

H-France Review Vol. 4 (May 2004), No. 60

Geoff Hare, *Football in France: A Cultural History*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003. xiii + 226 pp. Tables, glossary, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-85973-657-2; \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1-85973-662-9.

Review by Christopher S. Thompson, Ball State University.

On the night of July 12, 1998, this reviewer indulged in a spot of collaborative ethnography with two friends, wandering the streets (and, with appropriate restraint, the drinking establishments) around the Place de la Bastille. The French national soccer team had just trounced Brazil 3-0 in the World Cup Final and hundreds of thousands of ecstatic pedestrians, many waving French flags, had seized control of the capital. The crowds were not just joyous, but also diverse, as one would expect in Paris: "blacks," "blancs," and "beurs"--personifying the slogan with which fans of the multi-ethnic French team had replaced the standard "*bleu, blanc, rouge*"--mingled, chanting refrains to the glory of France's new heroes. Of the latter, none was more celebrated than Zinedine Zidane, the Marseilles-born midfield genius of Algerian parents who had scored France's first two goals. For many observers both French and foreign, Zidane and the team he had led to victory symbolized a new France willing to make peace with its colonial past and face the challenge of non-European immigration that has been its thorniest legacy--a united community defying the apocalyptic predictions of Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National.[1] Yet, even in what appeared to be a moment of unprecedented ethnic reconciliation, there was anecdotal evidence that Zidane-as-symbol could be appropriated for ends less conducive to national unity: one young *beur* with whom we spoke asserted proudly that Zidane was not French, but *Maghrébin*. Clearly, the collective celebration that swirled around us had not entirely overshadowed the complicated, often contradictory values and identities that have shaped modern French history.

Readers interested in the social and cultural impact of the world's most popular sport on twentieth-century France would do well to consult Geoff Hare's new book. A welcome addition to the field of French sports history, *French Football: A Cultural History* is a comprehensive yet tightly argued study that contributes to our understanding of both the place of sport in French society and the ways in which the study of sport can illuminate important features of modern French history.[2] Hare's focus is on "the values that football carries"; his hypothesis is "that these values are not static or constant, but are subject to change, and that football is one of the most visible sites of tension between old and new values, between competing cultural and social models; in other words, that football is an ideological battleground" (p. 4). He identifies three core values as having successively dominated the history of French soccer (with some overlap between phases): community, spectacle, and commodity.

Hare covers considerable ground, from the sport's early days add in the late nineteenth century and gradual establishment in the national consciousness to the hyper-*médiatisation* and extreme commercialization that characterize it today. Discrete chapters are devoted to soccer's socio-economic geography as it took root in local communities; the sociology of French soccer fans; the education of coaches and development of training structures that have recently culminated in an era of unprecedented success for French players on the national team and in top European clubs; the problematic relationship at times between the national team and French national identity; the revolutionary impact of television on the sport's economic structures and the fans' experience; and soccer's often troubling, sometimes corrupt relationship with the incestuous worlds of French business and politics, perhaps best illustrated by the misadventures of Bernard Tapie and the Olympique de Marseille club. As Hare readily acknowledges, he has omitted any consideration of women's soccer, admittedly only just beginning to emerge as a major women's sport in France with the participation of the French women's national team in the most recent Women's World Cup.[3]

Hare's achievement is not just that he covers the important aspects of his subject without sacrificing the book's narrative flow, or that he blends a consideration of broad trends with a deft eye for the telling case study; it is that even as he addresses the various components of the sport's history in France, he continually brings the reader back to

his central thesis, one that ties his study of French soccer to a broader historiographical debate. Hare argues that because soccer offers "particular insights into cross-cultural differences, as the sport becomes globalized, and into cross-national divergences that persist" (p. 7), it illuminates the question of "French exceptionalism" from a new perspective. He concludes that French soccer reflects values, priorities, and a social vision that are distinctly French: unlike the sport in other European countries, soccer in France has been shaped over the past century by a comparatively greater attachment of the French to public service values, amateurism, and community control, and by their accompanying rejection of free-market economic solutions. Hare's study thus benefits from an explicit comparative framework that draws especially on references to the development of soccer in Britain, where the sport was born in the second half of the nineteenth century. In contrast to the relatively tardy creation of a French professional soccer league in 1932, followed by a difficult infancy exacerbated by the Vichy regime's hostility to professional sport, British soccer has had a far more market-driven, "liberal" (in the European sense) history marked by early professionalism (players were paid legally from the mid-1880s), the development of the sport as a mass spectacle, and considerable autonomy from the state.

As the historiography of French industrialization suggests, there is a risk in emphasizing a comparison between the French case and any one country--all the more so when the other country is a pioneer in the development being examined. After all, why would one expect French soccer, in its organizational and economic structures or in its relationship to the state, to "look like" British soccer? In this instance, however, the approach is useful. As soccer was gradually exported from its birthplace to the continent and beyond, the "British model" (if this is not too grand a term) has proven influential around the globe. For example, by the time a professional league finally emerged in France, such leagues already existed in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Scotland, and Hungary. In Britain, and most countries, the dominant clubs have come from the largest cities, which enjoyed obvious financial advantages over smaller communities: the size of their crowds and fan base; the resulting sales of tickets, concessions, and apparel; and their appeal to potential commercial sponsors. More recently, huge television contracts have clearly favored big-city teams. It is no surprise, then, that national capitals and large industrial and commercial centers, such as London, Manchester, Liverpool, Milan, Turin, Madrid, Barcelona, and Munich, have for the most part emerged over the decades as the dominant forces in European soccer, often hosting more than one top-level club. Even clubs from much smaller nations, such as Anderlecht (Brussels), Celtic (Glasgow), and especially Ajax (Amsterdam), have enjoyed considerable success.

The French anomaly is thus particularly striking. Hare partly attributes these structural impediments to full-scale professionalization to the fact that French clubs have typically been founded and operated under the law of 1901 that governs non-profit-making associations. The "French exception" can also be explained by the relative absence of "homogenous working-class communities of the size of Birmingham or Manchester" (p. 21) which traditionally have made up the core base of soccer's fans. This begs the question of why Paris, by far the largest French city and one with industrial workers (although not, according to Hare, homogeneous working-class communities), has often been a "desert" in the landscape of French soccer--a vexing question to which Hare devotes several pages. On the other hand, comparatively small communities such as Sochaux and Auxerre, benefitting from the investment of local businesses and generous municipal subsidies, have been successful in top-flight national (if rarely in European) competitions. More recently, French "euro-cities" such as Lyon and Lille have made fielding a successful professional soccer team a side bar to a broader public relations campaign designed to elevate them to the rank of other, more celebrated European metropolises. The involvement of local politicians in the life of their town or city's club through the provision of municipal funds, favorable leasing arrangements with respect to the municipal stadium, etc., has shaped the kind of professionalism that could and did emerge in France.

Many of these practices, as Hare points out, have recently run afoul of European legislators who see them as a violation of free competition. For example, the Bosman ruling of December 1995, which formally recognized that professional footballers enjoy the same freedoms and opportunities as other workers in the European Union, has eliminated long-standing restrictions on the employment of foreign players. While consistent with the economic liberalism that pertains in soccer in Britain and elsewhere, the resulting rapid move to a highly competitive, increasingly global, free-market model has been far more painful to implement in France. There it conflicts with traditional patterns of state involvement and with certain policies, now rendered illegal or at the very least hampered by the EU, that were originally designed to contain the presumed harmful effects of unrestrained competition in the name of a broader public good. Thus, as Hare argues persuasively, soccer's history is particularly helpful in illuminating certain distinctively French approaches to the challenges and choices that have confronted advanced

western societies during the twentieth century. These include the provision of mass leisure and the extent to which equality of outcome, not just equality of opportunity, should be a desired social objective and therefore an aim of government. In the case of these two challenges, the role of sport has been clearly relevant on both a symbolic and a practical level to the conceptualization and implementation of the welfare state, particularly after World War II. French soccer clubs and sports associations in general, especially their amateur and youth teams, have been recognized by the French state as being of "public utility," thereby qualifying for official grants in proportion to their membership. As a result, "France has the strongest state intervention in sport" in western Europe (p. 31). It is hardly surprising, then, that French soccer has been (and continues to be) an "ideological battleground" where tensions between the competing values associated with community, amateurism, and participation on the one hand, and spectacle, professionalism, and commodity on the other, have been played out in a particularly public forum.

While Hare is especially insightful on the central question of the values associated with soccer in France, his study also sheds light on the issue of identities. For example, his examination of the cultural impact of non-European immigrant players includes a brief, tantalizing analysis of the first-ever international soccer match between France and Algeria in October 2001. Designed to build on the good feelings engendered by the successes of the multi-ethnic French national team, which had gone on to win the European Nations Championship in 2000, the match was held in the immigrant, working-class suburb of St. Denis, in the new stadium that had hosted the World Cup Final in 1998. Rarely has an event so badly missed its mark: not only did the public, made up largely of fans with North African connections, whistle at the French players (with the notable exception of Zidane) during warm-ups and player introductions, but the game had to be called in the second half when the field was charged by young North African immigrants, many carrying Algerian flags. Hare interprets this largely non-violent demonstration as an expression of their "frustration that hopes for an end to exclusion and discrimination that the French World Cup victory had raised have thus far proved unrealistic" (p. 138). The symbolic limits of the triumphant, multi-ethnic French national team were resoundingly confirmed in 2002: not only did the xenophobic Jean-Marie Le Pen qualify for the second round of the presidential elections, but shortly thereafter the French team was meekly eliminated from the World Cup it had hoped to defend--without scoring a single goal.

At times, Hare's treatment of identity is less successful, as in the case of a series of brief biographical vignettes of players whose careers and public images have been particularly prominent. One wonders whether Chris Waddle and David Ginola deserve the paragraphs he devotes to them, while simultaneously wishing he had devoted considerably more attention to the complex figure of Eric Cantona. For all his talent, this tempestuous *enfant du Midi* failed to achieve major success in France and is in fact associated with one of the greatest disappointments in the recent history of French soccer: the failure of the national team to qualify for the 1994 World Cup. Cantona then went on to an exceptional career in England, leading Leeds to its first English title in a generation and then, more famously, reviving the fortunes of Manchester United, which has since enjoyed a decade of unprecedented success. The ambivalence Cantona has provoked in his native France, reflected in the gentle parody of his persona on the "Guignols de l'Info" television program, contrasts with the lasting iconic status he has achieved across the Channel. For a study that rightly emphasizes a Franco-British comparison, this appears to have been a missed opportunity.

These are minor quibbles at best. Rather than distract from the significant contributions made by *Football in France: A Cultural History*, they point to its strengths. Not only does Hare's wide-ranging study cover considerable ground without ever losing sight of its main focus on values and identities, it also lays the foundation for, and points the way to, future scholarly study of the social and cultural impact of soccer in modern France.

NOTES

[1] See, in particular, John Marks, "The French National Team and National Identity: 'Cette France d'un "bleu métis"', in Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare, eds., *France and the 1998 World Cup* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1999), pp. 41-57.

[2] There has been surprisingly little scholarly attention devoted to the history of French soccer. For an earlier study, see Alfred Wahl, *Les Archives du Football: Sport et société en France (1880-1980)* (Éditions Gallimard/Julliard, 1989).

[3] The development of women's soccer in France and elsewhere has not attracted much attention to date. For its beginnings in Germany, Norway, Spain, and England, see Gertrud Pfister, Kari Fasting, Sheila Scraton and Benilde Vásquez, "Women and Football--A Contradiction? The Beginnings of Women's Football in Four European Countries," in J. A. Mangan, ed., *Sport in Europe: Politics, Class, Gender* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1999), pp. 1-26. For an historical overview of women's soccer in France, see Françoise Laget, Serge Laget, and Jean-Paul Mazot (with the collaboration of Elizabeth Foch), *Le grand livre du sport féminin* (FMT éditions, 1982), pp. 215-222.

Christopher S. Thompson
Ball State University
cthompso@bsu.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (May 2004), No. 60

ISSN 1553-9172