

## **France and Great Britain: the perception of aggressiveness in football seen from different angles.**

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What do a blow intended to hurt, a furious race to the net during a tennis match, insulting the opponent or the referee, a rough tackle and a smash in a volley-ball match have in common? At first sight, nothing, one might think. However all these acts evoke an aggressive attitude. But this attitude can change its form depending on how you look at it. (Dugas 2008).

Aggressiveness normally leads to impulsive (Freud 1949), reactive (Karli) or violent acts. In the context of sport, however, it can be defined as licit motor behaviour which will enable a player to beat his/her opponent(s). In other words, aggressiveness may be seen as pugnacious behaviour allowed by the rules of the game. (Collard, 2004).

The shades of meaning that can be attributed to the concept of aggressiveness, the way the term is used by the media or in various scientific studies oblige us to go into the consequences of the different perceptions of the notion.

To study the question as well as possible, we have looked into the perception of aggressiveness in football, as it is the sport with the most media coverage worldwide.

Nobody can deny that this sport is outstandingly successful nowadays, in terms of the number of people playing and media coverage. Despite its popularity, regrettable incidents (the brawl between the Turks and Swiss in the early stages of the 2006 World Cup, Zidane butting Materazzi during the World Cup final in 2006, the French anthem being booed before the France v. Tunisia match on Oct 14th 2008) leave frequent blots on the football copybook, thus giving the detractors the opportunity to question the merits of the sport. (Brohm & Perrelman, 1998, Vassort, 2005, etc). What is more, all the media “hype” surrounding the sport certainly leads to « *the development of public opinion about football being shaped by journalists’ gossip and a torrent of unsolicited comment.* (Poiraud et Teboul, 2007, 40). Football is played the same way everywhere, insofar as it is institutionalized, i.e. controlled by a federation that lays down the rules and guidelines to be followed. These rules describe, prescribe and establish the framework of the game worldwide. The rules are not open to discussion by players. On the other hand, within the same framework of regulations, variations might arise from the subjective interpretation of the rules. This allows a reinterpretation of the *internal reasoning process* of the game i.e. “*the relevant characteristics of a motor situation and the consequences they brings about in the accomplishment of the corresponding movement*”. (Parlebas 1999 216). It is therefore certain that culture can affect the way football is perceived in different parts of the world.

While the approach to violence and aggressiveness varies in time and according to sensitiveness (Élias, 1986), it is interesting to try to explain why, in the 21st century, perception of aggressiveness in football seems to differ between people involved in football at different levels, in two countries, France and Great Britain. Two nations, with two different playing styles:

the former tends towards a tactical, technical “Mediterranean” style, whereas the latter favours a more rough-and-ready, athletic game (Wahl, 1990, 120), with constant physical action. This point of view, albeit simplistic, does nevertheless call our attention to the possible existence of a cultural influence in the way football in general and aggressiveness in particular is perceived. In the 1970s some people were already questioning the apparent lack of fighting spirit shown by French players compared with their British counterparts. (Thill, 1975). Does the British public’s appreciation of tough, physical defensive action (tackles, etc), usually accompanied by applause, correspond to an obvious feature of cultural identity or just to stereotype ideas about English football?

We have grasped the fact that any study of the differences between two groups or two countries, will necessarily lead us to examine differences in culture, in particular in the field of games and physical action.

Therefore, we shall try to defend the hypothesis that “external reasoning processes” (the media, stereotypes, prejudice, etc) and “internal reasoning processes” both interact and influence our perception of aggressiveness in football. We also maintain that each country’s football culture affects the personal characteristics of each of its players and the way aggressiveness is perceived. Our inspiration comes largely from the school of “culture and personality” (cultural anthropology), which claims that “*each culture determines a style of behaviour common to all the individuals belonging to it*” (Cuche, 2004, 34). We shall, however have to take a historical fact into account in our analysis. This is the Bosman decision, taken in 1995, which allowed European professional footballers to circulate freely. It thus gave every European team the opportunity to play with an unlimited number of players from within the EU. So can this cultural melting-pot really attenuate the discrepancies between English and French football?

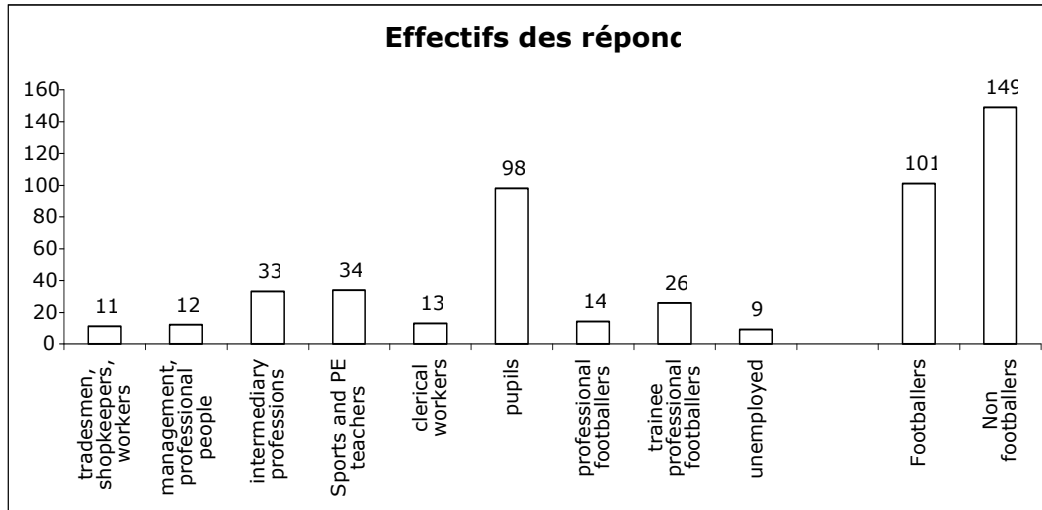
First of all we shall describe the tools used in the study. Then we shall then examine the differences in the perception of aggressiveness in France and in Great Britain and after that we shall look at the ways sporting culture (i.e. actually taking active interest or doing a sport) might affect the perception of aggressiveness in football.

## **I. Methodology**

In the framework of our enquiry, we questioned footballers, PE teachers and pupils in secondary schools in France and Britain. Two types of tool were used for all those questioned: traditional questionnaires (closed and semi-open questions), and paired comparisons (Condorcet procedure, 1974). But first, let us look at the characteristics of the people questioned.

### **1. The subjects of the enquiry.**

250 questionnaires were distributed (210 in France, 40 in the UK). These were shared among French and British schools, amateur football clubs (at county and regional level, and a random group of adults questioned in the street and at stations.



**Numbers of people questioned according to their socio-professional category, then according to whether they play football or not.**

## 2. The questionnaire

The questionnaire comprises 26 questions, divided into 3 themes corresponding to our different hypotheses. 8 questions concern aggressiveness in football. 7 concern sporting values and the values of football in particular. 7 others examine the connexion between the people questioned and sport. Lastly, five questions concern the personal characteristics (age, gender, etc). To do cross-sorting we used the software "Questions Data 6", which enabled us to calculate the degree of dependence between two questions, both globally and individually, "box by box" (Khi 2).

In the latter case, if the case is statistically significant in relation to the theoretical number, the programme displays a + or – sign. The plus sign indicates that the number of the box is superior to the theoretical number and the minus sign indicated an inferior number.

## 3. Pair comparison (CPP)

With the help of this tool we asked the people questioned to rank six team sports (football, volley-ball, handball, rugby, basket-ball and American football) in decreasing order of aggressiveness. The originality of this technique lies in the fact that it differentiates and orders a list of criteria by presenting them in binary manner. In this way the person answering is incapable of anticipating the final order. This means that social conventions and "wanting to give the right answer" do not influence the replies. For 6 stimuli, 15 pairs of sporting activities are proposed, two by two and for each pair, the person has to indicate which he thinks is the more aggressive.

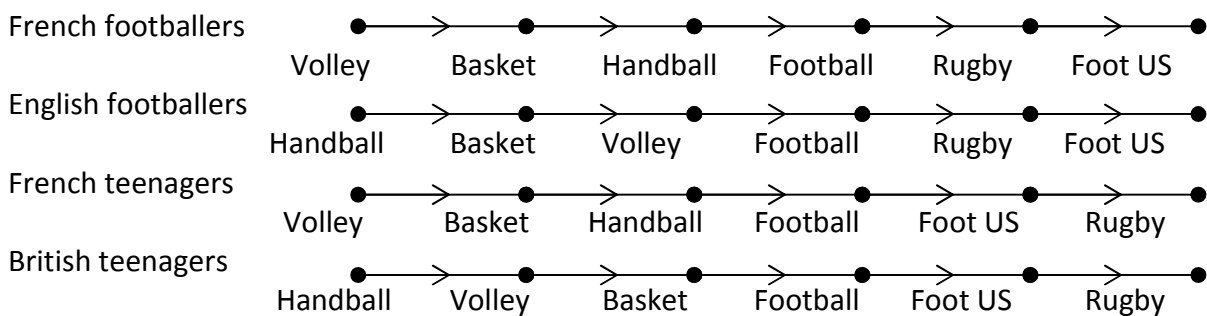
This method helped us to answer the following questions: Are some sports obviously thought to be more aggressive than others? Does the final classification fluctuate according to the category of individuals questioned?

What is more, by comparing these answers with those given in the traditional questionnaire, we shall attempt to distinguish exactly what kind of aggressiveness is in question.

## II. Results

### 1. Aggressiveness in team sports: differences of perception in France and in G.B.

To begin with, the results of the paired comparison enable us to affirm that the culture of a country can indeed influence the perception of aggressiveness in different team sports. The following diagrams show the differences between the way the French and the British perceive aggressiveness.



**Classification of 6 team sports according to their degree of aggressiveness by French and British teenagers and footballers (from the least to most aggressive); the order was obtained by binary and majority comparison. (CPP method for n respondents). The final classification is a total order unaffected by any ambiguity of the different stimuli.**

The British teenagers and footballers differ from their French counterparts by rating handball as the least aggressive team sport. This may be explained by the fact that handball is not played much in G.B. (few registered players, a mediocre national team). The entire aggressiveness component, inherent to the defence aspect of this sport seems to have been ignored completely by those questioned. In France, the good results achieved by the national team since the Barcelona Olympics and the subsequent media coverage have led to recognition of the sport, especially among young people and has certainly enabled them to see the difference between handball as it is played in clubs and as it is taught in P.E. lessons at school.

The perception of aggressiveness in handball in France and Great Britain does however seem to be an exception insofar as the results are quite clearly homogenous for both countries when it comes to representing aggressiveness in football.

We could emit the hypothesis that France has kept the late 19th century English cultural heritage, given that at that time, *“the use of English was above all a reproach of traditional local culture”* (Lafranchi, op. cit.16). Nevertheless, the hypothesis is undermined by the development of *“national or regional styles, opposed to the universal English kick-and-rush model”* between the two world wars (Lafranchi, op. cit. 19).

The disappearance of differences in European football culture, linked to the free circulation of European players and to the growing success of French players on English soil, can be highlighted. The work of French coaches, previously criticized, is now highly valued, especially in England where it has opened up the doors of the top clubs (Arsène Wenger in Arsenal, Gérard Houllier in Liverpool, etc). French players constitute the biggest group of immigrant players in the Premier League. Over 100 strong, there are more French than Welsh or Irish players in the Premier League.

As Lafranchi wrote, “for a long time, British football, regarding itself as the sole trustee of the original game, was fiercely opposed to the arrival of foreign players (...) It was not until the 1990s that British football opened its doors to the rest of the world once and for all”. (Lafranchi, op. cit., 21). The following table illustrates this change.

	England	France	Seasons
Percentages of foreign players	59,52 %	33,42 %	2007 – 2008
	55,38 %	32,06 %	2006 – 2007
	55,25 %	34,57 %	2005 - 2006
Nationalities of foreigners playing in Premier league	Africa : 10,34 % Lat Am : 10,34 %* W.Euro : 59,1%**	Africa : 43,99% Lat Am : 30,87 %* W. Eur : 13,9 %**	

\* Latin America

\*\* Western Europe

**Sources: Observatory of professional footballers. ([www.eurofootplayers.org](http://www.eurofootplayers.org))**

We can imagine that this melting pot may help to attenuate the cultural differences in English football and therefore overthrow the perception of the English-style game and of aggressiveness. In addition, as time goes by, the playing systems have changed, with one constant feature; a reduction in the number of strikers/forwards in relation to middle-field players and defenders. (Raballand, Cianterani and Marteau, 2008). Nowadays the notion of the “team block” seems obvious to every coach and this modifies the playing area considerably. In a few decades we have gone from “total occupation of the pitch to a middle-of-the-pitch game” (Raballand et al 2008, 11). Because of that, the *charging distances have* become shorter. Defined as “codified (average) distances separating two opponents in a game at the moment of their direct confrontation”» (Parlebas, 1999), they lead us to reconsider aggressiveness in football. Indeed, given that the violence of an attack tends to decrease with the increase of the charging distance in team sports (Parlebas, 1999), it is irrefutable that the shorter the charge, the more violence it induces. These changes can be illustrated by the increase in the number of fouls and consequently, stopped kicks. All this probably contributes to changing the perception of aggressiveness in football.

Even if it seems to confirm the idea that there are few significant differences between the French and the British, one could think that the uniformity of answers might be explained by the standardisation of the game and English acceptance of French know-how. However, whether

they are English or French, footballers differ from non-players in that the former founded their perception on instrumental illicit aggressiveness (pulling a shirt, a penalized tackle) whereas the latter are referring to hostile illicit aggressiveness (butting the opponent, insults).

Considerable distinctions can be observed between non-players and those who play football and even between players in different positions on the pitch. We think this is due to the possible influence of the “sporting culture” (i.e. whether they actually do sport or not), or even “football culture” of those questioned.

## **2. Can sporting culture influence the representations of aggressiveness?**

We agree with Luc Collard (2004), that in sport and especially in football, aggressiveness is not necessarily a negative and destructive element. This notion of “positive aggressiveness” was thus confirmed even by people in professional football, that is by the players and trainees, the large majority of whom think that “good aggressiveness” exists (100% (++) and 73%).

We also notice that only people who actually do sport talk about the existence of *motor aggressiveness*. One has to do sport to realize that *“in sport, aggressiveness is not necessarily deviant behaviour linked to frustration, but rather the significant organization of motor behaviour demonstrating the will to fight, the will to finish off the opponent, within the rights and prohibitions prescribed by the rules”*. (Collard, 2004, 39). Thus we realize that for 53% (+++) of those questioned, for whom sport is not very important, there is no such thing as “good aggressiveness” compared to only 26% (--) among those for whom sport is indispensable.

What is more, when we asked footballers what they thought was the most aggressive act in football, they based their answers on the internal reasoning process of the game. Professional trainees suggested a dangerous face-on tackle (23% ++). The tackle, in itself, is allowed in football. When it is successful, we have a case of licit aggressiveness. However when it does not succeed, how can the fine difference between a deliberate act and a technical error of execution be judged? This is where the referee’s job gets difficult.

It is possible to imagine changes in the style of play, (mentioned earlier) as an element that explains the differences in the perception of aggressiveness observed among the respondents. It is reasonable to think that the player, generally very keen, is perhaps too keen to have the hindsight necessary to analyze his sport.

Among the footballers, the tackle from behind is seen by forwards to be the most aggressive act (37% of the forwards questioned) whereas only 7% of the defenders thought that a tackle from behind was the most aggressive act. This answer is typical of the internal reasoning process of football. Indeed, the relation between backs and forwards leads the backs to use the tackle as a “defensive weapon”. We can therefore see why the backs do not see the tackle as being very aggressive even when it is not successful. Nevertheless, the forward is extremely afraid of tackles from behind because they are often sudden and dangerous. Mid-field players gave a variety of answers, because of their versatility.

When we look at the most aggressive acts in football, all the respondents agreed that hitting an opponent on purpose, outside action, is the most aggressive act.

But how does one distinguish between aggressiveness and violence? Faced with such paradoxes, how can the appropriate penalty for each act be judged? Butting an opponent on purpose may, to most people, seem more serious than a tackle that injures someone accidentally. In the first case, the culprit is suspended for just three matches whereas in the second case the culprit gets two months' suspension. Furthermore, the numerous broadcasts about football on radio and TV also modify people's perception of the sport. As they tend to talk more about the problems, (hooliganism, referees' mistakes, and other controversies), the media play a major role in modifying perception of aggressiveness.

## Conclusion

In view of the results of our study, we were able to point out the cultural traits that explain the different representations of aggressiveness in football. The people questioned who actually do sport identify motor aggressiveness easily whereas those who do not tend to refer to destructive aggressiveness, verging on violence. We were also able to affirm that having football culture enables different people to represent aggressiveness in different ways. Finally, the evolution of the game (less space) over the years, together with the mass-media coverage of football events seem to be the decisive factors in the representation of aggressiveness. In opposition to non-institutional games (traditional) in which different cultures live on at a local level, the birth of a sport is the result of globalization and the homogenization of different games. In spite of the homogenisation of the rules (with a few exceptions such as basketball, which has different rules in North America and Europe (NBA)) and the project to enforce an Anglo-Saxon model worldwide, (Gleyse, 2004), we notice that this international layer still has enough cultural anchorage to confer a certain local colour on football. We speak about the Brazilian « grinta », or British « kick and rush ». Nevertheless, the arrival of the Bosman decision seems to have created a third layer which could, without any further legislation, end up in a globalization of tactics and body techniques, more simply described as "a smoothing out of body cultures". Behind the players' liberation, certain see « *mild exploitation and infinite migration* » (Miller, 2008, 77) and fear for the clubs' futures, for the loss of identity, « *the end of belonging* ». (Miller, op. cit. 77)

Other specialists appear to be more alarmist and think that this liberation of the transfer market is already synonymous with a cultural loss. They think that money is now all-powerful. (Praicheux et Ravenel, 2004, 220). More pragmatically, the journalist G. Ernault (1996) emits the hypothesis that « *the dialogue of styles and personalities, which is the main function of great sporting events or great artistic festivals, will become a thing of the past* ».

Let us hope that the globalization of sporting activities will not iron out all the local cultural disparities that, even today, bring charm to international events. Despite everything, should we not see these heteroclitic teams as « *a cross-breeding process which aims to redefine body action according to the specificity of a socio-cultural group* » (Gleyse, 2004, 56), in other words, The globalization of football culture?

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