A View of the 1948 London Olympics from across the Channel: An Analysis of the French Press

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During the Labour Party’s preparation for the 1948 London Olympic Games, which were held from 29 July to 16 August and were, although only three years after the Yalta Agreement of 11 February 1945, an attempt to point the United Kingdom resolutely into the future, the French press did not hesitate to criticize the resourcefulness and relaxed attitude of the British. France’s ambivalent perception was, moreover, further magnified by the absence of Germany, Japan and the USSR, which reopened the question of politics in sport and its use for propaganda purposes, 12 years after the nationalist excesses of the Berlin Games. Analysis of coverage concerning the ‘Reconciliation Games’ in the main French papers highlights the contrasted effect of the London Olympics and illustrates the predominant weight of political ideologies in the construction of national identities. Finally, it underlines the recurrent difficulties encountered in bringing together the French and the British who were, immediately after the Second World War, divided between the necessity to commemorate and be hopeful for a pacified Europe.

Viewing developments in the context of post-war Franco-British relations, the French government and media kept a watchful eye over British preparations for the 1948 London Olympic Games, which were scheduled to be held between 29 July and 16 August. Organized soon after the end of the Second World War against a background of austerity and the emerging Cold War, the games were interpreted by the British government and media as pointing the nation resolutely into the future. [1] Restoring the Olympic movement after the cancellation of the 1940 and 1944 Olympiads, the 1948 Olympics re-opened the question of politics in sport, [2] most notably the use of the Olympic movement for propaganda purposes, 12 years after the nationalist excesses of the Berlin Games. [3] The absence of Germany, Japan and the USSR from the London Olympics accentuated the political factor. [4]
This article focuses upon French press perceptions of the 1948 Olympics, described variously as ‘the austerity Olympics’ and the ‘reconciliation games’, in the light of the fact that Britain and France were not only wartime allies but were also experiencing post-war austerity – 40 years after the 1908 Olympics, imbued with entente cordiale. However, unlike Britain, France was characterized by growing support for the Communist Party. Analysis of coverage concerning the ‘reconciliation games’ in the main French papers highlighted the contrasted perception of the London Olympics. Research was based upon in-depth study of newspapers from all parts of the political spectrum, plus L’Equipe, the main French sports newspaper. Thus the Communist Party was represented by l’Humanité, the Socialist Party by Le Populaire, the centre-right by Le Figaro, the Conservative Party by Le Petit Parisien and l’Aurore France Libre and the Catholic right wing by La Croix.

Revealing unanimity over and above any ideological divisions, research established that the French debate about the London Olympics proved to be a key moment in the positioning of sport and France’s future attitude towards the Olympic movement. In this manner, the episode highlighted the predominant weight of political ideologies in the construction of national identities, while revealing the difficulty of bringing together the British and the French, two nations divided between the necessity to commemorate the war and to remain hopeful of a pacified Europe.

Renewal of French Sport?

Directly after the Second World War, France and Britain were suffering badly, both on human and economic levels. Over and above the fact that 600,000 French and 400,000 British had died, the economic cost of the war was still heavy and the ‘need to make do’ guided the pressing reconstruction. On both sides of the Channel, the lift-off was rendered difficult by the lack of raw materials, the exodus of the population, the lack of labour and the crisis of the administration. In addition to these obstacles, the London games had to cope with the rising cost of living, a generalized black market and a ruined middle class. Just coming out of the war and faced with these shared difficulties, the United Kingdom appealed to the US General George C. Marshall who, in the famous speech he gave at Harvard in June 1947, denounced ‘the breakdown of the entire European economic system’. In such a context, French press had a contradictory perception of the organization of the Olympic Games. The 1948 Olympics could seem, at one and the same time, to be an additional burden from an economic point of view but also a suffering that was necessary for the reconstruction of the British Empire. For Le Populaire, the 1948 games had to mark a turning point:

Britain was one of the most cruelly touched countries and was taking the longest to recover. After the great parade of the 1936 Games, the athletes from sixty countries were going to appreciate the traditional sobriety of the British. This time, there would not be any question of using sport to serve state propaganda, but rather a question of serving sport.
As for l’Équipe and Humanité, if the Olympic Games were to participate in the renewal of the French and British nations, the Olympic tradition must be respected.

In line with previous games, the French press appeared divided about the question of amateurism and professionalism in modern sport. A common point, however, united all journalists: that of the need to see a conquering united French team that would symbolize the renewal of French sport and, more generally, that of the wounded nation and yield political benefits.

Shortly after the Second World War, journalists endeavoured to predict French chances, each in turn defending their forecast concerning the possible number of medals. The account of Pierre Lewden, ex-member of the French athletics team and writer of a regular ‘article in Le Parisien, could be seen to illustrate this: ‘Never before had the French arrived at the Olympic Games with the potential of those athletes preparing to parade at Wembley.’ [12] Le Figaro, for its part, stated that ‘the chances of those who represent us are quite good’ [13] in ‘core sports’, i.e. athletics and swimming, given that the French teams were considered to be efficiently prepared. According to L’Équipe of 29 July 1948, which was the only French daily to devote its entire front page to the opening ceremony, ‘Never have the French gone to the Olympic Games so full of hope’. For every daily newspaper, the optimism was splashed across several columns of the inside pages, and French journalists considered Alex Jany in swimming, as well as Claude Pujaon and Marcel Hansenne in athletics, to be France’s best hopes in these games. ‘Apart from this threesome, there are only good second roles’ [14] ran the headlines of the nationalist daily Combat.

The lucidity of certain forecasts was surprising. A month before the games, Le Populaire saw the nation as not being too brilliant: ‘In spite of the undeniable progress achieved, French swimming only has Jany and Georges Valleray.’ [15] A few days later, the same daily considered that ‘among the throwers, French athletics are pretty lousy’. [16] As for l’Aurore, if, like most of the French daily papers, it foresaw certain victory for Alex Jany, it nevertheless mentioned the weakness of the two teams in ‘weightlifting and shot put’. [17] In truth, analysis generally remained superficial, and only the men’s chances were referred to by French journalists, [18] with the exception of L’Aurore, which was the only one to acknowledge the women’s chances during the XIVth Olympic Games by mentioning an ‘almost probable’ for Micheline Ostermeyer in the shot put. [19] Reflecting above all on past and potential future exploits of the rare French champions recognized at international level, the forecast was a faithful mirror of France after the war – a mixture of ‘euphoria and illusion’. [20] Although the renewal of French sport was expected following the Liberation, media coverage during the 1948 games showed that, in the French mind, it remained a bastion of masculinity – women’s sport was generally ignored and/or marked by somewhat conservative references, with the image of sportswomen being in no way equal to that of sportsmen. [21]

The officials called upon during the London games to judge the women’s events were to have a rather tricky task. Indeed, the majority of the competitors were not only sporting champions but also outstanding beauties that could have entered a
cinema pin-up competition. The judges had to be scrupulously impartial and not allow themselves to be influenced by beautiful sparkling eyes that did their utmost to soften their hearts. It was difficult to make a choice both on the sporting level and that of plastic beauty... parade, the competition would be heated, and many male spectators were expected to attend the women’s events.

At the head of the list could be placed the European trampoline champion, Frenchwoman Mady Moreau. The ‘French Venus’, as she was called in the United Kingdom, was able, by her grace, to influence the judges watching her soar up from her trampoline in search of an Olympic title. In any case, she would be the most dangerous adversary of her rivals both inside and outside the stadium: ‘It was difficult to compare the relative values of the champions..., but if only physical aspects were considered, the French had every chance of obtaining success, if not in the Olympic event, at least in the hearts of the men.’ [22]

During this phase, the analysis of French journalists reflected the retreat of women’s sport in France, where their sporting performances were often overlooked. With only three French Olympic titles in the athletics events since 1896, it had been deemed unlikely that any woman could add to this tally – before the ‘unexpected’ [23] victory of M. Ostermeyer [24] on the first day of the London games. In spite of this, media coverage remained somewhat one-sided. In the majority of the French daily newspapers, the silver medal of A. Mimoun in the 10,000 metres and A. Jany’s qualification for the finals of the 100 metres freestyle swimming were given more coverage than the first Olympic title gained during the XIVth games. Only the Aurore France Libre covered the victory on the front page of its 31 July issue, with the title ‘France confirms the value of its athletes’: ‘The first flag that was run up the Olympic mast yesterday was French. The first national anthem played was La Marseillaise. The first winner was a graceful French girl of 26, Micheline Ostermeyer.’ [25] As was generally the case during the inter-war period, [26] national glory was still a priority in the French perception of the London games, and each medal thus gave rise to patriotic rhetoric that in a sense pushed the sporting result into the background.

A few days later, the same applied for Ostermeyer’s second title in the shot putt. Only the journalist of Le Parisien was able to imagine renewal of French sport in the feminine form:

She was unbeatable, marvellously unbeatable, joining force to grace and using an unequalled technique: Olympic Champion for the second time. What a consolation for us at the end of the first eight Olympic days, where we have often had to be content with small graces. What a consolation on the evening of the new and terrible defeat of Alex Jany in the 800m. [27]

Finally, it was the comments made when she obtained her third place in the high jump that illustrated the supremacy of geopolitical stakes in French perception: ‘Although Ostermeyer failed to achieve a three in one in the high jump, she did succeed in being third today, she has worked really hard for the renown of French sport.’ [28]
During the summer of 1948, tradition still had the upper hand over modernity in French mentalities. Whether it be surprise victories or athletes whose win had not been foreseen, or then again disillusion over the ‘cracks’, [29] as well as/or great leaders of the French team such as A. Jany, the London games indicated continuity with those that had gone before. [30] Renewal of French sport rested mainly on the shoulders of male victories in athletics and swimming, although other satisfactions were possible:

The master trio, Hansenne, Jany, Sepheriades, beaten . . . our great hopes collapsed, and the feeling of inferiority with which we were suddenly filled spread throughout our representation. The final analysis shows that the French, too eclectic to be first everywhere, obtained an honourable place in the global sport table. It is certain that we lack a reserve of athletes, a critical number of participants, without which the quality, not of a champion, but of a mass cannot come into being. [31]

This feeling of inferiority, already felt on the battlefield during the years 1939–40 and experienced daily between 1940 and 1944, had a singular impact on events on the track and in the pool at the London games, although everything had pointed to triumph. For French journalists, it was of paramount importance that ‘the blue singlet of France, embroidered with the cock of Gaul, valiantly holds its place in the saraband of continuous effort, during which so many athletic butterflies burn their wings on the Olympic flame’. [32] When this did not happen, and as had been the case for so many other disappointments, journalists strove, as best they could, to find explanations: ‘Jany has once again done his number. Today, Jany did nothing right: his nerves again.’ [33] For Le Parisien, ‘Alex Jany could not find the right pace, and his failure left his sister Ginette in a crying fit’. [34] French journalists went on to criticize the French champion, asking themselves ‘whether Jany did actually like to do battle’, alluding once more to the ever-present past.

As for Marcel Hansenne, the French press considered that he had fallen with honours. For Le Parisien, he ‘went down in the final of the 800m’, which was ‘certainly the greatest ever run’. [35] Félix Lévitan wrote that ‘Marcel Hansenne was beaten as he wished, in the French way, with panache. He went down like a Saint-Cyrian.’ [36] Finally, Pujazon was the athlete to be most criticized by Le Parisien, which considered that the champion ‘should recognize his defeat’ instead of trying to make excuses and maintaining a ‘troubled climate’, or cursing the journalists. [37]

Put briefly, no matter what the performance – original and joyful, as in the case of the three medals of M. Ostermeyer, or the contrasting performance of A. Jany – media coverage of the London Olympics revealed the growing importance of sports feats in shaping the national imagination. It was also one of the reasons why the French press did not mention Britain’s sports results, which were too few and not particularly distinguished in its opinion to be associated with any renewal of British sport. This is difficult to envisage for a France animated by competition with its British neighbour. At the most, Le Parisien mentioned ‘a devalued medal in the 4 × 100m’, probability because the French team didn’t win a medal in this race. [38]
Generally speaking, the nine gold, seven silver and eleven bronze medals won in the XIVth Olympics by the French team were interpreted and used by the media in a manner that exemplified an increasing politicization of sport within the nation. [39] In this sense, the articles that appeared in the French press confirmed the process. For *Le Populaire*, for example:

The die is cast. But our athletes in the major event that is the Olympics collected only headaches. ... Our athletes were correctly and sportingly beaten by men who were stronger, more combative and who knew how to suffer. Ours do not know how, no longer know how to suffer. They were told so often that they were supermen, true gods of the stadium, that they believed it. Convinced of their superiority, they never even began to imagine they could be beaten. ... We much prefer the silent elegance, far from the need for sensational interviews, with which our little guys, and especially our young girls, succeeded in sports that were perhaps a little less spectacular, but were enough to see the French colours run up the mast almost every day. [40]

**Contrasting Figures of Foreign Exemplariness**

In the context of the conference held in London in June 1948, with the aim of discussing the sharing-out of occupied territory, Franco-British relations of this period were marked by a reciprocal distrust. [41] Despite being allies, the French suspected the British of setting up a domination of Europe in the shadow of the Americans, while the British regarded the assertions of the French as ridiculous. The German question fuelled numerous controversies on both sides of the Channel. Until 1948, the French opposed Great Britain’s desire to see the three occupied German zones in the west transformed into an organized country, which could serve as a rampart against the extension of Communism. The French were opposed to such a perspective, defending the need for them to continue governing the Saar region alone. The idea of a restored – and once again menacing – Reich never ceased to haunt the minds of the French, whereas the British were, above all, intent on achieving an anti-Russian front as quickly as possible. According to S. Berstein and P. Milza, it was clear that the United States and its allies, of which Britain was one, could not take ‘the risk of maintaining a vacuum at the heart of Europe, into which their adversaries could be tempted to rush’. [42] For this reason, the Anglo-Saxons requested that France moderate its behaviour to finally accept a new autonomous Germany that came into being on 8 May, 1949, with the drafting of the Berlin Constitution. [43]

The London games, which opened a month after the conference of June 1948, forced French diplomats to face their responsibilities about the emerging Berlin crisis. While the delegations attending the London conference recognized that it was ‘necessary to give the German people the possibility, within the framework of a free and democratic government, to one day obtain the re-establishment of their unity that was currently torn apart’, the French representatives were asked to be less intransigent towards Germany and more attentive to the Communist threat.
On both sides of the Channel, the London Olympics were considered an opportunity to reinforce the Anglo-French alliance, still too fragile in the middle of 1948. Furthermore, both camps had high expectations concerning Avery Brundage, the future president of the IOC (1952–72), yet his ambivalent manner did nothing to appease French and British mistrust. [44] At the level of international relations, peace appeared more fragile than ever, and only a rapprochement between the two colonial powers could pave the way for the re-building of European stability. The exclusion of the Germans and Japanese, the presence of the Italians and the absence of the Soviets [45] during these games led to geopolitical arguments becoming the cornerstone of all analysis, against the background of Anglo-French competitiveness.

Paying no heed to the fact that the Olympic Games were being organized in a difficult context, with Europe in ruins, and just 12 years after the previous ones, French public opinion considered that the games had to show excellence. Well before the opening, the French were in great doubt as to the capacity of the British to come up to scratch:

As far as the organization of the Games is concerned, we risk being badly let down. We would be happy to be proved wrong, but we do not think that the British will be able to rival the Germans in this area. . . . From a sports point of view, . . . the war . . . has weighed heavily on the recruitment of combatants. It has eliminated the vanquished, certain of whom played a great role: the Germany of 1936 with its throwers, Japan with its jumpers. As in 1936, the USSR, which has become a top-ranking athletics country, will not be represented. [46]

In the same burst, the manager of l’Equipe, moreover suspected of collaborating, [47] associated ‘the negligence’ [48] of the organizers with the damaging absence of certain countries, required by such a high-quality competition, more particularly Russia. [49] The comparative approach with Hitlerian Germany underlined the fascination of French observers for a rationalized sports organization, which not only contrasted with the national situation, but also with British uncertainties, notably financial. By turning the 1936 games into a grandiose event, which was recognized as such by the French press, [50] Germany set a model of success which could not be neglected by subsequent games without the risk of their being weakened and disappearing altogether. The London games thus represented the possibility of a real regression in the opinion of the French public, which finally regretted a certain form of gigantism in these games. Three days after the start of the competition, Jacques Goddet’s editorial in L’Equipe was a veritable indictment, whose title left no doubt as to the thinking of the writer: ‘The Games have washed up on an island’. A pretentious host, little aware of the honour it had acquired and its responsibilities in terms of the prestigious competition it had been charged with, might well create a blot in Olympic history – such was the image of the games as perceived by the French:

Why London? . . . From a sports point of view, the choice is . . . questionable. It is to be feared that Great Britain, which has suffered so much, will not be able
to come up with an organization comparable to Berlin’s materially and technically. With two weeks to go, the track at Wembley has hardly been started, the organization committee, overwhelmed, leaves everyone in the dark about the essentials.

The country is a victim of its sporting tradition: sport is solidly anchored there, but in an empirical way, spurred on by love of the game and popular fêtes. It is a far cry from the quasi-scientific, in any case rigorous, conception demonstrated by the Germans twelve years ago.

However, although guaranteeing the success of the Games looks set to overwhelm the organizers, the universal character of the latter brilliantly asserts itself. [51]

Henceforth, the French press ceaselessly pilloried the organizers for a lack of visibility around the event in the British capital, when sport was supposed to serve the prestige of Great Britain. [52] Londoners’ inability to give information about the whereabouts of the competitions, the lack of signposting and deficient staging, were but some of the recriminations. The correspondent of Le Figaro insisted on the following last point, which was not without political significance:

A few banners with the five Olympic colours . . . pitifully hanging from their masts in the great heat; a few national flags of the most standard type on the façades of shops . . . London is no more animated than on any ordinary day. . . . Admit that for a foreign journalist . . . it is somewhat of a surprise to find nothing of the atmosphere that he was expecting, which his memory was all ready to liken to the different, but equally sensitive atmosphere he remembered from Berlin in 1936, Los Angeles in 1932, Amsterdam in 1928 and Paris in 1924. [53]

Most of the Olympic symbols then served to underline increasing negligence. On several occasions, readers were reminded that the flame had gone out on the route to London. The absence of coordination with the IOC was also mentioned. The irresponsibility of the London officers, particularly Lord Burghley, president of the organizing committee, was referred to: ‘The Olympic flag has disappeared, the one floating over Richmond Park was stolen yesterday. . . . Those who had already arrived were complaining bitterly that they lacked facilities to train.’ [54] To these symbolic aspects were added practical consequences affecting the athletes directly, ‘The settling-in of the different delegations did not always go smoothly. The Australian team had to leave the premises it was occupying . . . to make room for the Swedish, Danish and Italian athletes.’ [55]

In fact, the French daily newspapers perceived the British sporting model to be in decline, and scoffed at the certitudes that saw Great Britain as the home of sport: ‘Never has one seen an Olympic programme built in such a chaotic and illogical manner. In England, the sports officials work alone, each in their corner.’ [56] The idea of spreading the sites over the capital, London, owing to an out-of-date British concept that wanted to give an equal place to all sports, was subject to a great amount of criticism, since it resulted in the number of attendees differing considerably from what one might have expected for the Olympics:
Given the lack of enthusiasm shown by London spectators at the prospect of attending the final events, one tends to imagine that they are over. It is a mistake and an injustice, and if certain sports that are qualified, heaven knows why, as ‘minor’ do not have a proper attendance, it is largely due to bad organization. [57]

On the contrary, when the public was present, journalists were chauvinistic: ‘One of the things that rather surprises and disappoints me concerning the British public is the exaggerated encouragement they produce every time one of their compatriots participates in an Olympic event.’ [58] The fact that the marking-out of the winning line in the 400 metres’ finals had been forgotten was also a subject of derision, in order to stress British ignorance of even the most obvious of sporting rules. Finally, the boxing tournament that closed the Olympic fortnight underlined the incompetence of the officials, for ‘it was a complete mess’, [59] especially when it led to the elimination of the French boxers. There were also the hesitations of the organizers:

The Olympic Committee, which had waited for a series of catastrophes in the boxing competition before sorting out its referees . . . so ineptly that yesterday saw a new scandal take place. . . . The weight of the accusations weighing on the organizers of the 1948 Games gets heavier by the day. It is high time for the closing ceremony. It will be met with more relief than regret. [60]

Such attacks also allowed thinly veiled criticism of British culture. [61] The way of life was the primary target of the observers. Indeed, they frequently underlined the country’s questionable culinary tastes in comparison with superior French gastronomy, in order to show yet another form of superiority. The criticism became a travesty when it touched on things that could not be controlled, such as the weather. Many regretted the torrid heat in London that caused spectators to suffer from sunstroke, [62] while others mocked the changeable climate. The articles published in the French papers left a negative impression on the reader, thus helping to create a public opinion that was suspicious of Great Britain.

The behaviour of Londoners was also a recurrent theme used to underline a certain apathy. The lack of rigorous organization was accompanied by unacceptable behaviour from all protagonists, ‘The organization . . . beat all records for disorganization. For a whole hour, watch in hand, in the middle of a meeting, no event took place. On the lawn, the officials were yawning.’ [63] This repeated line of discourse illustrated a British population that was little concerned by the competitions and who, in the end, demonstrated a feeling of superiority that the French press often relayed. It contributed to the devalorization of a British empire, where reality belied its power and greatness, and contrasted with the self-satisfaction of the British. [64] Swaying between humour and contempt, journalists pushed a degraded image of the British people:

although ignoring how excited Laplanders can get for a seal hunting contest or how the little men of the Tierra del Fuego cheer an Assegai event, I admit that I have
never seen such mixed enthusiasm as that of the British public during these Olympic Games, ... a public that enjoys the reputation of having a better understanding and greater love of sport than any other, has gone way beyond what we can call composure when they greet the performance of an athlete in front of them, without warming their palms or fatiguing their vocal chords. ... Is it due to an excess of individualism, an excess of xenophobia or bitterness that British sport has lost its previous supremacy in most specialities? [65]

Everything was thus used as an excuse to compare habits on both sides of the Channel, in order to point up French superiority, which was objectivized in the field when the French gained more medals than the British, and came several places above Britain in the medals table. [66]

The sports atmosphere around the Olympics was thus an allegory of the British nation, a stage setting for a decline of which the British themselves were convinced. [67] The London Olympics were the occasion for symbolic confrontation by the French press some years after the Liberation. Although the remarkable role of the British people in the 1945 victory was regularly praised, it was with the objective of stressing their defects in comparison with French culture. These games were thus the occasion to show measured Anglophobia, usually in an implicit way, and not without geo-symbolical stakes that were contradictory to the mission of the Olympics, and which was to re-gild national prestige across the Channel. [68]

**Games of Peace?**

It has already been emphasized that the competition was held at a turning-point in Olympic history. Indeed, the constant line of discourse linking the Berlin Olympics with those taking place in the British capital showed a desire to establish a relationship between them:

This position led to geopolitical reflection in the case of many of the observers. ... Germany is 'out', so is Japan. If the Italian delegation was to keep its petulance, it should no longer send reports back to Rome. It was not the superiority of our Yankee friends that could worry us, such superiority was the native value of men belonging to a race that had turned sport into a rule of hygiene. ... Politics could only be seen in the shadow of their absence. The USSR had not taken up its invitation. [69]

Although the countries present led to a debate on the level of their sporting preparation, it was the absent ones that were the centre of attention. In a period marked by the re-composition of the Western bloc to face the USSR, the latter refused to participate in what it still considered to be a bourgeois sporting event. [70] Whereas this absence had been considered by many to be in the nature of things during the inter-war period, [71] it raised questions in 1948 that led the majority of the French press to call for the presence of Soviet athletes, [72] who were a guarantee of the quality of the Olympic titles:
The Olympic Games are a festival of sport only, they have not and should not have any other goal than to see... the champions of all the nations confront each other, with the exception of those who, by their acts, have excluded themselves from the world sporting community or those who refuse to accept the rules, considered to be extremely simple. On this last point, it is regrettable that the USSR declined the invitation of the Olympic Games Committee, which did not require them to make any concessions in doctrine or act. [73]

The sporting argument was the first to be put forward in order to justify the need to welcome all countries. Although Germany [74] and Japan were expected to return to the stadium – a possibility that was expressed as early as 1946 [75] – the absence of the USSR still raised questions: ‘One could but regret the absence of the Russian champions, and especially the women champions.’ [76] Evidence of the sports level of Soviet athletes had, in fact, been given, particularly during the international matches where their victories had multiplied since the Liberation and through the increasingly frequent world records, especially in athletics. [77] Having hoped that the London games would be those of renewal and communion of the different peoples, many felt that the final result of the Olympic fortnight was mixed.

Finally, for the Olympics to have all their value, it was to be hoped that those of Helsinki would really be called worldwide. It is no doubt preferable that countries such as Germany and Japan were excluded from the first post-war games. It is, nevertheless, a fact that the absent German throwers were sorely missed in London. As for the Japanese swimmers, they found a truly spiritual way to reply to their eviction by breaking the world 400m and 1500m records.

The case of the USSR was somewhat special. The officers of the Soviet Federation declared that they had abstained from attending the London games because they had not been invited. They were not going to miss Helsinki. The reserves of the Russians in terms of human resources were endless, and although their training methods were sometimes still basic, the performances of their athletes bore witness to their indisputable natural qualities: ‘Let’s hope that the Helsinki Games will be the real Games of peace!’ [78] The change in position was considerable compared to previous games, where a block had formed against USSR participation. [79] The latter was, moreover, also rejected by the French Communist daily which was, henceforth, implicitly in favour of a competition that was perceived as an international showcase. In people’s minds, the principle that the Olympics should welcome all countries and be the theatre of pacific confrontation established itself, thus making London the last Olympics marked by the absence of the USSR and its satellites (with the exception of later boycotts). To a certain extent, it thus consecrated the ideology of Olympic universalism. [80]

The political argument was the position taken by the French. In fact, the alliance knit together during the Second World War could have supposed the Soviets would be integrated into a changed international community, represented on the sports level by the Olympics. Although the division in France between Gaullists and Communists was clearly established in 1948, and more so since the return of the right
wing to André Marie’s government in July 1948 made it obvious that the exclusion of Communists was ineffective. While it was believed that the necessary action should be taken to bring the USSR into the Olympic movement, subtle criticism of the lack of will both in the IOC and the British organizing committee filtered out [81]. The USSR was not a member of the IOC and it followed the games in England with a critical eye. In the first place, the press attacked the composition of the IOC. It was surprised to see that among its members were those who had organized the games 12 years earlier in Hitler’s Germany, and it went on to attack Brundage, head of the US Olympic Association and vice-president of the IOC in particular:

On the other hand, these Games were never going to be a truly equal competition between all races and all countries. Among the competitors could be found no athletes from Israel, and Moscow Radio insinuated that the IOC had looked for an excuse not to allow Jewish athletes to come to London. [82]

Hope thus gave way to regrets, and many considered that the London Olympics were a failure that it would be unwise to repeat, as it risked weakening the Olympic structure. In spite of conventional affirmations that the Olympics were apolitical, political analysis of the London Olympics was omnipresent in the French press. Already in evidence since the 1930s, the idea of using sports performances as a tool for evaluating national strength was reinforced, and the XIVth Olympics were the scene of geopolitical confrontation; even if the protagonists did not actually meet:

Certain publicists stated that the abstention of the USSR at Wembley was dictated by the desire to avoid a sporting defeat that could damage its prestige. ... These were the quibbling arguments employed by the political adversaries of the USSR. In anti-Soviet unison, sports questions could not escape the orders dictated by the big shots of Yankee capitalism ... those who sent the colours of their country to the top of the Olympic mast could only take advantage of a rather diminished world supremacy. The real world Olympic Games can only be when sport, as part of human condition, is free from capitalist exploitation and its hypocritical pseudo-amateurism. [83]

Although those absent figured prominently in the French press, there were naturally numerous comments on the performances of those athletes who did attend. Set against the perception of the USSR, the United States of America was seen as a model in terms of its success and the power demonstrated during these games.

The major event for the French media was the total domination of the Americans. Accentuated by the Soviet absence, this seemed all the more symbolic given that certain of their victories were achieved against emblematic French athletes (A. Jany, M. Hansenne etc.) whose success had been deemed certain by many:

If there is an undeniable conclusion to be drawn from the London Olympics, more than from earlier editions, it is certainly the absolute supremacy of the representatives of the American nation over world sport.

It is said that the Americans are rich, that they have an endless reservoir of top athletes, so many truths that are amply demonstrated.
The Americans, in fact, benefit from something quite different, their conception of sport. They went to war like they did business; they perceive sport like they see war, that is to say by placing power of execution and efficiency first. [84]

The link between the victory of the Allies under the aegis of the Americans three years earlier and that on the sports field was taken up by most of the French media. The ‘great American trust’ [85] raised many questions, not only concerning the means employed that led to doubts being expressed over the amateur status of their representatives, but also to the drawing of greater conclusions. Contrary to the British, who were the object of a great deal of criticism, admiration could be perceived in comments that wanted to appear rational:

In all modern activity, the American methods have done wonders. ... The American success in athletics and swimming, the two basic Olympic sports, is due ... as much to the qualities of this new race, this race of pioneers, made up of exchanges, enriched by new blood, as to their mastery of the specific organization of the Olympic Games. There is also, in day-to-day life, a care for personal hygiene, from the mysteries of fecundity to the blooming of adolescence. Eugenics over there has become a science.

Finally ... the infinite possibilities of selection ... the diversity of the types and the number of adherents allows choice to be based on morphology. [86]

The concept of race is thus used to interpret the domination of American sportsmen and women. Impressed, the editor of L’Équipe developed a naturalist interpretation, which perhaps suggested that France had neglected this aspect. It was thus a question of taking inspiration from the American model, whose spontaneous eugenics seemed to work, and organizing it to develop a eugenic structure. Although scientific arguments were not lacking, social issues were prominent three years after France’s experience under Vichy, the memory of which was re-activated by the analysis to which the 1948 Olympics gave rise.

Moderate Anglophobia, associated with a reinforced pro-American feeling, led to the American sports model being exemplified. To be precise, it constituted a reference that could be used to judge the level of French sport. Far from being a bitter criticism, this position made it possible to bring out the strengths of a country that had certainly been weakened, but possessed strengths that should be brought to the attention of readers:

To American power, we willingly oppose French patience. It is more in keeping with the fundamental qualities of our race. It permits us to shine in those sports where technique requires a long apprenticeship, a method that has been thought through, precision of gesture, refinement in details and labour which is sometimes unrewarding and off-putting. In these sports, success is dependent on intelligence. A Chevalier, a Buhan or an Oriola are its products. [87]

Even though similar attitudes could be found concerning basketball or cycling, where France had shone, the bitterness of the journalists was only greater, in contrast with British athletes:
There is a French malady, quite different from that put forward, in London, by our representatives who were beaten or in a bad state. This malady has its roots in many causes: low demography, out-of-date sporting concepts, lack of means and equipment. There are, besides that, qualities and assets that could figure as a consolation. [88]

Conclusion

If the main bonus of the 1948 London Games remained that of their having taken place, for want of being the real renewal of the Olympics, they nonetheless participated in the resetting of the international sports chessboard, while being placed at the very centre of the reconstruction of a Europe that had suffered considerably from the Second World War. [89]

As a result of these first Cold War games, the geopolitical calibration continued as best it could, given the considerable weight of national imaginations in their reception. At that moment, the London games not only helped to better understand international relations, but also contributed to a clear perception of the growing influence of Anglo-Saxon culture [90] in mass French imagination under the Fourth Republic, while the latter had still to define its foreign policy. [91] In other terms, the games were a reflection of the Anglo-French relations at that time. They showed, at one and the same time, the convergence and divergence of the two countries, in line with the debates that animated their respective diplomatic moves concerning the political pact that France, Belgium and Britain had been discussing since 21 January 1948. [92] Globally, the French press did not budge from this principle. Even if ‘our athlete swimmers did much better than in Berlin’, [93] French journalists noted that

Generally speaking, our representatives behaved honourably, but that it was necessary to remove some of the managers who, in London, had shown their incompetence and stupidity. … For the rest of us, the XIVth Olympics were strangely disconcerting. We had days of glory and days of disaster. At the end of the day, country ranking placed us third in the immense competition. … Behind us, we find Great Britain. Behind us, we see Italy. … It was thus primordial for national propaganda that the millions of people, who attentively follow a sporting event of the size of the Olympics, can get an idea of the health of our country, of the vigour of its youth, from the results obtained by them in the Games. [93]

Although, with nine Olympic golds, seven silver and 11 bronze medals, certainly ‘France avoided looking ridiculous’. [94] Even if it was third in the medals table the ambivalence of the accounts, as has been seen in the French press, confirmed contradictory considerations concerning sport on both sides of the Channel, as well as over the Atlantic. At the end of the Olympic fortnight, the achievements of the Anglo-Saxons increasingly became certitudes that it was fitting to use as inspiration, in line with international relations, which were falling into place at the dawn of the 1950s.
Notes

[16] L’Aurore France Libre, 27 July 1948
[18] L’Aurore France Libre, 27 July 1948
[22] La Croix, 2 Aug. 1948.
[27] L’Aurore France Libre, 8 and 9 Aug. 1948.
[31] Le Parisien, 1 and 2 Aug. 1948.
[33] Le Parisien, 3 Aug. 1948.
[34] P. Lewden, Le Parisien, 4 Aug. 1948.
[35] Le Parisien, 8 and 9 Aug. 1948. Saint Cyr is the most famous Military School in France.
[37] Le Parisien, 10 Aug. 1948.
[38] Callède, Les politiques sportives en France.
[40] Vaïsse, Les relations internationales depuis 1945.
[41] Berstein and Milza, Histoire de la France au XXe siècle, 162.
Parks, ‘Verbal Gymnastics’.


Abgrall and Thomazeau, 1936. La France à l’épreuve des jeux Olympiques de Berlin.


M. Capelle, “‘Je déclare ouverts les XIVe Jeux olympiques’”, Le Figaro, 29 July 1924.

Le Populaire, 24 July 1948.

Le Populaire, 25 and 26 July 1948.


L’Aurore France Libre, 15 and 16 Aug. 1948.


Caute, The Dancer Defects.

‘Tandis que le stade de Wembley archicomble, des gens frappés d’insolation s’évanouissent par dizaines’, L’Aurore France Libre, 30 July 1948.

Le Parisien, 10 Aug. 1948.


Baker, ‘Sport and National Prestige’.


Gounot, ‘Face au sport moderne (1919–1939)’.

Keys, Globalizing Sport; Arnaud and Wahl, Sport et relations internationales.

Peppard and Riordan, Playing Politics.

M. Capelle, ‘62 nations . . . 17 sports . . . 6 000 athlètes’, Le Figaro, 22 July 1948.

Buschmann and Lennartz, ‘Germany and the 1948 Olympic Games in London’.


Le Parisien, 17 Aug. 1948.

Nina Doumbadze thus improved on the Moscow world record discus throw during the London Olympic Games, with a throw that was eight metres longer than that of Frenchwoman, M. Ostermeyer, winner of the Olympic title.


Attali and Froissart, ‘La représentation des JO de 1924 dans les presses de droite’.


Burghley went to Moscow to try and persuade Soviet entry.


Le Parisien, 3 Aug. 1948.


Ibid.
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