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## *Athletics and 'Basic Sport' in France (1930-1960)*

In post WWII France, physical education was still defined by two main conceptions: Swedish gymnastics and “gymnastique d’application” which was based on the system of Georges Hébert.

However, since the 1930s athletics (track and field) has reached a privileged cultural status and dominant position in physical education. It has been presented more and more as a “basic sport”, both in sport and school institutions throughout four different political regimes. In June 1959 a major statute asserted that detailed attention had to be paid to races, jumps, throws, in order to prepare the pupils for the physical tests of the national examinations. It also established athletics as an essential sport. In 1967 further regulations, while marking the recognition of sport more generally as an essential part of physical education, still considered athletics as fundamental.

The status of athletics was particularly obvious in the place it took in the assessments imposed by the French school system beginning in the 1940s. In addition to the Certificat d’Etude, athletics was the main test when physical education became a compulsory part of the baccalaureate in 1959. In 1953, the reform of the Certificat d’Aptitude Professionnelle (national assessment for labor students) also integrated athletics.

On the basis of this particular statute, it seems that athletics drew its institutional and pedagogical legitimacy from the meeting of two processes. On the one hand, the organization in charge of athletics (FFA) developed strategies for promoting the activity with the youth. Also, athletics could be used as a means for recruiting future athletes to the school, at the moment when the French sports leaders became aware to the fact that sport was not a matter for adults only. On the other hand, legislators used athletics as a transition from the educational and rational gymnastics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the moment when the cultural reform of physical education became inescapable in the context of the Cold War and fears about the degeneration of the race after WWII.

This study is based on a critical analysis of the discourses in and on athletics, in the sport institutions, the official texts on physical education and the handbooks of teaching. It argues that the dominant position of athletics in the French national curriculum in physical education between the 1930s and the 1960s was neither scientific, nor pedagogical, but purely ideological and political.