

# Egypt's Salah and Senegal's Mane only the latest Europe-based stars to grab attention at Africa Cup of Nations



- Before the Liverpool titans stole the show in 2022, tournament was dominated by Algeria's Riyad Mahrez, Cameroon's Samuel Eto'o and Ivory Coast's Didier Drogba

CAIRO: Rightly or wrongly, the Africa Cup of Nations final has been framed as the clash of the Liverpool superstars: Egypt's Mohamed Salah against Senegal's Sadio Mane.

The club's fans have revelled in the match-up and even Liverpool's official website has jumped on the bandwagon, posting a photo of the two on social media with the caption: "Proud of you both."

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp, meanwhile, noted that one of his players will return ecstatic and the other dejected.

This rivalry looks set to run, with the two nations facing each other in the final African qualifiers for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

While recent attention has gone to the two teammates and international rivals, the Africa Cup of Nations has in its modern history always shone a spotlight on European-based African superstars.

The current competition has already witnessed a strong focus on some of the best Arab players abroad, such as Salah, Manchester City's Algerian Riyad Mahrez, PSG's Moroccan Achraf Hakimi and even the absent Hakim Ziyech of Chelsea and Morocco.

In its 31-edition history, the Africa Cup of Nations has thrown up heroes who have either gone on to play on the world's biggest stage or, as is increasingly the case, have made Europe their home.

As captains, either Salah or Mane will step up to receive the trophy on Sunday night. In 2019, it was Mahrez — a Premier League star with Pep Guardiola's Manchester City and previously with Leicester City — who stole the limelight.

But one of the first names that come to mind when talking about African players is Ivory Coast's Didier Drogba.

The Chelsea legend held the title of top African scorer in the English Premier League with 104 goals — a record since broken by Salah — and made a remarkable 44 strikes in the UEFA Champions League, which he won in 2012 with the London club.

He also won the African player of the year award twice, and so far remains his national team's top scorer with 65 goals. With a list of honors that includes four Premier League titles, four FA cups and a Turkish Super Lig — the Turkish league championship — with Galatasaray, many consider him the greatest of all African exports to Europe.

However, Drogba did not win the Africa Cup of Nations

Then there is the great Samuel Eto'o.

He has been in the news recently as head of the Cameroonian Football Federation, hosts of the 2021 AFCON, but also has been considered the best African player in history.

Eto'o won the Africa Cup of Nations in 2000 and 2002, and remains the competition's all-time top scorer with 18 goals. He also won an Olympic gold medal with his country in 2000 and played in four world cups.

The Cameroonian lion also won three La Liga and two Champions League titles with Barcelona, and a treble of Serie A, Champions League and Coppa Italia with Inter Milan — a record that other African players can only dream of.

John Obi Mikel won the 2013 Africa Cup of Nations with Nigeria, and the bronze medal in the 2016 Olympics. He also won two Premier League titles, three FA cups and a Champions League with Chelsea to make him one of Africa's most decorated stars in Europe.

Another Ivorian to carve out a stunning career in Europe is Yaya Toure, who won the Africa Cup of Nations in 2015 and African footballer of the year four times. He excelled at Barcelona, winning two La Liga titles and the Champions League with Guardiola in 2009. He then moved on to become part of the Manchester City dynasty, claiming three Premier League titles and one FA cup.

No list would be complete without mentioning the unique talent of Liberian George Weah, the only African star to win the Ballon d'Or, which he was awarded in 1995.

Blessed with extraordinary skill on the pitch and character off it, Weah's major trophy tally included two Serie A titles with AC Milan, one Ligue 1 with Paris Saint-Germain and an FA cup with Chelsea.

While Weah won the African footballer of the year award three times (1989, 1994, 1995), he never made his mark on the Africa Cup of Nations.

Still, what other African star — apart from Salah, perhaps, in recent years — has been seen as outright the best player in the world at one time?

There are many others who have at one time or another shone in Europe and for their countries. These include Nouredin Naybet, Taribo West, Rabah Majer, Michael Essien, Samuel Kufuor, Kolo Toure, Abedi Pele, Seydou Keita, Benny McCarthy, Asamoah Gyan, Jay Jay Okocha, and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang. The list goes on and on.

And let's not forget the hundreds of home-based African stars who don't receive the same attention as their Europe-based colleagues but who are just as important to their countries' causes.

On Sunday night, Salah might lead Egypt to a record-extending eighth AFCON title, or Mane might lift Senegal's first.

Whatever the outcome, the Liverpool stars will no doubt be the first to share the glory with their teammates.

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