



**LAURENT DUBOIS**

# **SOCCER** **EMPIRE**



**THE WORLD CUP AND THE FUTURE OF FRANCE**

# SOCCER EMPIRE

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LAURENT DUBOIS



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## **SOCCER EMPIRE**

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*For Anton*

*We should score spirits as we score goals.*

ZINEDINE ZIDANE, 9 JULY 2006

## PREFACE

### Scoring Spirits

WHEN THE REFEREE BLEW HIS WHISTLE much of the globe fell silent. An estimated three billion people watched as the final game of the 2006 World Cup tournament began. The bar in Paris where I was sitting had been loud with conversation moments before. Now we turned as one toward the giant screen set up in the back, hypnotized, suspended in time.

I had followed the first part of the World Cup tournament in Michigan, where the faithful gathered in a university cafeteria to watch the games. Hundreds of Korean students, decked out in red and playing drums, showed up for one game. A handful of Ghanaians draped in flags braved nasty looks from U.S. fans as they cheered their team to victory. Many, though, arrived to watch without a deep commitment to any team. Part of the beauty of the World Cup is the freedom it gives us to choose sides. Especially as the tournament goes on and teams get eliminated, fewer and fewer people can actually root for a home team; most fans have to adopt one. They might opt for a powerhouse like Italy, Argentina, Germany, or Brazil, or lean toward a lesser-known team on an unexpected run, like Senegal or South Korea.

Sometimes the choice is infused with deep meaning and makes a statement about who we are. Sometimes it is just the expression of a fleeting affinity. In the film *The Great Match* a Touareg in the middle of the Sahara insists that those who surround him to watch the 2002 Brazil-Germany final on his television must root for Germany rather than Brazil. His reason? The good working relationship he once had with a German visitor. The West African migrants in the group are dismayed and refuse to follow the command; they see Brazil as their team. They're not alone: for decades, in a world of soccer (or, football, as it is called in most of the world and as I will call it here) that is still largely dominated by European professional and national teams, Brazil has carried the hopes of Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup>

I've long rooted for another team: France. Though my name is as French



as it gets, I was born in Belgium and have lived in the United States since I was three weeks old. So when I root for the French football team, it's not really about rooting for the French nation. I am rooting for something bigger than that. In contrast to nearly all European teams—the Dutch team has at times been the notable exception—the French team is and has long been a remarkably diverse group. It is a global team, a kind of transcultural republic on the field, whose players have roots in West, Central, and North Africa, the Caribbean, the far-flung Pacific territories, Armenia, and France's edges in the Basque country and Marseille. Like many other fans of the French team, I see in it the promise of solidarity, tolerance, community, and cooperation. Of course that wouldn't be enough if we didn't also like how they played. Luckily the French team often produces “matches that leave us breathless, that intoxicate us.” At their best, the players offer “a triumph of beauty, technique, daring, surprise and elegance.”<sup>2</sup>

The French team, however, can also be alarmingly inconsistent. The team that won the World Cup in 1998 and the European Cup in 2000 fizzled at the 2002 World Cup, where it was eliminated from competition without scoring a single goal. In 2004 two of its most important players, Zinedine Zidane and Lilian Thuram, retired from international competition. In 2006 the French coach convinced the two of them to come back and play for France one last time. But France's early World Cup games were disappointing. They tied against both South Korea and Switzerland and ended up in a situation where they had to beat Togo by several points to move on to the next round. Thankfully they won the decisive game. I rode my bicycle home that afternoon, belting out the “Marseillaise,” France's strident and bloody national anthem, to the empty streets of East Lansing, Michigan. A few days later France defeated Spain. And then, in the quarterfinals, they defeated Brazil. Crossing my fingers that they would win in the semifinal against Portugal, I bought a plane ticket. I would watch the final in Paris.

During the World Cup the globe turns into a giant stadium, but Paris was particularly vibrant the day of the 2006 final. The city hummed with the anticipation that comes from equal parts hope and dread as people prepared to watch their team play. French fans prayed for a national victory, of course, but they hoped just as much that they would watch Zidane—according to one poll the most beloved French citizen—end his remarkable career in the best way possible: holding up the World Cup in triumph. Waiting for the game to start, I wandered through the streets in my France jersey and bought a large, overpriced French flag from a merchant doing brisk business. Among the milling blue-, white-, and red-painted fans I watched the cars roll by fly-

ing flags and carrying signs saying, "Merci Zizou," Zidane's oft-chanted nickname. In front of me, along the Seine, a beat-up Citroën came to a stop, and I saw a lanky young man sitting in the backseat, holding a homemade flagpole with two small flags fluttering together: the red-white-and-blue French flag and next to it the Algerian flag, green and white, with its crescent and star. Zidane's parents had migrated from Algeria to France when Algeria was still a French colony. In 1962, after a brutal war, Algeria won its independence, but Zidane's parents remained in France. Zinedine Zidane spent his life at the haunted crossroads between the two countries. Flying on the same pole, fluttering against one another, the two flags became a single banner—for Zidane, for the French team, for Algerian France: a dream of reconciliation.

Settled in a bar with friends that night, I watched the opening ceremony, which featured a duet by the Colombian singer Shakira and the Haitian-born Wyclef Jean, who sported the Haitian flag on his shirt and his head. Many Haitians are passionate football fans, but the country has been in the World Cup tournament only once, in 1974. Through his music Wyclef Jean had found another way to give the Haitian flag a prominent spot in the tournament. On the field, meanwhile, gathered the largest group of Caribbean players ever to compete in a World Cup final. Standing at attention for the French national anthem were Thuram, born in the French department of Guadeloupe; Florent Malouda, born in French Guiana; and Eric Abidal, William Gallas, and the star striker Thierry Henry, all born in metropolitan France to parents from either Martinique or Guadeloupe. Several more players of Caribbean background, including Sylvain Wiltord, looked on from the sidelines.

Fans in the French Caribbean have long leaned toward Brazil rather than France, rooting for a team of players they felt best represented them rather than the team of their nation. By the 1990s, however, French Caribbean players were increasingly prominent on the French team, and younger fans from the region began supporting France, sometimes harshly criticizing their parents for continuing to support Brazil. Some pointed out that, especially in 2006, the French team had significantly more black players than the Brazilian team. As France faced Italy in the final the difference in the makeup of the teams was even more striking. It was as if two totally different visions of Europe were represented on the field. Almost all of the players for France had roots in the Caribbean or Africa and shared a history of empire and global exchange. Unlike France, of course, Italy never had an expansive empire in Africa, Asia, and the Americas; still, there are increasing numbers of immigrants, notably from its one-time colony in Ethiopia and North and

West Africa, in Italy today. Nearly all players on the Italian team, however, have family roots in Italy, although—as has long been the case—a few have links to Italian communities outside Europe, notably in Argentina.

Just after France and Italy faced off, the French forward Thierry Henry was knocked to the ground in a rough collision with an Italian player. The next minutes were confused, physical, a little ugly. Then the referee called a foul against the Italian team after Florent Malouda either was tripped (according to French fans) or dove dramatically after having lightly touched the foot of a defender (according to Italian fans) in front of the Italian goal. Zidane stepped up to take the penalty kick. Through years of play he has scored countless such kicks, usually by sending the ball streaking into the net. This time, however, he sent the ball flying up toward the goal's upper post. It spun off and downward, right behind the Italian goalie, Gianluigi Buffon. Amazingly, in the most important football competition in the world, he had scored a penalty kick in the most risky and theatrical way possible, with what is called a *panenka*, after Antonín Panenka, a Czech footballer who in 1976 scored a vital penalty kick by chipping the ball over the goalkeeper into the center of the net. It was as if Zidane was playing around, showing off in an afternoon pickup game with friends, teasing the goalie for fun. “He’s mad!” the elated French goalkeeper Fabien Barthez shouted to the sky as he watched Zidane score.

France held the lead with one point, but not for long. Soon after Zidane’s goal, Marco Materazzi headed the ball past the French goaltender off a corner kick. And then, to those of us watching, hypnotized, all around the world, the game went on. And on. Seemingly endlessly. France shone, playing the smooth and fluid football they’re capable of at their best. But they didn’t score. And still they didn’t score. And neither did the Italian team. By the end of regulation time all the players were clearly exhausted. Just watching them was exhausting. Thuram held together the French defense, as he had done in the semifinal game against Portugal. Zidane fought, sweating, his shoulder aching from a tangle earlier in the game, his captain’s band hanging limply on his arm, where he kept fidgeting with it. Then he sent a header toward the Italian goal. It looked for a breathtaking second like it might be a replay of 1998, when Zidane scored a header against Brazil that put his team in the lead, followed by another later in the game. But Buffon made an amazing, reaching save and tapped the ball over the top of the goal. We screamed, looking up to the sky in desperation, and so did Zidane. Again, no goal.

A few minutes later Marco Materazzi tugged lightly at Zidane’s shirt. Zidane spoke briefly to the Italian defender and started to walk away. But Materazzi called out a string of insults.

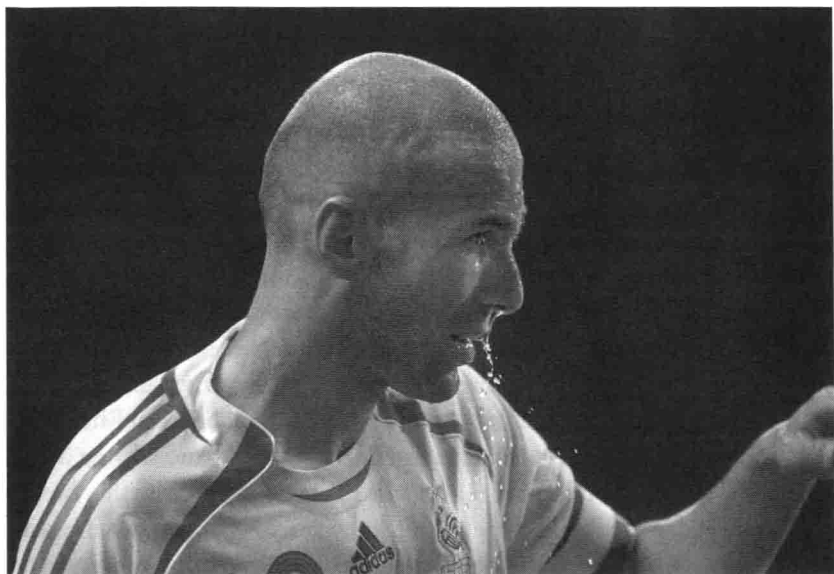


FIGURE 1. Zidane during the latter phases of the France-Italy World Cup final, 9 July 2006. Bob Thomas/Bob Thomas Sports Photography/Getty Images.

Later, looking back on the event, the next moment seemed to happen out of time. But as it occurred, those of us watching on television and even fans in the stadium saw none of it. The ball was elsewhere on the field. When the game stopped, we didn't know why. Then they showed the replay.

As Materazzi continued to bait the Frenchman, Zidane turned around, took a few quick, careful paces, and head-butted the Italian in the chest full force. Materazzi went flying to the ground.

Silence, disbelief, then groans filled the bar where I sat stunned. A few young men cheered, impressed. Zidane's action seemed to strike them as "a moment of real and instant justice, a rarity in the world."<sup>3</sup> On the field, after a few confused minutes, the referee held up a red card, banishing Zidane from the game. For his final exit, he walked briskly past the World Cup trophy, looking down. As he sat alone in the locker room, Italy defeated France in penalty kicks. While the Italian team celebrated, Lilian Thuram waved to French fans, tears in his eyes, the last French player on the field.

Paris was as if in a daze. On the metro two teenage boys hugged, one of them crying. I walked for a long time that night, so visibly stricken that several people stopped to give me pep talks, saying that it was okay, that there would be another World Cup, that France had played well, gone further

than anyone expected. Everywhere in the city strangers consoled each other. One even uttered that seemingly reasonable but truly nonsensical attempt at consolation often heard by football fans, telling me that it was just a game. I walked past the Hôtel de Ville, where a crowd of triumphant Italy fans gathered, huddled or leaping for joy. Some passersby looked on good-naturedly; others shouted "Fuck you!"—in Italian, to make sure they were understood.

I barely slept and then woke up in a depressing place indeed: Paris the day after France lost the World Cup. But, really, I was lucky. At least I wasn't alone, back home, being teased by friends who rooted for Italy. I had plenty of company for my misery. As the day went on, though, I noticed something. Though many people were mourning—I spoke with one woman who had tears in her eyes—most people were talking about Zidane. And his head. And the amazing way he sent Materazzi to the ground. And why he did it. And what Materazzi must have said to make him do it. And whether he was right to have done it. People were talking, even laughing in amazement, pondering right and wrong, insult and dignity, violence and responsibility. And all around me people—not everyone, of course, but still a lot of people—were gradually realizing, as I was, that they were captivated, even thrilled by Zidane's head-butt.

Many saw Zidane's action as a disappointing, even tragic ending to his career, lamenting that in allowing himself to be provoked by Materazzi he stupidly fell for the oldest trick in the book. Others condemned it as an inexcusable offense against the core ethics of the sport. But such interpretations didn't sit well with everyone. Indeed many rushed to defend Zidane, and even to celebrate him for what he did, usually assuming that he was the victim of a racist insult that required a dramatic response. In Paris and throughout the world, as people heatedly debated what had happened they projected their own fears, phantasms, and hopes on the head-butt. Indeed the French term for head-butt, *coup de boule*—literally "strike with a ball," the ball in this case being a human head—suddenly became a shorthand and a symbol.

Zidane left us with an offering. He exited the global theater of the World Cup by giving us his own, striking, answer to a universal question: What does it mean to face an insult? In doing so, he spurred millions of conversations, agreements, and disagreements, governed by endless returns to the game and to his final act on the field. A good number of the three billion people who had seen the *coup de boule* had an opinion about it—often a strong one—and felt compelled to analyze it, talk about it, moralize or joke or celebrate it. In France the discussion of the head-butt—impassioned, diverse, at turns comical and dead serious—powerfully illustrated how foot-

ball can both condense and propel larger political debates. Less than a year earlier a massive, month-long insurrection had broken out in poor *banlieue* neighborhoods throughout the country. Young protesters, many of them the children and grandchildren of immigrants, were enraged by the police brutality and demanded that French society respect their rights as citizens. Zidane had grown up the child of Algerian immigrants in such a neighborhood. In a France still reeling from the riots, many interpreted his *coup de boule* in relation to the ongoing struggle over the legacies of empire and the place of immigrants born of that empire in French society.

Drawn into the national and global conversation Zidane started, I read everything I could about the history of football in France. As a historian, I've spent the past fifteen years studying the history of the French Empire in the Caribbean and beyond, and I had seen only passing references to the place of football within that history. But once I started looking I discovered that football—a bit like Woody Allen's *Zelig*—was everywhere. It shaped and was shaped by all of the major transformations of the twentieth century, from World War I and World War II to the brutal conflicts over decolonization. A Frenchman, Jules Rimet, established the World Cup in 1930, when the French Empire was at its height, and administrators and teachers in the colonies did what they could to spread the sport, seeing it as a perfect way to diffuse Western ideals among the colonized. But they could never control football. It spread with startling speed in the colonies, notably in Algeria and the French Caribbean, and often became a vehicle for anticolonial protest. As early as the 1930s France's professional teams were recruiting players from the colonies, especially North and West Africa. Zidane and Thuram, I realized, were part of a long athletic tradition in which empire shaped generations of French football. The history of football illuminates the complexities of colonial rule and anticolonial resistance in the French Empire, as well as all that came in between. And returning to that history helps us understand how and why this sport has created its own empire, which shapes the experiences and perspectives of vast numbers of people.

This book focuses on the history of France and its empire, especially Algeria and the Caribbean, in order to tell a larger story about the link between football and politics. Throughout the world football teams become symbols for towns, regions, or countries to rally around, and games become opportunities for people to celebrate and perform their allegiance to a particular place. But precisely because people identify so intensely with teams and make links between teams and something bigger—a town, a nation, a history—football also serves to crystallize and condense questions, debates,

and conflicts about the collectives that teams represent. When a team takes to the field, fans say, "They are us, and we are them." But sometimes that can also force a question: "Who are they? And who are we?"

Football makes icons, and many fans develop a tight, even mystical connection with their sporting heroes. I focus on two of the most important French football icons, Zidane and Thuram, following their exploits both on and off the field. Both were born in 1972 and grew up on the edges of French society, subject to marginalization and racism, and despite their dizzying rise to stardom and wealth, they have never been totally free from those forces. Through their victories and defeats on and off the field, they have both exposed and challenged the forms of exclusion that shape French society. Starting in 1996 and through the World Cup of 2006, their presence on the field generated perhaps the most widespread and sustained public conversations about the topic of race in France in decades. With their teammates—including the Ghana-born Marcel Desailly; Christian Karembeu, born in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia; and Thierry Henry, whose parents are from the French Caribbean—they have performed miracles on the football field, inspiring the French to dream of political miracles that could transform society and truly fulfill the promises of equality that form the bedrock of France's Republican political culture. Perhaps most important, they have also pushed people to do the work necessary for such promises to be fulfilled, to grapple with the past of empire and its many effects on the present. On the turf, Zidane and Thuram have been bearers of an uncomfortable history, both soothing and reviving the wounds left by that history.

In early versions of football, players kept track of goals by scoring lines into the goalposts with something sharp, such as a rock picked up on the field, leaving a permanent mark of what they had achieved. Because of the practice, people began referring to making a goal as "scoring." As he prepared to play in the World Cup Final against Italy in 2006, Zidane described to his teammates what they should do on the field that night: "Il faut marquer des buts en marquant les esprits." The beauty of the phrase revolves around the double meaning of the word *marquer*, meaning "to score" but also "to mark" or "to leave an impression." Likewise, the word *esprit* means more than "spirit," combining mind, spirit, heart, and even soul in one. The goal of the players, Zidane declared, should be to pursue victory by playing beautifully, scoring the spirits of those who watched. They should strive to leave an imprint deeper than a victory, so deep that it cannot be erased.<sup>4</sup>

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## CONTENTS

List of Illustrations *xi*

Preface: Scoring Spirits *xiii*

Introduction: The Language of Happiness 1

1 A Beautiful Harvest 23

2 Caribbean France 47

3 Crossings 72

4 Roots 97

5 Two Goals 118

6 Two Flags 133

7 La France Métissée 154

8 An Unfinished War 177

9 Reconciliation 198

10 Burn 214

11 Coup de Boule 241

Epilogue: Returns 267

Notes 275

Acknowledgments 313

Index 317