

Gymnastics and sports in fin-de-siècle France

by Eugen Weber

In No. 52 of the Olympic Review we began to publish a study by Mr. Eugen WEBER, "Gymnastics and Sports in fin-de-siècle France". Here is the second part of this study.

RISE OF CYCLING

If press and public gradually became more knowledgeable about different sports, it was probably because of one particular pastime that would become particularly French, a sport that, though partly inspired by English ventures, may well be counted a French creation: "*Cours, vélo, cours dans ta lumière / Le progrès chevauche sur toi!*" sang DECKERT's "Ode au Véloce". The tone had hardly changed since the first modern sporting publications had sprouted in Paris and in the provinces around 1868-69, all devoted to cycling, symbol of "*moral and material progress*", means of regenerating man by physical exercise. Edouard SEIDLER has briefly traced the rise of a French sporting press from uncertain beginnings to 1894, when the weekly "Bicyclette" printed twenty thousand copies and the daily "Vélo", founded three years earlier, boasted sales of eighty thousand (22). By that time France boasted 132,000 velocipedes of one kind or another. The sporting press that catered to their owners had discovered and would reveal the close relationship between a certain kind of sporting activity, publicity and circulation

The first long-distance cycle race, from Paris to Rouen, was held in 1869. The 1870s and 1880s saw a great number of competitions, with the same race involving tri-cycles, penny-farthings, and other models then in existence. Almost all were amateur compe-

titions, and all were dominated by English cyclists. Thus when the oldest of the great road races still in existence, Bordeaux-Paris, was first run in May 1891, four Englishmen led the winners (23). It soon became apparent that, properly handled, such enterprises helped to sell newspapers and also cycles. It was "le Petit Journal" that promoted the great Paris-Brest-Paris race in 1891, and the second great sporting daily "l'Auto", launched the Tour de France in 1903 to promote its sales.

For a long time cycling remained an expensive pastime. The bicycle itself was likely to cost five hundred francs or more, equivalent to two months of a lieutenant's pay or three of an *instituteur's*. Regarded as a luxury, it was first subjected to direct tax; after 1900 the bicycle was taxed indirectly through the requirement of a license plate. Characteristically, the first prophets, champions, and practitioners of the new sport were *filis de famille*: the racer and future trainer, Paul RUINART, was the son of a wholesale wine merchant; Tristan BERNARD, who undertook the management of the Velodrome Buffalo in 1892, was the son of a builder and real estate man. A few years later Henri DESGRANGES, who took over the new velodrome at the Parc des Princes in 1897 and launched "l'Auto" - destined to become France's major sporting daily - was a notary's clerk, representing another social group. His humbler origins re-

flect the relegation of the bicycle from luxury object - one with which an arch-esthete like Robert de MONTESQUIOU did not disdain being photographed - to solid investment accessible to middle and lower middle class budgets. The change had been swift.

Between 1889 and 1891 John Boyd DUNLOP's pneumatic tyres had begun to replace solid rubber ones, inner tubes permitted André and Edouard MICHELIN to develop detachable tyres, cycle prices began to fall (24), and cycle racing to attract more popular attention. After 1891, cherished and publicised by the press, cycling became the most popular of sports. The winner of the Paris-Brest race, national champion Charles TERRONT, had a place of honour reserved for him at the Opera at the gala performance honouring the visiting Russian sailors in 1893. By 1897 H. de GRAFFIGNY's "Manuel pratique du constructeur et du conducteur de cycles et d'automobiles" estimated the number of cyclists in France at three hundred thousand. GRAFFIGNY exaggerated, but what a Paris paper had once sneered at as "*imbéciles à roulettes*" had become part of the landscape.

A young schoolteacher starting out in the Normandy countryside remembers seeing his first cyclist in 1890 and yearning for the machine that would put the surrounding world within easier reach than walking, which was all he could afford. But "*in 1895 bicycles were still very rare, in 1897 their price was still inaccessible for me.*" Finally, in 1898 help from his farmer father, a loan from an uncle who was a village mason, and fifty francs in savings enabled him to buy a second-hand bicycle. It took five years to repay the loan, but it was worth it. "*Henceforth I was*



Start of a cycling race in 1896

king of the road, since I was faster than a horse." But he was one of the privileged few: "perhaps the only one of my class to own an iron steed." (25)

The concrete economics of a major purchase indicate why bicycles remained thin on the ground, but also how - and why - they ceased to count as objects of conspicuous consumption. It is interesting to compare the original membership of the Club vélocipédique de Bordeaux, founded in 1892, an obviously upper middle class group, with that of the Cyclistes girondins, founded in 1897, several notches below the middle of the middle class (26). It was scarcely a coincidence that the first auto club in Bordeaux appeared in 1897, the very year when cycling publicists like Baudry de SAUNIER abandoned velocipedes for automobiles. Those who could afford it were turning to more exclusive activities. Where in 1891 the first sporting daily had

squarely entitled itself "Vélo", its rival ten years later hedged by setting out as "Auto-Vélo" and had shed the second term by 1903.

The cycle was no longer in the forefront of progress. The late 1890s saw it become a sport for shop assistants, whose kind accounted for fifteen out of twenty-seven founder-members of the Cycle Club de Bordeaux and nine out of twenty-one Cyclistes girondins. We witness the appearance of clubs like the Société des cyclistes coiffeurs-parfumeurs (1896) or the Union cycliste des postes et des télégraphes (1897) (27). Figures given by Jean FOURASTIE suggest a vertiginous fall in prices. The cheapest bicycle of 1893 cost the equivalent of 1,655 hours' wages of a factory hand in the provinces. By 1911 with hourly wages up and bicycle prices down, a cheap model cost only the equivalent of 357 hours - almost half the price of a sewing machine, and

hence accessible for bachelors of the working class. The evidence suggests that, for the masses, cycling remained a spectator sport (28). Yet, even so, its influence upon the fate of other amateur sports was great. It first suggested the pursuit of sport for pleasure in social circles where this was not normally envisaged; numerically important clubs not appealing exclusively to middle and upper classes were formed around it; last but not least, especially in the provinces, cycling enthusiasts contributed some of the first officers and experienced members to the foundation of more broadly oriented clubs (29).

ENGLISH INFLUENCE

Though touching smaller numbers, the great sporting revolution of the eighties and nineties was less concerned with cycling or with traditional sports than with organised open-air games of the kind associated with English public school education, particularly running and ball games. And, once again, the English influence is apparent from the start.

The first Club des coureurs founded in 1875 by two young Parisians (one of them English) died within only a few months. In 1877 André BERTHELOT (1862-1938), then at the Lycée Saint-Louis, gathered a few friends

eager to race each other and play football in the Bois de Boulogne. Apparently passers-by assumed that they were French-speaking Englishmen. This group also did not last very long. In 1880 the future arctic explorer, Jean CHARCOT, son of the great neurologist, then a fourteen-year-old pupil at the Ecole Alsacienne, started organised games at his school. But the Ecole Alsacienne was exceptional. Most secondary schools had neither room nor sympathy for such goings-on. Hence, in the course of 1881-82, a number of students from Right-Bank institutions - CONDORCET, ROLLIN, CARNOT (then the Ecole Monge) - got into the habit of running impromptu races after school in the entrance hall of the nearby Gare St. Lazare. Joined by some veterans of BERTHELOT's old group, they soon founded the grandiloquently titled Racing Club de France and began to organise regular Sunday races in the more tranquil atmosphere of the Bois de Boulogne.

First of French sporting associations, authorised by a decree of November 23, 1882, the Racing did not belie its name. Its terminology and style were borrowed from the turf. Runners were divided into stables, wore jockey costumes with coloured sashes and caps, sometimes carried horsewhips to complete the pretense, idled in the "*pesage*", ran under assumed horse names in races whose titles were borrowed from Longchamps and Auteuil and whose results were bet on by the assembled sportsmen and their fashionable friends. For Rodolphe SALIS in the "Chat Noir" (Spring, 1882), here was "*the latest creation of invading anglomania*" (30). Soon Ferdinand de LESSEPS himself accepted the honorary presidency. On July 6, 1884, he



Parisian socialites crowd to watch runners of the Racing Club de France in the Bois de Boulogne

presented the winner of the Prix de Panama with a handsome horsewhip. Very shortly such influential connections secured the Racing a permanent home in the Bois, where running tracks were later joined by football grounds.

Meanwhile in 1883, students of the Lycée Saint-Louis, who had been informally running and training in the Luxembourg gardens, moved first into the Tuileries, then, with prefectorial consent, to the Orangerie terrace. There they founded the Stade Français, which became the Racing's great Left-Bank rival. It was after a cross-country race in 1887 that the two clubs joined in

the Union des Sociétés françaises de courses à pied, followed in 1889 by the more comprehensive Union des Sociétés françaises de sports athlétiques (USFSA), which incorporated tennis, cycling, football, rowing, and similar activities. Some federal organisation was needed to facilitate the international encounters that began to take place in the mid-1880s and to encourage sporting activities and spread the sporting gospel, organising national competitions and keeping people in touch. "Les Sports athlétiques" USFSA's weekly bulletin, provides a mirror of their activity, in which ball games played an increasingly important rôle.

BALL GAMES

Football, at least, came to France two or three years before it reached Germany (31). A list of provincial teams in the "Almanach des Sports" of 1899 confirms the English game's predictable lines of penetration: the ports, the north (and Lyon) with their textile connections, the high-way from Normandy to Paris. Paris itself with its large Anglo-Saxon colony. Across the Channel in England, the Football Association had been set up in 1863, but it took some years to make up its mind how the game should be played. By 1871, however, Association football and Rugby football had become clearly separate and autonomous in England; about the same time, the game entered France through Le Havre, where the Havre Athletic Club (HAC) was born in 1872. Founded by Oxford and Cambridge men, its colours combined the blues of the two universities. It is not very clear what game the HAC played, but its first teams do not seem to have known or cared about - the rules finally set up in England. They played a "combination" game probably close to ruggur until 1891, when the Club finally set up two distinct ruggur and soccer sections - one of the first French clubs to do so.

For a long time French football was dominated by the HAC, or, if not by the club itself, then by the English sailors, clerks, and students

who colonised both soccer and ruggur until about 1914. When HAC won the French championship in 1899, six of its players were English. All the earliest Paris soccer clubs were also started by Englishmen. The Paris Football Club (1879-84) lapsed for lack of rivals. It was succeeded in 1890 by the Football Association Club, founded by the personnel of two English firms. Then, in 1891, the White Rovers (inspired by the Cup Final victory of the Blackburn Rovers) was founded at Bécon-les-Bruyères, and soccer clubs multiplied thereafter.

The USFSA - addicted to ruggur, which was "more highly regarded in the upper classes of (English) society" - reluctantly admitted the existence of Association football. After soccer clubs had threatened to secede, the USFSA organised a national soccer championship, won in 1894 by the Standard Athletic Club team, comprising one Frenchman and ten Englishmen. In 1895 James Gordon BENNETT, editor of the New York "Herald", donated the silver cup that would henceforth reward the winners of the Association football championship. By 1899 Association football boasted some three-score clubs in the Paris area alone, and Frantz REICHEL, one of the city's great ruggur players, noted that soccer - less violent, brutal, and dangerous than ruggur - had spread considerably in France: "*Which is a pity, for it is not worth as much as ruggur from the educational point of view.*" (32).

By the turn of the century French teams began to participate in international competitions, and these, especially against the English, tended to end in catastrophic scores: 15-0 in 1906, 12-0 in 1908, 11-0 in 1909, 10-1 in



Monge school's athletic association's football team

1910. In 1911, with a loss of only 3-0, the wind began to turn and, by 1921, French soccer could mark up its first victory against England: 2-1.

The trend probably reflected the gradual acclimatization of the game and the growing number of native clubs from which a truly national team could select its players. We shall see that the slow pro-

gress of soccer with its narrow, foreign base contrasts with the swifter adoption of rugby, introduced less by foreign residents than by French schoolboys. It was only after 1919, with athletic sports no longer a preserve of upper class teenagers, that the spread of ball games at the popular level meant the spread of soccer, which is not only easier to play and demanding of less effort, but easier to play informally

and without getting as dirty as one necessarily does in a rugging game.

RUGBY AND FOOTBALL IN FRENCH SOCIETY

But this was still in the future. For a long time the men involved in football (or other sports) were very few in number and considered themselves an elite. *"The Grand Prix at Longchamps,"* notes a sporting lycée professor in "Les Sports athlétiques", December 12, 1891 *"attracts over fifty thousand, a football match hardly five hundred."* This remained true for ten or fifteen years. The concomitant elitism may have been a compensation, at least in part; a spurning of grapes less green than out of reach. But elitism, whatever the motives behind it, was a crucial element of contemporary sporting effort. The Racing accepted only amateurs, as defined in 1866 by the English Amateur Athletic Club in a formula that banned professionalism or the possibility of gain, stressed the fact that the amateur is a *"gentleman"*, and excluded *"mechanics, labourers and artisans."* When the first article of the USFSA's rules barred all but amateurs from membership, it eliminated not only any athlete who had ever competed in an open race, or for money, or for pay, or for a share of the gate receipts, or against professionals, but also specifically,

anyone *"who has ever been, at any time in his life, a paid teacher or monitor of physical exercises."* The latter were professionals, hence barred from activities that gentlemen not only pursued but regulated. The true sporting spirit, as the general secretary of the USFSA explained to a provincial prefect, consisted in opposing *"professionalism, money prizes, betting, in a word all that paralyses the beneficent effects of sport."* (33)

No man could devote much time, let alone his life, to sport without a private income and not be somehow a professional. But the pioneers of pure sport addressed themselves to an audience who did not need to face this problem. Their determined stand against professionalism would play its part in the rival fortunes of Rugby and Association football.

Article 51 of the USFSA rules, concerning football competitions, declared that the national championship will be played out *"in two series of matchs (sic) played according to the rules adopted by the Rugby Union."* The first number of "Les Sports athlétiques" (April 5, 1890) devoted two pages out of six to *"Football"*. Closer examination shows this to have meant rugby until December 1893, when, soccer having been admitted into the USFSA, the football rubric begins to appear with two separate subheadings: "Rugby" and "Association" - the latter only hardly and very briefly mentioned for several years more. Revealingly, the bulletin of the Club nivernais d'amateurs, founded in 1895, was entitled "Le Rugby" and continued under that title until the eve of the First World War. When in 1894 a leading figure of the USFSA, Georges de SAINT-CLAIR, published "Football (Rugby)", it



Georges de SAINT-CLAIR, President of the French Sports Athletics Union

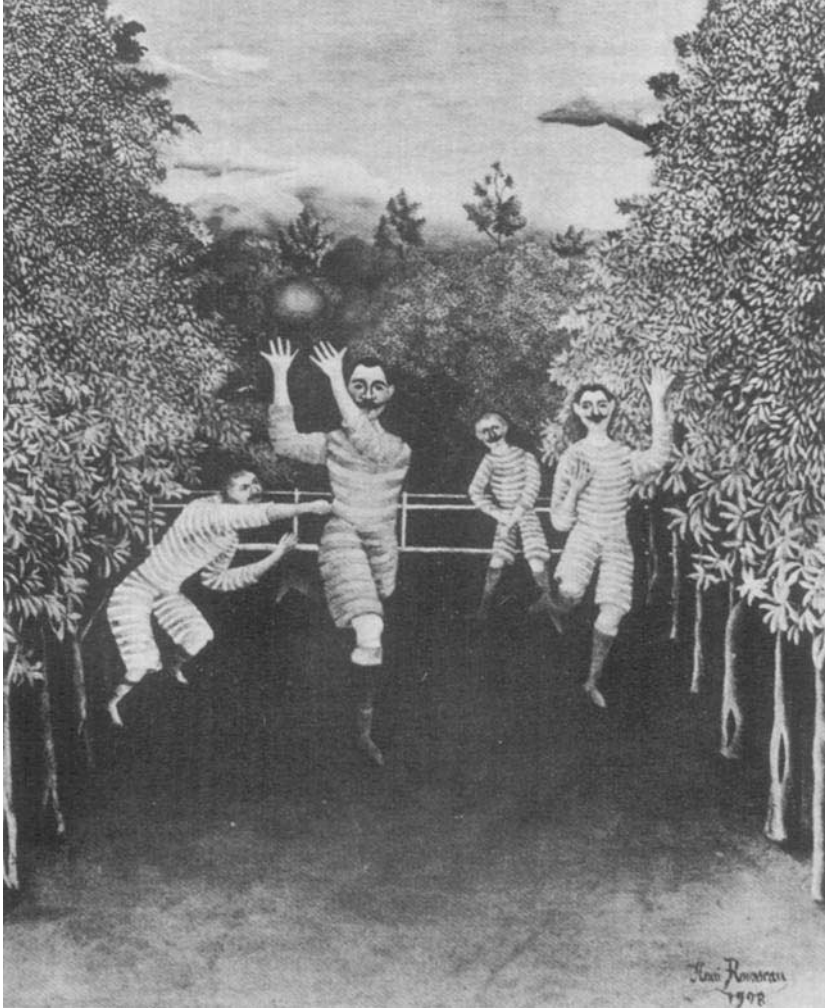
is clear that the subtitle was there only as an afterthought and that, for his friends of the Racing and the Stade Français, football was rugby. Soccer, tainted by English professionalism, carried too many vulgar associations. Rugby, even when played by the lower classes as in England, allowed for distinctions (34). Indeed, explains SAINT-CLAIR, referring to possible dangers of the game likely to arouse parental concern, most accidents (in England) occur in those *"northern mining districts where the population - very rough and brutal - does not bring to the game the desirable distinction and courtesy. When played by young, well-bred men, football is not dangerous."* (35)

The favourite game of English public schools, rugby

was the form of football that most students adopted, especially in Paris. It is striking to find Charles PEGUY, who in the early 1890s had introduced Association football in his *lycée* at Orléans, moving to the *cagne* at Lakanal and there taking up rugby because it was the game that Paris *lycéens* played (36).

Thus rugby spread, carried by the hazards of student life, to university towns and sometimes to other areas - like Nantes, where Parisian influences inspired the Stade Nantais as early as 1886, or Perpignan where, in 1889, a boy who had played the game at the Lycée Michelet in Paris founded the Union athlétique du Collège perpignanaise, seed of the great Catalan rugby school (37).

The strongest impetus for sport in the southwest came from Bordeaux. The chance presence of a dynamic personality had made the city the first centre of athletic activities in the provinces, through the Ligue girondine de l'éducation physique, founded in 1888 by Philippe TISSIE. Author of numerous articles and pamphlets on gymnastics and hygiene, Dr. TISSIE was one of the many medical men whose patriotic and sanitary concerns turned them into militant missionaries of sport. His energy, his influence, and that of the Ligue he founded, gained the support of the regional rectorate. As a result, the directives of the ministry of education, largely ignored in other areas, were applied in Aquitaine,



"Football Players" by Henri ROUSSEAU

where most secondary and a great many elementary schools made sports and games part of the regular curriculum. Offspring of modest homes, familiarised with running and games in primary school, could be found practising sports in associations of their own or in the Stade Bordelais, whose foundation in 1889 was a direct result of the enthusiasm generated by the Ligue.

Thanks to this groundwork, the first USFSA regional committee had been set up in Bordeaux in 1893. Regional committees followed in Toulouse and Lyon four years later. Meanwhile, Bordeaux became the first provincial city to play an important role in the national rugby championship, the Stade Bordelais winning it in 1899, playing in the finals for the next three years, and retaining the cup from 1902 to 1907. Altogether, after 1899, all but six of the national pennants were won by clubs from south of the Loire. The south, above all the southwest, remained rugby country, partly because of the USFSA's prejudices, partly because of the English influences radiating from Bordeaux, Bayonne, Biarritz and Pau.

Soccer appeared as a kind of Cinderella: *"Latecomer, faced with a cold reception... The wealthy clubs showing no interest, there was no publicity for its matches... School clubs, that is the bourgeoisie, keep away for ten years. Rugby alone seems noble, fascinating"*

(38). When, in 1909, the Douanier ROUSSEAU painted his "Joueurs de football", the players were obviously rugby players, and so were those of later painters who depicted ball games, like André LHOÏTE, Albert GLEIZES and Robert DELAUNAY. Equally revealing, the illustrated cover of the "Revue des jeux scolaires" showed two young men in sports costume, one wearing cycling knickers, the other football shorts and carrying a rugby ball under his arm. *"It seems as if Association football is essentially popular, and rugby the preserve of an elite,"* muses an observer, adding that rugby's future depends wholly on how it does *"parmi les milieux scolaires"* (39). Remarks such as these suggest a partial explanation of the intriguing hold of rugby on southern and most especially southwestern France.

By 1900, when Association football appeared south of the Loire, established clubs were controlled by rugby players, and a local tradition had grown up. Soccer teams and clubs were set up and, in the biggest centres, flourished. Association football became the great spectator sport of industrial urban centres, drifting to professionalism as a direct result of the role it played, the masses to which it catered, and the resources it commanded. But the small towns and small urban centres of Midi and Languedoc, which lacked both the industrial concentrations that furnished the public of professional soccer and the resources for a variety of sports, remained faithful to the amateur game with which they identified. Cities almost without industry, without an industrial proletariat, an urban network whose evolution in the 1960s can be compared to the stage reached by the industrial regions of the

north and east at the end of the nineteenth century, go far to explain the provincial conservatism of a region where the glories of amateur rugby go hand in hand with economic stagnation. The greatest teams of the twentieth century appear in centres like Narbonne, Lourdes, Pau, Bayonne, Dax, and Perpignan. A lawyer from Agen, a town of forty thousand whose team was three times French rugby champion in the 1960s, recently declared: "Agen must grow, prunes and rugby are not enough" (40). Yet it would seem that Agen's rugby flourishes best while its economy rests on prunes. "Sport d'amateurs... école de volonté, d'énergie," rugby, once favourite of the better off, endures as the game of more backward regions, of communities that, unable to subsidise professionals, continue to play it themselves.

NOTES

(22) "Le Sport et la Presse" (Paris, 1964), 14-35.

(23) Incidentally, the "Vélocé Sport" of Bordeaux, organisers of the race, convinced that no man could pedal 572 kilometers at one go, organised a dormitory at Angoulême, 132 kilometers from the start. None of the twenty-eight runners stopped. By September 1891, 211 competitors faced twice the distance: the 1,200 kilometer

stretch from Paris to Brest and back. That race was won by Frenchmen.

(24) Baudry de SAUNIER shows an advertisement for a cheap model selling at 375 francs. A good quality model cost fifty francs more. "L'Art de bien monter en bicyclette" (Paris, 1894), 21.

(25) Autobiographical sketch quoted in Jacques OZOUF, "Nous les maîtres d'école" (Paris, 1967), 122-23. A sound social historian, Pierre PIERRARD, finds workingmen beginning to use bicycles in 1914. "Lille et les Lillois" (Paris, 1967), 249.

(26) AD (Gironde), Sociétés sportives, Bordeaux. The Club vélocipédique counted five wholesale merchants, three university professors, a doctor, a dentist, a chief engineer, a builder, and a shopkeeper; Les Cyclistes girondins, presided over by the owner of a bicycle store, listed a printer, six shop assistants, three coiffeurs, and a student, but also a cafétier, a nicketeur, a baker, an ironmonger, a stationer, a sergeant-major and an armorer-corporal.

(27) One may note that in Bordeaux, at any rate, the postmen's union was set up in 1905, eight years after the founding of the cycling club.

(28) Relative prices based on figures in Jean FOURASTIE, "Le Grand Espoir du XXe siècle", (Paris, 1963), 171. For club memberships, see AD (Gironde),

Sociétés sportives, passim.
See also the evidence of Henri DESGRANGE's preface to Marcel VIOLETTE, "Le Cyclisme" (Paris, 1912), x, still clearly addressed to middle class readers.

(29) In 1896, Henri de TOULOUSE-LAUTREC, handy indicator of fashionable trends, produced a lithograph of a driver (his cousin, Tapié de CELEYRAN, muffled and goggled at the wheel of his automobile) and a sketch of the English champion, Michael, whirling around the track of the Velodrome Buffalo under the eyes of Frantz REICHEL, the athlete. The driver is engaged in a private adventure; the cyclist trains for a public show. But REICHEL's presence marks the link between cycling turned into a popular and profitable display and more exclusive sports destined in their turn to provide a public show.

(30) For details of all this, see BOURDON, "Renaissance athlétique", 42, *passim*.

(31) English boys attending private schools in Geneva, Lausanne and St. Gallen, as well as Swiss graduates of Oxford and Cambridge, established the game in Switzerland before it appeared elsewhere on the Continent: Le Chatelaine of Geneva was founded in 1869; the St. Gallen Football Club in 1879; and the Grasshoppers of Zurich in 1886.

(32) See "Almanach des Sports, 1899" (Paris, 1899), 420; "Almanach des Sports, 1900" (Paris, 1900), 387.

(33) Eyquem, "Coubertin", 63; letter of Pierre de COUBERTIN, Nov. 7, 1892, AD (Gironde), Sociétés sportives (Stade Bordelais).

(34) It was in 1895 that the Rugby Football League broke off

from the English Rugby Union on the issue of paying players. Dominant in the Midlands and the north of England, League rugby, with thirteen players, catered to a more working-class public than it did in the southern counties, where the public schools held sway.

(35) Georges de SAINT-CLAIR, "Football (Rugby)" (Paris, 1894), 20; see also BOURDON, "Renaissance athlétique", 248, *passim*.

(36) See BLANCHARD, "Ma Jeunesse", 112; Jules ISAAC, "Expériences de ma vie", (Paris 1959), 46, *passim*. PEGUY, who had led the Orléans lycée team to victory against its rivals of Chartres in 1891, captained the Lakanal team the following year, playing at fullback.

(37) Albert BAUSIL and Jean VIDAL, "Le Rugby Catalan" (Perpignan, 1924), 8.

(38) Raoul FABENS, "Les Sports pour tous" (Paris, 1906), 127.

(39) Edouard PONTIE, "Le Football Rugby" (Paris, 1905), 20. The title suggests that, by this date, the second variant of football had affirmed itself sufficiently to call for clearer definition.

(40) See Pierre LAROQUE, "Agen ou le modèle d'une équipe", "Le Monde", Nov. 25, 1969, p.17.

To be continued

