



Recruitment and Retention of Football Players as Determinant of Nigeria Professional Football League Clubs' Performance at National and Continental Competitions

Ridwan Ademola Adekola^{✉1*}, Ayobami Alade Okundare²

^{1,2} Olabisi Onabanjo University Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria

Correspondence: E-mail: ridwanadekola99@gmail.com

ABSTRACTS

Nigeria Premier Football League (NPFL) clubs have struggled to produce players capable of representing Nigeria at continental and international competitions. Most national team players across all levels are sourced from European clubs, highlighting the low competitiveness of the NPFL. This study examined how player recruitment and retention influence NPFL clubs' performance in national and continental tournaments. A mixed-method research design was adopted, with a sample of 420 football stakeholders. Instruments used included Players' Recruitment and Players' Retention questionnaires. Findings showed that recruitment and retention had no significant impact on club performance at either national or continental levels (Recruitment: $R = 0.077$, $R^2 = 0.006$, $F = 0.018$, $p > 0.05$; Retention: $R = 0.426$, $R^2 = 0.181$, $F = 0.665$, $p > 0.05$). The study concluded that these factors alone do not significantly influence performance. Instead, a combination of elements such as funding, financial management, coaching quality, and administrative competence play a more critical role. It is recommended that football stakeholders urgently integrate key administrative factors to enhance the NPFL's performance and elevate its status both nationally and continentally.

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INTRODUCTION

Football is one of the most recognised sports in Nigeria with larger followership members. Nigeria is blessed with young talents who are interested in becoming football superstars. However, the failure of these many future football stars to achieve their innate potentials of becoming football stars may be due to the mal-administration of Nigeria football administration by football administrators. Football administration is very essential in the development and the progress of the game of football. Administrators of football have important roles to play in the achievement of established goals through concerted efforts.

Incessant corrupt practices, mal-administration, and lack of accountability have negatively impacted African football development. Football has become a billion-dollar industry worldwide, but Africa remains at the lowest ebb of benefit. Over the years, the Nigeria football league has been flayed with different irregularities such as inadequate funds allocations, funds mismanagement, inconsistency of calendar/timetable, changes in the timetable, poor adherence to the released plan, the home must-win syndrome, inadequate security, irregularity in televised matches, perceived absence of neutrality in judgment and poor marketing (Nnamdi, 2016; Okundare et al., 2024). According to Iwuala (2016), it was noted that challenges in administration significantly contribute to reduced productivity in Nigerian Professional Football clubs. These challenges encompass managerial skill acquisition, inadequate remuneration, low morale, financial constraints, and outdated skills. These issues are likely to contribute to the underperformance of Nigerian football clubs.

The poor performance of Nigeria Football Clubs at continental competitions could be traced to inconsistency in the administration of Nigeria Premier Football League (NPFL) and failure to produce quality players for national teams that are capable of winning medals at continental and global competitions. Additionally, no nation in the African continent has been able to win the World Cup since its inception in 1930, the highest stage African nations accomplished in the World Cup football competition was the semi-final in 2022 which was held in Qatar and was credited to Morocco. The country was able to reach this stage due to the effective running of its local league and the good administrative skills of its football governing body (Team Forum Sport, 2024).

TEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Okwudili and Ugwuera (2016) suggest that components essential to a professional football league include: providing adequate welfare packages, ensuring regular payment of salaries, promptly settling sign-on fees, ensuring adequate security at match venues, licensing football clubs, providing good pitches, establishing clubhouses, handling player transfers effectively, ensuring high-quality officiating, and providing sufficient and quality infrastructure. Football is a major sport in Nigeria engaging youths actively while entertaining elders who

watch the games. Football has engaged many youths in the country. Players' welfare can significantly impact their performance on the field of play.

Also, African players are frequently recruited by European clubs at a young age, influenced by the commercialisation of football and the global reach of European football clubs. Many African football players migrate to European clubs primarily for economic reasons. According to the International Centre for Sports Studies (2019), Nigeria is listed among the top nations globally for exporting football talent, consistently ranking as the number one nation among African countries and within the top ten worldwide. Each season, Nigeria football usually recorded the transfer of significant players out of the Nigeria Football League to other African countries and most times European football clubs that attract more remuneration and wages to the player. For instance, at the end of the 2023/2024 football season, Ojo Olorunleke of Enyimba FC joined Al-Merrikh SC of Sudan (Dialy Post, 2024).

Similarly, O'Neill et al. (2015) observed that sponsorship is one of the vehicles for the propagation of any venture, and sports not exclusive. Sports cannot be heard and organized without proper sponsorship. In sports, sponsorship is needed for the organisation of sports competition, purchase of facilities and equipment, advertisement and media coverage. Particularly football, are closely intertwined with developmental issues, leading individuals, organisations, and companies to leverage football to achieve various personal and developmental goals. Players are often motivated to travel abroad in pursuit of personal needs and livelihood opportunities. In Nigeria, football competitions have significant economic implications. For instance, some communication and beverage companies prioritize the welfare of players by sponsoring teams or football clubs. During football seasons, especially when prominent players are positioned as ambassadors, there is typically an increase in demand for certain products at stadiums nationwide. The most important thing is to note that sports today needs money and cost so much to administer effectively. The author further explained that, the basic element in achieving effective organisation of sport event is availability of sponsorship to support and execute it (Okri, 2018)

Nigeria has two major domestic competitions at the highest level, namely the Nigeria Premier Football League and Nigeria Confederation Cup. The Nigerian Premier Football League (NPFL) is the top tier of club football in Nigeria's league system, established in 1972 and the Nigeria Federation Cup, widely recognized as the FA Cup, is equivalent to the England FA Cup and France's Coupe de France. Inaugurated in 1945 as the "Governor's Cup" it operates as a single-elimination knockout tournament involving 74 football clubs: 72 from Nigeria's 36 states and 2 from the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Participation in the tournament is determined through state cup championships, where winners and runners-up from each state cup competition qualify irrespective of their league standing. All matches are hosted at neutral venues. The winner gains automatic qualification for the subsequent season's CAF

Confederation Cup, or the runners-up qualify if the winner has already secured a spot in a CAF club competition based on league performance.

According to Thomas et al. (2019) inadequate sports facilities contributed to the low participation of individuals in sports and recreational activities. Poor maintenance culture of sporting facilities is one of the factors inhibiting athlete involvement in sporting activities in Nigeria. Football infrastructure across Africa is generally in poor condition, with only a handful of countries like South Africa and Morocco having world-class stadiums and facilities. Some countries, including Angola, Burkina Faso, Egypt, and Mali, have seen improvements in their infrastructure due to hosting the Africa Cup of Nations, which has spurred the construction and renovation of stadiums. However, overall, football infrastructure across the continent remains inadequate. This deficiency has contributed to a decline in attendance at football matches across Africa (Aksu et al., 2023). Adequate sports infrastructure and facilities play a crucial role in promoting sport participation and performance. However, there is a need for increased investment in the construction and maintenance of sports facilities across Nigeria. Limited access to well-equipped sports facilities remains a challenge, particularly in rural areas and disadvantaged communities (Onwe et al., 2018).

Transfer of Football players is an integral part of every nation Football League. European football clubs earn big fortune from sales of football player. Football players move every season from one football club to another clubs including NPFL clubs. Qu and Wu (2023) Opine that football transfers can be influenced by various external factors, such as economic conditions, regulatory changes, and technological advancements. Many NPFL football players opted to play in foreign football clubs after player one or two seasons of NPFL football. According to [trasfermarkt.com](https://www.trasfermarkt.com) (2024), more than thirteen football players left different NPFL clubs at the end of 2023/2024 football season for foreign football clubs. Players like, Olorunleke Ojo, Malomo Taofeek, Chibuike Nwaiwu, Jerry Alex, Leo Ezekiel, Okiemute Odah, Gbolagade Adelowo, Adam Yakubu, Sani Suleiman, Samson Olasupo, Anthony Omaka, Sunday Anyanwu, Chisom Okereke, Godwin Obaje. However, In NPFL, despite huge sums of money made from player sales in the NPFL, some fraudulent officials have designed a way to channel the money into personal pockets majority of NPFL clubs indicates that their player moved to another football clubs on free transfer basis. For instance, the case of the transfer involving Chikeluba Ofoedu of Rangers FC to Turkish club 1461 Trabzon in 2012. Ofoedu played for Rangers between 2011 and 2012 and upon transfer to the Turkish club, he was immediately claimed by Oak Zeel FC of Enugu. Oak Zeel FC said they were not aware of the transfer of the player to any foreign club, claiming the right to his transfer fees at the expense of Rangers FC. The player was claimed to have been loaned to Rangers FC and Oak Zeel FC wanted 80 per cent of his transfer fees while Rangers would receive 20 per cent. Similarly, former Akwa United midfielder Alhassan Ibrahim, popularly called Muazzam, was the subject of a transfer tussle between Akwa United FC and an academy after the player moved from the Uyo club to Austria Wien, he was reported by

Wien as signed from FC Heart rather than Akwa United FC, where he was since the start of the 2016/17 season. It was reported that the player was loaned to Akwa United FC by the academy (Punchng.com, 2017).

In addition, Mbalamula et al. (2017) stated that Nigerian youths have increasingly forsaken traditional citizenship values like love for their country, patriotism, and dedication to national ideas. Instead, they are drawn to the values propagated by the internet, particularly through their fervent support for foreign football. Among these, the English Premier League commands the largest fan base, comprising approximately 60% of enthusiasts compared to the other major European football leagues such as those in (Germany, France, Italy, and Spain) who collectively accounted for the remaining 40%. This has reduced national and continental football interest among Nigerians, and Nigerian fans' followership of European football leagues and clubs has significantly increased. CAF Champions League and CAF Confederation Cup are two major leagues played at the continental level by many football clubs across African countries, that have qualified from their various league based on their positions from their country league. Nigeria Professional Football League has four representatives yearly, two at the CAF Champions League, and two at the CAF Confederation Cup. CAF Champions League was introduced 59 years ago (1964). Similarly, the African Cup Winners' Cup was introduced in 1992 the competition name was renamed to CAF Confederation Cup 2004, which has since been considered the second African club competition. There have been several investigations into Nigeria's awful displays on the continent. However, numerous challenges plague the NPFL, with poor league organisation at the core. Specifically, issues such as inconsistency calendar, psychological factor, weak or absent club structures and the lack of professionalism in managing players' contracts contribute significantly to these difficulties. In addition to ethnicity-related challenges faced by visiting clubs, lopsided home team victories and poor officiating are significant sources of disputes between clubs in Nigeria. These issues also contribute to the declining performance of Nigerian clubs in competitions (Bali, 2015; Okundare et al., 2024).

METHOD

The descriptive survey research method was adopted for the study the population comprises of all football stakeholders (Coaches, Club Officials, Football Administrators, Football Players, Football Fans and Football Spectators) in Nigeria Premier Football League. Two hundred (420) football stakeholders were selected in this study using multi-stage sampling techniques while. A self-structured questionnaire was used as an instrument to elicit information from the respondents on the impact of live streaming/live televising on football club performance at nation and continental competitions. A self-structured questionnaire was the instrument used to elicit information from the respondents: (A) collected demographic information of the participants, while (B) Players' Retention Questionnaire (PRQ, $r=0.82$) and

Players' Recruitment Questionnaire (PRQ, $r=83$) was used and validated before administration, the questionnaire was administered physically to the respondents and their responses were retrieved immediately for data collection. Descriptive statistics were used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics involving simple frequencies (f), percentages (%), means ($\bar{x}$), and standard deviation (SD) scores were used to describe the characteristics of the samples while Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA) at the 0.05 level of significance were used to test the research hypotheses.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1: The recruitment of players by football clubs in the NPFL will not significantly determine the clubs' performance at national competitions.

Table 1: Regression of Recruitment of Players on Clubs' Performance at National Competitions

Multiple R = 0.077
Multiple R² = 0.006
Adjusted R² = -0.325
Std. Error of the Estimate = 57.83

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F
Regression	59.737	1	59.737	0.018	.902
Residual	10033.463	3	2017.263		
Total	10093.200	4			

* indicate significant F at $\alpha = .05$

Table 1 shows the result of the regression of the predictor variable (recruitment of players) on NPFL clubs' performance at national competitions. The outcome of the result is not statistically significant ($F = 0.018$, $p > 0.05$). This suggests that the recruitment of players by the clubs does not significantly impact the variability in the performance of the clubs at national competitions in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2: The recruitment of players by football clubs in the NPFL will not significantly determine the clubs' performance at continental competitions.

Table 2: Regression of Recruitment of Players on Clubs' Performance at Continental Competitions

Multiple R = 0.426
Multiple R² = 0.181
Adjusted R² = -0.091
Std. Error of the Estimate = 15.15

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F
Regression	152.626	1	152.626	0.665	.475
Residual	688.574	3	229.525		
Total	841.200	4			

* indicate significant F at $\alpha = .05$

Table 2 shows the result of the regression of the predictor variable (recruitment of players) on NPFL clubs' performance at continental competitions. The result indicates a non-significant outcome ($F = 0.665$, $p > 0.05$). This suggests that the recruitment of players by the clubs does not significantly contribute to the variance in the performance of the clubs at continental competitions.

Hypothesis 3: The retention of players by football clubs in the NPFL will not significantly determine the clubs' performance at national competitions.

Table 3: Regression of Retention of Players on Clubs' Performance at National Competitions

Multiple R = 0.512
Multiple R² = 0.262
Adjusted R² = 0.016
Std. Error of the Estimate = 49.83

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F
Regression	2643.364	1	2643.364	1.064	.378
Residual	7449.836	3	2483.279		
Total	10093.200	4			

* indicate significant F at $\alpha = .05$

Table 3 shows the result of the regression of the predictor variable (retention of players) on NPFL clubs' performance at national competitions. The outcome shows a non-significant result ($F = 1.064$, $p > 0.05$). This suggests that the retention of players by the clubs does not significantly influence the variability in the performance of the clubs at national competitions in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 4: The retention of players by football clubs in the NPFL will not significantly determine the clubs' performance at continental competitions.

Table 4: Regression of Retention of Players on Clubs' Performance at Continental Competitions

Multiple R = 0.660
Multiple R² = 0.435
Adjusted R² = 0.247
Std. Error of the Estimate = 12.58

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F
Regression	365.886	1	365.886	2.309	.226
Residual	475.314	3	158.438		
Total	841.200	4			

* indicate significant F at $\alpha = .05$

Table 6 shows the result of the regression of the predictor variable (retention of players) on NPFL clubs' performance at continental competitions. The result indicates a non-significant outcome ($F = 2.309$, $p > 0.05$). This implies that the retention of players by the clubs does not significantly contribute to the variance in the performance of the clubs at continental competitions. Though, it explained approximately 44% of the variance in the dependent

variable. That is, the retention of players by clubs in the NPFL does not significantly determine the performance of the clubs at continental competitions

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented and discussed in relation to the research hypotheses, offering an in-depth analysis of the structural and psychological factors shaping the dynamics of the Nigeria Premier Football League (NPFL). The results revealed that NPFL stakeholders widely acknowledge the presence of abundant football talent within the league, accompanied by a growing interest from European football clubs that continually scout for young Nigerian players. This indicates the international recognition of Nigeria as a fertile ground for football development. Stakeholders strongly supported the idea of retaining top-performing players and key squad members for several seasons, emphasizing that player continuity contributes to long-term team cohesion, tactical consistency, and sustainable club growth. However, despite this awareness, a significant number of NPFL players expressed a preference for pursuing careers abroad, particularly in Europe and other African leagues, primarily due to persistent underpayment, irregular salary structures, and poor welfare conditions.

This finding resonates with Dogari et al. (2018), who reported that players from Africa, Asia, and South America often contact football agents to facilitate their transfer to Europe, driven largely by financial motives and the pursuit of professional advancement. Similarly, Qu and Wu (2023) explained that football transfers are not solely based on individual performance but are shaped by broader external determinants, including global economic trends, regulatory shifts in sports governance, and the integration of digital technology in scouting and player management. This aligns with the economic realities of the NPFL, where financial instability continues to hinder competitiveness. Enenta (2015) further highlighted the issue of unpaid sign-on fees and salary arrears in Nigerian clubs, describing them as systemic weaknesses that have long impeded the development of professional football in the country.

Adebayo (2018) also affirmed that economic motivations remain the dominant factor influencing the migration of African players to European leagues, where the football ecosystem is more structured, financially rewarding, and supportive of professional growth. In line with this, data from the International Centre for Sports Studies (2019) consistently ranked Nigeria as Africa's top exporter of football talent and the tenth globally, illustrating both the country's vast human resource potential and its challenges in sustaining domestic football excellence. Interestingly, this study found that recruitment and retention strategies do not independently determine club success in national or continental competitions. Instead, performance outcomes are shaped by multiple interacting variables, including administrative management, funding efficiency, and psycho-demographic characteristics such as player motivation, self-esteem, and age. These findings support Adeleye et al. (2022), who emphasized that motivation, personality, and self-perception have significant joint contributions to athletic

performance and participation. Inadequate motivation or low morale among players—often caused by financial insecurity or lack of institutional support—can diminish commitment and performance levels, regardless of technical ability.

Moreover, the study underscores the indispensable role of coaching competence in shaping team outcomes. Alla et al. (2015) emphasized that well-trained and experienced coaches, particularly those with strong grassroots foundations, are essential for nurturing local talent and sustaining football development in Nigeria. This perspective aligns with Power (2020), who argued that a coach's ability to design effective training programs, apply scientific principles in conditioning, and foster a positive psychological environment directly enhances players' physiological and tactical performance. Therefore, football excellence is not solely a matter of player talent but a synergistic outcome of leadership, management, and psychosocial factors. Taken together, these findings suggest that improving NPFL club performance requires a multidimensional strategy that transcends player retention and transfer policies. Effective governance, sound financial management, improved coach education, and continuous psychological support for athletes are crucial components in building a competitive football ecosystem. The study thus reinforces the need for policy reforms aimed at institutional accountability, structured player welfare systems, and capacity development at all levels of football administration. Such a holistic approach would not only enhance the performance of NPFL clubs in domestic and continental competitions but also reduce the mass exodus of talented players seeking better opportunities abroad. In the long term, this could reposition Nigerian football as a model of professional excellence within Africa and the global sporting community.

CONCLUSION

Players' recruitment and retention does not significantly determine NPFL clubs performance at nation and continental competitions. However, collective factors such as funds allocation, funds management, coach competency and administrative skills collectively determine NPFL clubs performance at national and continental competitions. It is essential for NPFL football administrators to regularly update their knowledge of football administration. Lastly, there should be integration of selected football administrative factors by football stakeholders to move the NPFL to greater stature.

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