



Could A.I. Find Brazil’s Next Pelé?

Recruitment apps powered by artificial intelligence are gaining ground in Brazil, promising to even the playing field and find more soccer talent.

Santos F.C.’s youth team practicing with a drone hovering above. The footage it recorded would be analyzed by A.I., then used to measure player performance and identify weaknesses.

Extracted from the New York Times

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By Ana Ionova Visuals by Victor Moriyama

Ana Ionova and Victor Moriyama spent time with athletes, trainers and agents creating and using A.I. tools. They reported from Santos and Aguaí, Brazil.

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By Ana Ionova · Visuals by Victor Moriyama · 24 June 2026

Platforms like Footbao have quickly attracted hundreds of thousands of users in a country where playing professional soccer is a near-universal dream.

Brazil exports more star talent than any other nation, but deep economic and regional inequalities have historically made it difficult to standardize scouting. Finding talent has traditionally been left to olheiros—storied talent hunters who spend decades scouring amateur matches from the Amazon to the outback. Now, AI technology can reach these remote corners faster and more effectively, analyzing user-uploaded video drills to score and rank technical capabilities.



THE DIGITAL SCOUT — Youth trials in rural São Paulo State, where smartphone capture and spatial computing map and rank technical capability.



Matheus Alvarez using drones and AI-powered apps to monitor player performance during training sessions at Santos F.C.

THE INSTITUTIONAL ALLIANCE: SANTOS F.C.

The expanding role of recruitment technology has already reached the upper echelons of the sport. Santos F.C.—the legendary club where global icons like Pelé and Neymar Jr. got their start — has forged a strategic partnership with Footbao. The club aims to use the app to modernize its recruitment pipeline and keep a step ahead of competing clubs.



HISTORIC GROUNDS, FUTURE ALGORITHMS — Santos F.C. youth squads train under drone monitoring at the club's historic headquarters.

At the Santos training facility, youth squads now train under drone monitoring, feeding footage into AI to measure performance data. "We can't be everywhere at once," says Carlos Antônio Anunciação, scouting coordinator for Santos F.C. "Today, with the help of technology, we can go much farther."

INSIDE THE TECH FUNNEL

At Footbao’s office in São Paulo, analysts review the most promising clips flagged by the algorithm out of tens of thousands of user uploads, scoring players across two dozen categories. The ultimate goal is full automation to reduce human error and ground scouting in pure data.

"We're not trying to take the job away from a scout. We make scouting more efficient, more economical."

NICK RAPPOLT · CEO, FOOTBAO

FROM DIGITAL FUNNEL TO REAL-WORLD GLORY

The power of this funnel was on display at a recent tryout in rural Aguaí, where teenagers were selected solely based on their AI app scores. Among them was 18-year-old Davi Barossi, whose daily video drill uploads pushed him into the top 30 nationwide for his age group. By afternoon's end, Barossi was one of six players signed to a local team roster. "This is the opportunity I've been looking for," he said.



PERSPECTIVE FROM THE FIELD

While traditionalists note that AI has blind spots regarding physical traits and digital access, proponents agree that recruitment is soccer’s next data frontier. By blending human intuition with advanced algorithms, platforms like Footbao are building the future of global talent discovery.



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