The Athletic | The New York Times

Why international football is under attack like never before

Philip Buckingham Oct 10, 2024

On the eve of a new season, Manchester City and Portugal defender Ruben Dias used his social media accounts to lay out all that stood before him for club and country: 11 months of unbroken football, featuring as many as 85 games.

“POV (point of view): You play for City,” Dias wrote as a succinct caption to accompany his colour-coded, cross-competition schedule.

Two months on, Dias has already recorded 12 appearances for City and Portugal this season. More will likely come with his country in their two matches in the coming week before he returns to the club ahead of their Premier League trip to Wolverhampton Wanderers a week on Sunday. On and on it will go.

Dias is not alone. Bernardo Silva, his team-mate for club and country, is on the same demanding schedule, along with the majority of a City squad well accustomed to international duty.

Rodri would have been another had it not been for the knee injury suffered last month, a setback that ended the midfielder’s season in its infancy. The Spain midfielder had been a vocal critic of the increasing demands placed upon elite footballers just days before, saying strike action was now an option. “I think we are close to that,” Rodri said.

A string of high-profile players have since agreed that something has to give, and the comments of Maheta Molango, chief executive of the

Professional Footballers Association (PFA) players' union last month indicated that it could be the international game that finds itself most vulnerable in the push for reform.

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"We've been very clear that we want to give priority to our domestic competitions," Molango told the UK's BBC Radio 5 Live. "This is the bread and butter of our players, so I don't think that the issue is here domestically. I think the problem is more in terms of international competition, especially the national team competitions."

Club football's strength has grown inexorably in the modern era and that leaves the international game facing a fight for relevance.

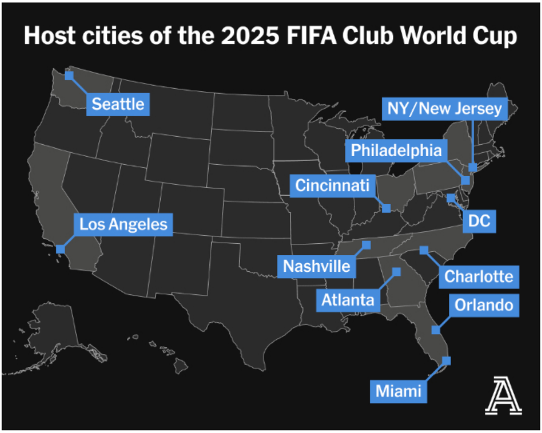
Few would dispute the World Cup's place at football's pinnacle or the emotional attachment to established continental competitions such as the European Championship and Copa America, but international football and its five windows within each domestic season has begun to feel like a hindrance to rival stakeholders who have nothing to gain from them.

"Quite clearly, it's a financial argument, isn't it?" Mick McCarthy, the former Republic of Ireland defender who went on to have two spells managing that country, as well as Premier League clubs, tells *The Athletic*. "Every player I came across would want to play international football. They were the happiest times of my career. But it's a monetary thing now. The Premier League is a monster and club football is what pays the way."

It is in these weeks, made up of uninspiring UEFA Nations League fixtures and FIFA World Cup qualifiers, when international football struggles to make pulses race. The next major tournament summers are a distant prospect. A hefty bulk of supporters, you suspect, would prefer to be watching club football this weekend and clubs would certainly rather their players were not flying off to distant countries to play international matches of dubious value.

A season like this without national-team tournaments at the end will see most countries play 10 matches across ringfenced international windows in September, October, November, March and June. The demands are neither extreme nor new but it has been the additions to football's calendar that have tightened the squeeze.

June will bring the semi-finals and finals of the Nations League, a UEFA competition only founded in 2018, as well as FIFA's revamped, 32-team Club World Cup. There are just seven days between one ending and the other starting. The overlap between club and international football is there in a season that also sees the winners of an expanded Champions League being asked to play at least two more games than in the past.



FIFA's Men's International Match Calendar (IMC) offers no opportunity for change until at least 2030 but players' unions have signalled their intent to challenge the global governing body.

FIFPro, a body representing 65,000 players worldwide, joined forces with the top European leagues to accuse FIFA of an "abuse of dominance" in legal action at the European Commission this summer. That was followed by the PFA teaming up with the French players' union in a separate case at the Brussels Court of Commerce. They set out to challenge the "legality of FIFA's decisions to unilaterally set the international match calendar".

FIFA stresses that key decisions regarding the IMC were only made after consultation with all stakeholders — FIFPro included — but the unhappiness of unions and the players they represent has been made clear in the past six months. International football or a FIFA-organised event, such as the Club World Cup, have begun to look the most likely target for elite players to take a stand unless they are assured of change.

"I managed twice at international level and I think I only ever had 12 games a season," says McCarthy. "It's not a lot. It'll always depend on who the players are, but we might get to a stage where we pick and choose players because pressure is put on.

"I can remember playing and (club) managers telling me not to come back (from international duty) injured. The players are all paid very well, but they just want to be protected. I understand that. They've got careers to think about."

International honours do not bring direct financial rewards to players but the pull remains obvious. Such tournaments shape legacies, as Lionel

Messi proved as his Argentina side won the 2022 World Cup. To walk away would not be easy for the majority of players.

Lionel Messi's legend was secured with his 2022 World Cup win with Argentina (Hernan Cortez/Getty Images)

"It's coming to a stage where, yes, decisions are going to have to be made," says Ian Baraclough, manager of Northern Ireland's national team between 2020 and 2022, tells *The Athletic*. "The game is so demanding now. You're at risk of diluting the quality of football and players having shorter careers. They'll end up picking and choosing."

Did he ever see a reluctance from players to meet international obligations?

"Players I dealt with and managed, I felt as though it was an honour for them to be playing for their country," Baraclough adds. "But there were certain times during the calendar, especially in the summer when it was friendlies, where players might ask whether or not they could miss games.

"It might have been a long season, they might benefit from spending time with their family. As a manager, you'd expect that. But that didn't happen often. I inherited the likes of Jonny Evans and Steven Davis, where there was an insatiable appetite to play for their country.

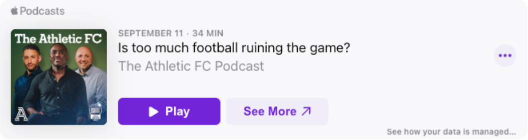
"I'm definitely not of the thought that international football doesn't mean anything. You get the odd one (disinterested player), and that's fine. But others don't want to give it up because they know one day they won't have a choice and it'll be over."

FIFA has a well-versed and justifiable defence of international football. It offers the opportunity for smaller nations to compete with the biggest; the chance for less-decorated footballers to rub shoulders with the game's greats. It is also a key driver of revenue to its 211 member associations, money used to further the development of football in all corners of the globe. FIFA's responsibility is not just to the elite.

Launching a hugely expanded (up from seven teams to 32) Club World Cup next summer, though, is an acceptance that club football has increasing power. FIFA has seen UEFA's income streams balloon through the Champions League and ultimately wants a piece of the action with a similar competition of its own. The Africa Cup of Nations, which was initially scheduled for next summer, has had to make way, moving back to December 2025 and January 2026.

The alterations and expansions have inadvertently brought scrutiny on the international game 20 months out from the biggest-ever World Cup, which will feature 48 teams (up from 32) and 104 matches (up from 64) across three host countries (the United States, Canada and Mexico).

"The players need to get their message across, ultimately, because you can't be asking for more from them," adds Baraclough.



Podcasts

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To shape the debate on the future of the international match calendar is to find an answer to one question: how many games in a season are too many?

"We're getting close to finding out, right?" Stephen Smith, founder of Kitman Labs, a sports data science and analytics company specialising in injury welfare and performance analytics, tells *The Athletic*.

“We can see the build-up, the number of games in quick succession, the level of competitiveness in those games, is all adding to a really challenging mix for teams, leagues and governing bodies to oversee.

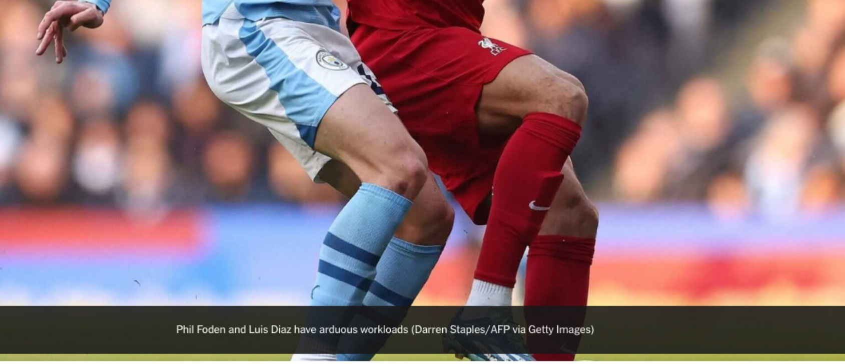
“The number of games and minutes over a season is not always the most accurate indicator of whether someone is likely to get injured. Obviously, if you’re pushing too many in, then it’s an issue, but cumulative minutes and games aren’t the only factor.

“It’s not the congestion between one game and the next but the chains of congestion. It’s those periods where a player has to continuously play a high number of games in a short window. That’s when we see the injuries really manifest themselves.”

That is the nub of players’ collective concerns: the more matches that are played, the greater the threat of injury. FIFPro’s annual workload report found that 10 players (all internationals) played in 70 games or more last season, comfortably exceeding the union’s recommended limit of 55.

The average international player is unlikely to surpass that number and will find no issues in adding 10 national-team games to his calendar. The CIES Football Observatory annual report, in fact, found only 0.31 per cent of players had featured in 61 or more games, with another 1.8 per cent playing between 51 and 60 times.

But it is the elite who are asked to do most in expanded competitions going forward: Phil Foden of Manchester City and England, and Liverpool duo Luis Diaz (Colombia) and Darwin Nunez (Uruguay) each made 72 appearances for club and country last season, according to FIFPro.



Phil Foden and Luis Diaz have arduous workloads (Darren Staples/AFP via Getty Images)

“The dangers are we erode the quality of our game because we’ll lose our best athletes,” says Smith, whose company has worked with the Premier League itself and with Chelsea and Manchester United. “We keep putting these superstars out there and if we ask too much of them, then we’re going to lose them. You’re going to end up hurting these players’ careers.”

Can we suggest the knee injury recently suffered by Rodri, who featured in 72 matchday squads with City and Spain last season according to FIFPro data, was the result of playing too much?

“It’s not possible to say it was a result of his workload but it’s not possible to say it wasn’t either,” says Smith. “Injuries never come from one source. They’re multifactorial. But I would say the player had an elevated risk because of the amount of exposure he was getting. And so would the vast majority of high-profile players who are playing more games than ever.”

Another factor in the future of international football is travel demands.

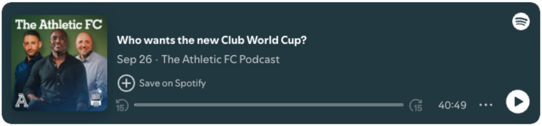
The European club game is littered with elite South American, North American, African and Asian footballers and each window calls for such players to embark on huge journeys between games. Tottenham’s Cristian Romero was found to have clocked up 211 hours of international travel — 163,000 miles (262,000km) — with Argentina as part of FIFPro’s monitoring programme.

“That plays a pretty enormous role,” says Smith. “We’ve done research looking at the impact of travel and the impact of time zones on player health and performance. There are very strong relationships between the impact of travel and both in-game performance and player health. It does take a huge toll.”

Football’s greatest problem remains an absence of joined-up thinking.

Dias has already played in games overseen by the Football Association, Premier League and UEFA this season, with more to come from the EFL (almost certainly) and FIFA. Each body has interests to protect and a reluctance to cede ground. Clubs, too, organise money-spinning pre-season and end-of-season tours that ask more and more of their players. It means summer breaks for the sport's elite rarely last more than three weeks.

"You can very easily state that fixture congestion is having an impact on player health," adds Smith. "The game partners need to come together and put their agendas to one side, because we have to protect our assets."



Who wants the new Club World Cup?

Sep 26 · The Athletic FC Podcast

Might the biggest countries eventually be spared having to qualify for major tournaments? Could all international games be squeezed into one mid-season window? Without a legal victory against FIFA in the years to come, it will largely be left to the international governing body and its member nations to decide how the next IMC will look.

That ensures talk of international football's demise remains premature. For now, it can just about cling to its romantic pull and the status quo.

"My view will always be that if you want to play for your country, you should go and play," says McCarthy. "The World Cup is always going to be the pinnacle and that's where players want to be. As a player, I'd play in every single international I could.

"You see it in a summer when you've got a Euros or a World Cup, everyone is buzzing. But, ultimately, like most things, it comes back to money. And the money is now in the Premier League and with the big clubs."

(Top photos: Getty Images; design: Meech Robinson)