

# Le Football

*A History of American Football in France*

RUSS CRAWFORD



"A tour de force, packed with new information on the U.S. military's century-long use of football for its soldiers serving overseas, followed by keen analysis of how the French have adopted America's game in recent decades. Crawford illuminates the challenges and opportunities of intercultural borrowing by sportsmen."—**ALAN S. KATCHEN**, author of *Abel Kiviat, National Champion: Twentieth-Century Track & Field and the Melting Pot*

"Truly amazing researching work done by Russ Crawford for a sport that is still very confidential in France. The life of American football in France is very similar to the one of rugby in the United States. It has been there forever, and yet no one knows about it!" —**RICHARD "LE SACK" TARDITS**, the second leading sacker in University of Georgia history, former player for the New England Patriots, and the only French player in the NFL



# LEFT FOOT BALLET

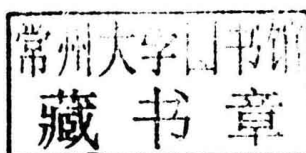
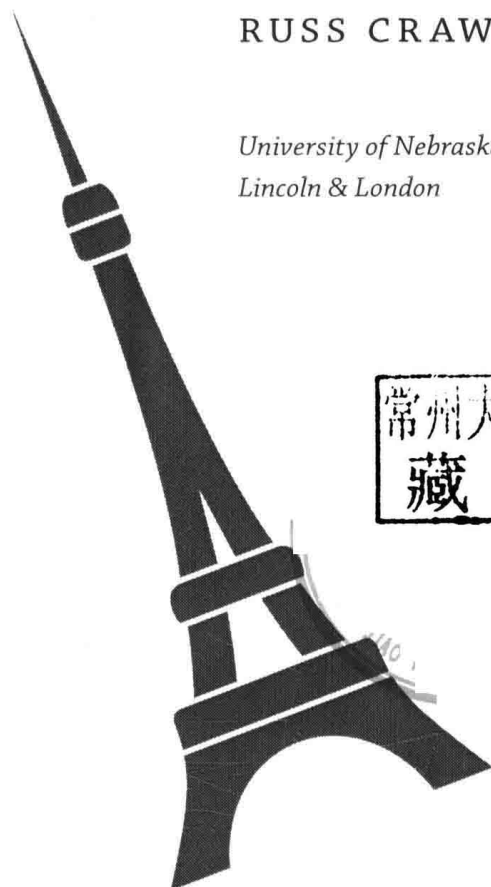
CRAWFORD •

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## PREFACE

May 5, 2012. Somewhere in France . . .

My initial experience with American football in France would make a good movie. À la *Caddyshack* (1980) or *Meatballs* (1979), it featured classic confrontations: rich versus poor, old-stock French versus immigrants, and white versus black. Moreover, the underdogs rallied from early adversity to win the big game.

My friend Jean-Marc Burtscher and I arrived early at the field on an overcast, cool day. Only one of the home-team players was there opening the Spartan locker rooms for the game, which pitted Jean-Marc's team, the Red Star of Noisy-le-Sec, against the Kiowas of Garches.

Noisy-le-Sec is a *banlieue* (suburb) on the eastern side of Paris, and part of the Seine-Saint-Denis Département, which contains the highest proportion of immigrants of any department in France. It is also one of the poorest *départements* in the country.

Garches, the home of the Kiowas, is an affluent suburb on the western side of the city. The Hauts-de-Seine Département, where it is located, is one of the wealthiest areas, not only in France but in all of Europe.

The Kiowas were founded in 1989 by a group of friends including Mario Mancuso, Cristophe Mortier, and Philippe Roger. According to their web page, the friends had played on first division football clubs, and after leaving those, began throwing the ball around in nearby parks.<sup>1</sup> They then formed a team and found a sponsor in the mayor of Garches, who provided the field located nearby at Vaucresson. They chose the name Kiowas because Mancuso and Mortier were fond of



Native American tribes but didn't want one of the commonly known names such as Apache or Sioux. They finally settled on the Kiowas, a tribe that they described as one of the "most aggressive Plains Indians."<sup>2</sup>

The Red Star is a more recent team, founded in 2008 by a group of young men with a passion for the game. During their first year, the junior team (nineteen and under) won the Regional Championship, and a senior team was created. The seniors also experienced success and had played in the Regional Championship semifinals in 2009 and the finals in 2010.<sup>3</sup> Along the way they began to pick up coaching and playing talent from the Angers Bleus (Blue Angels), one of the storied teams in French football history, including Jean-Marc and his brother Eric.

According to Jean-Marc, who joined the team in 2011, the founders chose their name because it was recognizable in their area, one that many teams in various sports had used to signal their location within *le ceinture rouge* (the red belt—referencing their communist local governments) that runs through many of the Paris *banlieues*.<sup>4</sup>

The Kiowas arrived slowly. They were often dropped off by their mothers, who drove late-model Peugeots or Renaults. They were largely white and seemed young and small. They looked like American high school athletes more than semiprofessional football players.

After a bit the older, more diverse, and more physically substantial Red Star players began arriving. The first pair to arrive exited an older-model car to the accompaniment of blaring hip hop music, tossed down their last pregame cigarettes, and moved toward the locker rooms. They looked dangerous.

As the teams moved to the field, which was a rugby pitch ninety yards long with sparse grass, the equipment and uniforms tended to blur the differences in the players. They would soon, however, become apparent enough. The home team scored the first points of the game by returning the opening kickoff for a touchdown. Having played and coached football, I knew that a big play like that could very well set the tone for the game, and not knowing much about the Red Star team, I feared that it might collapse.

But experience matters. The coaches and players of the visitors had been around the block a few times and did not panic. They demon-

strated that age and guile often trumps youth and enthusiasm, and the Red Star methodically began to impose its will on its younger opponents. The final score of 48 to 12 in favor of the Red Star did not accurately reflect how decisively the team from the poor part of the city dominated its more affluent opponents. The Kiowas, though they were defeated, went down as hard as they could manage.

The hitting demonstrated by both teams was an impressive introduction to football in France. The pads cracked from start to finish. Perhaps harboring prejudices that French football players would be similar to soccer players, who flop at the first sign of contact, I was pleasantly surprised by the enthusiastic violence displayed there. The players may have not been as large as some high school teams in the states, and they arrived to the action more slowly than I was used to seeing, but when they arrived, they did so with gusto.

The Kiowas, despite their apparent youth and frailty, gave as good as they got in on-field ferocity. What they lacked was the discipline and focus that the Red Star demonstrated that day.

The crash of the pads was not muted by any crowd noise, as only a handful of friends and family members stood in small groups along the sidelines—there were no grandstands. There was only sparse applause after the various scoring plays, and considerably more noise was coming from a nearby combination basketball/soccer court (with goal nets situated under the baskets). However, none of that mattered to the players on the field or on the sidelines. They were there for their teammates and for the love of the game.

Before and after the game, both teams displayed good sportsmanship, born perhaps out of a shared identity as outsiders in a French sporting culture that paid little attention to their courage and athleticism. This spirit of sportsmanship was another feature of the game that seemed, if not odd, at least unusual. As one who has been immersed in the win-at-all-costs football mentality of the United States for a lifetime, the environment of camaraderie and fair play was curious.

At one point, as the Red Star was driving deep into enemy territory, a receiver dived for the end zone and came up inches short. Standing close to the play, I immediately threw my arms up to signal a touchdown, attempting to induce the officials, who were not very impres-

sive, to give my new team the touchdown. To my surprise, one of the Red Star players standing near me shook his finger back and forth and told me that his teammate was just short.

This shocked me. American football players are trained from an early age to take any advantage possible. Once during a high school game, an official asked me if I had recovered a fumble, and although I was nowhere near the ball, I replied, without hesitation, that I had. We were awarded the recovery and went on to win the game. This was not golf, where every gentleman calls his own penalties, but the grim struggle for victory that is football.

This level of fair play was what I would have expected of an English public school athlete in the nineteenth century, or at least from a kinder, gentler time in American football history. Perhaps the best example of that spirit in the United States occurred in 1940, when Cornell was inadvertently given a fifth down against Dartmouth. Upon learning of the error from the game film, Cornell voluntarily forfeited the score, which cost it the game, and possibly the national championship.<sup>5</sup>

The sportsmanship display continued following the end of the game, when both teams gathered at midfield to congratulate each other and shake hands. They also gave a cheer, which was not really deserved, to the officiating crew. Outside the locker rooms the players mixed freely, and goodwill was the order of the day. This is likely not the case for soccer matches in France, where a postgame hooligan-led riot is not rare.<sup>6</sup>

The contrast between football and soccer is one that French football aficionados enjoy drawing. Good sportsmanship rules on the gridiron, unlike the anarchy that often reigns in soccer. Football fans stand and sing along with “La Marseillaise”; soccer fans hoot and jeer during the national anthem. A football game is a safe place to take a family. Attend a soccer game, and you may end up doused with tear gas.

The distinction between the sports, however, demonstrates the difficulty that football faces in France. The French have built a significant football subculture, with 21,650 licensed players on 204 teams playing full contact. However, the games are not commonly popular enough to draw sufficient fans to hold a respectable riot.<sup>7</sup>

So how had I wound up being one of the few fans at Garches that day? My interest in the history of French football began in 2004, when I traveled to the country for the first time to visit Sophie, the woman who would later become my wife. One evening, she took me to meet her high school friend Agnes Burtscher and her husband, Jean-Marc. While we were talking, he left the room and came back wearing a football helmet. I was stunned. I had never thought that, outside of NFL Europe, the American game was played on the continent.

Jean-Marc not only had his helmet but also many photographs, some of which will appear in the pages to follow. He told me about his days as a member of Les Anges Bleus and also began to relate some of the creation story of football there, which turned out to be a fascinating story.

I learned that football was brought to France in 1980 by Laurent Plegelatte, an avowed Trotskyite. As a historian of Cold War sports, I experienced considerable cognitive dissonance digesting this information. My dissertation explored the role that sports such as football played in strengthening the “American Way of Life” during that struggle, so the idea that a communist convinced the French to take up the game seemed wild.<sup>8</sup>

We spent most of the time debating the Iraq war, and I didn’t give much more thought to football there. I mentioned it from time to time, mainly to use the story to amaze my friends back home.

After we were married, Sophie and I continued to visit Agnes and Jean-Marc in France, and they came to our home in Ohio during their summer vacations. During their second trip we even attended an Arena League Cleveland Gladiators game, courtesy of tickets provided by Ron Selesky, their director of player personnel. Selesky, an old comrade of Jean-Marc’s, had once played with him on the Anges Bleus.

We persisted in talking about football in France and continued to agree that this would make a good book. Finally, after the Gladiators game, the idea penetrated beyond the surface of our brains, and we began making plans to make it a reality. The result of this planning was my presence at the Red Star versus Kiowas game, and eventually, this book.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First mention belongs to my wife, Sophie. Without her I would likely never have visited France. I also owe a huge *merci beaucoup* to Jean-Marc Burtscher. He introduced me to football in France and was an indispensable help in finding interview subjects, photos, and in general introducing me to the world of football *américain*. Without him this book would never have been written.

There are many others in France, including Eric Burtscher, who spent hours telling me stories about the early days of football there. A tremendous source of information came from the *Elitefoot* blog created by Olivier Rival, and the chapters on football after 1980 owe much to the information I found there. Julien Luneau of the Flash de La Courneuve welcomed me to practice, translated for me on RADIOSSA, and helped me with information about the early days of his team and the sport. Stephane Sardano and Yves Perelli assisted me with the history of the Angers Bleus. Mumu, Eclipso, Goldo, and the others at Radio Old School Spirit Association (RADIOSSA) also helped me tremendously. Thierry Soler and Olivier Moret at the Fédération Française de Football Américain offices took the time to give me the early history of the sport. The Red Star of Noisy-le-Sec welcomed me as a part of the team and offered stories about how they became interested in football. Thank you in particular to Axel Duez, Brice Beaudi, Dylen Cerna, Margaux Dewitte, François-Xavier Duqué, Yacine El Pendejo, Tym Ghex, Guillaume Griva, Jennifer Josset, Gary Mako, Evans So', and Julien Ozboyaci. Richard Tardits graciously took the time to remember his career at Georgia and in the National Football League (NFL).

The staff at the Bibliothèque nationale de France was very helpful and didn't laugh at my Nebraskan accent. Matthieu Chan Tsin, now living in the United States, enlightened me about the various reasons for playing the game in France. Finally, Chris and Vivette Mercadier, my French mother and father, housed and fed me on research trips and provided encouragement.

On the other side of the pond, I had the pleasure of interviewing a number of former players and coaches from United States Air Force Europe (USAFE) teams. First and foremost among them was Dave Madril. He told me of his days playing and about his participation in the 1961 tour. He also put me in touch with several other subjects, including Bernard A. "Barney Gill, an ex-lieutenant colonel in the United States Army and coach of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) Indians. Gill was without a doubt my favorite interview subject. To call him colorful does not do him justice. He led me to Russ Mericle, who played for Gill at West Point and in Paris. From the Laon Rangers I had the pleasure of talking with Jerry Curtright, the coach of the team, and with Chuck Bristol, who played for the Rangers and who provided me with some of his memorabilia. Ken Thrash also coached the Rangers and shared his memories of the early days at Laon with me. Dick Mullins, who ran an athletic program in Germany, helped me with the finances of the NATO-era athletic programs. Jose Nogueras, of Ohio Northern University, gave me the model for sports information divisions that I applied to the Argonauts. Ron Selesky, an American who played for the Angers Bleus, and Braxton Shaver, who played for the Flash de La Courneuve, told me about their lives as mercenary football players in France. Jim Foster and Stan Allspach regaled me with stories of their 1977 tour with the Newton Nite Hawks.

I also benefited from financial support that allowed me to visit France several times. Without the support of David Crago, provost of Ohio Northern University; Catherine Albrecht, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and Rob Alexander, the chair of the Department of History, Politics, and Justice, this project would have been much more difficult and costly. I also want to thank everyone at the University of Nebraska Press who helped make this book a reality; it was

a pleasure to work with everyone there. Finally, special thanks go to the students in my Sport and Society class, who read over my manuscript and told me to shorten my sentences.

If I have forgotten anyone, I apologize. For those who helped in this process, I enjoyed every minute of our conversations, and thank you again.



