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French Sport: Caught between Universalism and Exceptionalism

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This article argues that the question of national perspectives is a fundamental problem in the writing of European sports history. It does so by demonstrating that France has an equal pedigree, in terms of diffusion and exceptionalism, as Britain, and pleads for a less skewed approach to the history of the subject in general. The article shows, first, that France contributed significantly to the internationalization of sport in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with French networks facilitating the spread of sports across the globe. It considers the impact of French universalism on the institutional structures of world sport and assesses the importance of sport to governmental diplomacy. Second, it proposes that France occupies a special place in the history of European sport, halfway between that of the British on the one hand and other continental sporting cultures on the other. It discusses the role of central and regional administrations in the creation of a sports space that is distinctly marked by a lack of football hegemony. French sport, the article concludes, is characterized by a peculiar mix of anglomanie, invented traditions, internationalism, state interventionism and eclecticism.

1. Introduction

It is a truism of sports history that Britain, uniquely, both gave sport to the world and remained exceptional in its own sporting culture. On the one hand, team sports and high-profile individual games such as tennis originated in the United Kingdom; on the other, the dominance of cricket, rugby (two codes) and hockey along with the absence of handball and the relatively low take-up of road cycling lend the country an odd profile compared with the European mainland. Yet this paper will argue that the question of national perspectives – particularly ones that stress the dominance of one nation over others – is a fundamental problem in the writing of European sports history. It will do so by demonstrating that France has

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an equal pedigree in terms of diffusion and exceptionalism, and plead for a less skewed approach to the history of the subject in general.

The article will show, first, that France contributed significantly to the internationalization of sport in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Paris in particular acting as a diffusion point for British sports, with French networks facilitating the spread of sports across the globe. It will consider the impact of French universalism on the institutional structures of world sport (not only the founding of the Olympic movement, but also the politics of FIFA in the interwar period), and assess the importance of sport to governmental diplomacy. Second, it will propose that France occupies a special place in the history of European sport, halfway between that of the British on the one hand and other continental sporting cultures on the other. To illustrate this, it will discuss the role of central and local administrations in the creation of a sports space that is distinctly marked by a lack of football hegemony. French sport, the paper will conclude, is characterized by a peculiar mix of *anglomanie*, invented traditions, internationalism, state interventionism and eclecticism.

2. A universalism tinted with nationalism: international sport made in France

Since the Age of Enlightenment, and especially since the Revolution, French elites have shared a vision of France as a country responsible for giving universal values to the world. Although the Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) was preceded by founding texts promulgated in England and America, and despite the fact that revolutionary values were disseminated in Europe at the point of a bayonet, this conviction remained well established in the twentieth century, even in the thinking and actions of General De Gaulle and Jacques Chirac. Sport and political thinking about sport has not escaped this universalist spirit, which proclaims equality between men whatever their religion, their culture or their race, and which also presumes that this principle is applied in the field of international relations. Clearly, the French do not monopolize these ideas but they have been the most active promoters of them in the field of sport.

2.1. From the enlightenment to British sport

Like the men of the Enlightenment, French sportsmen drew some of their inspiration from the United Kingdom, even if some contested Britain's donor role. Jean-Jules Jusserand, a respected expert of the Anglo-Saxon world and French ambassador in Washington (1902–25), for instance, wrote in 1901 that 'athletic exercises are fashionable today in France; it is not a new fashion, and it is not an English fashion, it is a renewed French fashion'.[1] Nevertheless, he

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admired sport as one of the sources of British power via education and the way it constructed a model of virile masculinity. Due to the narrowness of the Channel and the often tumultuous and passionate relationships with their British neighbours, French elites maintained 'sporting' relationships from very early on with English aristocrats. From the reign of Louis XVI (1774–1792), horseracing, which had already been in vogue in England for some time, was introduced in France. The trend was quickly adopted by the most well-known aristocrats in Paris, notably the count of Artois, brother of the king and of the future Charles X (1824–1830). While some, such as the journalist Linguet, protested at the time 'against this copying of a foreign practice',[2] races sponsored by the king (*prix du Roi*) were established in 1781. The taste for horseracing was then resumed during the Restoration, before a French Jockey Club was created in 1834. It must also be remembered that the first velocipede races in the history of cycling were organised around Paris in 1868 (Saint-Cloud) and in 1869 (Paris-Rouen) and that they were won by the British man, James Moore. Similarly, the holidaying of wealthy English people on the French coasts in the 1870s encouraged the popularization of lawn tennis.

2.2. *Between Olympism and nationalism*

It is thus not surprising that the Olympic universalism of Pierre Coubertin originated from an admiration of the English sporting model – essentially the sports education of elites, which would allow for the 'recasting' of French youth. From a monarchist family, Coubertin 'rallied without passion to the cause of the Republic from 1887'[3] and was not in favour of the democratization and extension of sport to workers or women. His universalism was therefore a compromised and limited one, elitist in character and comprising the representation of a modern and international chivalry, in accordance with the reformed idea of Olympism from the Congress held in Paris in June 1894. Coubertin's project also borrowed from pacifist ideas developed during the first Universal Peace Congress held in Paris in 1889. Indeed, the instigators of this meeting, Hodgson Pratt and Frédéric Passy, had already proposed 'organising peaceful athletics meetings among foreign students'.[4]

However, Coubertin had to share his Olympic idea with the other co-opted members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and it quickly became tinged with a nationalism that subverted its initial universalism and internationalism.[5] From the Games in Athens (1896) to those in Berlin (1936), Coubertin was more or less complicit in this drift towards nationalism. It is true that French sporting and political milieus were not exempt from responsibility in this evolution, not least the press, which very quickly became both promoters of sports competitions and their principal commentator. The journalist George Rozet, who was close to the nationalist camp at the time, commented in 1911 on

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the first French victory in the rugby Five Nations Championship: 'After thirty years of clumsy kicks on the football pitches, one day the newspapers print the headline, as if referring to a European war: *France has beaten Scotland*'.[6]

2.3. Sport and French power in the interwar period

As in the other belligerent countries, the First World War was marked by the entry of the state into all aspects of national life. Despite the desire to return to the Belle Époque and to reduce state action to sovereign functions and the domain of education, state interventionism was set to last. In 1918, the sporting press had called for the creation of a 'Ministry for Sports',[7] and although no real unified sporting policy existed until the Popular Front, the interwar governments became more attentive to the role of sport in international relations. From 1920, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed a 'Tourism and Sport' section to the *Service des oeuvres françaises à l'étranger* (SOFE, Service of French Works Abroad), which was responsible for developing propaganda and French cultural influence worldwide. The SOFE directed its activities in three directions: strengthening French influence within the IOC, increasing the number of sports competitions against foreign opponents, and cinematic propaganda through broadcast images of national champions.[8] The interventions of the Foreign Office would be carried out in a more discrete manner in the interwar period, although such interventions led to English footballers giving the Nazi salute in the Olympic stadium in May 1938.[9]

In any case, French diplomatic activism was rewarded by the award of the Games of 1924 to Paris, right under the nose of Rome, where this was seen as the sporting manifestation of the 'mutilated victory'. The 'Musketeers' of French tennis who won the Davis Cup for the first time in 1927 in Philadelphia were invited to brighten up receptions organized by French ambassadors posted across the Anglo-Saxon world. The influence of French power, which was then at its peak, was therefore also achieved through sport. As at the beginning of the century, Paris and France became secondary centres for spreading English sports. Some Latin-American or African students discovered the joys of sport there, while the SOFE financed the creation of sporting clubs in the countries of the Little Entente. As regards the French Rugby Federation, it supported the development of rugby in fascist Italy and Romania. It should be noted that after the French team was ousted from the Five Nations Championship in 1931, it had to find alternative opponents. Above all, the French knew how to harness the development of sporting internationalism. At the end of the 1920s, numerous international federations still had their headquarters in Paris or elsewhere in France. Examples include: the *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* (founded in 1905 in Paris), the *Association Internationale des Automobile-Clubs reconnus*

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(1904, Paris), the *Fédération Internationale de Bobsleigh et de Tobogganing* (1923, Paris), the *Union Cycliste Internationale* (1900, Paris), the *Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique* (1881, Liège), the *Fédération Equestre Internationale* (1921, Lausanne), *the Fédération Internationale de Hockey sur Gazon* (1924, Paris), the International Lawn Tennis Federation (1913, Paris), *the Fédération Internationale d'Haltérophilie* (1920, Paris), the *Union Internationale de Tir* (1907, Zurich) and *the Union Internationale de Chasse* (1921, Lausanne). French leaders most often secured the presidency of these federations, like that of the most popular sporting federation, the *Fédération internationale de football association* (FIFA).

2.4. The football World Cup and French universalism

Although FIFA was founded in Paris in 1904 and its first president was the French journalist Robert Guérin (1904–1906), divisions within French football limited the influence of its leaders until the First World War. The election of Jules Rimet, president of FIFA for 31 uninterrupted years from 1921 to 1954 changed this situation. A trained and practising lawyer, Rimet used his diplomatic talents to appease minds within the international federation. The British 'associations', supported by the Belgian federation, sought to exclude the national sides from the central powers permanently, against the wishes of the neutrals. Finally, the British associations left FIFA in 1927, although the first football match in history between France and Germany was not organized until 1931.

During the whole of his presidency, Rimet continued to think of FIFA as a 'little society of sporting nations' and of football as an instrument for the 'rapprochement of peoples'.[10] He professed to believe in a sporting internationalism strongly tinged with pacifism, sentiments that were both embodied in the football World Cup, which took place for the first time in 1930. To be fair, key responsibility for this competition, often ascribed to Jules Rimet, must be attributed to the Anglophile and Anglophone secretary-general of the French Federation of Association Football, Henri Delaunay. 'Sir Henry', as he was nicknamed, formed part of the commission established by FIFA in 1927 to establish the feasibility of such an event. In contrast to the suggestions of others, such as Ugo Meisl, the father of Austria's Wunderteam, who favoured the creation of a European Cup, or Felix Linnemann, president of the Deutscher Fußball-Bund (DFB) who like his colleagues in the German federation was anxious that amateurs and professionals should be strictly separated, Delaunay promoted the idea of a totally universal competition that would have global reach and be open to footballers of whatever status. The FIFA Congress held in Amsterdam in 1928 voted overwhelmingly in favour of this proposal, which Rimet's activism helped become a reality two years later in Uruguay.

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3. French sporting culture: a form of exceptionalism?

The French are keen footballers, playing Soccer all over the country and Rugby largely in the towns, except those of the north and the east. They have also produced some first-class tennis players. Hockey is played, especially in the North, and basket-ball is also popular. They do not play cricket or go in greatly for dog-racing, nor does horse-racing attract the same following that it does in this country. A sport on which the French people *are* particularly keen is cycle-racing: if your unit finds a chance to arrange a cycle-race fixture with the local champions, most of the neighbourhood will turn out to see the race.

On the eve of D-Day, the journalist Herbert David Ziman perfectly synthesized French sporting culture in the booklet *Instructions for British Servicemen in France 1944*. Such observations, as the above, might not necessarily have contributed greatly to the war effort, but they display a sharp insight into French society in the interwar period and its forms of sporting and leisure activities.

3.1. The Reign of the 'petite reine'

In fact, unlike other European countries, such as Italy or Spain, where football was already the hegemonic sport or was going to become so, competitive sports were varied at first in France. In a country in which the urban population only reached a majority in 1931, cycling doubtlessly remained the most popular sport. The bicycle, called the 'petite reine', remained the most favoured method of getting about for the urban and rural working classes. Above all, the invented tradition of the Tour de France brought cycling out onto the country roads and presented 'a national space, a setting made of the territory itself'.[11] Created in 1903 in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, the Tour was invented and organized by the sporting daily *L'Auto* (1900–1944) and later its successor *L'Équipe* (founded 1946). It reused elements of republican culture that young French people were learning, notably in the famous reading book, *Le Tour de France par deux enfants* (The Tour de France by Two Children), and contributed to the rewriting of a national legend and of heroic figures, especially after the wars when the '*rescapé* image could be seamlessly merged with that of the heroic soldier'.[12] Supplemented by older races (Paris–Roubaix 1896) or more recent ones (Paris–Nice 1933), the cycling season ran, and still runs, from March to October.

As in all European countries, the intervening period was dedicated to the winter games, with football in the lead, although cycling continued in the format of the very popular *Six Jours* (Six-day races), the most important of which took place at the Vélodrome d'Hiver cycle track in Paris. There is a type of French paradox as far as association football is concerned. As a popular sport, it has the largest number of members but for all that, it has failed to become the French national sport. Unlike their neighbours, French footballers have kept the English

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term to refer to the game and have not translated it into the equivalent of *Fussball*, *fútbol*, or *calcio*. Similarly, French football has not produced major enduring clubs such as Bayern Munich, AC Milan or Real Madrid.

3.2. *The fragmentation of early French football*

This unusual situation, in a country that was won over to sport very early on, can be explained by the overlapping of the history of the people's game with the twists and turns of French political history. In fact, association football first suffered from the fragmentation of French sport. Indeed, the *Fédération française de football* (French Football Federation) was only created in 1919, some 20 years after its European counterparts. Until that point, French footballers had been divided among non-denominational and denominational federations. For the former, there was the *Union des sociétés françaises de sports athlétiques* (USFSA, Union of French sporting and athletics associations), whose leaders were linked to the anticlerical *Parti radical* (Radical Party) and favoured rugby football. Among the latter, the most powerful was unquestionably the Catholic *Fédération gymnastique et sportive de patronages de France* (FGSP, Gymnastic and Sporting Federation of Catholic Youth Clubs), an offshoot of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which had enjoined Catholics to reach out to the working classes. Young dynamic curates had identified football as a less violent game than rugby to enliven Sunday afternoons for their flocks. In fact, the geographical spread of football and rugby in France maps that of French religion. Rugby is the sport of the radical and anticlerical South-West, while football belongs to the Catholic West and North.

After the First World War helped popularize the game among the rural masses dispatched to the front, football became the leading French sport in the interwar period. Totalling 35,000 in 1921,[13] its members, as counted by the FFFA, rose to 116,277 in 1930.[14] This figure would increase if the members of religious or ideological federations, such as the Catholic Youth Clubs or the organizations of workers' sport, were included, and would reach around 200,000. At this stage, football really was, for French conditions, a sport of the masses, membership figures in other Latin federations at the height of their glory did not exceed those of the French Federation. In 1931, for example, Italy only recorded 108,442 official footballers,[15] a figure that barely increased during the 1930s.

Nevertheless, the intellectuals and elites preferred, and still prefer, rugby, because of its proclaimed amateurism and supposed academic aura. This is doubtless due to a specifically French nostalgia. Despite the existence of big clubs, such as *Stade Français*, *Racing Club de France*, or *Stade Toulousain*, rugby in France has long been a rugby of the villages whose champions have kept the flinty accents of the South-West and Midi.[16] In other words, rugby was, and still is, invested in the eternal image of a rural France, while football, which

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turned professional in 1932, embodies industrial France, situated to the East of a line that runs from Le Havre to Marseille. Football, first and foremost, represents a country that resolutely entered modernity. Tellingly, one of the first professional French clubs was FC Sochaux, a product of the Peugeot car factory.

3.3. The national celebration of French football

However, football has followed a distinctive mode of acculturation. In addition to the imprint of Catholic culture, from which its first major leaders, Jules Rimet and Henri Delaunay came, this popular sport also succeeded in taking on the emblems of republican culture. One of the most successful cultural transfers in France was the appropriation of the FA Cup. From the eve of the First World War, football's leaders and French journalists attended the final of the FA Cup in London's Crystal Palace stadium, taking lessons in the 'scientific game', admiring its popular success and marvelling at the peaceful behaviour of the British crowds. A *Coupe Charles Simon* (Charles Simon Cup) was created in 1917, which was dedicated to the memory of one of the (Catholic) leaders of French football who died on the 'field of honour' at Arras in 1915. The competition, won for the first time in Paris in 1918 by *Olympique de Pantin* in front of 2000 spectators, became known as the *Coupe de France* after 11 November 1918. It certainly kept its intended memorial character, while also serving to unify French football around the *Fédération française de football* (FFF). Above all, the leaders of the FFF, Delaunay and Rimet, quickly took advantage of its success to turn it into a 'national celebration of French football' through the analogy of the 14th of July, which, since 1879, celebrated the memory of the storming of the Bastille as well as the Republic. And, just as George V had been the first British monarch to attend the final of the FA Cup in 1914, the radical Gaston Doumergue was the first president of the Republic to grace the final of the *Coupe de France* with his presence in 1927. The sight of a stadium resplendent in blue, white and red and a president going down onto the pitch to have himself introduced to the players and presenting the trophy to the captain of the winning team at the end of the match came together to produce a republican ritual. The knock-out structure of the competition also coincided perfectly with the meritocratic values of the Third Republic. Like the scholarship student who, through self-sacrifice and work, could rise above the social sphere of his parents, the amateur team that trained hard could knock out many of the professional teams. The *Coupe de France* was therefore another place in which this ideal of meritocracy was expressed and glorified in the revenge of the 'little people' against the 'big people', 'honest people' against the 'profiteers' of professional football.[17] As indicated by the 'sagas' of little teams in the North and West of France who reach the final or semi-final of the event, it remains as such today.

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3.4. The melting pot of French football

Another characteristic of French football's distinctive development was the early integration of foreign players and players from the colonies, not only in clubs but also in the national team. From the 1930s, professional clubs that lacked talent reached out to footballers from Central Europe, and then South America. Soon these represented between 20 and 35% of the league.[18] Similarly, they turned to the colonies, where football began to increase in popularity during the interwar period. While Viv Anderson was the first black player to play for England in 1978, 'les Bleus' had fielded Raoul Diagne in 1931. Diagne, the son of Raoul Diagne, deputy of Senegal and the first black minister of a French government, was of mixed race and a child of the fashionable districts of Paris. With the selection of the Moroccan Larbi Ben Barek in 1938, the first great African player, the appeal to the colonies was fully realized. This appeal for 'natives' was practised in other sports too – the Algerian Ahmed Boughéra El Ouafi winning the Olympic Games marathon at Amsterdam in 1928 with the Gallic rooster stamped on his jersey. Such integration was a result of both the demographic weakness of France during the crisis years and the assimilationist project inherent to French colonization.

Football has continued to be one of the most visible manifestations of the 'French melting pot', with every sporting generation testifying to different strata of immigration. With a time-lag of around 20 years, immigrants' children come to wear the French jersey. Thus, 'les bleus' have been able to form the sporting embodiment of the 'elective nation' based on 'an everyday plebiscite', to cite the famous definition by philologist and historian Ernest Renan in his 1882 conference *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* If this concept came to a climax with the victory of *les bleus* in 1998, which was lauded in a uniquely unanimous consensus by virtually all the political parties,[19] it nevertheless had a painful birth. The best French footballers from immigrant backgrounds in the 1980s still had to suffer the same xenophobic and racist insults as Raymond Kopa, the French star of Polish descent who played for Stade de Reims and Real Madrid a generation earlier.[20]

4. Between the state, eclecticism and the sports business

As witnessed in the French-style sporting internationalism, the state occupied a prominent place in the development of French sport. In Western Europe, the concerns and interests of public authorities have doubtlessly been most beneficial to, and indeed reciprocated by, French sport. Unlike the 'volunteers' army' of English sport, which was regarded first and foremost as a part of civil society independent of the state,[21] leaders of French federations and clubs continuously obtained the recognition and financial support of the state. From the interwar period, representatives of the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies and ministries

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concerned with sporting matters sat on the *Comité national des sports* (CNS, National Sports Committee), a body created in 1908 to coordinate the action of sporting federations. Furthermore, through the 'approval' granted by the Ministry of War, sporting or gymnastic associations that provided the military preparation of future conscripts were able to benefit from subsidies. It is clear that this is an essential factor that differentiates British sporting culture from that of the continent: the existence of military service in the major countries of continental Europe played a fundamental role in the military and nationalist orientation of sport, while also contributing towards state interventionism.

4.1. Local policies of the left

In addition to the Ministry of War and, as we have seen, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the *municipalités* (local government) became major players in state interventionism from the end of the 1920s. The go-ahead for this had been given in Lyon, where in 1926 the mayor, Edouard Herriot, head of the *Cartel des gauches* (Left-wing coalition) government and a figure in French political life, opened the Gerland Stadium. This lead set by Lyon was followed by left-wing *municipalités* in the nearest suburbs of Paris, which built swimming pools and stadia within garden cities in the mid 1930s, marking the start of urban planning that targeted the well-being of the lower classes.[22] The first '*Office municipal de l'éducation physique et des sports*' (Local Office of Physical Education and Sport) came into being in Brest in 1930 in the town hall lead by the socialist Jean-Louis Rolland.[23] Spectator sports were not overlooked either, as indicated by the velodrome stadia built in Marseille and Bordeaux in preparation for the 1938 World Cup, which drew on this 'society of the stadium', combining the preoccupation with urban planning with marketing and 'mass politics'.[24] In sporting architecture, the Bordeaux enclosure, with its daring and functional lines, translated into the 'modernising volunteerism' of the founder of the Neo-Socialist party, Adrien Marquet, one of the members of the fascist break-away faction of the SFIO, the French Socialist Party.[25] In fact, although the Bordeaux velodrome was dedicated to the leading lights of French sports entertainment of the 1930s (football, rugby and cycling), its construction appeared to be a response to the muscular challenge of the totalitarian regimes of the 1930s, to which the French press sometimes complacently bore witness.

Moreover, it was in response to the ideological and sporting indoctrination of Italian and German youths that the Popular Front government (1936–1938) put in place the first real governmental policy for sport and physical education. Led by Léo Lagrange, a young hope for the SFIO and a specialist in military matters, this action sought first and foremost to propose a democratic model of sport aiming to 'satisfy a social need: the achievement of dignity [and] the search

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for happiness, […] without resorting to marching in lockstep'.[26] In other words, the practice of mass sport and leisure was encouraged to the detriment of enlistment but also to that of spectator sport. Jules Rimet and Henri Delaunay were thus refused the grants necessary to construct a 100,000 seat stadium which they hoped to have built for the 1938 World Cup. On this occasion, the state demonstrated a certain indifference.[27]

4.2. *Popular Front and Vichy*

The policy of the Popular Front was largely taken up by the Vichy regime, but from clearly opposing ideological bases. Sport and physical education, entrusted to the tennis champion and businessman Jean Borotra until 1942, were supposed to contribute to reforming and raising the moral standards of French youths. Placed at the head of an *ad hoc* institution, the *Commissariat général à l'éducation générale et aux sports* (General Commission for General Education and Sport), Borotra took his undertaking in three directions. First, physical education in school was developed, with a significant increase in the hours dedicated to corporal exercises and the introduction of an optional examination in physical education in the *baccalauréat* (school-leaving certificate taken at 17–18 years of age). Second, sport was promoted as mass practice and professionalism eradicated. The big professional federations (football, cycling, boxing) were given three years to change their status, while the rugby league was simply banned. Former professionals had to become athlete-instructors, i.e. state athletes who were obliged to dedicate their free time to training younger athletes. Third, a politics of investment was launched with a budget of more than 1.9 billion francs.[28] Borotra was relieved of his duties for being anti-German when Pierre Laval returned to power in April 1942, and was later arrested as he tried to cross the Spanish border and was sent to a concentration camp in Germany. His successor, Colonel Joseph Pascot, a former international rugby player, continued his work with much more authoritarianism and fewer resources. Food restrictions and the demands of the Todt organization limited the sporting ambitions of Vichy from that point on. Pascot also showed greater compliance with the German occupier and allowed the swimming champion Alfred Nakache and his family to be deported to Auschwitz, as well as the boxer Young Perez.

The Resistance criticized this oft-neglected aspect of Vichy politics, emphasizing more the form than the content. In fact, mass sport took off under the Vichy regime, as did sport for women. It must be stated that as the Pétain regime had banned local dances, the stadium was one of the few places young people could still meet. Above all, with the *Charte des sports* (Sports Charter, 1940), a distant echo of the *Carta dello sport* of Mussolini's regime, Vichy had launched state control of French sport. In the name of the authoritarian principles of the

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regime, the presidents of the federations were appointed by the General Commissioner of sport, i.e. Borotra and then Pascot, and all sporting activity from then on had to receive the approval of the state. If the democratic functioning of the sporting world was restored at the Liberation, the Fourth and Fifth Republics maintained the principle of state delegation, which means that federations receive the right to oversee the practice of one sport or another from the authorities. Whilst on one level, this law can naturally be questioned, it nonetheless allows for the public financing of their activities.

4.3. From Charles De Gaulle to François Mitterrand

Unlike post-war Germany or Italy, where the gymnastics teacher seemed to embody the quintessential Nazi or the Italian fascist who ambivalently broke away from Mussolini's muscular dictatorship by practising a sporting *sottogoverno*, the different French governments openly assumed the responsibility of the state when it came to sport. This was carried out with a striking lack of resources in the Fourth Republic but enjoyed a flamboyant approach under De Gaulle. At this point, two acts provided a framework for a government programme: to make up for lost time on sporting facilities, especially swimming pools; and to recruit physical education teachers for schools and technical executives for the sports movement.[29] De Gaulle and his Minister for Sport, mountaineer Maurice Herzog, sought to put in place a policy that would channel the enthusiasm of the baby-boomers and allow the President's politics to blossom into national greatness. In fact, the athletes were supposed to be the standard-bearers of a modernised France whose prestige had been restored. The sporting icon of the De Gaulle era was unquestionably Jean-Claude Killy, a triple gold medal winner of the Winter Olympics in Grenoble – games which themselves served to showcase De Gaulle's France. Officially, Killy was a customs officer but he was rarely seen monitoring the luggage of foreigners entering French territory.

Subsequently, neither right- or left-wing governments questioned this commitment to sport, Gaullist or post-Gaullist parties welcoming French champions like Guy Drut, winner of the 110 metres hurdles at the 1976 Montreal Olympics or the Olympic and world judo champion David Douillet into their fold. In 1981, presidential candidate François Mitterrand included amongst his 110 governmental proposals, one that specifically announced that 'the independence of the sporting movement vis-à-vis the state and its financial powers [would] be guaranteed'. Clearly this promise was not kept, but socialist governments gave a social twist to sporting policies. Campaigns for the construction of sports grounds in disadvantaged suburbs were launched and the idea that sport constituted a powerful means of integrating immigrant populations was forcefully underlined. Famously, in 1998 the Gaullist president Jacques Chirac and the

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socialist minister Lionel Jospin met to celebrate the victory of 'black-blanc-beur' France, as the black, white and Arab members of Zinédine Zidane's team came to be known.

4.4. French eclecticism

As we have seen, football did not become the French national sport, a British observer even called it 'a religion without faith, suitable for agnostics'.[30] This situation was influenced by the actions of the state. The era of sporting Gaullism, which also corresponds to a period of deep crisis in French football, favoured rugby and Olympic disciplines. In 1961, Maurice Herzog even promulgated a decree limiting the football season to eight months, which was essentially applied to amateurs.[31] Thanks to state and municipal aid, sports such as judo, the martial arts in general, handball, biathlon, tennis or fencing either found a chosen land in France or continued to thrive there. They became mass sports (the tennis and judo federations numbering one million and 500,000 members respectively) or at least factories that churned out champions. This eclecticism became apparent from a very early stage. At the Olympic Games in Berlin, the French delegation ranked fifth, tying with Finland for the number of medals won (19), while Britain came in tenth (with ten medals). The French athletes might not have distinguished themselves on the track but they performed well in cycling, boxing and weightlifting. Over 60 years later, at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the French won 40 medals in more than 19 disciplines, most notably BMX, mountain bike, taekwondo and archery.

4.5. At the heart of sporting Europe

More generally, the geographical position of France has made it a crossroads of European sporting cultures. With the well-known exception of cricket and, to a lesser degree, hockey, sports with a marked British identity are well represented. France is a leading rugby power, for instance, and the Catalan Dragons even play for the English Rugby League Championship. French sportsmen and women have excelled at various levels in professional basketball via former Protestant and Catholic patronage. The current NBA includes stars such as Tony Parker, who was born in France to American and Dutch parents and who chose both French nationality and the French team in recognition of a country whose state-sponsored sporting structures such as INSEP (Institut national des sports et de l'éducation physique, National Institute of Sport and Physical Education) allowed him to learn his craft. Similarly, physical education teachers recruited competitively by the state have turned the German game of handball into the very model of school sport. Today, French handball players are among the most sought-after in the German and Spanish leagues. The French team won the

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impressive treble of Olympic (2008), World (2009, 2011) and European (2010) titles. Yet again, because of its landscape, France belongs to the alpine and skiing nations. It records less regular victories than, say, Switzerland or Austria but still produces great champions such as Killy or the Goetschel sisters who make it into the skiing hall of fame.

French cycling also remains at the hub of European and world cycling, at least from a territorial perspective. The *Giro d'Italia* (1909) and the *Vuelta a España* (1935), were created on the Tour de France model (1903) and frame the main event of the world calendar. The Tour remains the property of a private firm, the Amaury Sports Organisation (ASO), which itself forms part of the Amaury group that owns, among other things, the daily newspaper *L'Équipe*. Thus, French sports business remains close to the structures of the early twentieth century, with the media continuing to play a predominant role.

French know-how in sports event creation and management also benefited football. Once again, despite a lack of playing stars of their own, leading French football functionaries and representatives of the press seized upon the atmosphere of 1950s' Europe and created the *Coupe des clubs champions européens* (European Champion Clubs' Cup) in 1955. The pretext for this is well known. The *Daily Mail* had claimed, somewhat presumptively, that English champions Wolverhampton Wanderers had to be the best club in the world by dint of having beaten the great Puskas's Honved Budapest (3-2) and Spartak Moscow (4-0) at home. The first European Cup, proposed by the daily newspaper *L'Équipe* and its journalist Gabriel Hanot, set out to question this assertion. Geographically, at any rate, the competition equated to the Europe hoped for by De Gaulle. It extended 'from the Atlantic to the Urals' and treated political regimes with a light touch, its first champions, Real Madrid, representing Pro-Franco Spain. The rival, and eventually complementary, project of Englishman Stanley Rous and Swiss Ernst Thommen – the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup – sought in its original conception merely to bring together teams from trade fair cities. In this sense, it was much more limited, not unlike the Europe invented by Great Britain with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). However, the French-style idea of Europe proved economically profitable. Played mid-week, the European Cup boosted the circulation of *L'Équipe* and of its sister publication, the weekly *France Football*, by holding the attention of the readers with the creation of a European sporting landscape.[32]

In this sporting Europe, which came into being as Old Europe prospered, the establishment of a subsidiary of Adidas in Alsace played an essential role in the soaring popularity of the three stripes brand. Entrusted to the founder's son Horst Dassler, this French branch expanded within the textile industry by buying out *Le Coq Sportif* and eliminating another French competitor, Hungaria, that specialized in football and produced market-leader balls.[33] However, despite the fact that Dassler acquired considerable influential power within the French Football

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Association and FIFA, as a whole French business remained wary of sport. This was first and foremost because of the public structure of French sports capitalism, which effectively limited investments in professional sport. French football could not count on the likes of Agnelli or Moratti families to pay a fortune to recruit stars. Moreover, in a return to a very French tradition, the big clubs of today (Girondins de Bordeaux, Olympique Lyonnais, Lille Olympique Sporting Club) have communications groups as their shareholders. Olympique de Marseille, whose main shareholder is the Louis-Dreyfus family which owns Adidas, is an exception.

5. Conclusion: between Europe and exceptionalism

A universalist concept of sport tempered by an early political instrumentalization; a multi-sport culture that showcases sports symbolic of British identity, such as rugby, but also a Germanic sport like handball; a country in which association football became the most popular sport very early on, without ever taking on the mantle of being the national sport; an interventionist state, which placed sport under its administrative and financial trusteeship; finally, a spectator sport within which press and communications groups maintain a dominant economic role – these are the major traits that define the French sporting model and make it both a synthesis of different national histories, and a country of marked exceptionalism. It remains to be seen whether the globalization of 'French' disciplines, such as cycling, and the creation of a real European sporting space (in a sport such as football) will jeopardize this hundred-year-old model in the decades to come.

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