

# **The Spread of Rugby in France: Sociability, Violence and the Break with Britain and Ireland**

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## **Introduction**

Fourteen years after the first match between the Parisian team Stade Français and the English team Rosslyn Park and a few weeks after the first match of the French national team against the All Blacks of Dave Gallaher, France played England in the Parc des Princes. The match was organised on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1906 and was supposed to be the first of an annual series of meeting between the two sides. The victory of the English players was expected on both sides of the Channel, although the score of 35-8 was claimed as too unbalanced by the French journalists. For the English observers, however, the match was above all a test, to see if an invitation should be given to the French team to participate in the rugby tournament played between the British nations since 1884. This became a reality in 1910, a fact that was seen in France as recognition of French rugby, although the real integration of France into the so-called Five Nations tournament dated from 1920.

In 1906, the France-England match provided a good occasion for English observers to focus on the specificity of French rugby and on its differences with the English game. Not an easy task, however, because rugby underwent very important transformations in those years. A new stage began, that would lead to a variety of changes in terms of diffusion of the sport in France, style of play, sport policy and sport relations with the British Unions.

## **French rugby before the Belle-Epoque**

In France, the development of team sports occurred mainly through the influence of nearby England, especially in areas with the largest British communities - in Paris and the ports along the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean. Rugby football was no exception. In 1877, French college students and British textile merchants working in Paris created the English Taylors club, followed two years later by the Paris Football Club. Encouraged by these examples, other French students in the capital founded the Racing Club of France in 1882, Stade Français in 1883 and the Olympic Club in 1888. In Bordeaux, in the southwest of France, the Bordeaux Athletic Club (BAC) and the Stade Bordelais were created under similar circumstances, at the initiative of a group of students and British nationals. The two clubs merged in 1900. Other teams, like the Stade Athlétique Bordelais (SAB) and the Burdigala soon joined them, allowing for the creation of a south-western championship at a time when soccer and rugby went their separate ways in France.

In the Bordeaux area, Scottish businessman J.J. Shearer was instrumental in introducing rugby. Together with Tom Potier, Jim Crockwell and Welshman Owen Roe, they brought the sport to Pau in 1888 and introduced it in Bayonne. Other Frenchmen from Bordeaux founded clubs in Agen (1900), Bergerac (1902), Oloron (1903), Casteljalous (1904), Mauléon et Saint-Sever (1905), Périgueux, Habas and Cambo (1906), Mont-de-Marsan, Hendaye and Soustons (1908) and Marmande

(1911). However, it has to be noted that some other major centres of rugby, like Toulouse, did not benefit from the presence of men from Great Britain or Bordeaux.

Most of these early teams were formed by young men from bourgeois families studying in famous high schools and universities: lycées Condorcet, Lakanal Michelet in Paris, lycée de Bordeaux, lycée de Talence... In Toulouse, the Stade Olympien des Etudiants de Toulouse was established by former high school students dispersed among the various colleges in the city. More generally, it was these young graduates whose efforts led to the institutionalization of most sports and who were ardent defenders both of amateur sports and a certain vision of the Republic. Recruitment was exclusive. Pierre de Coubertin, himself promoter par excellence of this bourgeois sport, refereed France's first championship final between the Racing Club and the Stade Français at Bagatelle Park in Paris in 1892.

Before the Belle-Epoque, the social characteristics of the players were reflected in a style of play which valued individualism, non-violent and spectacular games, by combining the aristocratic demand for elegance with the bourgeois emphasis on individual performance. Rugby thus provided the opportunity to demonstrate the qualities of dexterity, speed and quick decision-making that were the prerogatives of the upper classes. In contrast, strength was a value that was neither admired nor sought after. The rugby player was a very fast moving athlete who knew how to swerve and spin around, to run and break away - a playing style that pleased French reporters, who showered praise on these athletes. True tackles were rare. As long as hard contact was not essential, attacking strategies favoured individual over collective effort, just as in defence players were reluctant to tackle below the waist.

Rugby was an extension of track and field sports, and the players were mainly runners and jumpers who moved easily from track and field to team sports - sometimes during the same sports gatherings. In late 19<sup>th</sup> century France, rugby was not so much a collective sport as an individual one, pitting the intelligence of the athlete against the anonymous strength of the group. In general, it preserved the values of its first players who were reluctant, for example to get dirty or find themselves on the ground in a physically subordinate position. Certain forwards even refused to participate in scrums, which were less glamorous because they were more anonymous. The French rugby players had not yet broken with the style of life of the dandy. However, it was precisely these dimensions that were challenged when France played England in 1906.

### **The Belle-Epoque: a turn for French rugby**

Indeed, in various domains, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could be considered a turning point for the French rugby. The match against England in 1906 took place precisely when a new stage was beginning.

Since the late 1890s and early 1900s, rugby had spread ever more deeply into the southwest of France, whilst finding it more difficult to develop in the rest of the country where football was already implanted. Bordeaux, of course, was extremely important in this limited dissemination of the sport. This narrow development had two immediate consequences. The first was to make Bordeaux the strongest opponent to the supremacy of Paris in the championship.

Indeed, the French national championship, played since 1892, had so far included only Parisian clubs and among these Stade Français stood out. It would not be until 1899 that the USFSA (French Sports Federation) accepted the idea of a yearly final opposing the capital's champion side against the best club from the regions outside the Paris metropolitan area. As a result, the new French championship pitted Stade Bordelais against Stade Français, and the team from Bordeaux won the first such match on its home field. This highly symbolic final between a club from the southwest and a club from Paris would be repeated many times as southerners from Bordeaux, Bayonne, Tarbes, Perpignan and Toulouse gradually rose to dominance. Bordeaux especially imposed its leadership until the Great War, but the geographical dominance of the south western clubs became even more pronounced after 1918, when the Parisians disappeared from the list of winners.

The second aspect of the relatively narrow dissemination of rugby effected the rural areas of the South-West predominantly. Rugby spread from Bordeaux to the large cities and suburbs, and then fanned out through the valleys until it reached the village level. Most clubs still active today were established during this pre-1914 period. The top rugby teams, however, were all situated in the south central part of the country, an area more rural, more traditional, less urbanized and industrialized than the north, and whose economic and cultural opposition to the capital was explicit.

This limited diffusion, which was unusual in the history of French sports, eventually led to a village-centred rugby that was more noticeable in the Aquitaine region than around Toulouse and that brought in its wake a renewed enthusiasm for the game. Because this phenomenon involved a more rural middle- and working-class population, it resulted in the emergence of a new male ideal. This becomes apparent when contrasting the types of players recruited in the suburbs and small towns and villages with those recruited by the major Bordeaux and Toulouse teams before 1914. The intellectual and industrial middle classes still predominated on these urban teams. For example, the Stade Toulousain championship team of 1912 included seven University students, one manufacturer, one pharmacist, one city hall secretary, one salaried employee, two veterinarians and two soldiers. Similarly, the 1909 Stade Bordelais team included two merchants, two manufacturers, one shopkeeper, one farmer, three chemists, one chimney sweep, one university student, one teacher, one person with a law degree and two soldiers.

### **Unexpected consequences: regionalism and violence prior to WWI**

The major unexpected effect of the narrow localisation of rugby in France was to intense local derbies on a one hand, and anti-Parisianism on the other. Both processes resulted in an increased violence in play – a major difference from the earlier style.

Southwesterners used every opportunity to remind their teams about the Parisian menace. In 1907, the newspaper *L'Express du Midi* warned the Stade Toulousains' managers to keep their players in shape at a time when the Parisian teams were improving their performance at international matches. The final that Toulouse won in 1912 against the Racing Club led to a virtual deification of the team; a red statue of the Virgin Mary wearing the local colours was set up to thank the players and their supporters. It should be noted that the regional press had explicitly set up what was

at stake some time earlier: "Bordeaux and Toulouse will avenge... all the provinces for the great injustices they have too long endured and for the unjustified humiliations that Paris believes it can inflict.", said *Le Journal des Sports* in April 1909. Rugby was thus seen as cultural revenge for the political domination that Paris imposed on the provinces, especially in those provinces most sensitive to their identity. Anti-Paris sentiment was most intense in the southwest, since this rural area suffered at the beginning of the century from a crisis that affected the livelihoods of peasants in the wine-growing regions. Their migration towards the large urban centres prompted a renewal of the most traditional values, which at times took on a political slant. It is reasonable to believe that rugby served as a way for the peasant to affirm his virtues at a time when their values were being called into question. Rugby was a way the peasants could overcome their inferiority complex and take advantage of the body and muscular capital they had developed through work.

At the beginning of the century, the common Parisian 'enemy' allowed regional teams to overcome parochial rivalries. This was exemplified by an incident that occurred just before the French championship final in 1909 between Bordeaux and Toulouse, the two great sister teams of the southwest. The Bordeaux players, upon arriving at the Toulouse train station, were greeted by Toulouse supporters with cries of "Long live Bordeaux!" to which they responded "Long live Toulouse!". And at the end of the match won by Bordeaux, the spectators shouted, "Long live the provinces!". Such regional solidarity led to the obvious conclusion that "the shores of the Garonne are becoming the place of choice for rugby in France", as stated by *L'Express du Midi*,

It was not long before regional journalists started putting less emphasis on impressive individual breakaways, sometimes even criticising the lack of solidarity among the players. The positive descriptions of scrums and rolling mauls and the disappearance of dribbling indicate that the playing style that was valued and thus met the expectations of readers had profoundly moved in the direction of a game where strength prevailed over style. From then on, rugby noticeably joined other elements of southwestern popular culture. As a well known process of reinvention of tradition, it was - and still is - portrayed as an illustration of the southwest's 'natural' temperament. Rugby went hand-in-glove with other aspects of regional life and culture, such as bullfighting, hunting, festivals (the famous music band called "bandas") and the love of good food. Another symbol of the southwest was the "castagne," a Gascon noun meaning "fight" which has a large number of declensions and metaphors that clearly reveal the cultural importance of fighting. Finally, this part of the country was already well known for its machismo. Rugby became an excuse to reinforce all these cultural symbols. It regularly provided the occasion for enormous meals and the recounting of conquests and seductions. The press, for example, followed with avowed pleasure the feminine conquests of Ramondou, who played for Toulouse at the beginning of the century. Emile Lesieur, a Basque and French international player before 1914, recalls that he went to see a girlfriend in London every time the team played in England, much to the chagrin of the managers, who nevertheless tolerated his escapades. It is thus not surprising that the rugby player was increasingly valued for playing like a warrior and demonstrating his virility. Manhood had previously been displayed through style; now men tried to impress by being effective (winning the match) and courageous in the many local derbies which often degenerated into violent fights.

The intensity of the matches was also stimulated by the increasing popularity of certain teams and rugby in France in general. Certain players became legends. Emile Lesieur was the first French player to mark a try against the English team, in 1906, even though the most popular French player was probably Adolphe Jauréguy, who played for the Racing Club de France, for the Stade Toulousain and for the Stade français in the 1920s. He was selected 31 times in the national team, including 12 times as captain, and was the most respected French player among the British rugby fans, players and journalists.

### **Struggling against violence**

The very presence of violence on the rugby field can be seen through the efforts made to counter it. At the time the French were playing England for the first time, in 1906, at least four processes were being used to control violence: preventing, promoting new rules and techniques, educating and forbidding.

The first reaction against violence came from physicians. Considering the number and variety of problems that rugby caused, they worried enough to study the impact of the game on health. At a time when scientific research into sport was not very well developed in France, rugby was specific enough to lead to a dissertation on the accidents and injuries that occurred during the matches. Thus, Doctor J. Rachou observed the 1,275 rugby players who took part in the 1904-5 championship and presented a list of the 45 injuries that happened during it. The relevance of the study by itself does not really matter. More important is the fact that this kind of scientific statement confirmed that the medical community was seeking solutions, mainly under the form of prevention and norms applied to sportsmen. Rugby was thus presented as a virile sport which was reserved for strong men who had already developed their body with other physical activities.

The second attempt to reduce violence was the promotion of certain attitudes and techniques during play. Many articles were published, for instance, in the press around 1900 to advise players on what they had to do while playing. As expressed by E. Duchamps (Football- Causerie, *Les Sports Athlétiques* n° 304, 25 January 1896), "Our matches in France are not played roughly because our team players have neither muscles nor lungs. All too often the lack of muscles and lungs are replaced by violence". One of the most surprising recommendations was to play in silence. Indeed, it was often not possible to hear the referee, when all of a team's players and spectators were shouting noisily about tackling: "do not make the players edgy, encouraging one team rather than another or calling the players by their names. Restrict the expression of emotion in the interest of the game and wait until the final whistle to express your admiration to the winners", said the journalist.

This issue was possibly behind the so-called 'Baxter Affair,' which happened in Stade Colombes during a France-Scotland match in January 1913. There, the referee was threatened by the crowd which had found his decisions too unfavourable to the French team. The referee had to leave the Stadium under the protection of players and guards. The incident resulted in a hostile reaction by the Scottish rugby leaders and all relations with France were provisionally stopped because of the poor education and behaviour of the French spectators.

The commission in charge of the development of rugby in France tried to democratise the rules of the games, providing examples of refereeing problems in the press and asking the readers to make a decision, as if they were the match referee. The sports federation also created a special commission for rugby referees in 1900 and a school for referees opened in Bordeaux 5 years later. An intense reflexion on the rules and how to apply them developed at the beginning of the century, notably to make the game more fluent, less violent and more understandable to everybody. It is true that, at least until 1914, most of the French referees had a very formal approach to the rules and had difficulties when referring to the spirit of the game.

The third reaction against violence was to educate the players. Yet before 1914, sports could not be offered to children during their mandatory schooling years. Only a type of gymnastics that was analytically measured and controlled could meet the disciplinary and health requirements required by the law as well as by military medical and political authorities. State schools did not value an athletic model, but rather a hygienic model opposed to any practice posing a physical or moral risk. Authorities, including sports advocates, did not see how sports could offer any educational benefit for young people. Rugby, violent and uncontrollable, was the antithesis of everything deemed desirable for the pupils.

However, some people did speak highly of the merits of sport, for young children as well as teenagers. Among them was Philippe Tissié, a physician who advocated a more modern conception of physical education. Tissié wanted to develop outdoor activities without, however, abandoning Swedish gymnastics. This Protestant republican born in the southwest strongly believed in preserving the heritage of regional cultures, and considered games a cultural repository: "The soul of a people is revealed in games... Tell me how you play and I will tell you who you are", he said in 1900.

Tissié distinguished three types of games: recreational games, major games like 'la barrette' and sports like rugby. He took advantage of his role inspecting primary schools between 1896 and 1907 to organize barrette matches. This "soccer without violence" spread throughout the southwest with the support of regional education commissioners, the middle class and the local press. Very quickly, Tissié continued his proselytizing at a higher level, even within the Ecoles Normales d'Instituteurs [teachers' colleges] This would serve as an opportunity to further develop rugby, which was played in such clubs as the Normalienne Rochelaise, the Union sportive Normalienne d'Angoulême and the Union Sportive de l'Ecole Normale de Toulouse.

The last reaction against violence came from Catholic circles. In the Belle-Epoque, indeed, France was deeply divided between Republicans and Catholics and sport reflected this division. Church-State conflict reached its climax a few months before the France-England game, with the law which, in 1905, separated church and state in all areas of public life.

Since 1898, the catholic patronages which had developed in the country in reaction to the rise of the Republic, included all kind of sports, including rugby: "The enemy is here, ready to welcome the child entrusted to you and enroll him in these gymnastic, shooting and Physical exercise clubs where it [the "enemy"] knows how to admirably disguise its destruction of any religious thought." Thus, in the southwest, parish youth

fellowships spread rapidly at the beginning of the century and, in reaction, secular groups sprang up to stop the rise of clerical activity. This competition led federation leaders to make certain political choices, which resulted in the division of the two sports in 1906: clerical circles adopted soccer while secular republican militants claimed rugby. The clergy considered football “gracious, scientific [and] it creates a very precise feeling of distance, a perfect knowledge of its role (whereas rugby) quickly becomes jerky, fumbling, brutal and easily degenerates into fist fights; one seeks in vain a guiding principle”, the Patriot claimed in Feb. 1914.

Joris Vincent and Laurence Munoz have recently convincingly argued that the attitude of the clerical authorities was not really about violence and that this issue was probably more a pretext to marginalize a sport, which was perceived as incompatible with certain Christian values (proximity of the bodies). Nevertheless, the neglect of rugby in the catholic patronages mirrored the perception of the game at the Belle-Epoque, a game which was seen as potentially violent.

In spite of these various attempts to control the game, and despite the break caused by the Great War, during which the rugby leaders tried to extend the sport to new populations, the aftermath of the conflict did not result in a clear change in the characteristics of French rugby.

### **French rugby during the two wars: the end of a nice story**

Soon after World War 1, the French Sports Federation (USFSA) fell apart under multiple pressures and several single-sport federations were subsequently created. One of these, the Fédération Française de Rugby (FFR), took over the destiny of the sport in October 1920. One of its first objectives was to make French rugby more visible on the international scene. During this period, France played 24 international matches, not counting the Olympic Games. Rugby, along with soccer and track and field, was one of the best represented sports at international level. Rugby matches quickly achieved remarkable popularity in the country and games played against the British drew tens of thousands of spectators to stadiums. Major games even started to be broadcast on the radio in 1923, and the government, participating in the craze for sport at international level, suggested filming games that might further enhance the nation's image. As confirmed by the report sent to the ministry of the Foreign Affairs, “France's victory over Ireland in rugby football in Dublin in 1920, the first victory abroad for a French rugby team, had enormous repercussions. The political newspapers and numerous magazines in England and America devoted very long, illustrated articles to... these events... In similar cases, it would be most useful if propaganda films could include some episodes of important matches in which France is favoured to win”.

Barely a few months after the armistice, in a France intoxicated by victory and the worship of its soldiers, rugby became an instrument of nationalism: players and spectators constructed a male ideal corresponding to the ideal of national pride. As a result, there were no longer losers or victors of the Great War, only the French and others, in a state of confusion heightened by the dramatic intensity of rugby matches. The French faced the USA at the 1924 Olympic championship in Paris and the French, favourites to win, nevertheless lost the match before a stunned crowd. The American flag was torn up and the Welsh referee forcefully insulted. Olympic rugby

did not survive this incident, being removed from the games by the International Olympic Committee.

“That was the period of 'rrrace' with three R's and it was said that if Perpignan had won, it was because of the superiority of its 'rrrace'”, remembered Alfred Sauvy, former head of Racing Club. “Anyone who lost a match was treated like a coward and considered unworthy of the French race, the race of victors”.

Although being a man meant being a patriot above all - a Frenchman who declared his superiority over others - rugby's influence was not only limited to national pride. On the contrary, local identities were also shaped by the game. Indeed, the FFR was built on a foundation that remained very Parisian. International matches almost never look place outside Paris. However, rugby's social and regional distribution before 1914 continued. While the number of affiliated clubs reached a record 894 in 1924, their expansion was especially large in the southwest, and rural and working class populations increasingly identified with the game. Organizing a championship that required players to qualify by region helped create a very concrete structure that intensified identity issues: France against the foreigner, province against Paris, town against town. While these three levels differed, they all reflected rugby's ability to inflame group pride.

These developments led to an extraordinary accentuation of rough play and brutality in the game. The honour of the community, whether team, village or region, demanded the expression of strength and virility, even at the price of extreme violence. Intimidation became the rule, affecting players, referees and spectators, as reported for instance in *The Miroir des Sports* for a Carcassonne-Perpignan match, in 1925: "Excited by the spectators' shouts, their brains overheated by the sun, a vindictive spirit developed to an extreme degree, producing unprecedented scenes”.

French rugby then got caught up in a spiral in which avoiding defeat was all that mattered. Fights multiplied, and a torrent of insults would follow the first punch. In 1927, Gaston Rivière lost his life during a match between Quillan and Perpignan, a few weeks after several players from Perpignan had been attacked by their adversaries.

The federation was powerless to contain this drift towards violence. After the second fatal accident, in 1930, the courts held the FFR legally responsible. No longer recognizing the Federation's authority, 12 of the most prestigious clubs left the FFR to create an amateur rugby association, the Union Française de Rugby Amateur, hoping to put rugby out of its agony. This split illustrated a renewed social spirit among players and managers said contemporary commentators. To a certain extent, however, it was too late. The opportunity was too tempting for the directors of the International Rugby Football Board to pass up; they could flaunt their superiority and denounce the character of the French game. The Five Nations Tournament, which had admitted France since 1910 - no doubt because the French team presented absolutely no risk to British hegemony - expelled the country in 1932 and kept it out until the Second World War: “After reviewing the documents provided by the French Federation and dissident clubs, we are forced to decide that, given the unsatisfactory state of the game of rugby football as it is managed and practiced in France, neither our federations, nor the clubs under their jurisdiction, can organize or honour

matches with the French team or the French clubs, at home or abroad, unless and until we are satisfied that the game is managed and played in an appropriate manner”.

French rugby not only engaged in violence, but also in the soliciting and purchase of players among clubs. The FFR had no other choice but to exclude the guilty parties, and disqualified players soon rose up in opposition to the federation. The end of official relations between the FFR and the (English) Rugby Football Union facilitated contacts between some of the French dissidents and the Rugby League. This rift was formalized in 1934 with the birth of the so-called “game of 13” [Rugby League], officially professional, which recruited on the same territory as the game of 15 [Union]. Max Rousié, for instance, who was considered the best that France had produced in 75 years, was selected only 4 times for the national team (to play in the last Five Nations tournament in 1931), because he decided to play Rugby League soon after.

French Rugby Union had to face a competitor: Rugby League. Thus, after having lost the confidence of the British masters, French rugby underwent internal crises, which left it in an extremely difficult state. The FFR had 890 clubs in 1924; there were 784 in 1930 and no more than 471 in 1939. In June of that year, the British rugby leaders asked the International Rugby Board to cancel the French Championship as a condition of resurrecting international matches. This was accepted by the French Federation whose leaders did not see how to else to solve the crisis. France could finally play England in February 1940. However, a few months later a much more dramatic episode of the World History started, giving sport in general and rugby in particular a totally new challenge.

J. Rachou, *Le Football rugby et ses accidents*, Dissertation in Medicine, Bordeaux, 6 feb. 1905, pp. 20-34 (quoted by Joris Vincent, 2003)

<b>Team</b>	<b>Number of players</b>	<b>Fractures</b>	<b>Dislocations</b>	<b>Sprains</b>
RCF	90	0	0	2
SF	90	3	1	0
SCUF	70	1	0	0
Union sportive Parisienne	60	-	-	-
SBUC	70	2	1	0
SA Bordelais	45	0	1	0
FC Bordelais	30	-	-	-
FC Bordelais	30	-	-	-
FC de Lyon	60	1	0	0
Lyon Olympique	50	0	0	2
SC de Lyon	30	1	3	0
Section Bordelaise	60	-	-	-
O Marseille	40	-	-	-
SOE de Toulouse	50	4	1	2
Ecole Veto de Toul	40	1	0	2
S A de Toulouse	60	1	0	0
Havre A C	60	1	1	1
US Cognac	50	0	0	1
SA Cognaçais	30	-	-	-
A At Et de	15	0	0	2

Montauban				
S. Tarbes	60	0	0	2
S. Poitevin	35	0	0	2
Vélo Sport Chartrain	50	0	0	3
US Tours	50	-	-	-
US Blésoise	50	0	0	1
S. Grenoblois	50	0	0	2