



July 2026 Newsletter

African Excellence at the 2026 World Cup

The presence of people of African descent at the 2026 World Cup tournament was profound. Not only did 10 African nations qualify, but there was also heavy African representation from the African diaspora on prominent European and North American national teams. There were 122 players of African descent representing countries outside Africa. African soccer talent excellence was on display for the world to see.

The expansion of the 2026 FIFA World Cup team format to 48 teams allowed many African countries to qualify. Qualified teams included Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Senegal, Ivory Coast (Cote d'Ivoire), Ghana, South Africa, Cape Verde, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Of the 10 African representatives, an unprecedented 9 advanced past the group stage into the knockout rounds. Squads like Morocco, Senegal, Ghana, Egypt, and the Democratic Republic of Congo delivered deep and celebrated runs that energized the continent. The massive wave of African talent represented the continent's football development, a testament to the "Africa is rising" slogan. It shifted historical precedents for the continent's football development.

The African Diaspora in Europe and America formed the backbone of many top-tier contenders. Over 80 players of African descent represented 12 different European countries during the tournament. France was the clear example of African diaspora excellence. It featured 21 players of African descent. England included 15 players of African and Caribbean heritage, anchored by talents like Bukayo Saka. The Netherlands included 14 players, Switzerland 11, Belgium 9, and Germany 9, all of whom were of African descent.

The French players of African descent in the diaspora included Kylian Mbappé, who has both Cameroonian and Algerian heritage, and Aurélien Tchouaméni, who is of Cameroonian descent. Lamine Yamal, born to a Moroccan father and an Equatorial Guinean mother, represented Spain. Jamal Musiala, whose Nigerian British father and German mother, represented Germany. Masour Ousmane Dembele, born to a Mauritanian – Senegalese mother and a Malian father, represented France. Folarin Balogun, born to Nigerian parents, represented the United States of America. Tim Weah of Liberia, Folarin Balogun of Nigeria, and Haji Wright of Ghana represented the U.S as well. Eduardo Camavinga, born in Angola, represented France; Jamal Musiala, born to Nigerian parents, represented Germany; and Karim Adeyemi, born to a Nigerian father and a Romanian mother, represented Germany. Leroy Sane, born to a Senegalese father, represented Germany. Romelu Lukaku of DR Congo, Youri Tielemans of DR Congo, and

Amadou Onana of Senegal represented Belgium. Jose Luis Rodriguez of Panama.¹

African talent in soccer is not a new phenomenon. In the 1950's, Pele, the Brazilian whose real name is Edson Arantes do Nascimento, was the first Black player to capture the attention of the masses in soccer. He helped Brazil win their first title in 1958. He is credited with popularizing the phrase "**jogo bonito**," which translates as "the Beautiful Game."

Soccer is not just a football story. It is a lesson in migration, nationality, economics, culture, and identity. Soccer is an amalgam of cultures coming together to share and celebrate who they are as they enjoy sports. It is a time to acknowledge the unity in diversity and coexistence that sports achieve amongst people separated by millions of miles of ocean. The World Cup 2026 was a map depicting the journeys Africans have made within and outside the continent, resulting in the African Diaspora. The display of Africans in the diaspora at the World Cup is a reminder of the results of decades of accumulated migration and of how parents packed their bags and crossed oceans in search of a better life. Behind many World Cup stars is a family that leaves home in search of safety, education, or better opportunities. Decades of migration are reflected in the rosters of major national teams.

Africans first arrived in Western European countries in the 1500s, not as slaves, as most people think, but as independent sailors and members of royal courts, among other roles.

In fact, the Grimaldi Africans arrived in northern Spain in 1297, a time when Spain was attached to North Africa. They walked on dry land into Spain, France, Italy, and other European countries². In succeeding centuries, the transatlantic slave trade – the largest forced migration in recorded history and voluntary migration saw the creation of the largest black population in Europe and the Americas – the African diaspora communities.

World Cup 2026 was also a lesson in African excellence, an excellence that transcends soccer, one that is often ignored until it is needed. People of African descent have contributed to the world's achievements in many areas. Unfortunately, these achievements are not always acknowledged, marginalized, erased, and often unappreciated. People of African descent helped to develop Europe, the Americas, and other parts of the world. They helped win world wars and invent foundational technologies used worldwide, including household items, transit systems, medicine, and entertainment, to mention but a few. For instance, Garrett Morgan invented the three-position traffic light, Lonnie Johnson invented the Super Soaker water gun, Marie Van Brittan Brown invented the home security system, Frederick McKinley Jones invented the refrigerated trucking system, and Charles R. Drew developed blood plasma preservation, to mention just these. It is important to take time to appreciate the talents and contributions of people of African descent wherever they reside. It is important to

¹ Aromalarah, Michael. 2026. "The African-Descended Football Stars Playing for Other Nations," Okayafrica, <https://www.okayafrica.com>

² Nyangweso, Mary. 2026. *Transnational Africa: Culture, Religion and the Diaspora* (Routledge)

celebrate them to affirm their virtue and to deconstruct stereotypes that continue to be propagated against them. While African nations did not lift the trophy at the 2026 World Cup, African talent was recognized throughout the tournament.³ If people of African descent were embraced and appreciated for their contributions to the world, as they shone during the World Cup, the world would be a great place. I lay out some of these arguments in a forthcoming book, *Transnational Africa: Culture, Religion and the Diaspora* (Routledge, 2026), in case you would like to explore some more.

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³ Ikeke, Gift. 2026. "African Stars Lighting Up the 2026 World Cup for Other Nations," *Fun Times*, <https://www.funtimesmagazine.com>