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## HOW FRENCH IS 'FRENCH' SPORT?

PHILIP DINE

### **Introduction**

Scholarship on modern games and the construction of identity has tended to foreground representations of the nation, arguing that 'Sporting competition [...] provides the primary expression of imagined communities; the nation becoming more "real" in the domain of sport.'<sup>i</sup> This reflects the simultaneous rise of athletic sports and the consolidation of the nation-state, together with industrialization and urbanization. In France, as elsewhere in Western Europe, modernization thus went hand-in-hand with 'sportization'. The mass literacy which underpinned this process made possible the expression of sport-inflected nationalist sentiment in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; while the burgeoning popular press itself played a key role in the establishment of athletic competition as an enduring vehicle for national self-images. The launch in 1903 of the Tour de France cycle race epitomizes this linkage, occurring as it did against the backdrop of the Dreyfus Affair and as a by-product of the ensuing circulation war between rival sports papers. The event was the brainchild of Henri Desgrange, editor of *L'Auto*, which was itself established by the automobile manufacturer, and leading anti-*Dreyfusard*, Baron Jules-Albert de Dion specifically to compete with Pierre Giffard's *Le Vélo*, the pioneering journal which had supported Captain Alfred Dreyfus both before and after his notoriously flawed conviction for treason. This highly politicized invention of a French tradition reminds us that, from the outset, sporting nationalism has had at least as much to do with alterity as with identity, and hence with variously threatening (non-national) Others, typically contrasted with an ethnically imagined (national) Self.

In the case of the Tour de France, the allegedly hostile Jewishness of Dreyfus paved the way for assorted oppositions on the country's roads, as cyclists from across continental Europe competed at the pinnacle of the single standardized sport which was indisputably French in origin.<sup>ii</sup>

Over the years, the race became synonymous with the nation, functioning as a mobile celebration of unity in diversity, and constituting an authentic *lieu de mémoire*.<sup>iii</sup> However, even this archetypal manifestation of sporting specificity has been challenged by the forces of globalization, with its 1985 and 1986 editions together marking a watershed. The 1985 race was won by the veteran Bernard Hinault, in what was both his fifth triumph and the climax of a decade of French dominance. Thirty years on, no home-produced rider has managed to emulate Hinault's victory. Just as significantly, Greg LeMond's win in 1986, the first by a non-European competitor, launched a new era of internationalism, including an American engagement with the race which would culminate, competitively and commercially, in the seven straight victories (1999–2005) recorded by the now disgraced Lance Armstrong. Since Armstrong's departure, three Spaniards, two Britons, an Italian, a Luxembourger and even an Australian have won the Tour, but still no Frenchman, although the second and third places achieved by Jean-Christophe Péraud and Thibaut Pinot in 2014 bode well for the race as a renewed competitive opportunity, as well as a particularly cherished, and proportionately lucrative, heritage industry.

So much for a quintessentially French event which has fittingly been characterized as a 'pre-modern contest in a post-modern context'.<sup>iv</sup> But how have other sports responded to the challenges of globalization, and also to the opportunities of an increasingly multicultural society? Two case studies are offered here in which a distinctive national model may be seen to have been exposed to powerful transnational forces between 1985 and 2015, a period which also corresponds to sport's digital age. Several activities potentially suggest themselves for discussion: basketball, as an obvious American import, additionally noteworthy for France's silver medal at the 2000 (Sydney) Olympics, as well as for the subsequent recruitment by the National Basketball Association (NBA) of leading (and mainly black) French players; handball, especially given the prominence of the 1995 and 2001 World Championship-winning sides captained by Jackson Richardson (from La Réunion); and even fencing, in which the five Olympic medals, including two golds, won by Laura Flessel-Colovic (from Guadeloupe), between 1996 and 2004, make her France's leading female

Olympian. However, the sports targeted here are football and athletics, the most visibly international of modern games, as highlighted by their quadrennial showcases: the World Cup and the Olympic Games. The resulting case studies are intended to suggest some of the ways in which the state, the media and the relevant federations have responded to the multiple challenges of the corporate-financed and electronically mediated ‘global sporting system’.<sup>v</sup> There is an irony here in that the two mega-events which nowadays ‘are the preeminent symbol of the global character of sport’<sup>vi</sup> both originated in France: Pierre de Coubertin’s Olympic Games in 1896; and Jules Rimet’s World Cup in 1930. To which we might add Henri Desgrange’s 1903 creation of the Tour de France, often regarded as the world’s third biggest sporting event. As we explore the impact of globalization in more recent years, it is helpful to bear in mind this pivotal contribution to the internationalization of modern games.

#### **French football, 1985-2015: a hesitation waltz with postcolonial ethnicity**

One obvious strategy for responding to the challenges of globalization is to embrace the human potential of any society marked by a history of immigration. Sport in France is consequently not unusual in having a strong representation of elite practitioners of migrant heritage. As John Bale and Mike Cronin, working in the British context, have contended: ‘From a macro-perspective we would argue that sport *per se* is an eminently postcolonial phenomenon.’<sup>vii</sup> In the French case, the outstanding example of multicultural fusion remains the triumph of *Les Bleus* at the 1998 football World Cup. Much has been written about the on-field exploits and off-field symbolism of the so-called *black-blanc-beur* side, and almost as much about its fall from grace in subsequent editions of the tournament, including first-round exits in 2002 and 2010; not to mention the extraordinary circumstances of defeat in the 2006 final, which will forever be remembered for Zinedine Zidane’s valedictory *coup de boule*. Given this remarkable history, the French team’s solid all-round performance in the 2014 competition constituted something of a return to sporting normality. In symbolic terms, and with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the significance of France’s victory

as host nation in 1998 – itself not actually an infrequent occurrence, as England’s own single win in 1966 reminds us – was widely overestimated. Such a triumph would have given rise to popular enthusiasm at any time, especially given that the World Cup is a French invention and that the trophy had never previously been won by the national side. However, this generally unexpected victory was undoubtedly perceived at the time as a defining moment for the Republic, heralding a new consensus as regards migration, ethnicity and, crucially, social inclusion.

The widespread optimism which greeted the French triumph in 1998 was not wholly a product of journalistic imagination and political wishful thinking. One of those best placed to comment was Lilian Thuram, a key member of the cup-winning side who would go on to become an incisive commentator on race relations. Looking back on the win in 2004, he commented:

Dans l’euphorie de la victoire, j’avais l’impression que nous étions devenus le modèle parfait [...]. La plus grande richesse de cette équipe de France, c’était sa diversité culturelle. Ce jour-là, les personnes qui avaient des problèmes identitaires se trouvaient libérées de ce carcan.<sup>viii</sup>

With the state’s encouragement, the spontaneous festivity of 12 July 1998 seamlessly transitioned into the national celebration of *le quatorze juillet*. However, this political appropriation belied the competing meanings which could be placed on events both on and off the pitch. Encapsulating Thuram’s own reassessment, Laurent Dubois argues:

The victory of 1998 was not a confirmation that the reigning models of citizenship and immigration were working in France. It was a crucial opportunity to question and critique these models and to build on celebrations that provided a promising alternative. The mass communion that took place in the streets in 1998, liberating many from the shackles of their own uncertainty about their place in French society, should serve as a charter for a different way of being French.<sup>ix</sup>

Instead, sport would frequently be appealed to in the wake of 1998 as an antidote to perceived problems of integration at the local level, while serving as an alibi for the continued failure of political will as regards structural disadvantage and entrenched exclusion. It would not take long

for frustration at this sporting smokescreen to make itself felt, appropriately back at the Stade de France stadium. The limitations of the state's moral and material investment in sport post-1998 were dramatically revealed by the pitch invasion which brought to an end the first ever match between the full national teams of France and Algeria in October 2001. As Yvan Gastaut has observed, the Algerian supporters who booed the *Marseillaise* before the match and *Les Bleus* during it, before forcing the game's abandonment, were typically French citizens of Maghrebian heritage, who seized on the occasion to highlight the continuing reality of discrimination.<sup>x</sup> While not as spectacular, similar demonstrations marked the French games against Morocco in November 2007 and Tunisia in October 2008, leading President Nicolas Sarkozy to summon the head of the Fédération Française de Football (FFF) to the Elysée.

With the notable exception of the Far Right, politicians of every stripe had scrambled to associate themselves with the triumph of 1998, none more so than Sarkozy's predecessor Jacques Chirac, who continued to be an astute reader of the public mood when *Les Bleus* next appeared in the World Cup final in 2006. As Dubois has observed, whatever else happened in the golden summer of 1998, 'it also represented the arrival of a global brand: Zidane'.<sup>xi</sup> Eight years later, the star came out of retirement to lead France all the way to the tournament decider, where he put his team ahead with an idiosyncratic 'Panenka' penalty. Then, famously, Zidane was sent off in the dying minutes of extra time for head-butting the Italian defender Marco Matarazzi, who had coincidentally scored the equalizer. Once again, so much has been written about this globally iconic event that little more is needed here. However, we might usefully note Jonathan Ervine's observation that, 'Despite his expulsion, the French press was largely restrained in its criticism of Zidane and rarely sought to portray his behaviour as a symbol of his socio-ethnic origins.'<sup>xii</sup> For his part, Chirac went significantly further at an official reception for the French team, saluting Zidane as 'un virtuose, un génie du football mondial, un homme de cœur, d'engagement, de conviction', before telling the star: 'C'est pour cela que la France vous admire et vous aime.'<sup>xiii</sup> With these words, the President of the Republic underlined Zidane's status as an embodiment of the French

nation; just as Head of State Abdelaziz Bouteflika would claim the megastar for Algeria during what became a triumphal visit to his parents' homeland a few months later.<sup>xiv</sup>

Nicolas Sarkozy was to prove less sure-footed when confronted with the national side's on-field shortcomings and off-field meltdown four years later in South Africa. Now with an even stronger representation of players of migrant heritage, *Les Bleus* not only failed to perform on the pitch but very publicly rebelled against their widely criticized manager, Raymond Domenech, whom the similarly unpopular President unwisely supported with secret telephone calls at the height of the crisis.<sup>xv</sup> The players' revolt – exemplified by Nicolas Anelka's verbal outbursts, enthusiastically reported by *L'Équipe* – encouraged politicians and intellectuals to enter the fray. Most vociferous was the neo-conservative Alain Finkielkraut, who had previously commented unfavourably on the national side's evolution from a *black-blanc-beur* team to a *black-black-black* one.<sup>xvi</sup> These remarks were made to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* in the wake of the 2005 *banlieue* riots, which had themselves been triggered in the suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois by the tragic deaths of two local youths, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré. They were part of a group which, for reasons which remain unclear, entered a building site while returning home from an informal football game on the pitch of a neighbouring suburb; pursued by the police, the pair were electrocuted when they tried to hide in an electrical substation. Speaking on national radio, and employing loaded vocabulary that echoed Sarkozy's own when Minister of the Interior, Finkielkraut now asserted that 'on a rêvé avec l'équipe de la génération Zidane, aujourd'hui on a plutôt envie de vomir avec la génération caillera'.<sup>xvii</sup> Sports sociologist Patrick Mignon responded incisively in *Esprit* that events in South Africa were wholly over-invested with symbolic meaning, just as had been the triumph of *Les Bleus* in Saint-Denis a dozen years earlier. In each case, the hazards of competition had given rise to a national psychodrama, with the race-based pessimism of 2010 serving as a negative mirror-image of the multicultural optimism of 1998.<sup>xviii</sup>

Ironically, France's footballing difficulties have coincided with new opportunities for players opting to compete for the nations of their familial heritage. Options of that nature are open

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to footballers who, because they have connections (by birth, nationality, family origins or current residence) with more than one country can choose which of these countries they want to play for internationally. The impact of this dual eligibility has been particularly marked in the case of the Algerian national side. Having secured a memorable draw against England in South Africa, *Les Fennecs* made it to the knock-out stage for the first time four years later in Brazil, only going out after extra time to eventual winners Germany, who went on to beat *Les Bleus* in the next round. Had Algeria won, the social impact, in both countries, of a clash with France in the quarter-finals of the World Cup might have been considerable. What is certain is that, in a striking example of reverse migration, the Algerian heroics in 2010 and again in 2014 were achieved by squads more than two-thirds of whom were French-born, including many who had represented France at youth level. As Mustapha Kessous asked in *Le Monde*: ‘L’Algérie, l’autre équipe de France?’<sup>xix</sup> Regardless of the two countries’ relative performances on the international stage, the quasi-colonial power relations at play in the decision-making of doubly eligible players remain transparent: ‘Basically, if you’re born in France to parents of Algerian descent and are very good – like Manchester City’s Samir Nasri, Real Madrid’s Karim Benzema, and arguably the greatest French player ever, Zinedine Zidane – you play for France. If you’re only pretty good, you play for Algeria.’<sup>xx</sup>

In the wake of France’s South African debacle, the ‘quotas’ affair of 2011 embroiled Laurent Blanc, Raymond Domenech’s replacement as national coach and a veteran of 1998, in another race-related crisis. The scandal involved the setting of secret quotas on the number of players of migrant heritage eligible for the French football federation’s youth training programmes. In Andrew Hussey’s characteristically robust formulation: ‘The Blanc affair is no more or less than a debate about who is to be included in French life and who is to be excluded from it. This has the greatest impact in the *banlieues*, [...] where football is often the only escape.’<sup>xxi</sup> However, more telling than either journalistic interventions or political recriminations was the result of the 2013 FIFA Under-20 World Cup, which was won for the first time by *Les Bleuets de France*. No less concretely than Thuram and Zidane before them, the multicultural French junior side thus

‘delivered several answers to the question of how racism and exclusion should be confronted.

Above all, they responded by *being* France, undeniably and victoriously, branding the national consciousness with their presence in an irrefutable and profound way.<sup>’xxii</sup>

Before moving on to athletics, we may note in passing the broader transnational forces at play in French football, including the domestic league’s continuing reliance on the recruitment of African players, as highlighted by the *Annual Review of the European Football Players’ Labour Market*, which indicates that in 2008: ‘The highest concentration of African footballers per club was recorded in France and in Belgium. This result confirms the importance of the continuity of bonds inherited from the history of territories in the geographical configuration of flows, even within the context of globalization.’<sup>’xxiii</sup> Conversely, increased transnational mobility has seen both top French players and some managers drawn to other European leagues, exemplified by Arsène Wenger’s thirty-year tenure as manager at a distinctly francocentric Arsenal. For its part, the petrodollar-financed takeover of Paris Saint-Germain may have served to diminish the symbolic value of this not infrequently controversial club: ‘Since the takeover of PSG in 2011 by Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), the focus on the local or even the national has become less important as the club has set to establish itself on the European and international stage by signing internationally known players such as Thiago Silva, Zlatan Ibrahimovic and David Beckham.’<sup>’xxiv</sup> These are varieties of sporting delocalization which we will see repeated in French athletics.

### **French athletics, 1985–2015: postcolonial performance and Americanized individualism**

French athletics displays a postcolonial division of labour which has clear parallels in other national contexts, with elite performance in sprint events typically the domain of athletes of Caribbean or sub-Saharan heritage, while distance running at the highest level has long been the preserve of Maghrebian athletes. To make such an observation is, first and foremost, to draw attention to the historical coincidence of the rise (and rise) of modern sport and the rise (and fall) of the European colonial empires. The imbrication of imperialism and ‘sportization’ has been most extensively

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documented in the British context, but it is also now clear that France too sought to use sport for colonial purposes, often looking to its empire for representatives in the new international competitions which French pioneers had done so much to establish. Imperial administrators thus established patterns of recruitment that we would recognize today, particularly in athletics, as best illustrated by the Algerian-born winner of the Olympic marathon at the 1956 (Melbourne) Games, Alain Mimoun (originally Ali Mimoun Ould Kacha). This celebrated figure's standing is underlined by the fifty odd stadiums, fifteen streets and other public buildings which today bear his name and by the fulsome manner in which his remarkable contribution to French sport was duly celebrated on his death in 2013 at the age of 92.<sup>xxv</sup>

Mimoun's outstanding career reflects the extensive participation of Maghrebian competitors in distance running in the 1950s.<sup>xxvi</sup> Following the accession to independence of Morocco and Tunisia in 1956, and Algeria in 1962, this athletic strength was maintained through performances such as the silver medal won by the Moroccan Rhadi Ben Abdesselam at the 1960 Olympics. In contrast, the Rome Games were a historic low point for France, which won no gold medals at all, and only five in total, prompting an outraged General de Gaulle to embark on a state-managed transformation of sports funding and administration. Back on the track, the Tunisian runner Mohammed Gammoudi's silver medals in the 10,000m at the 1964 (Tokyo) Olympics and the 5000m at the 1972 (Munich) Games came either side of his gold medal in the latter event at Mexico City in 1968. Gammoudi, Ben Abdesselam and their compatriots thus both maintained a North African sporting tradition and pointed the way forward to the global superstars who would emerge from the 1980s onwards, such as Hassiba Boulemerka and Noureddine Morceli of Algeria, and Saïd Aouita and Hicham El Guerrouj of Morocco.

In the period 1985–2015, distance running in France has benefitted from the combined talents of athletes of Maghrebian heritage and naturalized competitors from North Africa, especially Morocco. The national records maintained by the Fédération Française d'Athlétisme (FFA) are eloquent in this regard, underlining the continuing dominance of such athletes. Current record-

holders born in Morocco include Abdellah Béhar, Mustapha Essaïd, Ismail Sghyr and Abdellatif Meftah, the last two of whom also competed for that nation before switching to France. French-born record-holders include Mehdi Baala, who took silver in the 1500m at the 2003 World Championships and bronze at the 2008 (Beijing) Olympic Games; as well as Mahiedine Mekhissi-Benabbad who won the silver medal in the 3000m steeplechase in Beijing, and of whom we shall have more to say later. As regards sprint events, and focusing on women's athletics, a striking feature of French national teams has been the strong representation of runners from the Caribbean, with Guadeloupe-born athletes a particularly constant presence, including as current record-holders. Such elite sportswomen include Francine Landre, Christine Arron and Patricia Girard, as well as France's most celebrated female athlete, Marie-José Pérec, whose five national records have stood for two decades.<sup>xxvii</sup> By revisiting her case we may usefully make some general observations about both the opportunities and the challenges of diversity for French sport.

This remarkable competitor was born in May 1968, just a few months before Colette Besson became the first Frenchwoman to win an Olympic track gold in the 400m, the event which Pérec would go on to make her own. At the same Mexico Games, Roger Bambuck, also from Guadeloupe, won a bronze medal in the 100m relay. This was the highlight of an athletic career that served as the springboard for another as a politician, which would see Bambuck become Minister for Youth and Sport in 1988. However, the 1968 Olympics would be globally remembered for an altogether more dramatic gesture of postcolonial political assertion, namely the black-power salutes by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the medal ceremony for the 200m. Pérec's own experiences both on and off the track may be located somewhere between these poles of institutional accommodation and radical rejection. Cathal Kilcline has recently presented a detailed analysis of the star's representation, documenting 'how a sporting figure serves as a prism through which prevailing attitudes towards money, America, race, sexuality, and the media's role in society are reflected'.<sup>xxviii</sup> World champion in 1991 and 1995, Pérec cemented her reputation as an exceptional

athletic force through her gold medal in the 400m at the 1992 (Barcelona) Olympics and, especially, her double triumph in the 200m and 400m at the 1996 (Atlanta) Games.

As recounted by Kilcline, Pérec's competitive success was appropriated by the media in ways which aestheticized her performances on the track, while asserting her 'metropolitan' integration off it:

In terms of her social ascension, Pérec traces a typically heroic narrative in leaving behind a poor childhood in the Caribbean to attain glory in major cities and mega-events. In the mid-1980s, a teenage Pérec, like many of the foremost Antillean sportspeople of recent time, left Guadeloupe for Paris and the Institut National du Sport et de l'Éducation Physique (INSEP) in the Bois de Vincennes.<sup>xxix</sup>

However, it was the racially inflected sexualization, and attendant trivialization, of her extraordinary achievements that would increasingly outrage the athlete. The most flagrant example of such coverage was *L'Équipe Magazine's* illustration of her 1991 World Championship win with a half-page close-up of her lycra-clad buttocks, which Pérec would very publicly condemn at the press conference called to celebrate her victory in the Olympic 400m in Barcelona the following year. Not that this dissuaded journalists at *Libération* from giving over the whole of their front page to a similar image to mark Pérec's historic double gold at Atlanta in 1996.<sup>xxx</sup> The athlete's long history of difficult relations with the media may readily be understood against this backdrop.

However, what had really enraged journalistic commentators in the build-up to the Atlanta Games – the first to be privately funded, most notably by the city's emblematic global brand, Coca-Cola – was Pérec's decision to leave France and base herself in California as a member of the hyper-elite group of runners coached by John Smith under the 'Hudson-Smith International' (HSI) banner. As Kilcline notes: 'The acronym revealed the underlying aim of the organization – to assemble a multinational group of elite sprinters where identification with the group (and hence with the coach) would take precedence over national allegiances.'<sup>xxxi</sup> By primarily committing herself to this body, rather than the FFA, Pérec not unreasonably intended to optimize her chances of success. However, this practical objective had a broader resonance as, by quite literally voting

with her feet for Smith's dream of 'a post-national organization of athletic mega-events', Pérec was perceived to have betrayed not only the Olympic values championed by Pierre de Coubertin, but also traditional constructions of national cohesion in favour of personal opportunism and thus, ultimately, her own material interests.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Ironically, France achieved its best ever results at Atlanta, finishing fifth in the medal table with 15 gold, 7 silver and 15 bronze medals. Nevertheless, the 1996 Games, including Pérec's role in them, were widely portrayed as a nightmare vision of corporate capitalism and hegemonic Americanization.

In the wake of Atlanta, Pérec's career became something of a soap opera, as media attention focused on her alleged off-track *caprices* rather than her on-track performance, culminating in her closely monitored departure from Australia just prior to the 2000 (Sydney) Olympics. Having pulled out of a series of important competitions in the weeks leading up to the Games, the reigning champion was pursued by journalists when she arrived to prepare for her anticipated showdown with local star Cathy Freeman. Pérec would go on to allege that she was subjected to abusive treatment by the Australian press and also claimed to have been the victim of security breaches intended to harm her chances of retaining her Olympic 400m title. Unsurprisingly, her sudden decision to leave the country was perceived by many as having been prompted by fear of a looming defeat, and was widely reported as such. Although the runner did not formally retire until 2004, this episode effectively brought her competitive activity to a close, also impacting negatively on her public esteem: 'In the aftermath of her leaving Sydney, her geographic and sentimental distancing of herself from the French delegation facilitated the discarding of Pérec from the narrative of national and Olympic solidarity.'<sup>xxxiii</sup> In recent years, the former champion would seem to have been officially rehabilitated, through her involvement as a celebrity ambassador for the FFA, her election to the presidency of the Ligue Régionale d'Athlétisme de la Guadeloupe and, perhaps most tellingly, the use of her image on the flag flying at the entrance to the national centre for sporting excellence, INSEP (rebranded in 2009 as the Institut National du Sport, de l'Expertise et de la Performance).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Fifteen years on from the drama of Australia, 'la Guadeloupéenne' was invited by *Le Monde* to look back on her career. While not referring specifically to her Caribbean heritage, she does highlight the peculiarly intense, and even existential, combination of obsessive self-assertion and excessive public expectation which characterized her performance of both individual and collective identity on the running tracks of the world. Her comments are particularly striking for the way in which, in her final sentence, Pérec rather oddly refers to herself in the third person, effectively paraphrasing her many critics within the media:

Après le coup de pistolet, j'étais quand même bien relâchée. Lorsque j'écoute les sportifs, je ne me reconnais pas. C'était une question de vie ou de mort pour moi. Une course pas gagnée était la fin du monde. Je voulais toutes les gagner, même les tours dans les championnats. Je ne voulais jamais être en dessous d'un certain niveau et je me prenais au sérieux. Quand on est comme ça, on se met la pression, ajoutée à celle de l'équipe de France. Nous n'étions pas nombreux et on attendait que la favorite rentre avec la médaille. Comme en plus elle n'était pas gentille avec les journalistes, ils allaient la tailler.<sup>xxxv</sup>

This candid assessment of the asocial and even antisocial experience of exceptional sporting achievement, paradoxically felt most acutely by the symbolically invested national champion, may usefully be compared with a more recent case of athletic celebration combined with media condemnation: that of the frequently controversial runner, Mahiedine Mekhissi-Benabbad.

The European record-holder in the 3000m steeplechase, and a double Olympic silver medal-winner in that event in 2008 and 2012, the athlete has also made headlines beyond the sports pages. In 2011, he became embroiled in a post-race brawl with compatriot Mehdi Baala, who is also of Maghrebian heritage. More bizarrely, the runner was involved in violent incidents with official mascots at the European Championships in Barcelona in 2010 and again at Helsinki in 2012, having won the 3000m steeplechase on both occasions. He has additionally been the target of unsubstantiated allegations of doping, particularly after his unpredicted Olympic silver at Beijing in 2008. Most recently and most dramatically, he was disqualified in the 3000m steeplechase at the 2014 European Championships for removing his shirt in a football-style victory celebration as he came down the finishing straight comfortably clear of his rivals. In a remarkable turnaround, he

went back to the Zurich track three days later to win gold in the 1500m. After that race, he paid tribute to the three people who had supported him following his disqualification: his coach, Philippe Dupont; his old sparring partner, Mehdi Baala; and the national technical director, Ghani Yalouz.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Born in Casablanca, Yalouz won a silver medal in wrestling at the 1996 Olympics and, despite being a non-specialist, was appointed to his current post in 2009, leading the French athletics team to record European medal hauls in Barcelona in 2010 and in Zurich in 2014. Yalouz has characterized his determinedly hands-on approach to competitor-management as ‘la méthode palabre’, which we might characterize as a sport-specific talking cure which would appear to be paying particular dividends in elite competition.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Questioned about Mekhissi-Benabbad’s actions, Yalouz responded: ‘Le sport, ce n’est jamais lisse. [...] On ne peut jamais prévoir. Il y a ce grain de folie de certains athlètes qui leur a coûté cher mais qui va leur permettre de comprendre que rien n’est acquis.’<sup>xxxviii</sup> For his own part, Mekhissi-Benabbad has forcefully asserted the linkage between his migrant heritage, his athletic achievement and his media representation:

Encore aujourd’hui, on me demande qui je suis, d’où je viens. Je réponds que je suis français. Ça pose un problème à quelqu’un? Je suis français! [...] Nous, enfants d’immigrés, devons faire plus que les autres. On ne démarre pas sur la même ligne: on part en retard, de beaucoup plus loin. On a trop d’obstacles, on doit être meilleur que les autres. Petit, mon père me disait: « *Il n’y a que les meilleurs qui réussissent dans la vie, il n’y a pas de place pour les faibles, il faut être le numéro un.* » J’ai grandi dans un quartier HLM de Reims, la mentalité dans une cité est très simple: c’est l’envie de gagner.<sup>xxxix</sup>

These comments are noteworthy for the runner’s strong identification with France, and thus with the national collectivity, in the first half of the quotation, before he moves on to place the emphasis squarely on the uncompromising individualism required of the elite athlete. The complex, and even conflicted, mindset which this reveals may offer a somewhat less attractive image of postcolonial sporting success than the ostensibly harmonious multiculturalism of France’s *black-blanc-beur* footballers in 1998, but it may also be a more accurate reflection of the global competitor’s lived experience.

## Conclusion

By way of a conclusion, we might briefly compare the post-1985 evolution of French football and athletics with that of rugby union. France's first modern team game, the fifteen-a-side code was imported from English public (i.e. private) schools in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war, its widespread implantation significantly preceding that of association football. Despite the French game's entrenched ethos of covert payments to players throughout most of the twentieth century, the sport worldwide was officially amateur until 1995, when rugby union belatedly embraced professionalism, thereby prompting not only an institutional upheaval in this most traditional of athletic pursuits, but also a revolution in the mind-sets of players, administrators and supporters. The reconfiguration coincided with that year's Rugby World Cup in newly post-apartheid South Africa and was driven by media corporations originating in the sport's other southern strongholds of Australia and New Zealand. The resistance to change of traditionalist forces in the national rugby federations of Great Britain and Ireland, together with France, was rapidly overwhelmed by new commercial actors and new competitive imperatives. Two decades on from this radical transformation, the French rugby landscape has been transformed, as a variety of often iconoclastic entrepreneurs have used capital derived from successful media operations to revitalize and even resurrect historic clubs. In a passionate rugby enclave far from the game's south-western heartland, the Toulon club has been reimagined by local businessman Mourad Boudjellal, who made his money as a publisher of *bandes dessinées* under the Soleil Productions imprint, including particularly the immigration-themed and often autobiographical work of his elder brother Farid.<sup>x1</sup> Recruiting star players from around the rugby world, Boudjellal's Toulon won back-to-back European Champions Cups in 2012–13 and 2013–14, thus making its mark on the now global game.

Important changes have also taken place since 1995 in the composition of the French national side. The make-up of today's professionalized *XV de France* increasingly reflects both the postcolonial diversity of the general population and the new mobility of elite players from the

southern hemisphere.<sup>xli</sup> The starting team in the first round of the 2015 Six Nations was consequently more newsworthy for its inclusion of three South Africans based in France rather than the tournament debut of a single ‘North African’. Following Rabah Slimani’s introduction against Scotland, similar starts were given in subsequent rounds to Eddy Ben Arous and the Algiers-born winger Sofiane Guitoune, from the Bordeaux Bègles club. The two prop forwards, Slimani and Ben Arous, come respectively from Trappes (Yvelines) and Sarcelles (Val d’Oise), where they played for their local sides before being discovered by the powerful Racing Métro and Stade Français clubs. These Parisian suburbs were the scenes of rioting in 2013 and 2014. However, while the integrative potential of rugby in the *banlieue* has been the subject of recent media attention,<sup>xlii</sup> coverage of the sporting ascension of Ben Arous and Slimani has remained essentially technical. This may be suggestive of a broader change in attitudes, contrasting notably with the reporting in 1997 of the appointment as French captain of Abdelatif Benazzi, who remains world rugby’s most celebrated player of Maghrebian origin, and it is with his case that we shall bring the discussion to a close.

Benazzi was born in Morocco and initially played there, including representing his country as a junior international, before being recruited by the Cahors club, then moving to senior side Agen, going on to play 78 times for France between 1990 and 2001. In his first season in charge of the team, he led the *XV de France* to a Grand Slam of victories over the other competing nations, its first such achievement in a decade. Occurring a full year before the triumph of the country’s *black-blanc-beur* football players, this was noteworthy in itself. Moreover, the choice of a North African – additionally, and publicly, a committed Muslim – to lead the national team was by no means only of interest to French rugby watchers given the widespread *Lepénisation des esprits* associated with the period.<sup>xliiii</sup> Benazzi’s symbolic stature was underscored later that same year, when he was appointed to the Haut Conseil à l’Intégration by the ever media-aware Jacques Chirac. His combined athletic accomplishments and community credentials would see him hailed in 2000 not only as ‘un sportif d’exception’, but also as ‘un modèle’ and, more specifically, ‘un grand frère’, by the Minister for

**Commented [KB5]:** Does this mean ‘South Africans based in France’? Recommend re-wording.

**Commented [U6R5]:** Done.

Employment and Solidarity, Martine Aubry. As the foregoing discussion of football and athletics will have made clear, idealistic declarations of sport's potential for social transformation must be treated with caution, particularly when made by politicians. Nevertheless, Aubry's description of the player and his distinguished contribution to the sporting life of his adopted nation remains worthy of note:

Un modèle, car son parcours exemplaire (du club marocain d'Oujda au capitanat de l'équipe de France) illustre parfaitement le sens qu'il convient de donner au mot « intégration ». Abdelatif Benazzi a su trouver une place – et quelle place – dans notre société tout en préservant son identité, son attachement à sa culture et à sa religion. Sa réussite est la démonstration éclatante que l'intégration n'est pas l'assimilation par la négation mais bien l'adhésion à un socle de valeurs et de principes communs dans le respect de l'identité et des différences de chacun. C'est ce message, fort, qu'il délivre à tous les jeunes dont les parents viennent d'ailleurs.<sup>xliv</sup>

Whatever our reservations about the concept of *intégration* itself, Benazzi's outstanding achievement in a rugby world struggling to come to terms with the shock of the new, combined with his wider record of public service, would seem to argue for cautious optimism as regards the professionally reconfigured game's capacity to encourage diversity in its playing ranks, as in French sport and society more broadly.

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<sup>i</sup> Joseph Maguire and Jason Tuck, 'Global sports and patriot games: rugby union and national identity in a United Sporting Kingdom since 1945', in *Sporting Nationalisms: Identity, Ethnicity, Immigration and Assimilation*, ed. by Mike Cronin and David Mayall (London: Frank Cass, 1998), pp. 103–26 (p. 106).

<sup>ii</sup> Maarten Van Bottenburg, *Global Games*, transl. by Beverley Jackson (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 45.

<sup>iii</sup> Georges Vigarello, 'Le Tour de France', in *Les Lieux de Mémoire: Tome III, Les France – traditions*, ed. by Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 884–925.

<sup>iv</sup> Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare, 'The Tour de France: A Pre-Modern Contest in a Post-Modern Context', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 20:2 (2003), 1–29.

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<sup>v</sup> Van Bottenburg, *Global Games*, pp. 1–9.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>vii</sup> John Bale and Mike Cronin, ‘Introduction: Sport and Postcolonialism’, in *Sport and Postcolonialism*, ed. by John Bale and Mike Cronin (Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp. 1–13 (p. 4).

<sup>viii</sup> Lilian Thuram, *8 juillet 1998* (Paris: Anne Carrière, 2004); cited in Yvan Gastaut, *Le Métissage par le foot: l’intégration, mais jusqu’où?* (Paris: Autrement, 2008), p. 39.

<sup>ix</sup> Laurent Dubois, *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), p. 169. On the legacy of 1998, see also *France and the 1998 World Cup: The National Impact of a World Sporting Event*, ed. by Geoff Hare and Hugh Dauncey (London: Frank Cass, 1999); Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, *The Making of Les Bleus: Sport in France, 1958–2010* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013); Cathal Kilcline, ‘Playing out the Postcolonial: Football and Commemoration’, in *France’s Colonial Legacies: Memory, Identity and Narrative*, ed. by Fiona Barclay (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 207–26.

<sup>x</sup> Gastaut, *Le Métissage par le foot*, pp. 139–43.

<sup>xi</sup> Dubois, *Soccer Empire*, p. 169.

<sup>xii</sup> Jonathan Ervine, ‘*Les banlieues* and *Les Bleus*: Political and media discourse’, *French Cultural Studies*, 25:1 (2014), 70–81 (p. 74).

<sup>xiii</sup> Le Monde.fr (with AFP and Reuters), ‘De retour en France, les Bleus accueillis à l’Elysée et applaudis à la Concorde’, *Le Monde*, 10 July 2006.

<sup>xiv</sup> Yvan Gastaut, ‘Le “voyage officiel” de Zinedine Zidane en Algérie en 2006 ou le retour du fils prodige’, in *Les Footballeurs maghrébins de France au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle: itinéraires professionnels, identités complexes* (ed. by Sarah Clément and Yvan Gastaut) (*Migrance*, 29 (2008)), 60–72.

<sup>xv</sup> Bruno Jeudy and Karim Nedjari, *Sarkozy côté vestiaires* (Paris: Plon, 2010), pp. 19–20.

<sup>xvi</sup> Dubois, *Soccer Empire*, p. 242.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ervine, ‘*Les banlieues* and *Les Bleus*’, p. 76.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Patrick Mignon, 'Le psychodrame du football français', *Esprit*, August–September 2010, pp. 6–22 (p. 6).

<sup>xix</sup> Mustapha Kessous, 'L'Algérie, l'autre équipe de France', *Le Monde*, 18 June 2010.

<sup>xx</sup> Tony Ross, "'The other French team': Soccer and independence in Algeria', *Washington Post*, 6 June 2014.

<sup>xxi</sup> Andrew Hussey, 'A race scandal, a fight for France's soul', *The Guardian*, 8 May 2011.

<sup>xxii</sup> Dubois, *Soccer Empire*, p. 274.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Citation and commentary by Raffaele Poli, 'African migrants in Asian and European football: hopes and realities', *Sport in Society*, 13:6 (2010), 1001–11 (pp. 1005–6).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ervine, 'Les banlieues and Les Bleus', p. 73.

<sup>xxv</sup> See, for instance, Le Monde.fr (with AFP), 'Athlétisme: Alain Mimoun est mort', *Le Monde*, 28 June 2013.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Manuel Schotté and Carine Érard, 'Retour sur une "contribution" coloniale: le succès des coureurs nord-africains dans l'athlétisme français des années 1950', *Loisirs et société*, 29:2 (2007), 423–48.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Record details from the relevant sections of the FFA website

<<http://www.athle.fr/ffa.performance/>>; supplemented by information from

<<http://www.lequipe.fr/base/athletisme/records.html>> and athlete profiles held by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) <<http://www.iaaf.org/home>> [all accessed 27 February 2015].

<sup>xxviii</sup> Cathal Kilcline, 'Constructing and Contesting the (Post-)national Sporting Hero: Media, Money, Mobility and Marie-José Pérec', *French Cultural Studies*, 25:1 (2014), 82–100 (p. 83).

<sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>xxx</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>xxxiii</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Anthony Hernandez (with Pierre-Jean Vazel), 'Marie-José Pérec: "Gagner était une question de vie ou de mort"', *Le Monde*, 19 February 2015.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Yann Bouchez, 'La belle moisson des athlètes français en Suisse', *Le Monde*, 18 August 2014.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Annabelle Rolnin, 'La méthode Yalouz', *L'Équipe*, 3 August 2010.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Bouchez, 'La belle moisson'.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Mustapha Kessous, 'Mahiedine Mekhissi: "Mon dopage, c'est la foi"', *Le Monde*, 13 July 2012.

<sup>xl</sup> Cathal Kilcline, 'Representations of Rugby and Resistance in Toulon: from Literary Tradition to Televised Spectacle', *Contemporary French Civilization*, 39:1 (2014), 93–110.

<sup>xli</sup> <[http://www.rbs6nations.com/en/france/france\\_squad.php](http://www.rbs6nations.com/en/france/france_squad.php)> [accessed 27 February 2015].

<sup>xlii</sup> Bruno Lesprit, 'Mélée sociale à Massy', *Le Monde*, 23 January 2015.

<sup>xliii</sup> Ian Borthwick, 'A Nation Places its Faith in Benazzi', *The Independent*, 1 March 1997.

<sup>xliv</sup> Abdelatif Benazzi (with Jean-Charles Delesalle), *Abdelatif Benazzi: la foi du rugby* (Paris: Solar, 2000), p. 6.