

The epicenter of the passport scandal

Brazilian players find themselves caught up in the European passport scandal. Some are the victims of unscrupulous agents and club officials. Others moved willingly in order to escape poverty at home.

BY BRIAN HOMEWOOD

in Rio de Janeiro

Brazil's politicians believe they are getting to the bottom of a fake-passport scandal that threatens chaos in Europe and is damaging the credibility of the world's most illustrious soccer nation.

Brazilians are at the epicenter of a murky affair in which players obtain counterfeit European Union passports to help earn lucrative moves to European clubs.

Up to 1,000 players, eager to get around restrictions on non-EU players, are under investigation.

"Lamentably, the use of false documents in the transfer of Brazilian players is not the exception, but the rule," said Aldo Rebelo, president of the Brazilian congressional commission looking into the *escândalo*.

The net of suspicion has even entangled former Brazilian internationals Edinho and Careca, who played in the 1986 World Cup and are now agents.

Corinthians striker Edu was the first case to come to light. His \$9 million transfer to English Premier League club Arsenal fell through last year



after he was turned back at London's Heathrow Airport carrying a counterfeit Portuguese passport. Edu returned to Arsenal this winter with proper documentation.

Since then, other Brazilians have been caught in the act with at least two — Warley and Jorginho Paulista of Italian club Udinese — sent home.

The most prominent case involved St. Etienne striker Alex, who has been suspended in France for holding a forged Portuguese passport. His club lost six league points.

Alex, charged in France with possession of a counterfeit passport, was interrogated by the commission in Brasilia and told politicians his club was to blame.

CLUBS TO BLAME. Alex said he originally entered France with a Brazilian passport. But at the end of last season, Alex said he was "induced" by the club to obtain a false EU passport, which he said was supplied by former World Cup defender Edinho.

"It's obvious that the player is involved," said Congressman Jurandil Juarez, "but the affair is centered on the clubs."

Edinho is almost certain to be questioned by



DANIEL AGUILAR/REUTERS

Brazilian Warley (tackled by American Frankie Hejduk at the 1999 Confederations Cup) was tripped up in the European passport scandal.



the commission, whose hearings could last several more weeks.

Leagues in Europe have different rules governing the eligibility of non-EU players. Some countries demand work permits; others limit the number of non-EU players each club is allowed to have on its roster or play at one time.

Afonso Martins Costa Filho, a prominent soccer agent, has implicated Portuguese civil servants in the affair.

He told how two officials, who he said worked for "the immigration service or the police in Portugal," provided fake passports for two young players, Jeda and Dede, to complete a move to Italian club Vicenza.

Martins said he obtained the documents on behalf of Careca, who was acting as agent for the two players, but he did not realize at the time that the passports were counterfeit.

HARDSHIPS AT HOME. The issue has underlined that Brazilians will do almost anything to play abroad and escape generally low salaries and the exhausting schedule of matches at home.

More than 600 Brazilian players moved abroad in 1999 to more than 60 nations. Destinations included Russia, China, Senegal, Indonesia, Finland and Iceland.

While players such as Barcelona's Rivaldo, Real Madrid's Roberto Carlos and Inter Milan's Ronaldo are household names worldwide, lesser players have found success lower down the soccer pecking order.

Striker Denilson Costa, unheard of in his own country, played a major role as Honduran club



ANDRÉS STAFFREUTERS

DRAMATIC START

Romario celebrated his first game of the 2001 Brazilian season with two goals in Vasco da Gama's 3-1 win over

Cabofriense. He also missed two penalties and saw a third goal disallowed. Romario, who scored a Vasco-record 66 goals in 2000, was on vacation for Vasco's first eight games. Vasco joins Flamengo, Fluminense and Americano in the semifinals of the first stage of the Campeonato Carioca.

Olimpia finished second behind the Los Angeles Galaxy in the CONCACAF Champions Cup and won the Honduran First Division's *Torneo Apertura*.

Last year, Eduardo Esidio broke the Peruvian championship goalscoring record, hitting the net 37 times to help Universitario to a third successive championship.

ABANDONED ABROAD. Rebelo says the players are the "least to blame" in the scandal. Many players move abroad as teenagers without playing for Brazilian clubs, and some are abandoned by agents if they do not find employment, he said.

The commission has already repatriated a 16-year-old who said his family had paid an agent \$5,000 to find a club in Belgium, only to be dumped with no food or money when an offer failed to materialize.

Georlan Gomes Bastos, known as Gil, told the commission he was so desperate, he accepted a false passport during an attempted move to Spanish Third Division club Lorca.

"I have five brothers who study," said the 21-year-old Brazilian. "I'm the only one who works, my mother is ill, and I had just spent four months playing for a club which paid me with a check which bounced."

Rebelo said the root of the problem was a social one.

"This confirms that in addition to a crime," he noted, "an urban tragedy exists when players in a difficult social situation accept false documents to play abroad." (*Reuters*)