams within the North African region, to the European leagues or to Arabian Gulf countries.

This paper's aim is to answer the following questions:

How can we explain the dominance of the North African clubs in football over other African Countries? And why does this dominance make them immune to other leagues poaching their stars?

To answer these questions we will use a number of scientific articles and data collected from the Transfermarkt, a site that is considered a reference in the value evaluation in football. First, we will spot through an economical lens the key indicators that may justify this dominance. Second, we will analyse the reasons that prevent the clubs, even the biggest, among them from retaining their stars.

1. Reasons for North African leagues dominance

In this paper, we are focusing on the economic factors that allow North African teams rule over African football. Although we are aware of the existence of many other political, geographical... factors, the lenses that we are using are economical. That being said, the data shows that the disparities between the market value of North African Leagues and their southern Counterparts are huge, with the exception of South Africa.

League	Country	Number of clubs	Total Value (Million €)
Premier League	Egypt	18	146,63
DSTV Premiership	South Africa	16	139,70
Ligue Professionnelle 1	Algeria	18	106,85
Botola Pro Inwi	Morocco	16	105,16
Ligue I Pro	Tunisia	16	94,21

Table 1: Highest value African leagues (Transfermarkt, s.d.)

The value of the leagues in the table above is based on the cumulated value of players within each of the leagues. DSTV Premiership, which is the South African league ranks second in the most valuable football leagues in Africa. Apart from that, all the other leagues in the top five are North African leagues.

Although we can see a difference in the market value even within these leagues, but the difference between them and the leagues below is humongous. Ghana Premier League, which is 6th, is valued at 26,43 million euros. To put everything in perspective, the gap between the Egyptian Premier League in the 1st place and the Tunisian Ligue I Pro is a little more than 52 million euros, but the gap between the Tunisian league and Ghana Premier league in 6th place is almost 68 million euros.

This huge gap is one of the important factors that contribute to the production of elite African teams in the northern part of the continent. The following table includes all the African clubs with an evaluation of over 10 million euros.

Rank	Club	Country	Market value (million €)
1	El Ahly	Egypt	29,18
2	Mamelodi Sundowns FC	South Africa	21,30
3	Esperance Tunis	Tunisia	19,45
4	Pyramids FC	Egypt	19,38
5	Zamalek SC	Egypt	18,90
6	Orlando Pirates	South Africa	17,68
7	Kaizer Chiefs	South Africa	14,63
8	Wydad Casablanca	Morocco	12,31
9	CR Belouizdad	Algeria	12,10
10	Etoile Sportive de Sahel	Tunisia	11,88
11	USM Alger	Algeria	10,60
12	Raja Club Athletic	Morocco	10,35

Table 2: Highest value African Clubs (Transfermarkt, s.d.)

Once again, in this table we can see that the North African teams are the ones with the highest values alongside with some South African Giants. This position allows for the clubs to acquire talent from other African leagues at a relatively low cost and keep feeding into their dominance. This also allows these same teams to go further in the continental and international tournaments and benefit from prize money. A big loop that does nothing but increase the gap between the north and the sub-Saharan region of Africa.

The inception of the African Champions League in 1997 by Issa Hayatou, president of the Confédération Africaine de Football (CAF), did go some way toward creating the economic incentives necessary to encourage players to remain with some African clubs. However, this applied only to a handful of clubs that qualified for the competition and at best it served merely to delay the migration of African players to more lucrative leagues (Darby, Akindes, & Kirwin, 2007).

Even within the North African leagues, the big clubs always are in the forefront in the acquirement of young promising players in other smaller teams in the same league or other neighbor leagues. The best example of that is the Egyptian giants that are always in the look for stars within established other North African clubs. They are usually successful thanks to their financial power and their promising sporting projects.

2. The struggle to keep stars

The North African football leagues may have an important advantage over the other African leagues, but they have no advantage in a more global level. This dominance on the continental stage does not translate into the broader football context. These so-called giants in African standards struggle to keep their stars.

In parts of North Africa, particularly Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, there are pockets of professionalism that can encourage players to remain at home, at least in the early part of their careers. Some clubs, such as Al Ahly in Egypt and Esperance in Tunisia, have slowly built up professional foundations while others, such as Arab Contractors in Egypt, have relied on investment from the corporate sector that has allowed them to not only hold on to their most talented players for longer but also buy and retain players from other African countries (Guesdet, 2002). Despite these varying levels of professionalism in North Africa, clubs are still not able to compete with European teams, even those playing outside the elite level, in terms of the salaries they can offer to players (Darby, Akindes, & Kirwin, 2007).

Bigger teams from Europe, Arabian Gulf or even China consistently poach not only the young talent with high potential, they mainly target already established players who proved themselves in the local leagues and in the continental competitions. In many ways this encapsulates the nature of European clubs' appropriation of football talent from Africa. These clubs are clearly financially stronger than their African counterparts are and they use their powerful economic position to dictate the terms on which the trade in football labor is conducted (Darby, Akindes, & Kirwin, 2007). Thus, the North African region becomes a nursery for football powerhouses to purchase talent with less risk and higher potential.

Another trend has been very prominent lately. A number of sub-Saharan players choose to play for North African clubs solely to gain visibility and transfer to a higher paying league.

Today, North African leagues stand as an intermediary between clubs with bigger bank accounts and African talent, reducing the risk for all parties.

For African players, it is an opportunity to prove themselves in a competitive league but that is not too competitive for their level. Once they establish themselves in the league, they get many offers that have more zeros than their current contracts.

For the foreign clubs with the big bank accounts, the North African leagues are a market for them to buy relatively cheap talent with enough competition and experience. This reduces the risk involved in buying players from lower level leagues.

Finally, for the North African clubs, the gain is primarily monetary. These clubs have two main roles in this market. The first role is an academy-like role, as they raise their own talent and sell it to the foreign clubs. The second role is a scout-like role, as they bring the sub-Saharan talented players; give them an environment where they can prove themselves before selling them to bigger clubs.

Some North African clubs built their business model around one of the roles aforementioned. Other clubs, even though it is not their business model but it represents an important part of their revenue.

An example from the first category is the Moroccan Club Fath Union Sport (FUS). FUS' objective is to be a forming club (Finances : Le «modèle FUS» difficile à dupliquer, 2016). That is shown over the years by the number of players who started in the club's academy before joining big teams in Europe and the Middle East. Always in Morocco, even the two biggest clubs in the league, Wydad and Raja, constantly sell their best players to foreign clubs despite their sporting projects and their performance on the continental level.

Conclusion

In this paper, we tried to look at the disparities between North African leagues and the Sub-Saharan leagues. As it is clear through the value of the leagues, the gap is huge and it might keep getting bigger as North African leagues continue their journey to a real professionalism. The gap is getting even wider because the Sub-Saharan leagues lose their stars and talents to other stronger leagues either in Africa or outside. We also noticed the particular place of the North African leagues as an intermediary between the bigger leagues and the smaller leagues and the roles that they play in this position.

To sum up, the North African football leagues are too big in comparison to the other African leagues. This generates a somewhat monopoly of the North African teams on the African competitions. However, this strength stays minimal in comparison to other leagues in Europe and Asia.

This paper serves only as an observation and further research might be conducted to explore in depth the particular economic situation of North African leagues and their clubs.

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