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The up-front legacies of France 2019: changing the face of 'le foot féminin'

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ABSTRACT

The drive to develop women's football in France, a game 100 years old albeit one long-stigmatised, was thrust into high gear in 2011. Since then, a confluence of events and cultural changes, from on-field results and officials' investment of greater resources to winning the 2019 World Cup host bid, greater mediatisation of women's players, and more – including the spectacular 2010 meltdown of *Les Bleus* in South Africa – have combined to energise and grow the game. This newfound dynamism was unforeseen a decade ago and illustrates some of France's biggest World Cup legacies: the up-front investments underpinning the sport's development during the 2010s, and the ways the country has repackaged itself as a champion of women's football and women in football, forever changing the face of 'le foot féminin'.

KEYWORDS France; women's football; media; *Les Bleus*; World Cup; sports diplomacy

'A trophy for us will be a turning point for women's football in France', French international and long-time Olympique Lyonnais Féminin (OL) skipper Wendie Renard told *The Players' Tribune* of her hopes for the 2019 FIFA World Cup.

But with this tournament little girls all over ... in Martinique, and in France especially, they will see us. They'll see us out there. In our own space. They'll see this job: a woman who plays football.¹

Renard's hopes were extinguished in *Les Bleus'* quarterfinal loss to the United States, 1–2, on 29 June 2019, but the tournament can still be considered a 'win' for France. Record-setting crowds, television audiences, and mediatisation thrust women's football into the domestic limelight for four weeks in unprecedented ways. Although foreigners remarked on the lack of marketing and publicity in public spaces around Paris and some of the host cities, there was a historic saturation of women's football across French sports and news publications, television broadcasts, print and television advertising, and digital sites.

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It is hard to overstate just how quickly women's football in France has changed. Growing up in 1990s Martinique, Renard was told that her dream of being a footballer was not possible as a professional women's league did not exist; today she captains one of the winningest clubs in the history of the global game, proving that women can earn a living and follow their dreams. There are several factors that play into how and why French women's football developed so rapidly, but conversations with players, coaches, and officials past and present point to 2011 as a key watershed moment.

It is a clear demarcation line for French Football Federation (FFF) Vice President Brigitte Henriques, a midfielder with *Les Bleues*, from 1988 until 1997. 'We can say that we have a before this [2011] World Cup and after', she said.

Before, nobody knew anything about women's football. It is like we did not exist. Nobody was talking about us in the media. But because of the great achievement we had for the first time [placing fourth at the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup], when we came back [to] France, it was incredible, because people discovered that women's football does exist in France and it was a great surprise for us.²

That year was a watershed in several ways. The election of Noël Le Graët as FFF president and his subsequent rollout of a plan to 'feminise' football, one which led to France hosting the 2019 World Cup, was a major turning point. Increased media coverage of a winning *Les Bleues* provided increased access as the nation to discover their women's team while social media portrayed a well-comported team, a contrast to their male counterpart's public image following the 2010 South Africa World Cup and team strike.

Most people think of legend Zinedine Zidane or legend-in-the-making Kylian Mbappé when they think of France and football, but the 2019 hosts worked to diversify such perceptions and realities. Although there is still room for improvement, the dynamism launched in 2011 illustrates the biggest legacies of France 2019: the up-front investments that underpin a sea change in women's football in an attempt to situate France as a champion of women in football, changing the face of *le football féminin*.

Origin story

Recent French efforts to champion the women's game are notable for until recently, France has not been known as a major football country, let alone a women's footballing one. Instead, it is the United States that has served as a standard bearer for the game's growth, fandom, and potential when girls and women can pursue football. It is a dynamism fuelled by a lineage uninterrupted by restrictions or bans, one underpinned by the 1972 Title IX legislation that paved the way for greater opportunities for

girls to play sports, and leadership in the fight for greater equality for female players.

Henriques recalled that she adored playing matches in the United States because of the excitement and number of fans who turned out.³ It was thus no surprise that as FIFA launched the Women's World Cup and Olympic football tournaments in the 1990s, the United States was a dominant force in international competition alongside China, Norway, and Germany, winning the 1991 and 1999 World Cups, as well as the 1996 Olympic gold medal. The French national team of that era did not qualify for those tournaments.⁴ This began to change after 1998 when *Les Bleus* won the men's world title, providing a multitude of legacies that took root and escalated dramatically in 2011 when *Les Bleues*, then ranked seventh in the world, became regular competitors at FIFA and Olympic tournaments.⁵

Despite this late arrival to the modern-day scene, *le foot féminin* has a long pedigree. France imported football from Britain in the late nineteenth century, but the game was one played by men, as Laurence Prudhomme-Poncet argues; in fact, French sports life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was predominantly masculine.⁶ That is why, as Pierre Bordieau points out, sport was long associated with the male body.⁷ While physical culture in the form of calisthenics, swimming, and dancing was encouraged for healthy female bodies, the more active, rough-and-tumble team sports such as football were not, for they were viewed as too violent for women.⁸

The First World War created conditions in which a short-lived women's football scene, one whose roots were based in Paris, emerged. The first organised women's match in France occurred in the capital on 30 September 1917, when members of Femina Sport squared off against each other; one week later a second match was played at Stade Brancion in Vanves between two teams from Club Français.⁹ Other matches took place and teams charged spectators admission.¹⁰ Yet, such competitions remained *caché*, hidden from public discourse with very little media coverage, effectively keeping women's football out of the limelight.¹¹

The game continued as a new era of women's emancipation marked postwar society. By 1920, a French squad played its first international match against England's Dick Kerr Ladies, launching the world's first 'viral' football moment when the two captains kissed on the cheek before kick-off.¹² But the number of players remained very small. During the 1922–23 season, approximately 200 women played across 14 Parisian-area and three regional clubs (Toulouse, Reims, and Tourcoing), and dwindled drastically by the mid-1930s as opposition built to women playing the game.¹³ Doctors, journalists, sportsmen, and the FFF, which from its inception prohibited women from joining, deemed football too masculine.¹⁴ By 1941, even the Vichy Government agreed and ruled it too harmful for women to play.¹⁵

In many ways, the discourse mirrored similar concerns, medical arguments, and gendered notions of what women should or should not do to maintain healthy bodies in other countries.¹⁶ Moreover, prohibiting full regulation and governance of women's football transformed the game away from one of fun, healthy physical activity and into one of entertainment and spectacle, as Jean Williams argues with respect to the English case.¹⁷ Instead, Frenchwomen were encouraged to take up sports more in line with perceptions of femininity, notably basketball, at football's expense.¹⁸ As a result, while there is a long, elite lineage of women's basketball in France, there is no such counter-narrative for football as Frenchwomen ceased active, organised league competitions after 1937.

The interconnected youth and sports crises of the 1960s began to change cultural attitudes towards sports. Officials and parents alike sought out organised sporting activities for a baby-boom generation raised in a new era of consumer goods, leisure time, and fears of teenage delinquency.¹⁹ This was reflected in changed attitudes towards physical activity, as Patrick Clastres argues, away from a gymnastics-focused physical culture associated with military service and motherhood towards the leisure-time activity of sports.²⁰ Moreover, baby-boomers were increasingly influenced by their counterparts across the English Channel, whose miniskirts, Beatles, and football symbolised a new global youth culture based on peace and prosperity.

Girls and women took up sport in greater numbers, urged on by government policies and programmes designed to create a more sportive society. The end goal of such state involvement in the everyday lives of its young citizens was to find talented women and men who could ultimately win medals and championship titles to portray a revived, rejuvenated France.²¹ Such efforts coincided with a new wave of feminism, marked most memorably by the May 1968 movement.²²

French society experienced vast changes during the 1960s beyond the sports realm. As the baby-boomers aged into the country's institutions of university, industry, and the professions, they challenged the status quo of their parents' generation. They questioned older attitudes on social issues, including gender and class divisions, state-imposed restrictions on industries like television and advertising, foreign policy, and the country's political life. What began as a student protest that March erupted into student revolt at universities countrywide in May, and spread into a general country-wide strike that June as workers joined in to protest the government and agitate for better labour concessions.

The May 1968 movement impacted the sports world. Professional male footballers went on strike, occupying FFF headquarters with demands for better contracts with improved labour and wage guarantees to rectify 'slave-like' working conditions. Influential sports daily *L'Équipe* ceased publication as its journalists went on strike. The French Basketball Federation (FFBB)

relaxed a labour rule that restricted the number of foreign players on teams. While 1968 did not topple the de Gaulle government, it was impactful and on the sports side resulted in a greater allocation of finances and resources to continue to encourage for more youths to play.

Sports benefited, but mostly the disciplines perceived as more feminine. Basketball remained the dominant team sport and the late 1960s and 1970s were a golden age as all-time greats Jacky Chazalon and Elisabeth Riffiod won titles and medals with Clermont Université Club, the famed 'Demoiselles de Clermont'. Their results generated media coverage that exalted female *basketteuses* and inspired later generations, particularly Riffiod's son, NBA champion Boris Diaw, to play the game.

Women's football, though it re-emerged at the same time, remained *caché*. Part of this was due to the way that it returned to the scene. Prudhomme-Poncet argues that the first women's teams created in the mid-1960s were produced as a spectacle, as a way to titillate male spectators, and were thus perceived as a sort of sports parody.²³ Part of the sport's hidden nature was also related to a long-held anti-football bias by the nation's opinion-making elites, one formed by a dedication to amateurism enshrined in the ideals of Pierre de Coubertin and one that football, the first major team sport to professionalise in the 1930s, was perceived to flaunt.²⁴ There was pride that a Frenchman helped bring into fruition the modern-day Olympics and that the country's Olympians historically fared well and 'won' for the nation.²⁵ That is why the sports crisis exposed by poor results at the 1960 Rome Games provoked the government into action.²⁶

The hidden nature of the women's game also tied into the reality that sports mediatisation was relatively new in France; a few print publications like *L'Humanité* had published a multi-page sports spread for years but the major news dailies of *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* dedicated no more than the token page to the topic. The emergence of *L'Équipe* in the post-1945 era as a viable, durable media enterprise changed the equation and turned sport into entertainment.²⁷ With its focus on selling newspapers, *L'Équipe*'s editorial team catered to the paying public and its focus on professional football and cycling. Nonetheless, some women were serious about playing and ushered in a new era of potential.

The FFF relaunched women's football, recognising it on 29 March 1970, which allowed teams to formally organise, players to officially register, and games to be regularly contested.²⁸ It was not something that the federation proactively took upon itself to do; its hand was forced by female players' grass-roots efforts to create an unofficial national team in 1968, especially teammates from a small club in Reims.²⁹ Thus slowly, a small football community was built, including an official national team composed (primarily of women from the Reims team). *Les Bleues* played what the FFF later recognised their first official international match on 17 April 1971 against the

Netherlands (which they won, 4-0), a game later acknowledged by FIFA as the first official international women's match. The team also represented France at the non-official women's World Cup tournament later that year in Mexico, playing in front of some 60,000 fans in Azteca Stadium.³⁰

Although the FFF continued to build basic structures for women's football, including creation of a women's amateur league (D1) in 1974, the sport remained stigmatised and its numbers small. Henriques recalled that growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, girls like herself played football, but theirs was a game practiced informally in the streets or in schools. 'It was something exceptional', Henriques said of how women played without thinking much about organised club play. Moreover, players were subjected to stereotypes of being tomboys, lesbians, and worse. 'They said that you were a boy, not a girl, or that you were strange', she recalled.³¹

The stigma of football as a masculine sport endured until very recently. It is a sentiment that Sonia Bompastor, who played for France from 2000 to 2012, encountered even at home. Born in Blois in 1980, Bompastor grew up playing badminton and tennis but, coming from a family where football was part of daily life, her first love was the 'beautiful game'. Her father was a referee and her older brother played with the local club, thus Bompastor often found herself on the pitch. 'Each Saturday and Sunday, I would go with them to the field and that's how I began to want to play football', she said.³² Her mother, however, was originally hesitant to let her play, fearful of the stereotypes – of being branded different, bizarre, and a tomboy – that Bompastor might have to fight against.³³

One of Bompastor's contemporaries, current FFF Secretary General Laura Georges, who played for France from 2001 until 2018, also noted that such stereotypes were common throughout her childhood. *Footballeuses* were made fun of for having big thighs and being unfeminine, she recalled.³⁴ 'People were surprised when I said I played football', Georges said. 'They said "oh, but you're feminine!"' an image at odds with their preconceived ideas of what a football player could look like.³⁵ Even though *Les Bleues* played competitive matches and the D1 existed, there was next-to-no media coverage of women's football and relatively few players, thus such images were allowed to go unchecked and unquestioned. Things began to change after 1998, albeit very slowly at first.

The legacies of 1998

Unlike 2019, the legacies of hosting the 1998 World Cup were realised after, not before, the tournament. One of that summer's bequests was inspiring new generations who dreamed of being the next Zidane.³⁶ 'The men being world champions, that really boosted women's soccer in France', said Kani Konté, a 29-year old former professional player who

now coaches teenage girls at VGA Saint Maur in the southeastern Parisian suburbs.³⁷

Konté was one of those impressionable girls. Although she grew up playing football alongside her brothers on the local field near their suburban Paris neighbourhood, Konté registered with the FFF following the 12 July 1998 World Cup final. 'It was really what propelled me to pursue [football], to get a license and play with a club', she said of that game's thrilling experience.³⁸

But resources were scarce. Girls like Konté had to enrol in their local football clubs and play mostly with boys for there were very few girls-only clubs. France (and many other countries) requires athletes of all levels to register each year with their national sports federation and obtain a license – a piece of paper attesting that the athlete is in good health and standing to compete in organised competition with their club. It is a metric used to determine a sport's popularity and thus how to allocate financial and other resources. The FFF had 34,997 licensed female players during the 1999–2000 season – just 1.8% of the entire football-playing population.³⁹ The lack of registered players translated into a lack of resources for *le football féminin* at the local community level, but young women who demonstrated promise and benefitted from another 1998 legacy: Clairefontaine.

The FFF's National Football Institute moved to Clairefontaine in 1988, and ever since then the town's name is shorthand for elite football. Clairefontaine was (and remains) where the national team trained, as well as where the federation developed the country's best young stars like 1998 World Champion Thierry Henry. As part of its World Cup host legacy, the FFF created an elite training section for girls at Clairefontaine, dedicated space where they could be coached, finesse technical skills and game know-how, improve physical fitness, and complete their academic and football studies – just as the FFF and professional clubs groomed teenaged boys in the skills and scholastics of the game. Creation of this programme also demonstrated the federation's commitment to forming the next generation of elite female footballers and providing them with the same coaching, scientific, and technical expertise used to develop elite male players.⁴⁰

Georges was one of the first girls to matriculate at Clairefontaine. For five years, she attended classes at the local town school, training on-campus in the late afternoons, balancing academics and athletics simultaneously.⁴¹ Sometimes she practiced with the boys to keep in top form. 'What makes Clairefontaine unique is the quality of the formation', she said.

It's what you learn, and you are taught by some of the best coaches in France. For me it was a kind of 'wow!' But it was one of the best experiences, to play with the best. Some of those boys are now professionals.⁴²

The 1998 tournament's legacies played out in other ways. In generating new interest in football, the victory mainstreamed the game. Moreover, and often overlooked, winning the FIFA trophy inoculated a new tradition of winning reinforced by the men's team with the 2000 Euro, the men's basketball team with the 2000 silver Olympic medal in Sydney, the ongoing strings of international titles within men's rugby and handball after 1990, and the women's basketball team, which won silver at the 1999 EuroBasket tournament and gold at the 2001 edition.

A watershed year

The legacies of 1998 took root, and by 2011 *Les Bleues* were ready for a breakthrough. While the team prepared for the Women's World Cup in Germany, Le Graët was elected FFF president in June 2011, a surprise win by an official known for his marketing and revenue-generating savvy. He appointed Henriques as Secretary General, the third highest position in the federation, and challenged her to grow the game on all fronts.⁴³ It was the first time a woman was in such a position of power within the FFF, and sent a strong signal that *Les Bleues* had a new, powerful supporter on their side.

It was a message embraced by national team players. Midfielder Camille Abily's sixteen year national team career spanned this key period of transformation. She's often credited with helping to change attitudes about women's football and footballers, but Abily points to the Le Graët effect in this undertaking. 'We have a great president who wants to improve women's football, so he gives directives to the clubs to develop women's football and also with the French team', she said of the confidence his election and subsequent policies instilled.⁴⁴

Le Graët's plan to rebuild French football was well received in the aftermath of *Les Bleus'* 2010 World Cup campaign. The team already contended with public image issues before the tournament in South Africa, but the squabbles and 'troubles' that culminated in the players' strike just before exiting after a dismal group phase further estranged the public from the team. For many French, the players' actions and attitudes were viewed as bad behaviour unfitting as athlete ambassadors of the country.⁴⁵ As Stuart Murray and Allen Pigman argue, international sports events and the elite athletes who compete in them represent and communicate on behalf of the nation, just as diplomats do.⁴⁶ This is why national teams and the comportment of their players matter and why they can represent the best (or the worst) of a nation.

French disgust with the men's team left an opening for *Les Bleues*. The team had a good public image thanks to the rise of social media platforms like Facebook and, after 2007, Twitter. It is little surprise then that Le Graët sought to rebuild the sport's public face and relationship through the

women's national team. It was a good look – but getting media exposure was tricky.

The French sports media landscape remains a tightly controlled affair, making it enormously difficult to communicate outside of reporters or publications. Thus, social media was a means for teams, leagues, and athletes to bypass the press and communicate directly with the public and cultivate fans. This was critical as so little women's sport – and women's football, in particular – was aired on broadcast media prior to 2011. Through social media platforms, *Les Bleues* could communicate directly with the French.

Many sought to dispel the stereotype that they were tomboys, lesbians, or too 'masculine', an uphill battle for sportswomen in disciplines so closely associated with masculinity like football. There were several failed or backfired attempts to put a more 'feminine' face to the team and its players, including a nude calendar in 2009. Since then, many have adopted a more feminine, stylised appearance with full make-up and manicured nails. A review of social media accounts for *Les Bleues* since 2011 illustrate the range of how players depict themselves, from the ultra-glamorous posts of Louisa Nécib-Cadamuro to the more low-key yet 'polished' looks of captain Amandine Henry and star striker Eugénie Le Sommer. For some athletes, notes Béatrice Barbusse, this is a natural expression of themselves, while for others, such forms of hyper-feminine appearance are a 'choice' they make to advance their sport, their team, or their personal brand.⁴⁷ But nothing resonated until 2011, according to the players.

That summer's tournament was memorable on many levels. It was a milestone for the eventual winners, Japan, after a fraught few months of earthquake, tsunami, nuclear meltdown, and rebuilding. But the tournament was a watershed for *Les Bleues*. They were knocked out by the United States, 3–1, in the semi-finals and ultimately finished in fourth place after a 2–1 loss to Sweden in the runner-up match. Yet, that competition demonstrated that France was competitive and solidified the place of players like Bompastor, Abily, and Georges in the lore of the women's game.

With winning results and a receptive public, the French began to tune in. *Les Bleues*' semi-final match was watched by what was then a record audience of 2.4 million at 18h00 on D8, a free television channel.⁴⁸ Access is everything, and the women's team was no longer hidden; instead they were finally part of the media landscape, though still not in prime time, and their fourth place achievement was fêted. 'The adventures of *Les Bleues* stopped in semi-final', declared *Le Monde*⁴⁹ while *Var Matin* declared, 'Women's football wants to finally seduce'.⁵⁰ Even Jean-Michel Aulas, the owner of OL Féminin, declared, 'I re-found the true enthusiasm of football' after watching ten of his OL players help *Les Bleues* to this best-ever finish.⁵¹

There was a shift within public attitudes towards the game. The parody of women's football that Prudhomme-Poncet articulated of the mid-1960s had

by now become a form of entertainment and as such was taken seriously. Integration into the sports-as-entertainment fold reflected the shift that occurred in men's football across Europe after 1980, as Dominique Marchetti and Karim Souaneff note, part of a larger Europeanisation of attitudes towards the sport.⁵² The growth of women's football across Europe at the same time, although less visible due to lack of mediatisation, was also part of the sport's Europeanisation, as Jean Williams argues.⁵³

Les Bleues had arrived. At the 2011 tournament's end, *Le Nouvel Observateur* asked, 'Must one win to finally be interesting?'⁵⁴ The answer seemed to be yes. As Bompastor noted, 'the people were more interested by women's football because it was broadcast on television. And we had good results'.⁵⁵

The new visage of French football

Since 2011, there has been what players describe as a sea change in the way the game is played, received, and perceived within France. One could argue that players have certain agendas to push with their comments, or only observe changes from the privileged level of elite players. But these women who have played or participated over the *long durée*, are helping to drive this change, and many remain closely connected to local programmes. Moreover, given the lack of mediatisation until more recently, these players' voices provide important oral histories critical for preserving and documenting the game's evolution.

For France, this evolution was propelled by good on-field results. *Les Bleues* contested the 2012 Olympic tournament for the first time, securing a fourth-place finish, and placed fifth at the 2013 Euro and 2015 World Cup. The team has also consistently been ranked among FIFA's top women's sides in the world over the past several years.

These feats are underpinned by the FFF's plan to 'feminise' football, a four-point agenda launched by Le Graët in 2011 to stimulate the women's game.⁵⁶ The focus emphasises women in football, becoming an example for how to increase participation as measured via the number of licenses, playing a role in elite international competition, and innovation in how to form female players. This plan fuelled Le Graët's efforts to position France as the best candidate to host the 2019 Women's World Cup. Although official bids were submitted in October 2014 and the final candidate announced in June 2015, Le Graët pushed since 2011 to remake French football with a strong commitment to and investment in *le foot féminin*.

To drive this ambitious agenda, the federation has devoted greater resources to developing the women's game. It established more than 1000 football 'schools' for girls aged 6–19 to provide training opportunities at younger ages, to better integrate them into the football world, and also to

improve detection efforts.⁵⁷ Part of the equation is encouraging parents to be more involved in the football lives of their daughters, a departure from an older culture of being spectators, not supporters.⁵⁸ The FFF provided more resources for clubs at local levels so that they could provide more opportunities for girls; in 2011 only 44% of football clubs trained young girls, but by September 2018, some 80% did.⁵⁹

Le Graët's plan encouraged greater roles for and involvement of women within football. He promoted Henriques to FFF Vice President upon his 2017 re-election and appointed Georges Secretary General. Together, they've formed a formidable duo and served as vital figures in the 'feminisation of football', but they're not the only role models. Ex-fencing champion Florence Hardouin has served as FFF Director General since 2013, and three years ago was elected by UEFA to sit on its Executive Committee, effectively making the FFF one of the few football federations in the world with so many female executives.⁶⁰ Nathalie Boy de la Tour has held the presidency of the Ligue de Football Professionnel (LFP), which runs the men's professional leagues, since November 2016 and the first wave of women have broken into the rarefied role of head coach of men's professional teams, notably Corinne Diacre, who coached second division (L2) club Clermont Foot for three years before being named to head *Les Bleues*.⁶¹ The plan to 'feminise' football has helped transform the sport from the top-down, one of the many advance benefits of the push to host the Women's World Cup.

Another factor that has contributed to the up-front legacies of France 2019 is the investment in professional women's football by club owners. Two gentlemen supporters in particular, Aulas at OL Féminin and Louis Nicollin at Montpellier, developed first-class sides, ploughing time, money, and talent into player development, building facilities, and also – critically – paying some players enough so that they could focus full time on football and not hold down a fulltime job on the side to make ends meet.

Nicollin, owner of Montpellier since 1974, began a women's team in 2001 and cemented himself as the professional game's late twentieth-century benefactor. He recruited some of the country's top and up-and-coming stars, including Bompastor and Abily, and furnished the first truly professional football environment for a women's team in France. That investment paid off; Montpellier won the D1 championship (2004, 2005) and the Challenge de France (2006, 2007, 2009). His son, Laurent, who took over upon Louis' death in 2017, continued the tradition.

But no figure has had a greater impact in developing the women's game than Aulas. In 2004, he purchased FC Lyon and folded it into OL Féminin.⁶² Although Aulas envisioned future business dividends from OL Féminin, when 16-year-old Wendie Renard signed with the team in 2006, female players did not receive a salary, instead earning a monetary bonus

for every game they won. They also played matches for audiences of sometimes just 50 spectators.⁶³

The situation began to change in 2009 when, at Aulas' instigation, the FFF created the first-ever professional contracts for female players and elevated D1 from top amateur status to the country's elite professional league. Women now received salaries for their football efforts, though there was great pay disparity between those who played for the top teams – OL and Paris Saint-Germain – and the other 10 clubs in the championship. Today, there remains a significant salary gap between D1 professionals, who earn an average monthly salary of 3000€ when the higher salaries of OL and PSG are factored in, and male professionals in Ligue 1, the country's top-flight professional league, whose monthly club earnings average 75,000€.⁶⁴

The investment by Aulas and others has helped make D1 a destination for football migrants. Starts Marinette Pinchon (Women's United Soccer Association, WUSA), Abily and Bompastor (Women's Professional Soccer, WPS) played in the United States in the 2000s, a country Sine Agergaard and Nina Clara Tiesler argue is a receiving country for female football migrants.⁶⁵ Yet, in the latest phase of the globalisation of and migration in women's football, the majority of French players are not sports migrants.⁶⁶ Moreover, even though national team selection propels professionalisation in most countries, as Jean Williams notes, in France by the late 2010s its plausible to argue that professionalisation drives national team selection.⁶⁷

OL Féminin counts many of the national team players on its roster and increasingly is the key driver of forming young members of *Les Bleues*. Whereas most of the French team prior to the 2019 World Cup cycle were formed at Clairefontaine, younger players on Coach Corinne Diacre's lists were developed at the youth academies of professional clubs like OL and Paris Saint Germain.⁶⁸

The team that Aulas built continues to dominate French and European competition. The team has won every D1 championship since 2006–07, the French Cup 10 times and the UEFA Women's Champion's League trophy six times. These results provided proved that investment in women's professional and elite football paid dividends. While Aulas' efforts were motivated by a businessman's acumen and desire to (eventually) turn a profit, his passion for the game remains real, by all accounts. Beyond rediscovering his love for the women's game in 2011, his support continues to propel OL and the FFF's feminisation efforts. As Renard told RFI, 'we feel he is someone different when he is with us, as opposed to when he's with the boys'.⁶⁹

The French have discovered their national team and players, and they have begun to take greater interest in the women's game. For Abily, it is a reflection of changing attitudes as well as increased access. 'People say that it is beautiful to watch women's football and that has helped start some of the changes', she said. 'People like to watch it'.⁷⁰ The FFF is helping to provide greater exposure

to and awareness of *Les Bleues*, utilising the same marketing structure for the team as for the men's team in the months prior to the 7 June 2019 World Cup kick-off.⁷¹

The French are increasingly tuning into women's football. The launch of broadcast media company beIN Sports in 2012 helped increase the overall number of hours devoted to women's sports – it broadcast more than 2500 h of women's competitions in 2018 – as did the September 2014 launch of the country's first weekly talk show devoted to women's football, 'Femmes de Foot', on Eurosport.⁷² But it is the national team that truly drives mediatisation and the 2015 Women's World Cup, broadcast by the M6 media group, set new records. Nearly 4.3 million people, 60% of the market, tuned in for the team's 22h00 quarterfinal, a nail-biting loss to Germany in overtime penalty kicks.⁷³ The 2019 tournament shattered all records. More than 10.6 million French tuned into *Les Bleues'* opening match against South Korea, 11.9 million for the team's second match, a hard-fought contest against Brazil, 9.5 million for its last group game against Nigeria, and more than 11.8 million for France's quarterfinal loss to the United States.⁷⁴

It is not just women who are watching women's football matches. According to Philippe Bony, Deputy General Director of Programming at M6, 70% of their 2015 Women's World Cup football audience was men, the same rate as for regular men's competitions.⁷⁵ Similar data suggests that Frenchmen are tuning in for D1 matches, too. It becomes a question of supply and demand, and broadcasters are now very interested. Media giant Canal +, the paid subscription channel that pioneered sports television coverage in the 1980s, broadcast all 132 D1 matches during the 2018–19 season, helping to place French mediatisation of women's football in a leadership position. 'The Canal + package for D1 *féminin* exists nowhere else in Europe', Henriques said of the partnership.⁷⁶

But with greater mediatisation comes greater scrutiny. According to Patrick Mignon, the hyper-mediatisation of football enables it to play a more important role in today's imagined society (and the questions it grapples with) than ever before.⁷⁷ Before France won its first World Cup in 1998 and gained entry to the elite pantheon of world football nations, there was not as much focus on whether or not it reflected an ideal form of assimilation, he argues. Today the same is true for *Les Bleues* in that presently there is very little focus on whether or not the team reflects the country's ideal assimilation or from where the players' family ancestry derives. *Les Bleues* reflect twenty-first century France, a *mélange* of women from all backgrounds, from all over the country, though there is a concentration of those who hail from the game's demographic bases in northern France, Ile-de-France, and Lyon. The most likely explanations for why there is relatively little fuss over the team's background is that they have yet to win a major title, though they claimed victory

at the 2017 She Believes Tournament, and the sport remains a recent, rising media phenomenon.

Change, however, is in the air. When Diacre announced her final list of 23 players retained for World Cup duty on 2 May 2019, she did so on the country's premier prime time newsmagazine on TF1. This form of public presentation is a tradition that the men's team coach participates in ahead of the World Cup or European Championship, but it was the first time that the women's team selection was given the same media rollout and newsworthiness. Diacre's decision not to retain young Paris Saint-Germain star Marine-Antoinette Katoto for the 2019 World Cup squad ignited unprecedented debate over the women's national team selection.⁷⁸

Greater mediatisation has led to an increased number of paying spectators at national team matches. By 2015, it was common for *Les Bleues* to play packed stadiums of 12,000–15,000 fans.⁷⁹ Tickets to the 8 February 2015, France-USA friendly were practically sold out within hours of going on sale, and sold-out stadiums, even for friendly matches, are increasingly the norm.⁸⁰ When France played the United States on 19 January 2019, they played in front of an at-capacity crowd of 22,000 in Le Havre.⁸¹ Those numbers continue to grow, as Georges pointed out. 'Now, every time we play in men's stadiums, it is crowded, and people pay to watch the team',

It's just great [for players], you feel the recognition of the people ... and they're starting to have groups of French fans. The men's team has a group of supporters who travel everywhere with them. So now the federation is trying to bring everyone together for the women's team, too.⁸²

The French turned out for their team during the 2019 World Cup. Every single France match was sold out, including games played in the 48,000-seat Parc de Princes in Paris.⁸³

Such attendance records reflect national pride in *Les Bleues*, but are also part of the larger trend of paying spectators at women's games. Two months earlier, 25,907 people attended OL Féminin's Champion's League match against Chelsea in Lyon, a new high for a women's professional match crowd.⁸⁴ In April 2018, some 20,000 paying spectators watched OL Féminin's Champions League finals.⁸⁵ Their excitement is enhanced by efforts of fan supporter groups. Georges recounted how the Lyon Angels rile up the stands while PSG's famed Ultras, who menace visiting teams for the men's home matches, started attending and cheering for their women's team at every Parc de Princes game starting with the 2016–17 season.

Moreover, as more French are watching and following women's football, the long-held stereotypes about who plays have shattered. 'I think already that the image in society has changed, that the image of women has evolved', Abily said pointing to greater media exposure of the game, continued good national team

results, and how OL has captured major titles. 'It's helped changed mentality. People accept more and more that women play football'.⁸⁶

Greater fandom, exposure, and investment has helped spur more women and girls to play. Increased participation is a key metric for the federation and the players themselves, who are prepared to rattle off the number of registered female players at any reporter who asks. When the federation reconstituted officially organised women's football in 1970, there were 2170 licensed players. By June 2011 on the eve of the Germany World Cup, there were 54,386; in the past eight years, the number of women's football licenses has grown by more than 60% to over 160,000, making France one of the European countries with the highest rates of growth.⁸⁷ In a country of 66 million and 1.5 million licensed male players, it is not a significant number and much work remains to be done. For example, of the country's 15,000 amateur clubs, only 2600 have female players.⁸⁸ Yet, growth over the past eight years is encouraging and aided by programmes designed to encourage women and girls to play sports more broadly. For example, the 'Sport pour Elles' (Sport for Her) programme, launched in May 2016, sought to get more girls to try basketball, handball, and other team sports, while pushing for greater mediatisation of women's competitions, to support elite female athletes, and to mobilise grass-roots energy.

All of these changes play directly into France's foreign policy agenda. The intersection of sport and diplomacy is not new, but it became a powerful tool during the Cold War. Sports diplomacy occurs whenever there is representation, communication, and negotiation in and around the sports terrain.⁸⁹ In the post-1945 era, the French tried to use sporting mega events to portray the image of a rejuvenated, winning nation that other countries could follow, an alternative to the bipolar Washington-Moscow axis – thus why the inability of many French athletes to medal or win titles during the sports crisis was so problematic.⁹⁰ This was particularly true with relation to basketball, a sport authorities thought the French should naturally excel at because it was the most cerebral team sport.⁹¹ Thus the Fifth Republic's attempt to harness results and performances to influence international publics has precedent, but the government's recent official sports diplomacy policy is unprecedented.⁹² Launched under President François Hollande and continued under Emmanuel Macron, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs has officialised a sports diplomacy policy to seize upon its rise as a global sports power.⁹³ It has also sought out a role hosting major international tournaments, what Murray and Pigman term international-sport-as-diplomacy, and the 2019 World Cup was the latest in a string of sporting mega events held on French soil.⁹⁴

National teams and elite athletes communicate and represent their country every time they play, communicating about the nation's values and culture while negotiating with counterparts on and off the pitch. Those who play professionally in overseas leagues like the Premier League and National Basketball Association (NBA) or for the national teams are thus some of the

country's premier *de facto* diplomats. That's why their comportment – and results – matter. The 2019 goalposts, of hosting a well-attended, well-received tournament and fielding one of the world's best teams that represents the elite of women in football and women's football (ideally, one that also wins), were anticipated to help bolster the image of France as a country that champions the women's game.

Legacies in the making

Since 2011, France has tried to remake itself into a champion of women's football. As Henriques argues of the country's recent, rapid progress, 'we have an exemplar federation driving the level of women's sport'.⁹⁵ The FFF has positioned itself as an example in the push for greater equity, one that dovetails with preparations to host the Olympic Games in five years. It is likely, given the pressure to prepare for Paris 2024, that such efforts and investments will continue after the crowds went home in 2019 so that the country can continue to portray itself as exemplar in the game.

Hopes were high following France's victory at the Russia 2018 World Cup that *Les Bleues* could feed off of the championship-winning vibes. While the United States ended these hopes with a quarterfinal win over France, *Les Bleues* still converted the tournament into a good finish. The pressure was high to deliver at least a podium finish, if not a world title. Star playmaker Amandine Henry noted the balancing act she and the team undertook in the months leading into the tournament. 'Most of the people know the team now', she said.

But we have more pressure because we have to be better. When you prepare for the World Cup in France, it is normal to have pressure. But it is not bad pressure. It is good pressure because you will have it in France in front of your family.⁹⁶

France did not win on the field in front of their families and friends in 2019. But, in the end, World Cup 2019 was a win for it fostered several up-front legacies that have grown the game and its fans in unprecedented ways.

Notes

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4. For more on the rise of these countries to dominate global women's football, see Jean Williams, *A Beautiful Game: International Perspectives on Women's Football* (Berg, 2007).

5. By July 2015, *Les Bleues* were third in the world – a rank they held until September 2017 and only regained in June 2018. FIFA, ‘Women’s Ranking’, https://www.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/ranking-table/women/rank/ranking_20180622/ (accessed January 14, 2019).
6. Laurence Prudhomme-Poncet, *Histoire du football féminin au XXème siècle* (L’Harmattan, 2003), 11.
7. See Pierre Bordieau, *La domination masculine* (Seuil, 1998).
8. See Mary Lynn Stewart, *For Health and Beauty: Physical Culture for Frenchwomen, 1880s–1920s* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), Richard Holt, ‘Women, Men, and Sport in France, 1870–1914: An Introductory Survey’, *Journal of Sports History* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 121–5; and Jacques Thibault, ‘Les origines du sport féminin’, in *Les Athlètes de la République*, ed. P. Arnaud (Privat, 1987), 331–9.
9. Prudhomme-Poncet, *Histoire du football féminin au XXème siècle*, 25.
10. Femina Sport’s early matches had an admission fee of 0,50 francs. Prudhomme-Poncet, *Histoire du football féminin au XXème siècle*, 29.
11. This is different from women’s football in Britain of the era, which was covered by some of the press.
12. Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, ‘How the Great War Made Soccer the World’s Most Popular Sport and Led to Its First Viral Moment’, *The Athletic*, November 16, 2018, <https://theathletic.com/653722/2018/11/16/how-the-great-war-made-soccer-the-worlds-most-popular-sport-and-led-to-its-first-viral-moment/>.
13. Prudhomme-Poncet, *Histoire du football féminin au XXème siècle*, 169.
14. The *Fédération Française du Football Association* (FFFA), which eventually became today’s FFF, was founded in 1919. For more on this era, see Prudhomme-Poncet, *Histoire du football féminin au XXème siècle*, 13.
15. Prudhomme-Poncet, *Histoire du football féminin au XXème siècle*, 177. There is a body of work on the Vichy regime’s attitudes and policies towards sport and women’s sports, including Fatima Terfous, ‘Femmes et activités physiques sous le régime de Vichy: politiques et enjeux médicaux’, *Genre & Histoire* 21 (2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/genrehistoire/3181>, and Christophe Pécourt, ‘Le sport dans le France du gouvernement Vichy (1940–1944)’, *Histoire Sociale* 45, no. 90 (November 2012): 319–37.
16. Based on paper presentations at ‘Upfront and Onside: The Women’s Football Conference’, National Football Museum, March 2018, some of which appear as articles in this collected volume. <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/upfront-and-onside-the-womens-football-conference-tickets-41423084561#>.
17. Jean Williams, interview with the author for Krasnoff, ‘How the Great War Made Soccer’.
18. Prudhomme-Poncet, *Histoire du football féminin au XXème siècle*, 149.
19. See Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, *The Making of Les Bleus: Sport in France, 1958–2010* (Lexington Books, 2012).
20. Patrick Clastres, ‘Génération athlétiques et éducations corporelles. L’autre acculturation politique des présidents de la Ve République’, *Histoire Politique*, no. 23 (February 2014): 73.
21. For more on why the Fifth Republic wanted to cultivate a culture of sport that ultimately would feed into the nation’s elite sports programmes and produce athletes who could win for the nation, see Krasnoff, *The Making of Les Bleus*.
22. See Claire Duchén, *Feminism in France* (Routledge, 2013); Dorothy Kaufmann-McCall, ‘Politics of Difference: The Women’s Movement in France from May

- 1968 to Mitterrand', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, no. 2 (Winter 1983): 282–93; and Susan Weiner, *Enfants Terribles: Youth and Femininity in the Mass Media in France, 1945–1968* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), among others.
23. Laurence Prudhomme-Poncet, 'Mixité et non mixite: l'exemple du football féminin', *Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, no. 18 (Coéducation et mixite, 2003): 171.
 24. For more on changing French outlooks towards football, see Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, 'Devolution of *Les Bleus* as a Symbol of a Multicultural French Future', in *The State of the Field: Ideologies, Identities and Initiatives*, ed. David Kilpatrick (Routledge, 2018), 149–57.
 25. For more on the French Olympic tradition see Thierry Terret, *Histoire du Sport* (PUF, 2016), *Histoire des Sports* (L'Harmattan, 1996), and *Les paris des jeux olympiques de 1924* (Atlantica Biarritz, 2008). The Olympics provided an avenue for French sportswomen to gain acclaim, particularly 1960s alpine skiers like Christine and Marielle Goitshel, while others like 1940s swim champion and later International Olympic Committee Director Monique Berlioux helped shape the international sports movement. Yet, because the women's Olympic football tournament was inaugurated in 1996, it is only more recently that French players can utilise the Games to etch their story into national Olympic pride.
 26. For more on the sports crisis and its implications for how the country was viewed by foreign publics, see Krasnoff, *The Making of Les Bleus*.
 27. Gilles Montréal, 'L'Équipe: médiateur et producteur de spectacle sportif (1946–1967)', *Le Temps des médias*, no. 9 (February 2007): 107–20.
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 29. This effort was portrayed in *Comme des Garçons* (2018), which rebooted the conversation about the 1960s pioneers. For greater details, see Jeré Longman, 'In Women's World Cup Origin Story, Fact and Fiction Blur', *New York Times*, June 25, 2019.
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 31. Henriques, 'French Women are Taking Over Soccer'.
 32. Sonia Bompastor, interview with the author, October 9, 2015.
 33. Ibid.
 34. Laura Georges, interview with the author, February 19, 2018.
 35. Ibid.
 36. Krasnoff, 'Devolution of *Les Bleus*'.
 37. Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, 'France's World Cup Title will Again Help Women's Soccer', *espnW*, August 9, 2018, <https://www.espn.com/espnw/sports/article/24319560/france-2018-world-cup-title-help-build-momentum-2019-women-world-cup>.
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 39. FFF, 'Statistiques Licences—Licenciers—Saison 1999/2000', https://www.fff.fr/common/bib_res/ressources/430000/6500/150202145443_1999_2000.pdf.
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- August 2014, so that the country's top aspiring females could attend school and train alongside other elite teenaged athletes already in residence at INSEP.
41. Girls whose families lived at a distance from Clairefontaine lodged on-campus during the week and returned home to their families on the weekends and at holiday times; Georges' family lived in the Parisian area, and at press time it is not clear whether she lived at home or lived at Clairefontaine during her entire formation period. For more see Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, "You Open Their Minds": Why France Moved Their Women's Football Academy Away from Clairefontaine', *The Athletic*, June 27, 2019, <https://theathletic.com/1050454/2019/06/27/you-open-their-minds-why-france-moved-their-womens-football-academy-away-from-clairefontaine/>.
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 43. Henriques, 'French Women are Taking Over Soccer'.
 44. Camile Abily, interview with the author, March 4, 2018.
 45. For a more detailed treatment of 2010 and its aftermath, see Krasnoff, 'Devolution of *Les Bleus*'.
 46. Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman, 'Mapping the Relationship between International Sport and Diplomacy', *Sport in Society* 17, no. 9 (2014): 1098–118.
 47. Béatrice Barbusse, *Du sexisme dans le Sport* (Anamosa, 2016), 97–103.
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 53. Jean Williams, *Globalising Women's Football: Europe, Migration and Professionalization* (Peter Lang, 2013), 14–15.
 54. Florine Duranton, 'Foot Féminin: faut-il gagner pour enfin être intéressée?' *Le Nouvel Observateur*, July 11, 2011, <https://m.leplus.nouvelobs.com/contribution/171529-foot-feminin-faut-il-gagner-pour-devenir-interessante.html#>.
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68. For more, see Krasnoff, "You Open Their Minds".
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80. Coeffier, 'Pourquoi le foot féminin a la cote'.
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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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