Crowd Control: Transforming Stadium Spectatorship in Interwar France

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A record crowd of 25,000 spectators welcomed the first day of 1913 by witnessing an international rugby clash between France and Scotland at the Parc des Princes stadium on the southwestern edge of Paris. L’Auto, the influential daily sports newspaper, described an "unimaginable din" at the entrances to the stadium; authorities were forced to close the gates to both the cheap standing-room section (the populaires) and the main grandstands, as "not another spectator" could fit inside the stadium. But the crowd's festive New Year mood quickly soured during the match. When the Scottish side handily defeated the French, twenty-one to three, the public turned its anger on the English referee, J. W. Baxter, who appeared to favor the Scots in some of his decisions. The crowd stormed the field at the end of the match, hoping to lay hands on Baxter. The unfortunate referee was able to escape to the dressing rooms thanks to the timely intervention of police forces on horseback and several burly rugby players who screened him from the angry spectators. After a half-hour wait, Baxter fled the stadium in the automobile of one of the chief French rugby officials, disappointing the thousands still waiting to inflict further damage upon him.

The "Baxter Match," as it was remembered in France, sounded alarm bells for French journalists and sports officials. L’Auto's editor Henri Desgrange described it as the first "violent" stadium incident on French soil. L’Auto also read the Baxter

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1 L’Auto, 2 Jan. 1913.
2 L’Auto, 2 Jan. 1913. Le Figaro's Frantz Reichel concurred with Desgrange's assessment of the crowd, noting that each one of Baxter's calls was justified. Le Figaro, 2 Jan. 1913.
Match as an ominous sign of a new kind of sports crowd in France, one that was not comprised of true "sportsmen" (the English was deliberately used) but of enthusiasts who lacked the appropriate knowledge or background to understand sport properly. This was a coded way of describing the influx of working-class spectators and spectators from the presumably violent rural hinterlands into French sporting grounds and stadiums in the decade before World War I, a phenomenon that only accelerated from 1919 to 1939. By the 1930s, crowds of 40,000 to 50,000 regularly attended the Five Nations rugby matches (against England, Wales, Ireland, or Scotland) or the final match of the Coupe de France soccer competition at the Olympic stadium in the Parisian suburb of Colombes; gatherings of 25,000 to 30,000 were not uncommon in the stadiums of Toulouse or Bordeaux.

Far from rejoicing at the burgeoning popularity of spectator sport, journalists and sports officials were greatly worried by what they deemed to be the troublesome, undisciplined, and violent behavior of spectators. In an attempt to "reform" this crowd during the interwar period, the sports press and to a large extent the mass-circulation dailies propagated a narrative about ideal spectator behavior that urged the public to learn how to appreciate sport impartially for its own merits, suppress any kind of partisan leanings for the teams involved, and tolerate the physical rigor of the stadium experience through a process of "sporting education" that would eventually lead to participation. The "ideal spectator" narrative effectively defined spectatorship as a urban, bourgeois, male pastime, dismissing working-class men, almost anyone from the provinces, and women of all classes as irrational, emotional, and undisciplined spectators who could only acquire the necessary knowledge and rational self-control to behave appropriately inside the stadium with difficulty, if indeed at all. A spatial implementation of the narrative of ideal spectatorship occurred inside the stadium, as fencing and separated seating sections corralled and controlled spectators. But these physical and narrative attempts to define spectatorship existed in continual tension with the collective
practices of spectators themselves, which eluded easy regulation or definition. From the development of "supporter" culture to crowd violence and female participation, mass spectatorship emerged with its own rituals, codes, and behaviors that not only contested the ideal spectator narrative, but contributed to the eventual recasting of the spectating public as a national body of consumers.

This paper traces this tension between the proscriptive, regulatory nature of stadium spectatorship in the interwar period and the diverse set of spectator responses that ensued. This is the tension between what French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre calls the "representations" of space, or space as it is conceived by architects, political authorities, bureaucrats, etc., and "representational" space as directly lived through practice. In these contested visions of both space and spectator behavior we can read much broader social and cultural anxieties in France after World War I and the halting emergence of new mass cultural forms in interwar Europe.

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When English "team sports" like soccer and rugby first surfaced in France in the early 1880s, they were almost entirely the domain of upper-middle class urban professionals, university students, and high school students, who either belonged to Anglophilic clubs like Racing-Club de France or Stade Français in Paris (both founded in the mid-1880s) or to smaller clubs founded largely by British expatriates in the provinces. Not surprisingly, club newsletters and early newspaper articles depicted spectatorship as a familial practice and a demonstration of associational friendship rather than a form of mass entertainment. But this era of "heroic spectatorship" – already disappearing on the eve of World War I, as the Baxter Match

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indicates – collapsed completely after the war, when soccer, cycling, and rugby emerged as true mass sports that attracted a large section of the French working classes. During this period, the Tour de France – the marathon three-week bicycle race around the perimeter of the nation dating to 1903, staged by L’Auto and Henri Desgrange – entered its golden age of popularity. Soccer and rugby, too, attracted increasingly larger crowds; thousands of spectators were routinely turned away at the gates for large-scale matches like the Five Nations or the Coupe de France. As spectator sport became increasingly more profitable, the spaces for sport proliferated and expanded; almost all modern French stadiums were constructed or substantially expanded during the interwar period. Not surprisingly, sports themselves acquired their formal organizational trappings during the interwar era. The French rugby and soccer federations were both born in the immediate aftermath of World War I, and professionalism reached French soccer in 1932 at the insistence of wealthy industrialists like Jean-Pierre Peugeot, who not only founded the Football-Club de Sochaux-Montbéliard in 1928, but openly paid his players to boot.

By the first few years of the 1920s, the sporting "public" of Colombes or the Parc des Princes differed dramatically not only from the intimate turn-of-the-century gatherings, but also from more well-heeled assemblies at the horse racing track or the sedate crowd of notables (both men and women) at the Roland-Garros tennis stadium for the Davis Cup or the Internationaux de France. Although one should hesitate to overemphasize the working-class nature of the crowd, as there certainly were

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6 L’Auto, which enjoyed the ninth-highest circulation of any French newspaper in the late 1920s, around 300,000 copies per day, printed 700,000 on a daily basis during the Tour’s annual run in July. Edouard Seidler, *Le Sport et la presse* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1964), 67.
multiple classes of tickets at most matches ranging up to forty francs for a place in the "tribune d'honneur," approximately 30,000 of the Stade de Colombes' roughly 50,000 places were ten-franc or eight-franc standing-room slots at the two ends of the oval stadium. In the press, the image of Colombes during a big soccer or rugby match was certainly that of working-class society in miniature. In 1930, France-Football described the 35,000 people in attendance at Colombes for the Coupe de France soccer final as anonymous common folk and the twenty-two players as humble working-class guys (gars du peuple). When the president of the Republic, Gaston Doumergue, appeared at the stadium, he was reaching out to the masses in a "democratic" fashion.

The sports press and sports officials undeniably celebrated this sort of crowd as "natural," "festive," and spirited, but they also feared it as potentially disruptive in the manner of the Baxter Match. The flip side of Rabelaisian festivity in the grandstands was the possibility – often voiced by the press – that good-humored crowds could quickly "turn" into chaotic, turbulent masses. In their concerns about the new sporting public, sports officials and journalists certainly voiced fears about pathologically violent and mindless urban mobs such as those evident in the work of sociologist Gustave Le Bon. Moreover, fears about crowds in the post-World War I era were also colored by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 and the growing control of the French Communist Party over local municipal governments in many of the industrial suburbs around Paris, the so-called "red belt." Finally, fears about rugby crowds in particular drew upon

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8 See Football, 5 May 1932, for a typical breakdown of ticket prices at large soccer matches.
9 France-Football, 7 Aug. 1930. Even though this was in an era before the president was directly elected, one can read Doumergue's behavior as an appearance before his constituents.
stereotypes about the unruly, violent residents of the Midi. The rugby stadiums of the southwest, as pictured in the national press, were arenas where chaos reigned on the pitch and in the grandstands. As one of many examples, L'Auto opined in 1921 that the "new partisans" of rugby in southern cities like Tarascon and Perpignan had rendered rugby matches extremely "stormy" and "rowdy." Violent rugby crowds, the newspaper declared, had since spread even to regions north of the Loire.

Beyond these sorts of anxieties about mass gatherings, many sports officials and journalists – even those who actively promoted spectator sport, like Henri Desgrange – found the very idea of mass spectatorship deeply problematic in the aftermath of the First World War. In response to the demographic catastrophe of the war, calls for physically "regenerating" the French nation took a variety of forms, from pro-natalist legislation designed to encourage families to have more children to calls for physical fitness education and better access to sports facilities. In this climate, spectator sport was often denigrated as parasitic. When, for instance, the French Olympic Committee lobbied the city of Paris and the national government for substantial financial support to build a massive 100,000-seat stadium in advance of the 1924 Olympics, its opponents persuaded the city council to reject the project as an expensive misuse of resources that would not substantially render French men and women any healthier.

This hostility to spectatorship persisted at official levels throughout the interwar period and crossed the political spectrum: both Léo Lagrange, the socialist undersecretary for sports and youth under the Popular Front, and Marshall Pétain himself noted that neither would give a single sou for 20,000 people to watch twenty-two athletes.

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11 L'Auto, 3 May 1921.
In light of these anxieties about turbulent crowds coupled with a genuine ambivalence regarding spectator sport, sports officials and the press attempted both to regulate the physical environment of the stadium and to propagate a narrative about disciplined, well-mannered spectatorship that they hoped the public would internalize. On the physical level, stadiums in the 1920s evolved from grandstands at the side of the field to segregated, fully-enclosed spaces. Spectators were increasingly constrained by barriers within particular sections based on their ticket class. The stadium grew even more constricted as officials progressively installed fencing to separate spectators from the pitch. Fences were justified by the sports press as necessary to prevent crowds from spilling onto the field in the manner of the Baxter Match; according to this logic, the crowd needed to be protected from its own worst instincts. By enclosing the crowd and restricting it spatially, sports officials hoped that spectators would not only behave properly, but would internalize the demands of the stadium by better tolerating crowded conditions.

In this sense, the stadium was a Foucauldian disciplinary space, designed to corral and contain spectators. Beyond this physical regulation of the stadium environment, journalists and sports officials also campaigned in both the sports press and mass-circulation dailies like Paris-Soir for the "improvement" and "education" of the public in order to train crowds not to behave violently or impulsively. On one level, spectator education consisted of teaching the uninformed crowd the rules of rugby or soccer; L'Auto and its counterparts argued that the public jeered the referee or became angry over a match because of its imperfect understanding of the game. On another level, spectator education entailed providing the French with models of appropriate comportment: to this effect, L'Auto, Miroir des Sports, France-Football, and the rest of the sports press

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14 John Bale, Sport, Space and the City (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12.
15 L'Auto, 8 Jan. 1927.
17 Football, 27 Nov. 1930.
continually idealized British crowds, whom journalists lauded for behaving less violently and understanding sport more profoundly than their French counterparts. Moreover, according to French reports, British spectators had adapted to the spatial demands of the stadium without fuss; not only did they remain rigidly in place next to the field, they physically occupied less space in the grandstands.18

By learning the rules and emulating more knowledgeable crowds, the French spectator could – in this narrative – internalize a particular code of conduct inside the stadium that stressed self-discipline and emotional self-control. Writing in 1934 in France-Football, Maurice Pefferkorn argued that a "good public" had to be passionate (chaud) and emotionally invested in a match but also needed to be fair and even-handed.19 In practical terms, this emotional state required the crowd not to "intervene" in the match by criticizing the referee or, even worse, subjecting him to more than verbal pressure as in the Baxter Match. The ideal spectator would maintain the distinction between sport and politics and would refrain from turning international sporting matches into political protest rallies. Pefferkorn concluded that the culture of spectatorship, if properly instilled in the masses, would help spread "class" and propriety (tenue) to the public inside the stadium.20 By appreciating the rules and acquiring a sense of proper discipline, spectators would also more readily become athletes themselves.

In the context of interwar France, "sporting education" attempted to "improve" spectators of the lower social orders and turn them into sportsmen. This narrative addressed fears about misbehavior in the stadium and effectively gendered spectatorship. If ideal spectators were disciplined, rational, and unemotional, women were perceived to lack all of the necessary qualities to take their place appropriately inside the stadium. The press mocked female spectators as emotional and ignorant of the

18 Ibid., 14 May 1931.
19 France-Football, 18 Oct. 1934.
20 Ibid.
basic rules or principles of sport. In the pages of L'Auto and Miroir des Sports, female spectators appeared almost exclusively as hopelessly infatuated with star athletes or other male spectators.\(^{21}\) The ideal spectator narrative, in short, could not accommodate the female spectator; the sports press thus tried to trivialize the presence of women in the grandstands or at least represent them safely within the universe of conventional marriage roles.

Yet sporting officials and the press found that their narrative and physical efforts to create ideal spectators or exclude problematic ones were perpetually renegotiated by the spectators themselves through a complex range of practices from "supporter" partisanship to violent behavior. Because the whole narrative of ideal spectatorship hinged on the crowd's impartiality, for instance, it was severely undermined by the reality that the French public, not surprisingly, showed an early proclivity to "take sides" inside the stadium. The actual practice of spectatorship at most rugby or soccer matches was a highly partisan, active process that involved singing, chanting, and other behaviors that earned the opprobrium of the press.\(^{22}\) Yelling insults or witticisms at the players or referee, for instance, appeared to be common practice even as the sports press did its best to discourage such behavior. In one example, when the jersey of Hauc, a somewhat fleshy forward for Narbonne, was ripped during a match in 1928, a wag called out: "A brassiere if you please!" (Soutient-gorge, s'il vous plaît!).\(^{23}\)

\(^{21}\) For example, the 1924 novella "Georges et la Dactylo" (George and the typist) revolves around the transformation of automobile executive Georges Pétunier from a flabby weakling into an enthusiastic spectator and sportsman and the simultaneous metamorphosis of his secretary, Andrée Duillot, from a "hardy pageboy" and emotional rugby fan into his dutiful and happy wife. L'Auto, 30 Mar. 1924.
\(^{23}\) Lyon-Sport, 15 Apr. 1932.
Despite all injunctions to the contrary, sporting crowds often voiced their reaction to contemporary political events inside the stadium, throwing coal at Italian players and chanting antifascist slogans during the 1938 World Cup in Paris and Marseille.\footnote{In a retrospective published before the 1998 World Cup, at least two newspapers (L'Humanité and Le Parisien) interviewed Jean Beze, a spectator at the 1938 France-Italy match at the Stade de Colombes. L'Humanité (26 May 1998) emphasized the antifascist tendencies of the crowd at Colombes, while the June 1998 magazine edition of Le Parisien for the suburbs claimed that the match had no serious incidents.}

Partisan support for specific teams institutionalized itself throughout the 1920s with the development of "supporter" groups, notably in the immigrant-heavy northern industrial areas near Germany and Belgium. Racing-Club de Roubaix, for example, had four organized fan clubs by the end of the 1920s that appear to have emerged spontaneously rather than at the urging of team management.\footnote{Catherine Carpentier-Bogaert, et al., Le Peuple des tribunes: les supporters de football dans le Nord-Pas-de-Calais (Béthune: Musée d'Ethnologie régionale, 1998), 46.} In Lens, the Supporter Club de Lens gained two hundred members quickly after its inception and posted a representative to the club's administrative council by 1934.\footnote{Ibid.}

Supporter organizations also helped facilitate intercity travel for important matches such as the finals of the Coupe de France or the Championnat de Rugby, organizing special trains at discounted fares for team supporters.

If partisan behavior, even the formation of supporter clubs, defied the notion of appropriate spectatorship, spectators also challenged both the physical and narrative injunctions to self-control. Spectators entered the stadium without appropriate tickets or occupied the wrong part of the stadium entirely. Crowds frequently scaled barriers and fences to spill onto the pitch to catch a closer glimpse of either the players or the official dignitaries in the main grandstands. Active disobedience inside the stadium culminated with outright spectator violence. As the Baxter Match demonstrated, crowds directed many of their worst
urges toward the referee, but the violent spectator also entered into conflict with the players on the field and the other inhabitants of the grandstands. Journalists also blamed spectators for inciting players to adopt a more violent style of play. While reports of crowds "lynching" referees in the south were perhaps exaggerated, they were not completely invented; one of the reasons the British Home Unions broke off relations with France at the end of the Five Nations tournament in 1931 (besides the issue of tacit professionalism in France) was violence on and off the field.27

Images of crowd violence offered proof to sports officials that their project of sports education (éducation sportive) remained eternally unfinished. Spectatorship did not imbue the crowd with "class" and "bearing" as the press had optimistically hoped, nor did it suddenly produce more high-caliber French athletes as a result of heightened participation. Instead, the largely working-class crowd – in the case of rugby, a provincial and southern crowd to boot – resisted attempts to "improve" it or make it behave in ways more acceptable to the elites who administered French sport. Female spectatorship may have been another form of resistance to this narrative; photographic evidence documents the continued presence of women inside the stadium despite constant discouragement and ridicule and suggests a failure to construct spectatorship as an exclusively masculine activity.28

What, then, does the discussion of the contested crowd reveal more broadly about spectator sport, leisure, and mass culture in interwar France? On one level, it indicates that historians have been too quick to dismiss sporting crowds as insignificant cultural phenomena. Much of the scholarship on leisure culture in the twentieth century has, until recently, generally accepted the perspective of theorists like Theodor

28 For attempts to assess female sports spectatorship in Spain and Germany, see Walton, 44; and Erik Jensen, "Crowd Control: Boxing Spectatorship and Social Order in Weimar Germany," in Histories of Leisure, ed. Rudy Koshar (New York: Berg, 2002), 89.
Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who viewed leisure and sport as fundamentally alienating for the spectator. Moreover, historians of French sport have pointed to the relatively small size of French stadium crowds in comparison to British ones to argue that spectator sport and spectator culture were relatively "underdeveloped" and thus of marginal importance in France. Both scholarly currents require revision. The intense scrutiny devoted to the stadium crowd as well as the very real and sizeable crowds that consistently attended matches belie the contention that crowds were of marginal cultural importance. The behavior of the stadium crowd, which actively resisted attempts to shape it in particular directions, indicates that there was nothing particularly parasitic or alienating about interwar spectator sports.

More broadly, the debate over the stadium crowd signifies the anxieties surrounding mass leisure culture in twentieth-century France. Debate over stadium spectatorship was a response to the commercialization and diffusion of spectator sport across the hexagon during the interwar period. As soccer and rugby moved beyond the realm of elite sporting practice, they became mass consumer events despite deep ambivalence on the part of their promoters. Even as journalists and sporting officials railed against the "dangerous" and disruptive crowd, they tacitly recognized the claims that the "uneducated" sporting spectator had made on the stadium space. In recognition of this reality, the French stadium public was viewed increasingly as a collective of consumers who had certain rights and privileges. Loudspeakers, numbered jerseys, and blackboards became common aspects of the stadium experience in the 1920s and 1930s in part due to spectator pressure and the acknowledgement that spectators deserved to be informed, even if they were not long-time sportsmen with an intricate knowledge of the game.


Hare, 64.

L'Auto, 24 Apr. 1924.
The insistence on "neutral" spectatorship, too, disappeared, or at least diminished; the French soccer federation helped found a "French national team supporters" club in 1933 in recognition that partisan behavior could be tolerated and encouraged at a certain level.  

This national diffusion of stadium spectatorship as a form of mass consumption may not have infused "class" and "bearing" into the spectators, but ironically it helped knit those problematic working-class and provincial crowds into broader narratives about spectatorship and French identity. In the case of soccer, teams from Roubaix, Lille, or Lens – all sponsored by local industries and backed by working-class supporters – often culminated their seasons by reaching the finals of the Coupe de France competition, held at the de facto national stadium, the Stade de Colombes. Spectators who traveled to the Cup final, read about the travels of other spectators, or listened to the radio broadcasts made a journey that connected them to Paris, whether they hailed from Lille, Roubaix, Marseille, Sète, or Rennes.  

This fusion of class, regional specificity, and national identity also occurred in the context of the national rugby team's matches at Colombes. For France-Scotland, the opening match of the Five Nations competition in January 1930, Midi Olympique's Marcel de Laborde remarked that the grandstands at the Stade de Colombes were jammed with southerners (méridionaux) who wanted to witness the "frolicking" of their compatriots, "so numerous on the French team." The organizers at Colombes accommodated this southern crowd, playing typical songs from the Midi over the public-address system before matches, even those that did not feature the national team, to make the crowd feel as if it were at home. While never fully losing its disruptive and turbulent potential, the stadium crowd thus emerged as both a consuming and a national public through the

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32 Football, 6 Apr. 1933.
33 Ibid., 3 Mar. 1932.
34 Midi Olympique, 3 Jan. 1930.
35 L'Auto, 28 Mar. 1937.
experience of spectatorship and its mediatized diffusion and discussion throughout the interwar period.

The debates over spectatorship in the 1920s and 1930s, then, testified to the contested emergence of a new set of mass cultural practices. Ultimately, despite the best efforts of engineers, architects, journalists, and sports officials to restrict their behavior, spectators occupied the stadium in various ways that suggest a need to reassess the importance of mass leisure spaces and their publics in the first half of the twentieth century as a formative space for modern mass society in France.