

Thinking Outside the Penalty Box – Young Poets Network challenge
Arsenal FC footballers
Funded by Arts Council England

Arsenal has a legendary record when it comes to African players. No premier ship club has featured more Africans, in fact. See below for a handful of African footballers who have played for Arsenal:

African players

Danny le Roux – South Africa

Christopher Wreh – Liberia

Jehad Muntasser - Libya

Kaba Diawara – Guinea

Nwankwo Kanu – Nigeria

Lauren – Cameroon

Carlin Itonga – DRC

Kolo Toure – Ivory Coast

Emmanuel Eboué – Ivory Coast

Alexandre Song – Cameroon

Emmanuel Adebayor – Togo

Plays with African heritage

Patrick Vieira – Senegal

Jeremie Aliadiere – Algeria

Rami Shaaban – Egypt

Abou Diaby – Ivory Coast

Johan Djourou – Ivory Coast

Fabrice Muamba - DRC

Read on for profiles of African players who have played for Arsenal.

1. 'Gervinho' – Gervais Yao Kouassi – Cote d'ivoire

Born 27 May 1987. National team known as Les Elephants

<http://www.footballandmusic.co.uk/2014-world-cup-song-every-team/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bsj35KUZeos> – the nature of the Ivory Coast team



Gervinho is easygoing, polite; even shy. It is difficult to imagine him at the hub of the dressing-room wisecracks. But there is an unmistakable steel, a single-mindedness that has driven him from the commune of Abobo on Abidjan's north side. Gervinho arrived in London as a champion, his 15 goals and 10 assists helping Lille to their first league title in 56 years and, with things looking up once more at Arsenal, he is not afraid to make bold statements.

"Ivory Coast is like Arsenal," Gervinho says. "We have not won a tournament since 1992 so that's a number of years. We've got good players and it's very similar to the situation at Arsenal. Every time we approach a tournament, we say we are going to win it and then we miss out."

France's top division is followed nearly as keenly as the Premier League in Ivory Coast and Gervinho's title triumph last season was celebrated wildly and commemorated unusually. "A group of artists in Ivory Coast recorded a song about me," Gervinho says. "The lyrics said the country had gone through some very difficult months and seeing me on TV with the title enabled the people to forget their troubles."

Ivory Coast has been wracked by civil war and Gervinho also remembers hardship in his youth in Abobo, which is one of the most densely populated communes in the country. "Life was tough for me and my family," he says. "We experienced very hard living conditions."

Football, though, brought hope and salvation. "Thanks to football," Gervinho says, "my family are able to live well. Football really has saved my family and it's true that it saves a lot of families in Africa. It gives us the means to be able to give a better life to our loved ones. I was taken into the academy in Abidjan in 1997, after I started at a small club called La Colombe, and for a family to see their child at the academy ... they already hope that he is going to succeed."

It is easy to trace Gervinho's enthusiasm for the work of Save the Children, Arsenal's global charity partner, which aims to build better lives for children around the world. It was at the academy that Gervinho was given the Brazilian nickname, which is derived from his first name, Gervais, and it was where he formed deep bonds with the interns, who included Salomon Kalou, Didier Zokora, Emmanuel Eboué and the Touré brothers, Kolo and Yaya. "Kalou was my best friend," Gervinho says. "Before I came to Arsenal I'd already been to London to see him play for Chelsea so I knew the city a little bit. I love everything about it, apart from the cold."

Gervinho is close to Didier Drogba – he was a guest at the wedding of Chelsea's other Ivorian striker in Monaco last June – and his adaptation to his new surrounding has been eased by his funky entourage, whose presence has become a feature of Arsenal home games.

Who is your sporting hero?

Didier Drogba has been an inspiration to all of us in the Ivory Coast national team. He is a great motivator for all of us - and some of the talks he gives are like a president trying to motivate his country. It is not just what he does on the field - but also all he does for all of our people off the field.

What would you do if you were not a sportsman?

I don't know - growing up in the Ivory Coast is not easy. It is not as easy to say I would work in banking or I would work in education - because there are not always those opportunities. It is not an exaggeration to say that football saved me and my family - it is so much more than a job.

What would you save if your house burned down?

I grew up with very little - so material things have never been that important for me. If my wife and children were out the house - then that would be all I would need.

What is your favourite song?

I love to listen to anything from the US hip-hop scene. Jay Z and Kanye West are my favourites.

What's the programme you can't miss on TV?

I like to watch games that my friends play in. I tried to record and watch all the games that Drogba, Emmanuel Eboué and Salomon Kalou play in. Also Samir Nasri is a good friend of mine - so I do like to watch the Manchester City games when he is playing.

Last film you saw?

Something with my kids. When I get home from training - it is nice to sit down and watch a movie with them. They love the Madagascar movies.

Can you cook?

Not so well - because I have had somebody do it for me. When I joined Arsenal my wife didn't join me in London right away - but the club cooked for me after training.

If you could have dinner with three famous people, who would it be and why?

Jay Z, Thierry Henry, and President Obama are three people I really respect.

Your favourite holiday destination?

I like to relax in the South of France. The weather is so good, the food is so good, and it is perfect because we can all speak French.

In a film of your life, who would play you?

(Laughs) That isn't something I thought about - but they would have to have their hair done by my guy in France if they wanted it to be realistic!

Tell us a secret?

Artists back home have made a song about me. It was at a time when we had gone through a lot of trouble and violence in our country - and the lyrics said that seeing me lift the French title enabled them to forget their troubles for a while. That was very humbling.

[Source: Article in *The Daily Mail*. Read more here.](#)

2. Thierry Henry - France - Guadeloupe/ Martinique

Born 17 August 1977, Henry spent eight years at Arsenal where he is the club's all-time record goalscorer. At international level he represented France and is his country's record goalscorer too.



Henry is of Antillean heritage: his father, Antoine, is from Guadeloupe (La Désirade island), and his mother, Maryse, is from Martinique. He was born and raised in Les Ulis suburb of Paris which, despite sometimes being seen as a tough neighbourhood, provided good footballing facilities. As a seven-year-old, Henry showed great potential, prompting Claude Chezelle to recruit him to the local club CO Les Ulis. His father pressured him to attend training, although the youngster was not particularly drawn to football. He joined US Palaiseau in 1989, but after a year his father fell out with the club, so Henry moved to ES Viry-Châtillon and played there for two years.

Henry is a member of the UNICEF-FIFA squad, where together with other professional footballers he appeared in a series of TV spots seen by hundreds of millions of fans around the world during the 2002 and 2006 FIFA World Cups. In these spots, the players promote football as a game that must be played on behalf of children.

Stand Up Speak Up

Having been subjected to racism in the past, Henry is an active spokesperson against racism in football. The most prominent incident of racism against Henry was during a training session with the Spanish national team in 2004, when a Spanish TV crew caught coach Luis Aragonés referring to Henry as "black shit" to José Antonio Reyes, Henry's team mate at Arsenal. The incident caused an uproar in the British media, and there were calls for Aragonés to be sacked. Henry and Nike started the Stand Up Speak Up campaign against racism in football as a result of the incident. Subsequently, in 2007, *Time* featured him as one of the "Heroes & Pioneers" on the *Time* 100 list.

Other work

Along with 45 other football players, Henry took part in FIFA's "Live for Love United" in 2002. The single was released in tandem with the 2002 FIFA World Cup and its proceeds went towards AIDS research. Henry also supports the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation and Cystic Fibrosis Trust.

3. Abou Diaby - France - Ivory Coast

Born 11 May 1986, Diaby was born in the 10th arrondissement of Paris, but was raised in a housing development in Aubervilliers, a north-eastern suburb of Paris. He is the son of a long-distance truck driver and developed an interest into the sport of football after becoming fascinated by several players who played on the 1998 FIFA World Cup-winning team, most notably midfield stalwart Patrick Vieira, whom Diaby describes as "a monument to French football". Diaby was also adept at playing other sports such as basketball and boxing. He played for 6 years at Arsenal, but suffered 39 injury and fitness layoffs.



Of Ivorian descent, Diaby is a practicing Muslim and, while growing up, developed a fascination towards the subjects of religion, philosophy, science, and astronomy. Diaby became interested in accountancy after taking a course at the age of 17, while he was at the Auxerre youth academy.

4. Alex Song - Cameroon

"The indomitable Lions"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygn tRxCUqrQ> – team profile

<http://www.footballandmusic.co.uk/2014-world-cup-song-every-team/> - Cameroon song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1TxBvzLh7o>



Song was born in Douala, Cameroon and lost his father at the age of three. Since then, his uncle Rigobert Song has been like a second father and was a major influence in choosing football as a career. Unable to find a club or academy where he could hone his skills, Petit Song, as he is known in the Cameroon side, opted to move to France, joining SC Bastia at the age of 16. One of the players who inspired Song the most when he was young was Michael Essien.

Charity work

In 2011, Song became an ambassador for Grassroot Soccer, an international non-profit organisation working through football to stop the spread of HIV. As a native of Cameroon, Song is keenly aware of the toll that the AIDS epidemic has taken on the African continent. "Grassroot Soccer empowers role models throughout Africa to teach young people the skills they need in life. My uncle, Rigobert Song, was a very important role model for me growing up, and I understand the importance of young people having someone in their lives they can look up to and trust," Song said. "By using soccer as the classroom, GRS coaches are able to engage young people through a sport they already know and love. I am excited to be a part of this great mission."

5. Kolo Touré - Ivory Coast

Born 19 March 1981, Touré is an Ivorian professional footballer who plays for English club Liverpool as a defender. He previously played for Manchester City and Arsenal, where he was a member of the famous 'invincibles' side of the 2003–04 season. He is the elder brother of Manchester City's Yaya Touré and the late Ibrahim Touré, who died in June 2014, of cancer aged 28. He is frightened of animals.



He observes fasting during the Islamic month of Ramadan and has stated that "It doesn't affect me physically. It makes me stronger. You can do it when you believe so strongly in something. A normal human can be without water for much longer than one day."

Ivory Coast background

Born in Bouake, the second largest city in Cote d'ivoire, Bouaké is a centre for the Baoulé people and is known for its crafts. The economy is based on the cotton industry. The city largely grew from the 1970s after the construction of the power station at Kossou Lake flooded land to the west of the city. Bouaké is known for its large carnival and market and for the catholic St Michael's Cathedral. Bouaké was established as a French military post in 1899 and has been an administrative centre since 1914.

French and United Nations peacekeepers currently reside in the city as part of an enforced ceasefire between the rebel-held north and the government-held south. After the attempt to overthrow the president Laurent Gbagbo had failed, the rebel forces FN (*forces nouvelles*) led by Guillaume Soro made Bouaké their center of control. Subsequently, Bouaké University, opened in 1996, was closed down in September 2002. Financed by Unesco, the university reopened in April, 2005. Kolo grew up by the sea in the town of Abidjan on the west coast of Africa but his football foundations are based in South America after learning the game the samba way. "Football is the biggest sport in the Ivory Coast and everybody loves to play. Africa is very much like Brazil. We have beaches back home and people love to play football there. We also play barefoot on the roads if we have to because there is not a lot of money. But we enjoy it and everywhere you go children will be playing." Moving to Europe has been a culture shock. Away from friends and family for the first time in a strange country with strange food and awful weather. He has also been

concerned to hear reports of a civil war in the Ivory Coast following an uprising against the government. "Of course I am worried about what is happening back home. I am on the telephone every day to make sure that my friends and family are ok. But I think that everything will be ok soon. I think we have good people to bring calm."

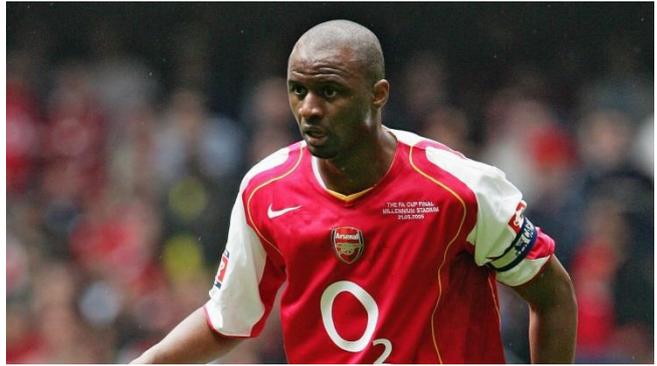
"I do not think my family will move away and come to England. If you grow up in a country that is where you want to live and that's where you are happiest. But I didn't really know anyone in England when I came and of course I miss my family. I am very happy to be here though and my girlfriend is coming over soon. It will be good for her to be in England because she cooks the African food that I love! I hope that she will bring some special bananas that we have back home. They are my favourites but I don't think you can buy them here in England."

"One of the other things I don't like about this country is the bad weather. It's always very cold, although that's probably the same everywhere in Europe compared to the Ivory Coast where the weather is beautiful."

6. Patrick Vieira – France – Senegal

Early life

Vieira's family moved from Senegal to Dreux in France, when he was eight, and he did not return to Senegal until 2003. His parents divorced when Vieira was young, and he never met his father again. His grandfather



served in the French Army, making him eligible for French nationality at birth. His surname Vieira, which is Portuguese, is his mother's maiden name, who is from Cape Verde. He was brought up by friends and relatives because his mother Rose went to the Dreux suburb of Paris to build a better life for her family.

He has become more and more conscious of the importance of his native country – "I want to discover my roots now, the country of my heart" – and of his desire to know more about his father, who he has not seen since childhood. He looked for a substitute father-figure in many of his trainers ("I never really missed my father because I was so close to my family, my grandfather and my four uncles"). "Every one of my trainers has taught me something."

Work in Senegal

He returned in 2003 and established the Diambars Academy in Saly, some 40 miles south (2 hours) from Dakar. When he first visited the site, it was a huge expanse of red dirt. But with fundraising and the help of other players with African connections, the academy is now thriving giving hundreds of youngsters in Senegal the gold dust that is education and help towards sporting excellence. 30 per cent of the school's time is spent teaching the youngsters football while the remaining 70 per cent is concerned with academic pursuits. "We want to teach them skills that will help them get good jobs if they can't be footballers. Senegal produces a lot of talented footballers and we want to harness that talent, but it is just as important to help kids if they can't read and write. Playing football is great but they must go to school." The first intake of 36 youngsters came after extremely rigorous scouting of 15,000 children. They need a good attendance record at school before being considered aged 11.

And when he returned, he made a point of visiting the house in Rue Dara where he was born. He made a point of meeting family and friends who looked after him while Rose was establishing in a new life in France. And he made a pilgrimage to the grim Ile Goree – the last staging post for slaves who were being shipped to the Caribbean and to America. It was the point of embarkation for some three million Africans who would never see their homes again. It visibly moved him. On the island is the Maison

D'Esclaves, the slave house. It is a grotesque monument to inhumanity and it had a huge impact on Vieira. "The week I spent in Senegal has made me grow up as a human being because I have seen so many things."

7. Chioma Ubogagu (Nigeria)

"The Super Eagles"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fetWGB62rOI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS>

[h6PrxKL-g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS)

<http://www.footballandmusic.co.uk/2014-world-cup-song-every-team/>



Born 10 September 1992, Ubogagu is a British-born American football player who plays as a forward for Arsenal Ladies and the United States U-23 women's national team. She previously played for Stanford University and the United States Under-20 team at the 2012 FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup. At age 3 her parents divorced and she moved with her mother to Texas. In February, 2015, Ubogagu signed with Arsenal, the club she'd supported as a child, and her British birth made it easier for her to acquire a United Kingdom work permit.

Her grandfather is former Nigeria and Tottenham Hotspur player Austin Eneuke. She became an Arsenal fan watching the North London derby, despite her father urging her to support Tottenham.

Her name Chioma means "Good God" in the Igbo language, spoken primarily by the Igbo people in southeastern Nigeria.

8. Kanu (Nigeria)

Kanu was born 1st August 1976 in Owerri, which is the capital of Imo state in the heart of Igboland. The Owerri Slogan is *Heartland*. It is currently referred to as the entertainment capital of Nigeria and is home to an annual beauty pageant called "Miss

Heartland". Owerri sits in the rain forest and produces many agricultural products, such as yams, cassava, taro, corn, rubber and palm products. Owerri also sits on huge crude oil and natural gas reserves like most of the Igbo land areas.



He was twice African player of the year, Olympic Gold medallist, European Cup winner with Ajax, League and Cup Double-winner with Arsenal – and FA Cup finalist with Portsmouth.

Charity work

His football foundation aims to take on "agents who have for years preyed on young African players, ripping them off and leaving many penniless and abandoned". He has pledged to set up his own academies across the continent – starting in Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Somalia – because he does not believe that the ones already in existence are good enough or act in the interests of players and their families. Kanu also wants to advise the football federations of these countries on how to educate and teach youngsters and coaches so that they are looked after properly. Kanu already has a heart foundation, named after him, which has been working for the past eight years to save the lives of hundreds of children who need surgery. He now wants that, too, to go further. Instead of flying the patients and their families out of their homelands for their operations he wants to have five hospitals built – in Nigeria, Ghana, Rwanda, Ziwababwe and Uganda. And for them to be built within the next 18 months. "It's possible," Kanu says as he explains his hugely ambitious plans. "A lot of companies want to get involved and it can be quick to build things in Africa. They know we can do this."

The foundation started in 2000 following his own well-documented heart problems. In the summer of 1996, after leading Nigeria to Olympic Gold, with some superb goals and a string of assists, Kanu was set to be star of Serie A after securing a big-money move to Internazionale.

Personal challenges

The 6ft 5in striker was already a double-European Cup finalist – and winner, in 1995, against Milan having also secured three Dutch league titles with Ajax. Aged 19, the

world was at his, fairly substantial, feet. Instead a medical at Inter, having already signed and played in pre-season friendlies, showed he had a faulty aortic valve. "When it happened the doctor said to me 'you can't play football again'. It was the end of the world. I was scared. But I'm a Christian and I prayed that God would help me," Kanu says. "The first thing was to have the operation [four hours of open heart surgery in the United States] and once that was successful I never believed I would not play again."

A career was not lost but 14 months, the time it took for him to rehab, was. Inter moved on. They signed Roberto Baggio and Ronaldo and, after just 11 games, Kanu had to move on, too. To Arsenal – for the £4m it had taken to transfer him from the Netherlands to Italy. "My heart problems changed my aspect on life," he says. "If you have been in hospital for that kind of thing, then it does. No one knows what the future holds and maybe that's why I started to think about others more. When it happened it helped me understand what life was all about. I've always taken responsibility but only when something like that happens can you really see."

One day, soon after signing for Arsenal, Kanu was watching television. It was about the problems of heart surgery, the waiting lists, the operations that needed to be done. The idea of setting up a foundation was born. It started by raising money for two young Nigerian children – Oluwatofunmi Okude and Enitan Adesole – but that was expensive, costing £15,000 each, with the operations in London. Soon children were being taken to Tel Aviv and then Miot Hospitals in India. Two hundred and ninety lives have been saved. "But the main aim of the foundation now is to have hospitals built in Africa," Kanu says. "I know it's going to cost a lot of money." He is looking for companies to help fund the work and take on the naming rights while a charity dinner will take place in London in September to really kick-start the campaigning.

"I get hundreds of letters from all over Africa and that's where the pressure comes in. You hear the story, and everyone's story deserves help, and you want to help," Kanu, whose foundation has a waiting list of more than 1,000 children, says. "There was an incident last year when we were raising money for a family so that a child could have an operation. We'd organised a charity football match but on the morning of the game news came through that the child had died."

9. Emmanuel Eboué

“Every time I pull on the Ivory Coast shirt I feel very proud. Football, and playing for my country, is what I live for.”

“When I’m on the pitch I try my best. This is my job, being a footballer, and if i didn’t work hard in and out of

training then I wouldn’t be here for long. I want to prove myself here at the club. The spirit we have here is quite contagious. If you see one of the big players working their heart out then you do the same. It is natural.”



Emmanuel’s belief in a higher power is evident throughout any interview, and he is not alone with the Ivory Coast a country in which 70 per cent of the inhabitants hold a religious conviction. “I believe that God has a path for you. He decides what happens. This is something shared by everybody in my family. I even have a bible in my car which I read all of the time.”

Married, with a baby girl, Emmanuel foregoes the lifestyle normally associated with a young footballer. “I don’t go out much to tell you the truth. If I’m not at training then I prefer to spend time with my family. I’ve not really had the chance to go out and visit London in any great detail – it’s hard with a baby girl. However, I hope in the future to go and visit some of the city. Since I’ve been here I’ve been making the effort to learn English.”