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Review of Le Football dans Paris et ses banlieues

lindsaypieper / 21 July 2018

Sorez, Julien. *Le Football dans Paris et ses banlieues : un sport devenu spectacle*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013. 410 pages. Notes, index, illustrations, appendices. 22 euros. Print.

Reviewed by Peter Marquis

In, *Le Football dans Paris et ses banlieues*, an historical exploration of the development of soccer in Paris and its suburbs (in French “les banlieues”) from the 1890s to the 1940s, Julien Sorez sets out to answer key questions related to French social history and the global history of the world’s most popular sport. First, Sorez scrutinizes the centrality of soccer in the French national context given that the capital has always been viewed as the centre of legitimate cultural practices such as the theatre and the opera. Second, he wonders why Parisian soccer took a secondary role in the interwar years when the game began to commercialize and yield profits nationally. Third, Sorez ponders whether soccer sociability enabled a set of like-minded professionals to strengthen and duplicate their socio-economic ties or if the practice paved the way for a “reconfiguration of the social world creating new links through associations” (p. 20).



Thanks to his deft use of archives from



Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013

associations, clubs and leagues at the municipal and departmental levels, Sorez manages to explain the paradoxical peripheral situation of Parisian soccer in France. As opposed to London or Torino, corporations never invested to create teams that would be the flag-bearers of their economic and cultural identities. Furthermore, religious associations struggled to take root in the Parisian area. Also, the writer shows that Parisian clubs frequently moved from one playing ground to the next in a nomadic way hardly conducive to creating long lasting identifications between the population and their environment. Finally, political actors failed to capitalize on soccer's social prestige as they were vying for recognition and resources within the Paris metropolitan area.

Nevertheless, Sorez asserts that soccer was one of the main levers to form a suburban identity for working class people, mostly young men coming from the province or from overseas. As the 1930s wore on, soccer grew out of its initial anglophile fan base to reach out to popular classes thanks to the process of social legitimization of sport as a greater good in addition to classic forces such as school or the family. Reports in the mainstream press praised the feats of heroes, both manly and respectable. Prominent local figures attempted to exert social control over their constituencies through organizing soccer clubs, but Sorez cautiously notes that players and spectators asserted their agency to oppose preferred models of admiration and behavior.

Sorez concludes that the success of Parisian soccer in the 1930s was due to its capacity "to adapt to a universe of contemporary representations and (...) dominant values of its times" (p. 376). Like Van Bottenburg, Sorez steers clear from a formalistic explanation of soccer's appeal, as he demonstrates that the sport took on several social meanings depending on the individuals, the place, the social standing, or the strategies at work.

Of particular interest to this reviewer was chapter one where Sorez shows the British origins of Parisian soccer both in terms of the initial players who were mostly British students in Paris or French students who took a year abroad in the British Isles and practiced soccer in their high school when they came back. The British tutelage was also present in the executive organization of the first Parisian clubs such as the Standard Athletic Club, the Red Star (founded by Jules Rimet), the white Rovers or even the Club Français. Sorez shows with great skills in analyzing microscopic archives that the British role both energized competition, improved the level of play (through the prevalence of the

pass for example) while on the other hand impeding the social legitimization of soccer within the established athletic institutions such as the USFSA to which soccer conveyed amateur, socially dangerous, working class values.

In chapters three and four – gathered around the title “territories” – Sorez traces the gradual spatial legitimization of soccer in Paris and its suburbs. He argues that from the end of the 19th century to the 1920s, soccer was badly considered so that it was played at the margins of the cities, often on vacant lots or at the edge of woods. Yet its imaginary territory was made real by the mindset of the players were who resilient enough to build plaques, move goal posts and to create cafes (*bistrots*) through which their existence was made real in the minds of those engaged.

This drastically changed after the First World War when municipalities tapped into the potential of the soccer craze to establish political clout through the building of municipal stadiums. The author shows how politicization impacted elections and facilitated social control over soccer players. Two types of control existed, one through rules and regulations implying proper behavior and sanctions, the other – internalized – which replicated onto the sporting arena the discipline brought forth by the paternalistic factory.

Sorez devotes chapters 5 and 6 to the question of identities and social bonding. He makes a compelling case that soccer in and around Paris asserted values such as masculinity. Indeed women were strictly banned from the practice and the social rituals around soccer. Clerical professions made up 23% of the 115 players that the author managed to socially identify. He also makes the case that soccer was surrounded by rituals such as the journey to play away and the inevitable visits to the drinking house. In the interwar years soccer took on a different social role as it became less family oriented and dovetailed with the values of the new individualistic age; however the government and athletic associations strove to instrumentalize soccer to train the French youth into patriotic citizens. Sorez quotes the mainstream press which harped on the theme of the “family spirit” of the soccer club to combat selfish attitudes which would endanger the nation (p. 265).

The last part is devoted to the social legitimization at soccer because the sport grew from a British marginalized practice for men of similar social and professional backgrounds to a mass sport played nationwide which took on several social meanings including what constitutes proper behavior. Sorez analyzes acts of violence and social disorder through a critical framework because he questions the use of the word “violence” then as opposed to today’s standards. In these pages he other proves a fine writer using the thick description of games and off the lines attitudes based on primary and secondary sources. To him, soccer represented a school of masculinity both for the players and the audience; he analyzes the chants in the stands; however he warns the reader that the available documentation is too slim to make definite interpretations.

In the eighth and last chapter the author devotes very interesting pages to the transformation of soccer into a spectacular activity, a show that was both commercial visual and social. He first analyzes the creation of the soccer star through the mainstream press that focused mostly on the style of living of the player more than on his playing style. Stress was laid on the players’ day jobs as bakers or grocers to silence the fears of those

attached to pure amateurism. But in the 1930s being a full-time soccer player became a legitimate occupation as illustrated by the career of Raoul Diagne, son of Senegalese house member who decided to become a player whereas he could have gone on to be a lawyer or doctor (p. 347).

Furthermore, soccer in and around Paris became a legitimate social outing based on the creation of paying entrance to stadiums where an average of 4,000 people attended season games (p. 358). But unlike drama or the opera which favored silence, discipline of the body and emotions, downplaying of the interaction between musicians actors and the audience, soccer allowed the spectators a more open behavior, or even to voice their discontent, enthusiasm and demands for good quality in exchange for the money paid. The author uses a few newspaper sources to argue that spectators belonged to various social classes and were unevenly distributed in the stands: the most expensive seats along the centre of the stadium were occupied by middle classes and bourgeois people, whereas the stands – seats behind the goal posts – were for the populace.

Overall, *Le Football dans Paris et ses banlieues* is very effective in showing the evolution of Parisian soccer from a socially segregated informal pastime to a nationwide commercial endeavor cutting across various social classes. But Sorez's analyses go beyond the legitimization thesis as he delves into the details of metropolitan politics, interactions between the press and elite, and the advent of group identities anchored in spaces in rituals (Halbwachs). Thanks to a rich array of sources, the author manages to make the compelling case that in order to understand the rise of soccer in and around Paris, one has to acknowledge its "plasticity which allows for a differentiated and diversified appropriation by the social agents, which testifies of the social emulation on which the sport could rely to flourish" (p. 378).

Sorez's approach and conclusions echo those of other scholars of early 20th century and interwar sports, especially Riess (1999) and Marquis (2009) on baseball in the American city. However, one aspect which seems to be lacking in Sorez's otherwise very complete study is gambling. Was it officially banned? If there was tolerance, who derived profit from it? When money is involved, spectators tend to develop a sense of excitement and belonging to the local team that transcends social and spatial rituals. How did this play out in and around Paris both before and after the First World War?

Peter Marquis is Associate Professor of US history at the Université de Rouen (France). A specialist of sports and urban history, he contributed to P. Peretz, ed. New York: histoire, promenades, anthologie et dictionnaire (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009) and edited "Sports in American Society" (Transatlantica, 2012). His latest publications have focused on US sports in France during WWI, sports and the American presidency, and the place of baseball in US popular culture. He is currently working on spectatorship and masculinities, as well as on pedagogy. Follow him on twitter @sportetsocietes.

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