

---

JANSON, GILLES. *Emparons-nous du Sport: Les Canadiens français et le sport au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Montréal: Guérin, 1995. Pp. 239. \$24.95

GUAY, DONALD. *La Conquête du Sport: Le sport et la société québécoise au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Outremont: Lanctôt, 1997. Pp. 244. \$22.95

Our nineteenth-century ancestors variously viewed sport as salubrious, innocent, character building, or just plain fun. It is, of course, all of those things, but games and physical exertion can also have much more serious motivations and more lasting repercussions. As Gilles Janson explains in his *Emparons-nous du Sport*, the Francophone population of Québec, at first wary of any Anglo-American recreations, in a very short time adopted a different outlook, and in the end Canada's French-speaking residents embraced sport as another means to express their own national aspirations.

Today, Montréal is as enthusiastic a venue for sports as any other city in North America. Huge, largely French-speaking crowds attend Expos baseball games, Canadiens hockey games, and scrimmages of the Canadian Football League's Alouettes. If anyone needed further evidence, its hosting of the 1976 Olympic Games showed that Montréal had arrived as a sporting center. As far as amateur games are concerned, it never takes too long to find baseball teams playing in city parks, pickup basketball tournaments in schools, impromptu hockey games almost everywhere, and just about any other sport that is played across Canada and North America in general. While this much is similar to the rest of the continent, it was not always so. Ever since Québec's absorption into the British Empire, the French language and culture have defined its character and flavor. *Emparons-nous du Sport* shows quite convincingly that French Canada's current love of athletics is a far cry from the chilly reception that it gave sport in the early 19th century.

Prior to the late nineteenth century, French speakers rarely participated in sports (with the possible exception of horse racing). During the 1870s and 1880s, Anglophone Montréalers founded competitive clubs to play lacrosse, baseball, football, and other sports, although French Canadians rarely participated in them since English-speakers ran them. Some vocal segments of the Roman Catholic clergy, who warned parishioners that sport was violent, potentially sinful, and (worst of all) Protestant in its origins, further discouraged French participation in competitive games. Although founded by the French in the seventeenth century, Montréal had gradually become a haven for English entrepreneurs and businessmen with only a small French minority. With the rise of nineteenth century industrialism however, Francophone residents moved to the city from the countryside in order to work in the new mills and factories. The early 1890s consequently saw a rise in the city's overall French-speaking population as well as a sufficiently comfortable Francophone middle class that had the time and the energy to devote to recreational activities. This population shift changed the politics, demographics, and the sport of the city.

The sporting revolution among French speakers became accelerated when many Québeckers found jobs in the mills of New England, introducing them to a culture of sport and recreation that evaded them in Canada. Many of these economic refugees returned to their native province, but like emigrants before and since, they had picked up a few new habits—like a love of sport, including baseball—along the way. More than their affection for any specific game, however, their love of sport in general proved to be the most enduring of these importations.

When they returned to Montréal, many French Canadians continued to participate in sports. While they were about this, who better to confront than their old rivals, the English? As French Canadians began to march down the road to political liberation, sports often proved to be a symbolic way to illustrate their newly-found energy and sense of nationalism. This political and athletic empowerment is at the core of Janson's book, with its title adapted from a famous slogan of the time. French-Canadian nationalists encouraged nineteenth-century French-Canadians to seize almost anything that would bring them power, pride and prestige, raising the cry of, "Emparons-nous du sol!" ("Let us seize the land!") after the abortive revolt of the Metis leader, Louis Riel. The author transforms that evocative demand into "Let us seize sport."

Rather than adopting the sporting norms of France, Québeckers turned to the recreations of the conquerors (or to those south of the border) for their inspiration. Like most other things in French-Canadian society, their sporting life became an amalgam of Anglo-American models and native invention.

Those readers who want a more theoretical approach to the same subject can consult Donald Guay's excellent and complementary work, *La Conquête du Sport: Le sport et la société Québécoise au XIXe siècle*. Guay has pointedly left his title ambiguous: did sport conquer the French-Canadians, or did they conquer it? Like Janson, the author of *La Conquête du Sport* shows that Francophone participation in games and athletics was actually a part of the sporting revolution that conquered the entire western world at the end of the nineteenth century. Guay also makes the point that sport had been adopted and accepted by French speakers of the province in the late nineteenth century but in a politicized way to make it more palatable to Francophone participants. These two works should be taken together, to give readers a more complete understanding of this phenomenon.

Since I tend to enjoy a more factual and analytical approach, I would choose Janson's volume if I had to read just one of these books. Gilles Janson is special collections librarian at the University of Québec at Montréal, and he has done much important research using both primary and secondary sources. In fact, the story that unfolds is as much the history of sports journalism as it is sport itself since he uses articles from the city's various newspapers to support his points. Among the Francophone population sport grew at the same time as the men who recorded its events. For instance, records show the first sports editor in Montréal in 1891 while *Le Courier Athlétique*, the first ephemeral French-language sporting newspaper, appeared in 1892.

Janson has written a wonderful book that details the reasons behind Québec's acceptance of the sporting culture. My only wish is that the author had chosen to show us where these all-important early stirrings of the sporting movement later took French Canadians. The early twentieth century was a particularly rich time for Francophone sport, and I

would like to have heard more of this rather than ending the story rather abruptly in 1899. One can only hope for a sequel that will delve into this era of Québec's sport history.

The province of Québec may be as sports-mad as any other region in Canada or the United States, but it arrived at this position via a vastly different route from the rest of the continent. By seizing sports and adapting them to their own ends, Francophones for better or worse also chose to participate in the social and political games that make us all North Americans.

—DAVID CHAPMAN