



LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF

THE MAKING OF *Les Bleus*

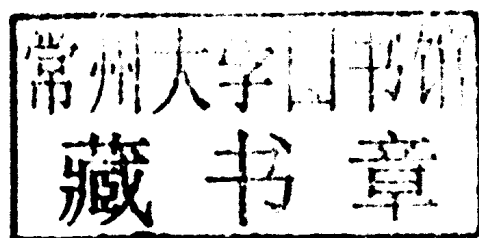
Sport in France, 1958–2010



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Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff



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Abbreviations

Bac	<i>Baccalauréat</i>
CAC	<i>Centre des Archives Contemporaines</i> Center of Contemporary Archives
CNSHN	<i>La Commission Nationale du Sport de Haut Niveau</i> National Committee of Elite Sport
CREPS	<i>Centre Régional d'Éducation Physique et des Sports</i> Regional Center of Physical Education and Sports
DTN	<i>Directeur Technique Nationale</i> National Technical Director
FFBB	<i>Fédération Française de Basket-Ball</i> French Basketball Federation www.basketfrance.com
FFF	<i>Fédération Française de Football</i> French Football Federation www.fff.fr
FIFA	<i>Fédération Internationale de Football Association</i> International Federation of Association Football www.fifa.com
FIBA	<i>Fédération Internationale de Basket-Ball</i> International Federation of Basketball www.fiba.com
INF	<i>Institut National de Football</i> National Football Institute
INSEP	<i>Institut National des Sports et d'Éducation Physique</i> National Institute of Physical Education and Sport www.insep.fr
OM	<i>Olympique de Marseille</i> Professional football team of Marseille www.om.net
ORTF	<i>Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française</i> Office of French Radio and Television
SSE	<i>Section Sport-Étude</i> Sport-Study-Section

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Lastly, a disclaimer. All views portrayed in this book are mine and do not represent those of the U.S. Department of State or the United States Government. Information for this study was obtained from publicly available information, as well as from oral history interviews conducted over the period 2002-08.

A Note on Language

So as to serve as wide an audience as possible, I have used a transatlantic vocabulary that uses French, British, and American terms for the sports examined. Thus, the term “football” is used throughout this work to refer to the sport that Americans call “soccer,” and “footballers” and “basketballers” refer to those who play football and basketball, respectively. “Games” are “matches” that are played on the “pitch” and the “field.” School sports programs are “sport-study sections” or “*sections sport-études*,” (SSE) and the “youth academies” examined in this work are the same things as “youth centers,” “development centers,” or “centers of formation.”

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Introduction

Setting the Scene

Johannesburg, South Africa, in late June 2010 brimmed with excitement. It was the middle of the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) World Cup, the quadrennial football juggernaut that revives nationalism and stereotyping and mixes them with joy and tears as teams representing 32 countries battle for first place and bragging rights. The exuberance was greater than usual as it was the first time the 80-year-old tournament was held on African soil. The promise of football's future and the hopes of the competitors sparked the air. Despite such festivity, the environment was not quite so joyous for the French national team or their followers. Instead, *Les Bleus*, as the team is known, were en route home in disgrace, the latest in a series of football-related scandals.

In previous months, controversy swirled over the team's unsportsmanlike qualification for the tournament, allegations that several footballers were implicated in an underage prostitution ring, and reports of acrimony between the players and the coach. Rather than improve *Les Bleus'* image and the nation's sense of self, the World Cup campaign backfired. Instead of victory or vindication, the team spectacularly self-destructed. *Les Bleus* played dismally and did not progress beyond the first round of play. The team's off-field actions compounded their poor performance on the pitch. Player Nicholas Anelka was kicked off the squad and sent home by head coach Raymond Domenech for allegedly swearing at him. In a show of solidarity, the rest of *Les Bleus* staged a strike at a practice open to the public. Reporters documented the players' refusal to leave the team bus and train in advance of their last match, news instantaneously disseminated around the world.

The strike was considered a disgrace, and accusations and questions swiftly followed. The National Assembly held closed-door sessions to listen to *Fédération Française de Football* (FFF), the national governing body, and player testimony as to what went wrong in South Africa. President Nicholas Sarkozy became involved, asking player Thierry Henry to tell his side of the story. The actions of the team were considered extraordinary in France, but the postmortem undertaken by government officials was not. At the time, many

around the world wondered why the events were so politicized. Why was the government involved in sports affairs? The embarrassment was great, but was there a larger significance for the French nation or beyond? This was not the first time that France lamented a humiliation by its athletes at a major international athletic competition. Fifty years earlier, the poor showing of French Olympians at the 1960 Rome Games created a similar debate, launched a "sports crisis" where the nation's elite athletes failed in their quest for athletic accolades, and forced the republic to recast the role of sports and its importance to the national image.

This is the story about how and why sport became an affair of state. The main narrative is the Fifth Republic's quest to create elite athletes in two global team sports, football and basketball, primarily at the youth level. While the objective of this mission was to improve performances at international competitions, such programs were quickly seized upon to help ease domestic issues and tensions. Examination of this plot serves to better understand the larger history of how France coped with and adapted to the myriad changes endured after 1945. In what ways did the country reconfigure its global role? How did domestic changes impact society? In a globalizing, post-colonial world that increasingly moves toward European integration, how has France come to terms with the past? With the hyper-saturation of television and media constantly diffusing images of the nation, in what ways has France sought to create a new "French" identity? This story helps answer such questions. The history of the state's co-option of youth sports forms a compelling tale and serves as a prism through which to investigate the larger history of France, the evolution of society, the impacts of the media revolution, and the government's mission of public health. It underscores just how much things have changed—yet still remained the same.

The extent to which France harnessed the athletic domain was unprecedented among other West European nations. After 1945, a country's ability to exert "soft power," or influence others through the cultural sphere, became more important. In France, sport, particularly at the youth level, was used to cultivate soft power internationally, to transmit republican ideals of democracy and fair play to the youth, and to examine and create a modern, post-colonial French identity in a globalizing world. The onset of the Cold War forced countries of all sizes to rethink their relevancy. Sport was but one way through which to reinforce one's position.

Many states turned to the athletic field and encouraged the sportive "successes" of their athletes in order to establish a sense of world prominence. Images of an athletically "victorious" nation with "winning" athletes depicted by print and broadcast media helped reaffirm a country's relevancy. Increased mediatization of the Olympics after 1960 augmented this phenomenon even more. However, it was difficult for smaller countries to contend in the same ways as the superpowers. This quandary, combined with the rapid growth of new FIFA members following decolonization, made football and its World Cup

ever more important. Since football is an inexpensive sport—all one truly needs is a ball—it was more accessible. Starting in the 1960s, the ability to win the World Cup or other major football tournaments was a way for countries to compete in the quest for sports influence, especially as the United States and Soviet Union were more focused upon Olympic medals. This type of soft power was desirable in an atomic world in which traditional shows of power, such as military or diplomatic might, were no longer applicable in the same ways.

While many studies focus on the East-West rivalry at the Olympics between the United States and the Soviet Union, or the use of sports as a way to establish independence from a patron through medal counts and athletic titles, as was the case with East Germany, few have examined the French example. As a medium-sized country without vast resources, France could not follow the models of the United States or Soviet Union. While influenced by the East German example, copying such a totalitarian system was antithetical to French values and republican ideals. Instead, at a time in which the Fifth Republic took an activist role in the economy and lives of its citizens, a different approach was necessary. France never had a reputation as an athletic power despite a long tradition as an influential leader in certain cultural spheres. In fact, the nation lacked any sort of sports culture. Nevertheless, the government realized that sport was an increasingly important forum through which to derive status and influence.

The French sought to find a “third way” in sports, much in the way that it wanted to create an alternative between the diplomatic policies of Washington and Moscow. The identification of France as a nation of sports men and women who exemplified the ideals enshrined in athletics, such as playing by a set of codified rules, democracy on and off the field, and the humanity of playing the game, was desirable. Use of sport to ameliorate the national image abroad could help rectify public opinion of France and reassert the country’s honor in ways more potent than other, more traditional French spheres of soft power, such as gastronomy or literature. Successful sports programs and athletes were also ways to maintain ties with former parts of the empire.

At the same time, the prism of sports could be used in other ways. Domestically, it could help assimilate the youth into society. Athletics, especially team sports, instilled young citizens with republican values. Steering the youth toward organized activities negated time spent possibly succumbing to delinquency or doing drugs. Moreover, sports could facilitate assimilation of immigrants by conferring and legitimizing citizenship and a sense of belonging to the nation.

Fifth Republic sports systems placed the training of elite athletes under the state. At the same time, private clubs also played an important role in detecting and molding players to serve the republic in elite competition, such as the Olympics or the World Cup.¹ The phenomenon of elite athletes training for competition full-time is a recent one that evolved after 1960. Professional athletes, on the other hand, are paid to play sports for a living. They are businessmen and women paid for their services (athletic entertainment) and do

not necessarily play in the country in which they hold citizenship. As professional athletes are often named as a nation's elite competitors, the lines between the two categories can be blurred. This is especially true for football and basketball. The roster for *Les Bleus* at the 2010 World Cup was composed of professional players designated to represent the country. The image of France as told and represented by this squad mattered a great deal. Not only did the politicization of the World Cup incident force a re-examination of sports policies and programs, it also called into question the degrees of "success" of the French model, and with it what it meant to be "French."

Continuity and Rupture

While the story of youth sports initiatives is one way to comprehend the history of the Fifth Republic, the state's employ of athletics was not unique to the postwar period. French ideology connecting physical movement to a healthy body and a child's education can be traced back several centuries. More recently in the nineteenth century, physical education (gymnastics and calisthenics) was promoted in state schools. By the 1880s the desire to cultivate a healthy and civic-minded youth and the new mandatory schooling obligations intersected with the rise of modern sports and physical education movements. Athletically active youth would be stronger, more fit, and better able to serve in the military or produce healthy children.

France traditionally looked to the Prussian and German model of physical education first pioneered by Friedrich Ludwig "Father" Jahn in the early nineteenth century.² Several decades later, French republicans promoted a strong physical education program within the schools. The Ferry Laws established obligatory gymnastics instruction and drills for boys. By 1884, gymnastic exercises, military marches, and swimming were a prescribed part of the national scholastic curriculum.³ A parallel agenda for girls was also instituted under the belief that physically fit females would produce healthy babies to counter the nation's stagnant birth rates. By the 1880s and 1890s, society perceived that light physical exercise for women had similar health benefits.⁴ Physical education as a promotion of health is a legacy that has endured.

By the late nineteenth century a competing concept to physical education emerged. Sportive education was encouraged to develop skill and physicality through team sports, such as football, rugby, and basketball. Led by Pierre de Coubertin, this alternative stemmed from the sports movement that developed in early nineteenth century Britain under Thomas Arnold.⁵ De Coubertin, a vocal proponent of British education, urged the merits of team sports in helping to build the next generation of democratic leaders. Additionally, team sports could help instill desirable traits, such as discipline and respect for meritocracy, which would help mold youth into exemplary future citizens. Thus in addition to health, athletics were thought to instill morals and ideals.

These attractive aspects prompted the Popular Front (1936-38) government to promote sports to the masses. Provision of state subsidies to facilitate the practice of sport and make it more accessible was one legacy. Such programs also extended the health merits of exercise to the population at large, thus firmly grounding sports in a public mission (promoting health). The right-wing Vichy regime further solidified and reinforced the role of athletics. Vichy's 1940 "sports charter" tried to rebuild the nation's strength through the youth. Led by Minister of Sport Jean Borotra, a well-known tennis champion, the National Revolution co-opted adolescents into athletics programs that sought to form healthier, hardier bodies. The state's increased emphasis upon physical fitness, especially for boys and young men, indicated how Vichy desired to reconfigure the idea of French masculinity as one of strength and courage.⁶ After Liberation the politicization of state-run youth sports retained a collaborationist stain.

It was against this backdrop that modern team sports developed. Focusing upon the two most popular sports in France (and the world), football and basketball, yields interesting comparisons as well as unique lenses through which to understand and discuss sports, media, medicine, states, and societies in the modern, globalizing world. Football and basketball, both Anglo-American imports, have different class and religious histories in France. Both sports were introduced in the late nineteenth century, did not require expensive equipment, and could easily be played in fields or in the streets. They were accessible to all, unlike sports such as ice hockey or tennis, which required expensive equipment and specific terrains. Their close associations with the British (football) and Americans (basketball) and the values these games sought to impart (fair play, meritocracy, democracy, team work) associated football and basketball with the desirable trait of modernity.⁷ After 1945, the turn toward team sports was a way to break from the past.

Football in the late nineteenth century was associated with the upper and middle classes, whose sons learned the game while at school in Great Britain. World War I democratized the game through the trenches. Frenchmen of all classes took football home with them and spread its popularity after the war. Northern France in particular became riveted with football fever, due to an industrial working-class population that appreciated the competitiveness of the game. Football appealed not just to the working class, but also to their employers, for it fostered a sense of team solidarity and cemented the community together. The Popular Front government particularly emphasized the sport, lending it greater legitimacy.

Football's popularity was furthered by the international codification of rules and organization of competition. The 1904 establishment of FIFA formalized the sport.⁸ The FFF, created in 1919, quickly became the country's largest and most powerful sports federation, a further testament to French proclivity toward the sport.

The entrenchment of football in Western Europe was universal. By 1914 it permeated British society, and after 1918 many Continental European societies

also warmly embraced it. The Italians and the Dutch were notably passionate for the sport.⁹ Despite such football fever, not all countries professionalized prior to 1939. By the outbreak of war that year, France, Spain, Italy, and England all had professional football leagues, while the Netherlands and Germany did not professionalize until after 1945.¹⁰

The interwar growth of football and sports international competitions enabled sportsmen to become ambassadors abroad.¹¹ The notion that the athlete could be a goodwill ambassador for a nation and symbolize a country was potent. A greater push to develop such heroes was stimulated by cross-border competitions, which cultivated elite and professional players. FIFA and the FFF both promoted global competition, and Frenchman Jules Rimet, as president of FIFA (1921-54), suggested an international tourney to be held every four years. Under his guidance the first football World Cup was held in Uruguay in 1930.

Although Frenchmen were at the forefront of organizing the game, the national squad did not fare well in international competitions. At both the inaugural 1930 tournament and its successor in 1934, France exited after the first round of play. In 1938, the team crumpled in a second-round defeat that eliminated them from competition. Although under the German Occupation and the Vichy regime club-level play remained intact, the depleted numbers and reorganized leagues did not facilitate improvements.¹² France did not qualify for the World Cup in 1950, but things changed with the rise of several football greats.¹³ Legends Just Fontaine, Raymond Kopa, and Maryan Wisnieski, all from immigrant backgrounds, led France to third place in the 1958 World Cup. The team's successes combined with the skills and popularity of its heroes subsequently became a way to bind the nation together.

Despite football's popularity, team sports were not accorded time within the structures of the rigid school day. Thus they did not gain wide acceptance as a vital part of a student's education as did physical education. Instead, boys and young men pursued football as a leisure time activity after school or on the weekends with the youth teams of their local sports club. In this they were much like their counterparts in Continental Europe where school athletic programs still emphasized physical education after the war, even in countries such as Italy and West Germany where the legacy of the fascist youth athletics programs was more poignant than in France.

Today, football is the most popular sport in France and the one most consumed by its citizens. For many boys, it is a way of life. Youth's embrace of football exploded in the years after France won the World Cup in 1998. One long-time youth coach noted that he had 40 or 50 more kids wanting to join his team in a "snowball effect" after the tournament.¹⁴

There are comparatively few women who play football or attend professional games. Football was originally a fairly violent activity and carried the stigma of being a "manly" sport. Society thus historically deemed football an unacceptable endeavor for girls. Such sentiment dates to the turn of the twentieth century, when social, medical, religious, and educational leaders felt

that females should not exercise in the same ways as men, lest an overly exercised body became too muscular and unfeminine.¹⁵ These ideas have changed greatly over the past century, and football is increasingly accepted as a sport that women can play, and play well. The recent successes of the women's national team, *Les Bleues*, has played a large role in the changed public opinion and stereotypes about women and sport, and bears further consideration.

Basketball, on the other hand, has long been perceived as a sport easily applicable to women, as the game's aesthetics, such as elegance and grace, were traits usually attributed to females.¹⁶ Despite this, there lacks a substantial historic narrative, press coverage, or scholarly literature on women's team sports in France, perhaps attributable to these early perceptions. This study therefore focuses on male athletes and teams, though there is ample room for further examination of women's sports.

Basketball is today the second most popular team sport in France and has a very different history than football. The French believed basketball to be a sport that required thinking and calculation in addition to skill.¹⁷ Despite French appreciation of the sport as a cerebral one suited for the national character, basketball took much longer to be widely disseminated.¹⁸ It never attained the same level of popularity or power as football, although it was one of the few American sports embraced in France.

Invented in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1891, at the Young Men's Christian Academy (YMCA), basketball found a permanent home in Europe after 1892.¹⁹ Since the YMCA was a Protestant-backed organization and its educators spread basketball within France, the sport was associated with the Protestant Church.²⁰ Basketball was played widely in its early years by the *Union chrétienne des jeunes gens* (UCJG), the French branch of the YMCA.²¹ By the early 1900s, basketball became popular with the youth groups run by the rival Catholic Church and was embraced as an alternative to the German-inspired gymnastics.²²

Gérard Bosc, former National Technical Director (DTN) of basketball, notes that the sport spread through religious youth sports leagues at the height of the religious battles and anticlerical movement.²³ The games devolved into a *de facto* fight between religious factions as these struggles worked themselves out. The 1905 Émile Combes law banished all religion from government, public life, and the state schools, but basketball retained its early Protestant association. According to Bosc, basketball was not as fully nor as warmly embraced for these reasons, especially in comparison with football, which had a class-based, not religious, association.²⁴

The experience of the Great War removed basketball's religious stigma, and American servicemen stationed in the country helped renew its popularity.²⁵ The sport expanded as more French learned how to play. Contrary to the example of the United States, where basketball has always been dominant in urban areas, French basketball has historically, until the past twenty years, been strongest in rural areas.²⁶

In 1920, the *Fédération Française d'Athlétisme* (FFA) created a special Basketball Commission to govern and manage the sport. The first organized championship was in 1921, won by Evreux Athletic Club, and France played Italy in its first international game in 1926, which the French won, 24-20. Basketball became more fully regulated with the 1929 creation of the *Fédération Française d'Athlétisme et de Basket-Ball* (FFABB), remodeled out of the old FFA. By 1932 the basketball contingent of the FFABB obtained independence and became the *Fédération Française de Basket-Ball* (FFBB). That same year, an international governing body, the *Fédération Mondiale de Basketball Amateur* (FIBA), was founded.²⁷ Similar in scope to football's FIFA, FIBA set universal rules and regulations for the game and promoted it around the world. The sport's international appeal was such that by 1936 basketball became part of the Olympic Games.

Just as in football, the 1930s for basketball was an era of increased international competition in the form of friendly matches and tournaments. France was an interwar basketball power, garnering the title Champions of Europe for 1937. Despite occupation by the Germans, basketball continued to be played and semi-professionalized after 1945. In 1949 the first Championship of France was created for the men's leagues, and by 1951 a similar Championship of France was in place for women.²⁸ Despite increased popularity and success in competitions, youth basketball was not as widespread as football.

As both sports grew in popularity prior to 1958, they helped forge a unified society. Although they developed along social and religious divides prior to 1914, football and basketball helped mend these cleavages after 1919 and thus were important in forging a national identity. Athletics proved to be important prisms through which to interpret and understand the country's history, how it viewed itself, its social order, and its ideals.²⁹ National sports narratives are important ways to create a sense of community and unity, while certain stereotypes can be portrayed in competitions.³⁰ Playing for the national team can help one assimilate into society by enveloping the athlete in the symbols, colors, and flag, literally conferring a sense of "belonging" and legitimacy. Singing the national anthem also serves this purpose. Aiding a nation's sportive narrative through competing for the country can also further inscribe someone with a sense of inclusion.³¹ Immigrants traditionally assimilated into society through the tools of the republic: patriotism, education, political participation, and culture. In the twentieth century, sports served this republican tradition.³²

The media also helped foster a "French" identity. The press reported on the imagery surrounding the national teams, their exploits, players, and foes. This helped reinforce the country's narrative.³³ Specialty sports publications such as *France Football* (1946) and *L'Équipe* (1946) provided daily or weekly coverage of national teams, victorious clubs, and prominent athletes. Through such coverage, the press also chronicled the waxing and waning of the nation's prestige abroad as viewed through the number of Olympic medals or major titles won. International impressions of a country's athletic victories or defeats had

new resonance as the growth of television broadcasts impacted a society's sense of self, class, gender, and role in the world.³⁴ Thus, media played an important part in crafting identity.

Thanks to the media, the domestic merits of sports evolved to complement the international uses of athletics as forums through which to “fight” battles, reinforce the superiority of a nation or ideology, and garner influence abroad. After 1918, the Olympics were an important showground for the use of sport as an international tool. The Olympics of the 1930s were politicized by Nazi Germany, which used the 1936 Games as an opportunity to demonstrate to the world the merits of the Third Reich. Athletes who attended from all corners of the globe experienced German hospitality. The media reported on the dynamism with which Germany had recovered from the war in terms of Nazi rebuilding, employment, social services, and organization of a mass event. The press departed from Berlin with a favorable impression of the regime, despite its racial policies. These images and words were carried to the foreign public through newspapers and magazines, photographs, radio broadcasts, film reels shown at movies, and, for the first time ever, live local television broadcasts in an experiment with the new medium.

As the Olympics became politicized, so, too, did many other competitions, including the World Cup and “friendly” international matches between teams.³⁵ This enabled Cold War political rivalries and hostilities to be fought in the sporting arena, aided by the growth of media and television. One example was the infamous men's water polo final between the Soviet Union and Hungary at the 1956 Melbourne Games. The match, held one month after the Soviets steamrolled into Hungary, was so rough that there was Hungarian blood in the pool.³⁶ Speaking nearly 40 years after the incident, a former Hungarian Olympic diver recalled that there were “very, very hard feelings” that year between the two teams.³⁷ Eventually, as decolonization rapidly spread in the 1950s and 1960s, the rivalry of former colonial ruler versus former colonial subjects started to play out within the sports arena.

Road Map

At the start of the Fifth Republic, France was a nation in transition. Chapter One investigates this era of perceived crises. No longer considered a “Great Power” and caught between the two superpowers, France struggled to find its niche in global affairs. The humiliating defeat by Germany in 1940, combined with two wars of decolonization (Indochina, Algeria) tarnished the image of the nation. Revelations that French forces used torture during the Algerian War further sullied French *gloire*, while the dismantlement of the empire by 1960 had many questioning what the future role of France in the world would be.

Domestically, too, France was in flux. The postwar economic prosperity, known as the Thirty Glorious Years, transformed the economy and hastened