



Developing athletic “atomic armaments”: The role of sports medicine in Cold War France, 1958–1992^{☆,☆☆}



Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff*

U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Washington, DC 20052, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 June 2012

Received in revised form 27 March 2013

Accepted 2 April 2013

Keywords:

France
Sports medicine
History
Football
Basketball
Doping

ABSTRACT

As the national and ideological battles of the Cold War moved into the sports arena, many states sanctioned sports development programs to create winning athletes to represent the nation at elite international competitions. For France, mired in a variety of crises during the 1960s, this meant producing athletes who could restore national prestige and honour via sports victories. Such athletic “atomic armaments” could garner soft power through athletic success and restore the image and glory of the nation. Part of the prescription for improving performances was to encourage the development of sports medicine. At the same time, medical supervision and knowledge were applied to protect the health of the nation’s premier sportsmen and women, particularly youth athletes who represented the upcoming generation of “winners.” While originally designed for the elite athlete, sports medicine trickled down into amateur and sports-leisure ranks, thus becoming an affair of state.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

After the stalemate between capitalism and communism solidified in the late 1940s, disputes could no longer be settled on the battlefield. Instead, the athletic arena became a venue where countries could face-off against their rivals and seek to assert national reputation, influence, and self-esteem. Winning athletes symbolized a strong, influential state, a necessary image in the decades after the destruction of the Second World War. The drive to win athletic victories spurred the turn to sports medicine in the third quarter of the twentieth century to optimize performances and produce results. For some ardent Cold Warriors in both the East and the West, any competitive edge that medicine could provide to athletes had to be seized upon and deployed to demonstrate the superiority of a particular way of life. Many countries invested in sports medicine programs in order to increase the opportunities for their athletes to set new records, win Olympic medals, or bring home world championship titles.

[☆] All views portrayed in this article are those of the author and do not represent those of the U.S. Department of State or the United States Government. Information for this article was obtained from publicly available information in France, as well as from oral history interviews conducted by the author during 2006–2008.

^{☆☆} The author is a historian in the Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. Her book, “The Making of Les Bleus: Sport in France, 1958–2010” (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012) examines the history and evolution of youth athletic development (football and basketball) in France.

* Tel.: +1 917 450 5525.

E-mail address: Lkrasnoff@gmail.com

The French were no different, and sought to develop athletic “atomic armaments” to garner soft power through sports success and restore the image and glory of the nation. Part of the prescription for improving performances to produce results was to encourage the growth of sports medicine. Better diet and nutrition were developed to improve athletic ability and physicality. New strength and conditioning exercises were integrated into training to prevent injury while increasing endurance and aiding post-competition recovery. Greater medical supervision sought to safeguard athletes from the perceived dangers associated with increased athleticism. Decades later, officials believed that such measures to protect athletes from overtraining or doping was an obligation of the state (Meyer, 2008). At a time when doping arguably could enhance athletic feats, the French state enacted anti-doping legislation and incorporated anti-doping education into its sports medicine programs, though it is debatable how strong or effective these measures were.

There was a conflict between the state’s objective of wins and its policies of greater medical supervision. A mixed message was sent: win, but perhaps not at any cost. Sports policies and medical programs were designed to produce better results. However, efforts to obtain more immediate dividends (victories, medals) may have come at the expense of the longer-term health, well-being, and strength of the body despite efforts to protect it. More scholarship is needed on the enduring consequences of French sports medicine programs, but the existing record provides a complex portrait of the different ways medicine was incorporated into athletic preparation.

Examination of medically-based measures taken to improve results in football and basketball provide an interesting snapshot of how France tried to rectify the image of the nation through sports while ostensibly protecting athletes' bodies from harm. Football was and remains the most popular team sport in France and the world. As such, international football tournaments like the football World Cup confer degrees of legitimacy and respect not possible for less-popular sports, or the Olympics (Defrance, 2003). Basketball, a sport the French believed they excelled at as it was a "cerebral" team sport, was not nearly as popular as football, but had a growing following.¹ The Cold War sports rivalry between the United States, the Soviet Union, and East Germany at the quadrennial Olympic Games overwhelmed efforts of countries with smaller populations and resources. Consequently, football and basketball events became prized as an arena where other countries could compete. They were also sports most widely practiced in France, thus many citizens at one point or another were exposed to football or basketball, unlike sports such as fencing or athleticism. The focus on youth sport was indicative of the desire to create the next generation of athletes who could win honours, medals, and trophies for the nation. Sports medicine was deployed as a tool to facilitate this, and over time became incorporated into more mainstream sports participation. In this way, sports medicine and some of the techniques and practices prescribed for elite athletes began to trickle down to the general athletic public, thus resulting in a de facto state supervision of the French body.

2. France in crisis

The desire to develop athletic "atomic armaments" to serve the nation came at the height of several interconnected crises. By the 1960 Rome Olympic games, one of the first truly modern Olympiads (Maraniss, 2009), France was in a state of existential calamity. The disastrous campaign to maintain a French Algeria brought the Fourth Republic to its knees in 1958, created the Fifth Republic, and conferred wide-sweeping executive powers on new president Gen. Charles de Gaulle. Immediately, de Gaulle contended with detangling Algeria, long considered an integral part of the *métropole*, from France. The Algerian War (1954–1962) smudged the nation's credibility, legitimacy, and prestige as reports of torture tactics utilized by the French military against the local Algerian populace leaked to the media. This tarnished the image of the *hexagone* around the world and at home. De Gaulle worked towards Algerian independence (obtained in 1962), but this was not the only predicament that confronted the nation. Stripped of its Great Power status after 1945, de Gaulle feared the unchecked dominance of the superpowers would consign France to international irrelevance. Dismantlement of the empire in Indochina, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa by 1960 meant that de Gaulle had to find a new role for France in the world and rectify the nation's perception abroad and sense of self.

There were many ways that a nation could lead internationally in the postwar period. Increasingly, states sought to employ soft

power, influence derived from a nation's culture. The Americans in the 1950s and the British in the 1960s led by cultural example as the music and fashions of Main Street and High Street generated capital around the world. While the French traditionally garnered such influence through gastronomy and literature, by the 1960s it seemed that French culture itself was under attack by a perceived fifth column—the youth. An explosion of births in the 1940s and 1950s (the "baby boom" generation) led to struggles over the extent of influence held by the new Anglo-American infused youth culture, one that increasingly embraced recreational drugs, and worried many authority figures over the loss of an identifiable "French" culture. A perceived rise in the numbers of juvenile delinquents as a result of increased leisure time did not ease parental anxiety. The boomers' sheer numbers strained the state's institutions, while youth discontent with the status quo came to a head during the events of May 1968. Additionally, immigrant labour from the former colonies, recruited to staff the manufacturing jobs that postwar prosperity and consumerism needed, settled and began to further change the demographic.

Government officials wished to use sports to improve the diminished image of the nation and ameliorate the youth crisis. This route proved problematic, as the 1960 Rome Games demonstrated, for France was also mired in a sports crisis. The nation's Olympians won only two silver and three bronze medals at that summer's Olympiad, an embarrassment to the nation. The poor French results were broadcast and publicized widely to a global audience. The inability to garner medals or tournament titles in football, the world's most popular sport, or basketball, the sport at which France felt it most naturally should excel, continued throughout the decade and contributed to the sense of crisis.² French athletes projected an impression of decay, hardly the way to generate soft power through athletic prowess or restore the global image of the nation.

To counter such depictions, sports policies and programs were launched in the 1960s to create a new generation of sportsmen and women who could win major competitions. The focus was on the youth to develop future athletes and provide supervised leisure time activity—an attempt to curb the perceived youth crisis of the era. Encouraging the youth to play sports was also beneficial for the nation's health. Many officials believed it necessary to strengthen the French body, which was decimated by the severe caloric restrictions of the wartime years (Brissonneau, 2010, p. 33). The sports crisis did not begin to ebb until the state tried to more actively cultivate a national sports culture in the 1970s. The key was legitimizing sport and elite athletic preparation through national legislation.

The October 1975 Mazeaud Law provided social and financial assistance to elite athletes during their training period, on the basis that, "the development of the practice of sport and physical activities is a fundamental element of culture, which constitutes a national obligation" (Government of France, Law Number 75-988 of October 29, 1975).³ The law provided for youth athletic development, under the genesis that training athletes from a young age could socialize them according to accepted notions of French identity. The Mazeaud Law sought to produce winning athletes and teams that could restore honour and portray a rejuvenated nation.

¹ In summing up the best ways to improve for the Rome 1960 Summer Olympic Games, the government believed that the intensification of identifying and training "prime material" [elite athletes] must occur, that the general organization of sport in France should be reconsidered, as well as the management and managers of French sport. It also acknowledged the two sports that the government felt were its best chances of obtaining "favorable" results: fencing and basketball. Not only were there good athletes in both of these sports, but "fencing is the most intelligent individual sport," just as "basketball is the most intelligent team sport." The French could excel at "intelligent" sports because "we produce intelligent athletes," the government reported (Notes for the Director General of Youth and Sport on the Preparation for the 1960 Olympic Games, undated) Center of Contemporary Archives, Installment 19780586, Article 100 "Rome Olympic Games of 1960."

² At the 1960 Rome Olympic Games, France failed to win any gold medals, outperformed by countries such as Ethiopia, Denmark, and Japan, which each won at least one gold medal.

³ It was the first time that the French state acknowledged that sport, not just physical education, was an integral part of French culture. Furthermore, in the promise of state support for sports development, the government pledged itself to a remarkable new route, one previously only undertaken by the Eastern European communist regimes in making sport a crucial element of national policy and funding.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/889591>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/889591>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)