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Russ Crawford, *Le Football: A History of American Football in France*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. 366 pp. Illustrations, tables, endnotes, bibliography, and index. \$39.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN-10: 0803278799.

Review by Keith Rathbone, Macquarie University.

As a graduate student in France, I played softball out in the *Bois de Boulogne* in a league that included teams from the United States, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Japan. These teams always made sense to me. We were all strangers in a strange land that came from avid baseball cultures, and we played together as a way to recapture a little slice of our far away homes. I was less clear about where the two all-French teams learned to play. Baseball never appears on French TV, the sports dailies rarely cover the long MLB season, and even the most American of bars in Paris do not open for the World Series. The general French public's ambivalence to baseball is also visible in the lack of facilities in the Parc Bagatelle, where we played, which has no permanent infield and no outfield fence. We brought our own bases. We played without a backstop, and as the catcher I had to chase every poorly thrown pitch and foul ball. The grass was rarely cut, and grounders dribbled to hard charging shortstops. Nonetheless, when we played against the French teams, I quickly learned they had skills as batters and fielders and also a clear understanding of the strategy of the game. They once ran an infield shift. These matches against a cadre of French baseball aficionados illustrated how extensive the globalization of sports cultures had become in the years since the rise of the internet and satellite television.

In *Le Football: A History of American Football in France*, Professor Russ Crawford takes on the question of how sports cultures migrate from the United States to France. Instead of baseball, Crawford investigates the allure of American football, a sport traditionally viewed as alien to Europe. Many French critics have even labeled American football as too brutal to ever be popular in France. Nevertheless, through an exhaustive examination of football players, team managers, military officials, and sports entrepreneurs, Crawford produces a general history of American football in France that outlines when and why sportsmen took to the gridiron in the hexagon. His research covers diverse American and French actors such as U.S. military teams operating out of army bases in France and Germany; college teams, including the Texas A&I University Javalinas and the Henderson State University Reddies, on football tours of Europe; and eventually French sporting clubs such as the *Castors de Paris* and the *Anges Bleus*. He notes that American football never really caught on in France until "a Frenchman decided he had a purpose for which the sport would be useful," and he concludes that "in the global marketplace of culture, only those products that find willing audiences in the target market are consumed" (p. xviii). Crawford's investigation of the French football marketplace thus continues his previous work on athletics and Americanization in Western Europe during the Cold War.

The reception and translation of American culture in Europe has attracted the attention of scholars interested in the transatlantic movement of ideas, practices, and products. In one of the foundational works in the field, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization*, Richard Kuisel examines the opportunities and challenges provoked by the introduction of American products such as Coca-Cola to a

skeptical postwar French public. More recently, Victoria de Grazia, Uta Poiger, and Jonathyne Briggs have considered the place of American business, film, and music in postwar Europe. Sports history can provide insight into this field, although probably not to the same extent as studies of American music, movies, or consumer culture because few American sports have enthralled Europeans to the same extent as Hollywood and rock and roll. The limited number of American football players in France remains a constraint to Crawford's nonetheless worthwhile contribution.

With an extremely methodical approach, Crawford catalogs nearly every football player, forward pass, and first down to have ever occurred in France. *Le Football* proceeds chronologically, but it can be roughly divided into two sections. The first part of the book explores the long history of Americans playing football in France, starting with the arrival of the Great White Fleet in 1909. The first chapters focus primarily on GIs playing football. During World War One, American commanders believed that the introduction of football would improve their men's morale, provide an avenue for soldiers to exercise, and keep them away from less desirous temptations. These wartime tours continued after World War Two with the formation of a pair of leagues, the USAREUR Conference and the USAFE Continental Conference, that brought together soldiers stationed across Europe. The USAREUR and USAFE conference should have allowed Crawford to examine football's appeal across Europe since West Germany also hosted soldiers that played football. I wonder what insights Crawford might have been able to draw from a closer comparison of French and German receptions of football.

"Pigskin missionaries" (p. 29) also brought American football to the hexagon and tried to turn French civilians into gridiron fans. In 1938, football entrepreneurs Jim Crowley and Kurt Reiss accompanied American college football players to France on a tour with stops in Paris, Lyon, and Toulouse. In spite of staging several matches, the interwar tour attracted little attention from French newspapers and created few new fans, except for the noted ruggier Jean Galia. American sports entrepreneurs also organized a series of tours after the Second World War, which welcomed both college and semi-professional teams from the USA. The postwar tours enjoyed some limited support from French elites--the advertising included the French pop star Sheila. However, these tours also failed to generate interest for football as a product.

The failure of American football in France until the 1980s seems to support Crawford's contention that "if the indigenous population is not receptive to the product being promoted, then no amount of urging can force it to accept that product," but we should wonder also about how other sports in France became popular (p. 31). Pierre Bourdieu recognized that people do not choose a perfect sport, but rather choose between a wide variety of actual athletic activities, comparing one against another and seeking out those that satisfy their physical and emotional needs. Furthermore, recent work by Eric Read and Christopher Thompson illustrates the ways in which the growth of cycling in France relied not only upon the interest of fans, which waxed and waned over time, but also on the considerable efforts of French sports elites such as Henri Desgranges at *L'Auto*, French advertisers, and the French state, which invested considerable resources in the Tour de France. A fuller comparison between the growth of the less popular rugby XIII and American football might have better explained to me why the later failed to gain popularity.

Crawford's early chapters rely too much on American voices. Although he is careful to examine the French press' account of football matches, he notes that "most of the press aligned against adding a new sport or (viewed) it as nothing more than a sideshow" (p. 54). Since few civilians attended football matches, they left little record of what they thought. To get at the opinions of ordinary people, Crawford relies heavily on a close reading of a very few reporters, but these articles are not a substitute for the varied opinions of French sportsmen and women. As a consequence, the broader conclusions that he draws about why French sports fan rejected football almost seem to arise from a kind of truism: French sportsmen did not play football because they did not want to play football. It was too aggressive, slow, incomprehensible, brutal, or even possibly a threat to the established order. Except soccer, cycling,

and rugby were popular in France in part *because* of these same traits; cycling especially capitalized on the suffering that long races forced athletes to undergo.

Crawford clearly feels more at home in his later chapters when he examines the growth of American football in France in the 1980s and 1990s. The final three chapters of the book are full of rich characters and compelling details. Football's breakthrough in France occurred in 1980 when the French communist, Laurent Plegelatte, brought back footballs, shoulder pads, and jerseys from Colorado in order to introduce football to his political friends and "toughen up his 'Red Guards'" (p. 190). From there American football quickly developed a cult following in the suburbs around Paris. Over the following three decades, a homegrown football league grew in the capital and spread to the provinces, following a traditional pattern from the center to the periphery. The motley crew of French footballers resists simple generalization. Teams included men and women, the political left and right, and people of varied race or ethnicity. Outsider status united them. These footballers remain a small but mighty group of sporting misfits that wear thumbs-down helmets, learn to play by watching tapes sent from the United States, and exchange information about tactics and matches over the internet. Despite the general apathy of most French sports fans, these footballers have built a tenuous but growing community across the country and even have beaten some surprised American teams.

Le Football would not have been possible without Crawford's discovery of new sources, which is one of the real strengths of the manuscript. Although his bibliography is limited, he makes ample use of most of the best literature on French football sports available in English, such as Philip Dine's *French Rugby Football* and Richard Holt's *Sport and Society in Modern France*. There are, however, some interesting inclusions and elisions in Crawford's use of primary sources. Crawford digs deeply into the obvious reports, uncovering a trove of football news stories in *Stars and Stripes*, but also surprisingly discovers articles from stateside papers such as the *Toledo Blade*. He should be applauded for also discovering a wide variety of articles about American football from major French newspapers such as *Paris Soir* and *Le Figaro*. At the same time, there are significant lapses in his use of the primary sources of the interwar periods. He does not look explicitly at sports specific periodicals such as *L'Auto*. Local sports pages in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais and the Ile-de-France also covered American football matches in the months after the Second World War, and they would have lent him greater insight into what ordinary sportsmen thought about American football.

I applaud the way that Crawford makes ample use of sources most historians would ignore, and his book shows how historians can take advantage of the work of interested amateurs. For his later chapters, he interviews with dozens of French football players, including Eric Burtscher, Stephane Sardano, and the only Frenchman to ever play in the NFL, Richard Tardits. These knowledgeable insiders provide rich personal testimonies on the early days of French football teams and help to answer the question of why French sportsmen did eventually take up pigskins, shoulder pads, and helmets. He also cites internet sources extensively, especially those home-made digital history projects put together by engaged French football fans. These webpages might not have the prestige of the archive, but for scholars interested in recent and local sports history, these fan-produced resources typically supersede the limited records available in public repositories.

At the same time, Crawford's significant omissions prevent me from offering a wholehearted recommendation to readers looking to know more about sports in France. His knowledge of French sports history is limited to the context of American football. Although Crawford does cite other historians' work on sports in France, he does little to situate his own work within larger conversations about French sports. Crawford argues that the development of football in France needed a Gallic Prometheus to bring gridiron knowledge to France. Crawford's formulation makes it seem like early twentieth century French sportsmen were uninterested in exogenously developed games, but many of France's most popular spectator sports, including soccer and rugby, have their origins outside of

France, so why did soccer, rugby XV's, rugby XIII's, all brought over by British emigres, succeed where American football failed?

His lack of knowledge about French sports leads Crawford to elide the essential role of commercial capital, state investment, and legal infrastructure that undergird sports in France. In his chapter on football in the interwar period, he claims that “the sporting fraternity in France... seemed to be circling their wagons to reject the interlopers and keep their supposed professionalism out of France,” when in fact the professionalization of sports at the time was a complicated question with advocates for and against it (p. 53). For example, French *football* had professionalized in 1932. Rugby thirteens professionalized in 1934. Cycling, horse racing, and boxing had long been professional. These professional leagues were only possible because of the support of the state, French sporting federations, business interests, and powerful club owners. Crawford might have been better served by digging deeper into these French debates about the role of professional sports in France, which would have illuminated divisions more salient than the political left-right framework he uses to understand the press reactions to American football.

In addition, although he is a forceful advocate for American football, his close connection to the French football players and fans prevents some critical interrogation. On several occasions, Crawford mentions that French fans view football matches as safe and wholesome. These “family affairs” are contrasted with French soccer matches where players and fans do not sing *La Marseilles*. This is a subtle racial dog whistle that Crawford misses. Any historian familiar with French sport would easily make that connection because the racialization of French soccer has been commented on by former player Lilian Thuram, who has spoken at length about the national anthem issue, and historian Laurent Dubois detailed the whole affair in his monograph on French soccer. The place of non-white players in football in France remains unclear. Although Crawford is careful to note the presence of non-white football players, especially among the Red Stars of Noisy-le-Sec, who “looked dangerous,” American football in France remains an overwhelmingly white sport in comparison to soccer or basketball (p. viii).

Ultimately, until its final chapters, *Le Football* is less a book about French sports than it is a book about sports *in* France. The grander conclusions of Crawford's investigation are frequently hidden in his extensive research on the outcomes of tours. The early chapters can feel especially list-like, as Crawford covers several seasons of competition in the USAREUR Conference and the USAFE conferences. At the same time, Crawford's work does contribute to the larger question of how foreign sports become popular. He rejects what he calls the “cultural imperialism theory” but only obliquely acknowledges alternative arguments that foreground the role of sports elites, the sporting press, and the state in the creation of sports marketplaces. I sometimes wonder if he even completely buys his argument as he tosses asides such as “the only way football could have taken hold in France in 1938 would have been through the sponsorship of deep-pocketed patrons” (p. 38) and “the arrival of televised NFL games would do much to help spread the game through the Hexagone” (p. 220). More importantly, Crawford misses the opportunity to connect his interesting investigation of football in France to the broader and more meaningful question of how French people adopted or adapted to American cultural production in the years following the Second World War.

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