

Out of Africa: football to light up the world

Chaotic: But African football produces a huge amount of top talent. © PA

The Africa Cup of Nations kicks off tomorrow, taking elite players out of top European teams for up to six weeks in mid-season. Cause for complaint? Or brilliant for the global game?

It is tournament time in Africa. In front of a 40,000 sell-out crowd in Libreville, the hosts **Gabon** will face débutants **Guinea-Bissau** in the first match of the 2017 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON).

In three weeks and 32 matches' time, we will know the identity of the new kings of African football.

Many European fans will be irritated. AFCON takes elite players out of the Premier League and other top European teams for up to six weeks, right in the middle of the season.

But this year AFCON is fighting back. It claims that not only is it important in its own right – just as the European Championship or Copa America are – it is also a brilliant opportunity for Premier League fans to spy new stars and to keep up with their heroes.

In addition, so it says, the tournament offers unparalleled levels of quality, passion and excitement, as well as a talent-spotting feast, and an almost guaranteed 'big surprise' either on or off the pitch.

Take quality. Five Premier League clubs' record signings hail from the African continent, and the most highly sought-after player in the January transfer window, Pierre-Emerick **Aubameyang**, is there too.

And if players don't always seem to care enough in the European game, African football is different. The passion that surrounds the whole tournament is almost tangible.

One writer this week said it was 'one of the most exciting tournaments out there'. Rarely does any team go in as strong favourite, and unfancied sides can go far. Two years ago hosts Equatorial Guinea made the semi-finals, two before that **Burkina Faso** got to the final, and in 2012 Zambia actually won it.

As for talent spotting, remember how Didier N'Dong, Sunderland's club-record signing, caught the eye as a youngster in Equatorial Guinea, as did Dieumerci Mbokani, now leading the line for Hull City.

Poverty is of course a huge problem in much of Africa. But many believe that without the myriad distractions of affluence such as TVs and Xboxes, children in Africa spend far more time honing their ball skills than their European counterparts.

So how much is sporting success really about wealth?

Moneyball

Football's simplicity — all you need is a ball — led to it becoming the game of the poor all over the world, say many. Most of football's all-time greats, such as Diego Maradona and **Pelé**, grew up with nothing except football. You can have pristine pitches and highly-paid coaches, but they cannot produce raw talent.

Let's not be naive, reply others. Look at how well rich European countries do at the World Cup. They succeed because their players have access to the best facilities, and because their football is a highly professional, organised money-making machine.

YOU DECIDE

1. Do rich countries have an intrinsic advantage in sport?
2. Who will win the Africa Cup of Nations?

ACTIVITIES

1. Research two sportspeople: one from a very poor background and one from a very privileged background. Write 500 words comparing their upbringings and how it affected their careers.
2. Think of ten sports, and list them by the value of financial outlay necessary to take part in them.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"Everything in life is affected by a form of the class system."

What do you think?

Q & A

I'm not interested in football. Why should I care about this?

You do not have to be fascinated by the offside rule or by Burkina Faso's chances at the AFCON to find the question of why certain countries are good at certain sports interesting. This touches on many questions of society and history. Why, for example, does Jamaica produce so many sprinters, and why are New Zealand the best rugby team in the world?

Who will win the Africa Cup?

The favourites are Ivory Coast, who won the competition last time after several near-misses. Senegal have a strong team, with Liverpool's Sadio Mané their best player. Algeria were the most impressive African team at the last World Cup, nearly eliminating Germany, so look out for them too. There will be two matches per day, at 4pm and 7pm UK time.

WORD WATCH

Gabon

The central African country co-hosted the 2013 tournament with neighbours Equatorial Guinea. It is generally viewed as a relatively safe haven in a dangerous region.

Guinea-Bissau

The tiny West African country was a Portuguese colony until 1973. It has a population of 1.6 million. They are the only team making their AFCON debut in 2017.

Aubameyang

Arsenal, Paris Saint-Germain and Manchester City are said to be interested in signing the player. Born in France he plays for the German club Borussia Dortmund, having scored 20 goals in 22 games this season. He has said he wants to join Real Madrid.

Burkina Faso

The only team of those three to reach the final stages this time. Chelsea's Bertrand Traoré is seen as crucial to their progress.

Pelé

Many rank the Brazilian star who played in each World Cup from 1958 to 1970 as the greatest footballer of all time, though he only ever played in South America, and scored many of his goals in uncompetitive matches. Others think that Diego Maradona, Lionel Messi or Johan Cruyff are more worthy of that accolade.